Immobility in Mobility:
Narratives of Social Class, Education, and Paralysis

By Keith Nainby & John B. Pea

> I argue that the relationship between schooling and media representations of vocational and cultural aspirations has become symbiotic [. . .] so school learning is organized around behaviors required by types of bureaucratic work, as well as the rewards offered by consumer society for performance according to established corporate norms. [. . .] The student remembers little or nothing about the content of knowledge . . . but remembers how to succeed in receiving good grades, gaining admission to a decent college, or university, and how to curry favor with authorities—teachers, counselors, employers. Working–class kids often fail to get the message right. [. . .] The result [. . .] is cultural homelessness.
>
> —Aronowitz, <u>Politics</u> 201-02

> Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain
> Now he walks these empty rooms looking for something to blame
> You inherit the sins, you inherit the flames
> —Springsteen, "Adam Raised a Cain"

The two passages above both present images of working–class people confronted with crushing doubt—doubt about whether accomplishing their

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goals, goals that have seemed worth working for, goals that much of society has framed as noble and necessary, will ultimately prove liberating or even rewarding. These passages also suggest that a major consequence of this doubt is alienation, not only from the society that has apparently betrayed a person from the working–class but also from her or himself. In this essay we propose that working-class kids who grow to become permanent members of the academy, as we figure out how to "make it" as professors and as professionals, have also learned other, bleaker lessons about our society, our colleagues, and ourselves. These lessons, we contend, can be profoundly damaging, even immobilizing, on at least three levels for people in the category of "critical education scholars and teachers from poor and working-class backgrounds." On a personal level, we may be learning to despise ourselves or dismiss some of our core values in the process of learning to succeed in the academy. On an interpersonal level, we may be learning that we are communicatively incompetent, or at least significantly less competent at the outset of our careers, and that this incompetence will always constrain our ability to effect change through established scholarly channels. On a societal level, we may be learning, simply in an effort to survive academically, cultural codes and patterns of behavior that cut us — we potential theorists of working-class experience — that cut us off from our working–class roots and thereby further weaken the almost nonexistent fiber of class solidarity in this country.

Authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Molefi K. Asante, and bell hooks have discussed the ways in which scholarly standards and cultural assumptions in academic institutions in the United States persist in their long tradition of devaluing and marginalizing scholars of color, women scholars, gay and lesbian scholars, and anyone else who does not conform to established (though often unacknowledged) norms. Our purpose in this project is to offer three sets of thematically linked, dialogic narrative accounts of the confusing and complex paths of social mobility and immobility that these institutions have provided us: two straight-identified, white-appearing American men from working-class backgrounds who are now critical education scholars and professors of communication. We are not suggesting that our working-class childhoods can or should give the two of us a right to claim *a posteriori* a minority status; instead, our hope is that our positions of relative privilege can become a meaningful vantage point for reflecting on the unique interrelationship of social class and higher education — specifically in our cases, of working-class histories and academic lives.

Personal Narratives

Keith: "Easy"

Whenever my partner and I have a big disagreement about anything, I clean like a maniac. I clean the floors, the backsides of long-undusted furniture, the crevices

of countertop corners that no one will ever see. Cleaning that stuff is hard work, you see. I think I clean like that because I want my partner to love me for working hard, for not taking it easy when our relationship is at issue. I now believe, after years of reflection on the insights offered to me by critical educational scholars, that I do this because of an important difference in what schools have valued in me and what I learned, through my working-class family life, to value in myself.

My schooling history, from fourth through twelfth grades, was uncommon in this country: I attended a public school with a private school culture. It goes without saying not only that we could never have dreamed of affording a private school, but that it would never have occurred to my mother (I was in a single-parent family during elementary school) to look for options like scholarships or to question the merits of the district's public schools. Everyone in our family (my mother was a third-generation American, her grandparents were Eastern European Jews) had long assumed that, while education was valuable as a chance for upward mobility, the American public school system was the only meaningful site of such barely-conceivable nascent middle-class success. What the teachers and administrators told my mom became the uncontested truth in our house about school, about achievement, about possibilities — the only relevant path toward social mobility for me, her oldest child. What they told her, in my case during my third grade year, was that I had tested into the district's "gifted" program and therefore I'd been selected to be bussed — more than thirty miles away — to a magnet school that housed "gifted" students from across the county.

You can imagine the wonderful things the other kids in my neighborhood said when they asked (ever-so-gently and open-mindedly) why I didn't ride their bus, why I didn't go to their school, why I left so early and was seen by them, as they were already long at play, sweating in the late afternoon humidity of southern Florida, why I was seen getting home so much later than them with my heavy bag of books in tow.

But their abuse was a small price to pay for the reward of a publicly funded prep-school quality education. At my school, after all, I was surrounded by other students who pushed one another to do their best academic work, to always enroll in the highest available tracks, to take as many Advanced Placement classes and tests as possible (I took eight, and the district paid for every AP test for every student without limit) — and of course, to get the best grades and be admitted to the best universities. That was what we were there for, that was the fundamental purpose of Pine View School for the Gifted in Sarasota County, Florida.

I have reaped an enormous range of benefits, of privileges, because I attended that school. I firmly believe that had I not been thrown into an environment where academic achievement was the overwhelming standard by which social popularity, interpersonal meaning, and self-esteem were defined, I would likely have finished my education with my high school diploma and immediately taken a working-class job. I would never have come to think of myself as academically "gifted," and I certainly wouldn't be teaching college, reading critical educational scholarship, or

writing essays about my working-class childhood and schooling experiences. And, while I try because of my political commitments to steadfastly reject the hierarchical judgment that my life as an aspiring middle–class academic is "better" than my life would have been as a line cook at Kissin' Cuzzins restaurant — I know as much as I want to deny it, to stand up for some kind of working-class solidarity, to scream that my working–class family loved me better than any institution of higher learning ever did, damn it I *do* feel more empowered being a scholar, more in control of my own life, more capable of making sense of my history and my future. I know I would be capable of making sense as a line cook, too, but it wouldn't be nearly as easy.

Easy. That's why they let me into Pine View, because schoolwork was so easy for me. Supposedly, the point was to challenge me, to make school harder. But of course, if it's still easy even in the magnet school for gifted kids, then you get a huge scholarship to a big urban private school up north. And if it's still easy there, you get to go to grad school. And if it's still easy there, you get to teach and publish and maybe someday get tenure, which means that it becomes easier for you to keep teaching and publishing. So, from my perspective, they never really wanted it to be more challenging at all; the more easily academic rewards came to me, the more easily I could keep them coming. As Aronowitz suggests, this means that I've learned precisely the lesson that is most important in our schools: how to make it look easy, how to make it look to other students and to teachers and to admissions offices and to department chairs and to editors that I belong here, that I fit in, that it won't be hard for me to succeed according to existing standards. If they think it will be hard for you to succeed then you're a risk, you might not be a worthwhile investment; so you'd better be sure you make it look easy.

It's easy, too, to recognize in hindsight how my school taught me more culture than content, how I learned the lesson that I'd better not make it look hard. Most of the students in my small school were wealthy, at least solidly middle-class and in quite a few cases "above" (horrid metaphor) that socioeconomic level. This was (and still is) a source of great controversy in Sarasota County politics, with many parents from lower-income households justifiably asking why their tax dollars help support what seems, in every other respect, to be a private school for the county's secularly-inclined but well-off families. When I attended the school, it had approximately seven hundred students and was more than ninety-five percent white-appearing as well as bizarrely wealthy — Sarasota is a wealthy county generally, but not like this: I can recall about fifteen kids or so from my graduating class of sixty-nine that were *not* driving new-looking cars to school once they got their licenses. In the Pine View community, it wasn't just schoolwork that the other students made look easy: their clothes, never hand-me-downs or tattered from playing, fit smoothly and seamlessly, like an extra cotton skin. Their teeth, at least after the braces-era of their childhoods, looked drawn in by an airbrush artist they were so straight and white. Their cars shifted like butter, changed lanes like the wild cats after which they were named. Easy. And the only hope I had to survive in this culture was to make

my good grades look really, really easy, as easy as it gets. It didn't make me cool, but it earned me a minimal level of respect.

And at home? How did my family earn respect? The lessons I learned at home were vastly different, painfully different. I rarely let anyone from my school see my house, and I convinced myself at the time that it was because I was a loner. But now I believe that it was shame, that I was ashamed of our crooked-looking wooden house with its peeling paint, its uninsulated walls, and its ugly yard (no one in their right mind could call this thing a "lawn"). I didn't want kids from school to witness the circus of our squabbling stepfamily with five kids sharing two bedrooms and one tiny bathroom. I learned every day at school that, because academic work came easy, I deserved, I would someday earn, the right to live "correctly," "properly," with multi-thousand-dollar teeth and a butter-shifting cat car. This place, this "home," felt so incorrect and improper; so shameful.

But it was a home, without question, and I owe much more to my family than I owe to myself or my school. My parents showed us they loved us by breaking their backs at low-wage jobs, then coming home and pushing us hard to give them a hand with dinner or the dishes or the laundry. Everyone I knew outside of school, my siblings, my parents' friends, everyone my family spent time with, worked hard for everything they had. The harder they worked, the better things were, ever so achingly slowly better but still better. Harder, better. And it was in those rare moments when the hard and the easy, when my family and my school, intersected somehow, to my dismay and shame — my mother waiting with me in the old beater car through a violent rainstorm before a morning bus ride, my stepfather taking time on his precious day off to drive me to a weekend event way up at the school — it was in those rare moments that the hard and the easy rubbed each other raw. As I got a bit older I started to understand, started to foresake shame for pride, for something like the paltry seedlings of a working-class sensibility: "*You*, you bastard future lawyers with your lawyer mothers and lawyer grandfathers, these are my parents, *my* parents, and they kill themselves every goddamned day so that I have clothes and a place to sleep, so don't look down on them, don't you dare, because they work hard for me, so hard, so much harder than I've ever seen any of you work at anything, so don't you dare!"

However, my claim is not that I've moved "forward" from shame to pride, from naiveté to class consciousness. This reconciliation, of all things, is not so easy. I'm still not sure, from day to day, if I can admire myself for having completed my Ph.D. and begun a professorial career. Shouldn't it have come harder, if it's worth having? If a component of working-class solidarity is knowing what hard work is all about, can I be at once a scholar *and* a theorist of working-class experience? Is writing this essay hard enough to count for anything at all? I'm not sweating as I write, my limbs and my back don't ache as long as I sit properly, I don't keep track of my hours. Do I love my academic self as much as my family loved me? Can I learn to? Has anything in my schooling taught me how to do that? How can I be a "critical educational scholar" without taking it way, way too easy?

John: "My back was feeling much better"

Is "cultural homelessness" just Aronowitz's borrowing and melodramatic "poaching" if you will — from a culturally popularized discourse about "the homeless" in our society, Aronowitiz's linguistic "slumming" among the discourses of "the underclasses?" Lately, I've begun to wonder. Three nights ago, I threw my back out, the latest misfortune in a long line of frustrations for the year. In the fall I totaled my old truck, bought a new used car that I couldn't afford, bounced my rent check as if I had to <u>convince</u> myself that I couldn't afford it. You see, I wanted a car that would stay running this time, my personal dream of middle-class safety. Wasn't I pulling in an instructor's salary at a state university? Shouldn't I be able to afford a car for crying out loud, one that wouldn't break down for once?

Three nights ago I threw my back out. I also swallowed all of my remaining pills (muscle relaxers), downed the rest of the bottle. I deliberately make it sound more dramatic than it really was: there were only nineteen pills. I counted them over and over, trying to decide whether they were enough to put me to sleep forever. They were also old, two years old, but I had been saving them for just this moment. I really laid on my comforter for hours, holding that stupid bottle in my hand: if I let the genie out, what wish, exactly, would I be granted?

I had no idea what would happen. I knew I didn't want to damage some part of myself for life, go halfway and ruin myself in unforeseen ways. I also knew that I didn't want to shit my pants or drown in my own vomit. I really just wanted to relieve <u>all</u> the pain, lower back, lower spirit, lower intelligence, and lower aspirations than I was supposed to have. Finally, noteless and too tired to care, I just swallowed them, dry, bitter, little stupid white innocuous pills. I had told people that I had back pain that last day at work; maybe they would think it was unintentional. And I could be free.

Cultural homelessness. I guess someone could say that by refusing to leave a note, I had no class. And I guess I would agree. I've been trapped between classes for a long time now: too confused, scared, and crazy-feeling to totally commit to the middle-class and too financially bound, "educated," "articulate," and alone to return home. And I despise myself for that last sentence, the hidden pretensions that I've learned to encode without thinking about them. Now, at a strange university, in a strange town, in a strange system of codes, I'm still playing Springsteen over and over, "The Badlands:" "I'm caught in a crossfire that I don't understand." And I've read all this stuff about social class, and I'm supposed to be writing a damned dissertation on it — codes of social class performance and communication — and I still don't understand.

I don't have a home, and it's killing me. But thank God, I do have a place to sleep, some warmth. But if these pills don't' work . . . what if they find me — covered with shit, bathed in piss and vomit because all my muscles are too relaxed to function well, functioning too well to do the job? What if I can't get up to answer the door or phone? Where will they put me? Where will I go?

Fuck it. I'm a religious man. Despite their God of the sword, I'll be going home, peace at last.

I wake up fine after fifteen hours. My back was feeling much better than my soul. I have to say I was disappointed.

Interpersonal Narratives

Keith: "Cultures of Control"

One particularly painful memory I have of learning my school's culture of wealth and ease: I'm about twelve, wandering around scuffling the dirt and daydreaming, not caring that I'm getting dirt on my brand-new sneakers, a few sparse streaks of filth crisscrossing their shiny new white tops. Ben and Matt, best friends and paragons of cool, walk up and scowl at me, looking me up and down. Ben asks, with a sneer, "Why do you wear old pants with new shoes?" I look down and notice, for the first time as far as I can remember, that the hem of my pants was frayed, that there were holes in the knees. I had no answer, of course; the question didn't even make sense. If I'd been both brave and class-conscious, like most of us at age twelve no doubt, I might have said, "As opposed to what? Buying five new pairs of pants every time we scrape together the money to get a pair of sneakers on clearance?" But instead I said nothing.

This isn't an especially damaging story, I admit; no broken bones, no road rash, not even a nasty name. I suffered far worse as a kid, and I was a white boy whose parents usually had jobs, so I know I had it rather easy in terms of abuse. It stays with me, however, because it is emblematic of my experience of being one of the few poor kids at my school. What we learned was that nothing was worse than being dirty. It's one thing to be poor, but if I somehow had learned, from the careful tutelage of Ben and Matt, to hide that poverty, to beg, borrow, or steal new pants to match my new shoes, then my presence would be much less offensive. The reason I stood out was because I was a blight, an eyesore: how dare I wear such ugly old pants to school? To *their* school, the place where they were supposed to be learning how to fit in at Harvard? After all, if I was attending Pine View, wasn't the whole point for me to learn how to fit in there too? I'd better damn well get at it, Ben implied.

I have an idea now about why dirt, in particular, was the central problem for the Bens of my childhood. This idea was suggested to me by Mary Douglas, through John Warren, in their scholarship on dirt as a cultural and racial symbol. I believe now that my tattered pants, standing out in stark relief above my new shoes, were offensive to Ben because they represented the uncontrollable, the always-out-of-place. My pants, to him, could not be put away like breakfast dishes hidden in the dishwasher that his family must have owned; they could not be erased from memory like his own torn pants, replaced by a weekly or monthly trip to the mall with the credit cards his family must have used. We were out of place,

those pants and I, and so he resorted to snide commentary, the only way he knew to put us in our places.

Why should control of the environment have been differently important for Ben than for me? There are simple answers, like the greater relative chaos of my household (if I remember right, Ben had just one sibling in his enormous house) and the greater relative power of his family to gain a measure of control over things like pants. But I craved control, too; the move to buy the sneakers on clearance was itself an effort by my parents to control their economic options. Are there meaningful distinctions among social classes in terms of their approaches to control?

I propose that one such distinction may manifest itself in our relationship to institutions like schools. My experience as a working-class kid was that institutions were "other" than us, were always assumed to be "against" us, even if blindly so. Our lives were out of control: we lived paycheck to paycheck or, before my stepfather moved in, welfare check to welfare check. When my mother was told I was "gifted," this was like being told I'd been hired for a job, or fired from a job: it was done to us by some nameless, faceless monolith. It was a chance, a precious economic opportunity, but not something generated by me or for me. It was done *to* me, *to* us, and we had to cling to it while we could and make the most of it. Had I not been selected for this program that my mother hadn't even previously heard about, notions like complaining to the school board or challenging the assumptions behind a magnet school for "gifted" children would never have entered her mind. No wonder Pine View continues to function as a publicly-funded segregating tool to this day.

But this school, for Ben and others like him, belonged to them. Had Ben somehow failed to test in, I have little doubt he would have retaken the test until he made it. If he hadn't, I also have little doubt his parents would have brought their opinion of Ben's test results to administrators. I don't fault them for this; like my family, they were responding to controlling forces. But the crucial difference is that Ben's family seemed to presume that good economic decisions meant staying in control, putting institutions to work for you, protecting your investments. Institutions, for the upper classes, exist to maintain control, to protect wealth from dissipating. Institutions, for the lower classes, for my family, exist to control us, and it is we who need protection from them.

Old news, perhaps, for readers of Marx and Steinbeck, but I believe this perspective on institutions extends to schools, and persists in teachers and scholars from working-class backgrounds. When I stand in front of a classroom, I know in every cell in my body that I am there on borrowed time, that the institution has temporarily lent me its authority but it can snatch that authority back at its whim. When I submit a prospective article I do not assume that editors or readers can or will adjust to my working-class sensibilities; I am the one who must adjust my vocabulary, my thematic analysis, if I want to make sense. Otherwise, that rejection letter will be done to me; I will read it the way I read the letter that invited me to a magnet school I'd never heard of, with bewilderment and not with entitlement.

If the standards of success and failure have been collapsed this way, if institutional rewards and punishments are so puzzling as to be one and the same for many working-class teachers and scholars, then our chances of becoming a permanent class-centered voice seem slim. Again, old news perhaps in an academic community that has begun to acknowledge its roots in colonialism, patriarchy, and other forms of domination. What I am advocating here is that we working-class academics speak publicly about our relationship to institutional cultures, that we let our colleagues know without shame (much easier said than done) when the interpersonal rules at a departmental dinner or a meeting with a dean overwhelm us and confuse us. It's not as trivial as etiquette, although I confess I have no idea which fork is for what. Interpersonal risks are real within the academy, and though I've been part of many classroom conversations confronting hidden cultural assumptions, I've found very few opportunities to confront these same assumptions in the hallways of our offices. If those hallways are cold and antiseptic, immobilizing to those of us from working-class backgrounds, we can and should weave that experience of immobility into our educative work.

John: "Cultures of Fear"

I'm feeling way too vulnerable now so let me start with a place relatively outside my emotional vortices of terror: a recent viewing of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. Moore constitutes the incidents at Columbine within an entire oeuvre of Euro-American white (is it mostly suburban as he claims?) fear. Moore at one point details a humorously sad retelling of how the "white" culture of fear developed historically in America, obviously a simplistic understanding of history but a telling one no less, and one that resonates with the stuckness in my body, particularly now.

I say particularly now because last fall I deliberately and decidedly disconnected myself from 95 percent of my old life. I closed my email account without offering anyone but my two sisters and two of my friends my new email address. Anyone else could find me through the university. I changed my home phone number to an unlisted one and gave the new number out only to the same four people. I have never cut myself off so completely from the human race. Why?

Last fall, I received a number of phone calls, calls mostly from colleagues or friends, needing to vent about other people. Such calls would almost always begin with "You know I love so-and-so" and then would consist of whatever the caller needed to discuss concerning what violence was done to them by, or how violently they felt about, "so-and-so." It's important to realize that this was not an isolated case or an isolated person; this was common behavior among my colleagues and friends. I even featured a section in my stage show that highlighted this behavior, trying to indicate how it affects me to be invited to participate in it, how it hurts me, and how it drives me crazy.

Perhaps "crazy" is the operative term here, the term that should be able to get me unstuck. Indeed, having spent a significant portion of my life in counseling (albeit not recently enough), I think I can constitute this behavior as decidedly not crazy, but as healthy behavior in predominantly middle-class communication. These colleagues and friends are not judgmental dopes: there are good, legitimate reasons to act this way. Any counselor could explain what is happening. I'll do my best to articulate my own middle-class understanding of how this communicative process is validated within middle-class culture.

The key word in the last sentence is "process." People are not stones; they are in process. They are continually making their worlds and their relationships, fashioning and refashioning the worlds around them, constantly negotiating through process *how* they will choose to respond to another human being's communication. In middle-class culture, how I respond to that communication is purely my own personal business. Where, when, and how I respond to that communication, particularly those communicative acts that hurt me or do violence to me, is a matter between me and the person with whom I choose to process. By keeping this process personal, I accomplish many good things in the world: (1) I keep from making the situation worse by returning violence for violence. (2) By processing my responses with friends I avoid participating in and performing uncivil behavior, behavior that encourages others to *not* speak to me again if I respond inappropriately. This allows me to keep the communication lines open on whatever terms I feel are left available to me. If I want to remain in a relationship I may need to "vent" with others in order to decide what I am willing to negotiate and what I am *not* willing to negotiate in this relationship. (3) Finally, by reserving my response and processing with others first, I ensure that my response is "reason–able;" in other words, as Habermas discusses, if called upon I can provide "good reasons" for responding the way I do. Perhaps in some ways it comes down to what Habermas describes as issues of "sincerity" and "truthfulness," what I can trust myself to communicate to you truthfully about me and what I can trust about the sincerity of your reaction to me. In other words, are you being "real" with me? Is what you are communicating what you are really feeling for me?

Of course, it is this issue of reality which is one large element of being stuck. I heard one of the most articulate teachers I've ever known, a teacher who espouses postmodernism, once say: "I wish that word [reality] was struck from all our vocabularies." I can appreciate that desire; my life has been a nightmare as I have tried to distinguish when I was battling the ghosts of "class" and when I was battling the material effects of cultural and economic inequities. I still don't do that very well. I keep wanting to change the violence in my metaphors: battle seems like such a capitulation to reconstituting violence in the world. But some days I really can't tell the difference between battling for my sanity and battling for my visions of the differences in classed performances — performances that have "real" material effects.

Perhaps some anecdotes are in order: experiences that I am still processing

(good middle–class communicator that I am). I hope to show in these three incidents that I participate, even as I write, in constituting this particular middle–class style of communication. In my mind, I refer to this style as "table–ing" in part because it always seems to happen at a table or on a phone. I will keep these descriptions vague, not because they were not materially "real" events with "real" people but because I "really" am not trying to hurt any individuals.

In the first scenario, I have been invited to dinner with some new colleagues that I am only beginning to know. In the course of the dinner, they discuss another (absent) colleague that I have also just begun to know. The general agreement is that they do not care for this colleague very much, that they don't really even like him. Now that I've known this colleague for some time, I know that he is under the impression that the people at dinner are good friends of his. Although this situation is less immediate than my earlier descriptions of "You know I love so–and–so," it is obviously the same phenomenon of processing communication. Do they not trust how this person will react if he knows their "true" feelings? Are they reserving the right for their feelings to change? Are they wanting to spare his feelings in some way? I'm not sure; this was their business, which of course is why I am discussing it now.

In a second instance, some people (I don't know who) decided it would be a good idea to hold a secret conference at a university; I say "secret" because a number of graduate students in the relevant research area were not told about the conference. Presumably it was none of their business. Now, I know a number of students, myself included, who would like to ask questions about this conference and the decision to keep it secret. (Who cares about not being invited to a secret conference? What people seem to be most angry about is having to learn about the conference through colleagues at another university.) Again, presumably the conference is nobody's business excepting the participants, and evidently the <u>response</u> to the conference is also nobody's business: it doesn't get discussed publicly (as far as I know) and no one seems to trust anyone enough to express their true feelings about it. But their are certainly a number of "table" conversations focusing on this event. There is a power differential involved here: there could be real damage to relationships that might happen should anyone say the wrong thing. But life goes on; everyone's personal reaction and business is preserved and respected. Everyone is free to process this event however they personally see fit.

On a third occasion, I was interviewing someone for a project. We had to "do it secretly" because the person did not want her roommate to know that she was talking to someone. And of course what followed were a number of observations about the roommate's behavior, prefaced by the comment: "I love _____. She's a great person, but she drives me crazy." At this earlier time in my education, I didn't think to ask her: "Do you ever think to tell her this stuff?" I assumed it was none of my business.

Perhaps the reader can fill in her or his own stories like this, her or his own experiences of processing. Again, there are very good reasons for communicating

this way: we are all in process. But perhaps this is one of my first places of feeling "stuck." If this *is* a phenomenon of middle-class culture — and please know this is *the* question I am wondering about, whether other people out there experience this as a difference in communication style between some middle-class and some working-class communication — if so, then I would like to know. No, I haven't completed a study; I have no "scholarly"evidence. Right now, it's just a gut feeling, and since I've lost my guts somewhere, lost the courage of my own intuitions, I need other people to see me out of the woods.

I'm terrified of seeming to accuse middle–class folks of something like "insincerity" or "untruthfulness," which is how I'm afraid I will be heard. If these observations about middle-class performances <u>can</u> be communally constituted — i. e., if anyone else has experienced these feelings, these differences, then I might venture some ideas about possible unintended consequences for those of us in the academy as we participate in such cultural communication. In the rest of this section I will try to explain why this communicative pattern of privately processing, a pattern that makes me feel stuck and crazy, is a class-based phenomenon — or at least a phenomenon that I encounter more frequently as I ascend the social scale. I also want to try to explain why this pattern of communication tears me apart and always makes me want to leave the academy. What follows is, of course, speculative in character, coming as it does from my own reflections on this communicative phenomenon.

How does the white fear Moore described come into being? What are the material consequences of the "table-ing" talk phenomenon for middle-class communities? Earlier, Keith explored how middle-class and working-class communication might differ in terms of constituting "control;" here, I want to discuss the implications of such control of communication for creating a culture of fear. In many ways I am attempting to step outside of middle-class culture, "feeling through" my working-class background to try to articulate an *experiential* difference. It remains for readers (and I think only those who've experienced both kinds of communication) to determine if this is also a *material* difference.

On an interpersonal level I notice, as I attempt to negotiate some middle-class cultures, a tendency for communication to become a matter of personal possession, of personal perspective and ownership (a point supported and elaborated by Philipsen in his work on Nacirema culture). As I have tried to suggest in the earlier examples, my communication in these cultures is *my* communication: I am to be held accountable for it, and I can also change the world with it — but I reserve the individual right to change it, when and where and with whom I please. I am not being sardonic here; I also believe in these points. I am an ambiguous, complicated human being and I have the right and the freedom to determine who I talk to, and when, and why.

If my observations are "true" then I might also suggest a tendency for this communication to become more ambiguous, more sophisticated in nuance and process. Because I am a complicated and growing and changing person, my

communication grows and changes with me. I may not care for Ted at this point in my life, but who's to say that I might not care for Ted down the road: I reserve the right to feel differently, so I refuse to burn my bridges with Ted. I might learn that Ted has different facets to his personality that I haven't yet discovered. I am willing to "table" for now my impressions of Ted, but I reserve the right to "vent" about him if I have the need.

Finally, I might come to understand that such processing in communication, such table-ing of other people, is a "fact of life." It doesn't mean anything more than it already is, complicated people processing with one another about one another. This is normal, everyday talk. Doesn't everyone do this? This is healthy communication. Yet, I am wondering and speculating if there might not be other consequences, other lessons in this communication as well.

If I understand the concept of interpolation correctly, then what is called forth in our communication is always already broader than whatever we intended when we communicated in the first place. Once communication happens, then a variety of different experiences can be called forth, evoked. When people call me "instructor," many things are being evoked at the same time: institutional power and ranking, style of vocational communication, classroom positioning, etc.

I want to talk about what gets called forth for me at all those "tables:" fear. I leave those tables wondering who is talking shit about me now and won't tell me to my face. I leave wondering if there is anyone who really likes anyone in middle-class culture, and quite frankly, how would you really know? I know that in some cultures gift-giving is marked as a sign of affection, but gift-giving, like compliments, can also constitute power relations and reestablish inequalities between people. How do we mark differences in middle–class cultures? And here's the part where, personally, I am stuck: I have no idea.

I always get about so far in professional cultures, and then I hit this wall, this sense of profound isolation: I have no idea who my friends are. I've been sitting at too many tables where people have dissed someone else — which would be fine, except then I see them meet one another at conference or in the classroom and their performances suggest they are old friends. I don't mean to suggest that there are no people who have affection for me, that people don't consider me their friend (or vice versa); but what I do want to suggest is that it's much harder to tell than when I'm not in professional, middle–class cultures. I believe that middle-class people have friendships that are just as close; I'm not talking here about strength of sincerity, or depth of friendship, or bonding ability. Rather, I am trying to identify codes that are being used, codes that I can't recognize, and this leads me to believe they are class-based. As a white Euro-American male, constituted by and constituting the predominant codes of white patriarchal power, I still experience some real tension in professional middle-class cultures. I am afraid of them.

What's happening here? Secrecy seems to be such an acceptable code of communication that it drives all other codes before it. Perhaps it's secrecy-as-

rebellion, as conspiracy to change the systems: always keep them guessing, because if they "have" you they will do violence to you. Certainly people of color, women, gays, lesbians, bisexual people, and transgendered people have highly legitimate reasons for such (in)visible communication, reasons connected to mutual survival and solidarity. Yet what I am talking about seems to occur interpersonally between middle-class people of different races and ethnicities, among women and men, and between people of various sexual and affectional orientations.

As I look at predominantly middle-class neighborhoods, I recognize some of the aspects of fear Moore noticed: some sound walls, some gates, some nameless-ness, some clearly defined areas of possession. Sometimes I watch the teachers I have respected the most over the years yearning to get the hell out when school ends. And I wonder, why? Could it be that these table-ing conversations, though legitimate, are also generating cultures of fear? Who can I trust? My partner, my handful of intimate friends, my pets, my counselor. Who else is there? And who else should I need to trust? My neighbor? My colleagues? My God? My, my, my, I really don't know. But I'm the one who swallowed those pills. I am cynical, but I am really hurting. I don't know.

Narratives of Solidarity?

Keith: "Grief"

In the fall semester of 2001, I was teaching a section of a social foundations of education course. We were embroiled in one of the all-too-typical arguments about whether learning was fundamentally a social activity, overdetermined by social forces; or whether, instead, people had "innate" capacities for learning that merely manifested themselves differentially from person to person, classroom to classroom, community to community.

Tired of relying once again on the mountain of statistical evidence linking socioeconomic status, per-pupil local expenditures, and academic achievement, I tried a new tactic. "Can anyone," I asked, "remember learning how to read in some way *other* than through the persistent attention and support of a loved one, such as your parent?" There was a long period of silence, during which I started to feel self–satisfied. "Now we're getting somewhere," I thought. And perhaps we did; perhaps the image of learning to read had pushed the conversation forward a bit. But having conjured for myself in that moment the memory of my mother teaching me to read as I sat in her lap, I was overcome, later that day and for several days after, not by teacherly pride but by a sense of loss.

My mother had been dead for a little more than four years at that point. One of the things I've learned about grief, during the process of grieving for her, is that it's a state of being rather than an event: it has no temporal boundaries, neither a clear beginning nor a welcome end, and no spatial ones, no sharp, arid places where it is

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wholly absent from my feel for the terrain. I've found, instead, that grief is something that immerses you once your loved one dies, and the feel of the droplets lays on your skin, hangs from your lips, drips into your eyes, refracting your experience of the world in unforeseeable ways indefinitely after.

My experience of learning, for example, has changed since that day when I asked all of us to remember being taught to read. Flooded with the doubt that accompanies the loss of a mother, I've begun to question again what all this is good for: Is critical scholarship a more valuable vocation, for me or for anyone, than being a line cook? Can I claim, looking myself unabashedly in the mirror, that dialogic teaching is a means of working, in some small way, toward social justice? Can my mother, or any of the people whose days are ticked off by toil and time clocks, be proud of what I'm doing? I've been taught by educational scholars to always ask these questions, but no reflexive research lends them the immediacy they take on for me when they are cast up by waves of grief.

One tentative answer I've found is a risky one to share here, because it can be read as selfish — in fact, it directly contradicts a central claim I find in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Just what the academic community doesn't need, an upwardly mobile straight white man offering selfish observations that are, on top of it all, sacrilege, heretical when read in light of the bible of critical pedagogy. But this narrative is about the hope for working-class solidarity, and so I'm going to hurl my answer into the fray and take full responsibility if it offends readers. I believe that writing and teaching for social justice can and should be undertaken as nourishment for the educator, and not simply altruistically, not only in the service of the oppressed. I respect Freire's caution that teachers, by virtue of our teaching credentials, have always already been rewarded by the status quo and therefore we cannot be said to do our work from "within" an oppressed community. However, I also respect Aronowitz's claim that cultural lessons are probably the most enduring ones we learn in our schools. For this reason, I contend that many teachers and scholars in this country who come from working-class backgrounds are indeed doing our work from "within," at a minimum, conditions of extreme — and often debilitating — cognitive dissonance. The cultural lessons of our childhoods remain with us even as we assume the nominal power positions of classroom authority and published expert. Our goals should not be, in the supposed service of acknowledging our privilege, to forget, ignore, or erase the visceral impact these lessons retain for us each day, even as we collect once-unimaginable paychecks. Yes, I am enormously privileged, even socioeconomically when I compare myself now to my parents twenty years ago. But the fact that I still feel, as I stand in front of a group of students and talk about learning to read, the fact that I still feel working-class, that I still talk and think within that milieu (sometimes; not, of course, when I use words like "milieu"), that the thought of not being working-class anymore leaves me overcome with grief and loss — this means, to me, that I still stand with one foot in the working-class even as I climb that social ladder. This posture should be a

source of strength, not weakness. My working-class history should help me be a better, more sensitive, more reflexive teacher and writer. If I don't allow it to do so, I'll forget where I come from; and then, I'll really have lost my mother.

Perhaps a call for embracing our class backgrounds is obvious for the audience of this essay. But the implication I have drawn, in conversation with several other people interested in social justice, is that our work is for ourselves, too. I argue that it is not only disingenuous to deny that we critical educators are nourished, yes selfishly so, by our work; it is crippling also. If we hope to sustain one another, if scholars from the working–class hope to have an opportunity to theorize the complex class relations of our contemporary world of global economic colonialism, then we must take solace in saying loud and clear that our work is — at least in part — for us.

John: "Love and Passion"

I came to school beaming with love, a love that was not my own but was given to me by a host of people with whom I had worked: a going-away party was held in my honor in Billings, Montana, before I left for my doctoral program. Virtually everyone from work showed up to wish me well, to give me the gift of themselves — hard working-class lives to take with me and remind me of the day-to-day human costs of trying to make a meaningful life. On the day I left Billings and that working-class community, I don't think I've ever felt so strong, not in my entire life. I felt empowered to speak, to voice, to story.

After years of graduate school, I've felt myself diminish more and more: as the years have gone on I've had less and less to say. Meanwhile, my colleagues all seemed to *find* their voices, seemed freed to voice within the postmodern condition. They learned to thrive in ambiguity. I learned to identify the violences in my own voice, even the violence of presuming to speak about and for others. I learned to listen, a wonderful gift from one of the most compassionate teachers I have ever known and one of the most compassionate students I have ever known. Now, I can listen to a greater degree; but somewhere along the line I lost my voice.

Recently it all came to a head as I met with classes for the first time this semester. I couldn't explain the course or my requirements to students. I could not complete sentences. The students looked at me like I was the most inept teacher they'd ever known: their faces were, together, one big mask of confusion. It wasn't their fault; I'd lost the ability to trust even my teaching. I was in trouble. That night was a crisis; I prayed all night long. I needed a miracle.

Recently, I guest taught in a colleague's acting course. We were using the techniques of Augusto Boal and Anne Bogart to develop imaginative scenes: creating places and populating those places with stylized actions and movements. I asked students to call out an environment. I'm sure it was selective listening on my part when the first answer I heard was "a trailer park." "This should be interesting," I thought.

I saw my job as brainstorming facilitator, not censor. So I wrote down their list of rather enthusiastic associations: "white trash," "alcohol," "rednecks," "drugs," and "welfare mothers" were just some of my favorites. After "welfare" was called out a second time, I was surprised to hear a student in one of the first two rows yell, "Oh COME ON!!" That's all she said, but it was enough to focus my attention. By the time I looked up, she was already beginning to look down at her feet, her arms crossed in front of her as if protecting herself from an act of betrayal that even she hadn't expected. She jolted me out of my cynicism, my own conditioned voicelessness and acceptance of stereotypes about working-class people, people like my old friends and some family members. Now it was my turn to remember who I was: "OK, let's try to think of some other aspects that aren't just stereotypes." She had called me back to my own passions. We never spoke one-on-one: I didn't want to betray something that seemed to haunt both of us. I still wonder, as always, whether that was the right thing to do.

But this person also reminded me of one of the last academic conferences I'd attended. I went to a panel on "postcritical considerations," where much of the dialogue was about a return to "love" as a basis for constituting talk among ourselves. For that dialogue alone I might have gone to my room and cried, in pleasure — a miracle. As it was, however, no one else seemed to notice that the only two negative examples of human behavior presented in those wonderfully written and performed papers were of working-class males. I went to my room and cried anyway. I guess I'd had enough love for the day.

Conclusion

Social mobility carries with it a sense of loss. To be socially mobile is to move from one place, economically, culturally, personally, to another. One consequence of that loss, sometimes, is immobility — a paralysis brought on by the violent, forceful, uncertain rush of social mobility itself. The immobility of fear, the feeling stuck, the not being sure what educational successes have been hard-won and what scholarly failures should have been easy to swallow: these have been for us an integral part of saying farewell to the economic, cultural, and personal homes that have, for better or worse, nurtured us. After all, whatever their oppressive conditions or questionable values, they have been our homes.

Learning to accept the feeling of immobility that comes with social mobility may be a way of grieving for those homes. Like all grief, this process can be healthy, empowering, a hopeful and optimistic good-bye. But like all grief, it can also turn on us, poison us, teach us to despise ourselves (be "depressed"), to feel incompetent in our communication with others (be "crazy"), and to forget our roots, forget why we love what we grieve for in the first place. We argue that working-class scholars should always be given, and should sometimes take, opportunities in our research and in our lives — patiently and with a genuine sense of loss — to come to terms

with our choices to move away from our homes. For only by doing so can we hope to reintegrate our personal, interpersonal, and social knowledges. This reintegration can give us the chance to figure out what good, useful, necessary lessons we want to take with us from our working-class homes. It can give us a common foundation for building new homes, and new communities, perhaps with other working-class scholars who hope to theorize social class and education in the United States. It can give us the power to avoid being depressed and crazy.

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