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**Swerve: A Memoir of Identity in Three American High
Schools**

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Schools**

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Dissertation

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Dedication

For Sebastian

Acknowledgements

This project is one upon which I embarked when I first became a teacher just after college. I have been both a student and a teacher for all these years and recognize that much of the valuable learning that has come to me came by way of the many students I have known. The nine students I have written about in this dissertation were students who stood out to me when I began to contemplate the processes of identity formation and the role of alcohol and drug use within the particular community of the American classroom. And yet, there are hundreds of students who did not appear in this work who will be forever in my memory and who helped me to become the teacher and writer I am today. In addition to the gratitude I send to them, I am grateful for the input and guidance of several remarkable educators. Without Mark Smith I would most likely still be spinning my wheels. Many thanks to Mark for his unwavering support, his humor, and his ability to encourage even when he must have had his concerns and doubts about my schedule, my relocations, and my own reconsiderations of the project. Needless to say, if I had attempted to find footing on my own without Mark's thoughtful input I might still be lost in the woods of Connecticut. Laura Furman is a dear friend and an outstanding mentor who reminded me over the years to keep my eye on the prize and to write from my heart. On numerous occasions, as both teacher and friend, Laura reminded me to trust that along the way the subconscious mind and the conscious mind will meet up, and when they do, great things can happen. Lori Holleran Steiker, Cary Cordova, and Elizabeth Engelhardt were readers with a keen attention to detail and to the larger scope of the project. I couldn't have asked for more focused and appropriate input. Ella Schwartz, the graduate program coordinator for the Department of American Studies at

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Swerve: A Memoir of Identity in Three American High Schools

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study of nine different students in three American public high schools, their experimentation with alcohol and drugs, and their respective processes of identity formation. While much work has been done to establish the relevant and various paths towards finding identity in the American adolescent and in the fields of American education, public schooling, and youth culture, this work attempts to offer a specific presentation of what the path towards finding identity looks like in the American classroom for students who also experiment with alcohol and drugs. The nine students are presented in this work via three different category types of identity formations: Creativity Through Chemical, Charisma Through Chemical, and Challenge Through Chemical. The presentation of the students is ethnographic in nature given the various strengths and attributes of the ethnographic approach. The classroom is a valuable location for establishing a unique perspective on adolescent self-expression, a place where students' projections and the perceptions of others are intertwined. What students experience in the classroom as a group and individually is a meaningful element to their evolving identities. This work establishes the significance of these experiences in conjunction with the students' experimentation with alcohol and drugs. Adolescence, as

a period for young people of identifying with group culture and as an individual while differentiating between right and wrong is a significant developmental phase. This work acknowledges the communities in which these students are engaged, their respective high school communities, the relevant details of each classroom, and explicates the details of their processes of identity formation for these nine students within the context of their classroom cultures.

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Introduction

I grew up in Kansas, a state once known for its progressive thinking and a liberality that verged on “lawlessness” and that is now better known for its educative turmoil regarding the curricular roles of evolution and religion¹ and for being a dramatic location for debate and violence within the Pro-Life and Pro-Choice movements². I remember thinking upon hearing of the murder of our family friend, Dr. George Tiller, the controversial doctor who performed later term abortions and who was killed by a pro-life supporter, *Indeed, What IS the matter with Kansas?*³ There is no candy-coating the anger inside of that murder, especially when one considers the essence of the Pro Life argument: that taking a life is indefensible. But it wasn’t long once I recovered from the shock I felt after learning of Dr. Tiller’s death, that I began to consider the extremes that color Kansas history. In doing a quick Internet search of Kansas history the first sentence I read is: “The history of Kansas, argued historian Carl L. Becker a century ago, reflects American ideals. He wrote: ‘The Kansas spirit is the American spirit double

¹ The Kansas Evolution Hearings were a series of hearings held in the capitol of Topeka May 5 through

² On May 31st, 2009, anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder murdered Dr. Tiller while Tiller was an usher for a church service. For years Pro-Life and Pro-Choice representatives had gathered for protests at Tiller’s Wichita clinic where he performed early and some later term abortions.

³ Frank Thomas, *What’s the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York, Metropolitan/Owl Book 2005). Frank discusses the rise of anti-elitist conservatism in Kansas, and contrasts that rise with the left-wing populist movement that was so passionately present in 19th century Kansas.

distilled. It is a new grafted product of American individualism, American idealism, American intolerance. Kansas is America in microcosm.”⁴

Much of that Kansas idealism and intolerance in my estimation is rooted in the struggle to exist in the midst of such social and natural intensity and unrest. I am reminded of the stories I know of the Kansas past. The violence inspired by the provisions of the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed settlers of the Kansas territory to decide whether or not they would allow slavery within the state borders and that instigated the “Bleeding Kansas” period that presaged the Civil War and that inspired the cut-throat passion of John Brown and his abolitionist vigor. The lawless vigilantes of the American West. The religious extremists of the late 20th and early 21st centuries who speckled the news with their evangelicalism and proselytizing. The heat. The cold. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The locusts, memorably, that swarmed so severely in 1875 that the skies turned black, farmers hid in their barns afraid to watch the destruction, and crops were damaged in a matter of hours. When the locusts were finished devouring everything in sight they left as quickly as they had come, never to be seen again. These are just a few examples of the bizarre and complex Kansas “nature.”

Growing up in this state with such a vivid past and such a colored history and identity as well as attending a solidly quintessential high school have contributed to my perspective of American young people, identity formation, and public schooling. Kansas

⁴ Carl L. Becker, "Kansas," *Essays in American History Dedicated to Frederick Jackson Turner* (1910), 85–111

offered to me an ideal childhood in many ways and my own high school was presumably what we all imagine when we talk about an exemplary public school. I was offered the rigor and intensity of an International Baccalaureate program and the cultural diversity and socioeconomic variety that comes with a relatively urban public school setting. And yet it was all so relatively “safe.” I was safe to explore my own trajectory as an American Youth, as a student, as a member of various groups and subcultures, and as a thinking, creating, dreaming American. It was a safe environment where I could challenge authority, challenge convention, challenge conformity, and yet I managed to grow into what I have jokingly referred to as my “frighteningly patriotic” self. I respect, appreciate, and defend the idea of America. And my public high school experience has much to do with that respect as well as does the geological and natural rhetoric of Kansas. I treasure the Kansas landscape and the extremes of Kansas living. I am proud and respectful of the severity of heat in the summer and the vast emptiness of the Kansas flint hills. I was drawn to the stories of Kansans who have become iconic such as Carrie Nation, Gwendolyn Brooks, Charlie Parker, and Amelia Earhart. Much of my own teenaged identity was rooted in this recognition of and admiration for my state and that heritage. And then later, as I made my way through teaching in various high schools in this country and then pursuing my interest in becoming a scholar of young people, I often returned to my own upbringing, my own schooling experience, and the elements of the Kansas rhetoric and history that led me to feel rooted in my own sense of self.

Blue Ace

The high school I attended was the same high school both my father and maternal grandmother attended—their respective class photographs hang on a wall not far from where my own is hung. We are the Blue Aces, a mascot that harkens back to the flying aces of World War I and which also serves as a reminder of the aviation industry that has been the economic backbone of the city for several decades. Cessna and Beechcraft remain based in Wichita still today while Learjet, Boeing, Airbus, and Spirit maintain a strong workforce.

When I was a student, I was one of 2,200 kids. Ours is the largest high school in the state, built in 1923 and is currently one of nine public high schools in the city. We are home to a consistently competitive basketball team and when I was a student, the games were held in the old gym, called The Hanger, with bleachers that were located on a mezzanine, seemingly suspended from the ceiling. Visually, it is a typical Midwestern city high school: red brick, three-storey building in the Collegiate Gothic style, landscaped front lawn, set back from one of the main thoroughfares of the city—the same street where my childhood home, the buildings that held many of my parents' restaurants, my mother's office, my father's office, the buildings my father has refurbished, and my favorite bookstore are all located. My sister and her husband's current home is an easy

two blocks down from our childhood home, a half a block off from that same thoroughfare.

I remember after learning to drive, cruising that street to and from school, sometimes in the midst of playing hooky, and waving to my father as he drove the same stretch heading in the opposite direction, to his various projects downtown. We'd wave as we passed one another, both of us feeling that sense of connection. There he is. Here I am. We are on the same busy street. Safe on our way to where we need to be. And then, eventually, I would park in same parking lot where my father had parked as a high school student years ago and walk those same halls he walked.

The high school is currently filled, as it was when I was a student, with the students who come from the oldest neighborhoods in town. They are upper-middle class white kids. They are African American kids, many of whom live nearer to the school. They are Latino. A few are Asian—mostly Vietnamese. Some have Native blood. In the midst of the regular workings of the school there is the International Baccalaureate program where students can complete a rigorous course of study on par with A.P. and collegiate level work. It was and still is as far as I can tell, a well-rounded, nurturing place preparing students for next steps and new ways of thinking.

What I remember from my own high school days is probably no different from what many students today experience: late nights cramming for exams, skipping sixth period to play Frisbee in the park on a fresh and bright spring day, the clatter of cafeteria trays and the dull roar of merging lunchtime conversations, meetings in parking lots to

discuss Friday evening's plans, basketball games, after game parties, friends' faces in the halls, some memorable and dedicated teachers and a few bizarre and mysterious ones, and lots of characters in the midst of their own self expression and interactions with one another.

Those relationships were the center of that world--the heart of our high school experience. Students bonded with teachers and coaches. Students explored with other students. Teachers bickered with other teachers unless they were like the media and photography teachers who were inseparable women who wore similar jumper dresses and sandals. Administrators processed with parents. Librarians reprimanded students. Students aggravated librarians. Custodians supported teachers. Teachers ignored custodians. The inner-workings of these complicated relationships stimulated the pulse of the school. And it was the success or failure of these inner-workings that was, ultimately, the success or failure of the school on the whole. For the most part, the participants found a balance and all was well.

I remember the most complex of these relationships being the ones the students negotiated with one another and within their own concepts of self. The same is true for students today and as a teacher I have seen this path of finding self via a variety of young people. Students face an onslaught of portrayals of the American High School and the various cliques and subcultures within.⁵ Young people in the American high school must

⁵ For example: *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, *Glee*, *American Graffiti*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Mean Girls*, *Friday Night Lights*, etc.

come to terms in their own realities with how they relate to their peers, how they come to terms with their own identities, and the various ways in which they will explore reality, perceptions, truth, and creativity.

I have spent the past decade and a half in the midst of this processing, teaching in the public schools of Massachusetts, Texas, and Connecticut; learning from the students within several classrooms all the various ways in which kids explore and create. My time inside of these classrooms with these students has been the most meaningful and challenging of my teaching and learning experiences. The students I came to know were predominately African American, Latino, Cape Verdean, West Indian, Caucasian, and Asian. They grew up on welfare; their parents commuted to Manhattan for high power jobs; they were the sons and daughters of lobstermen, teachers, investors, corrections officers, editors, musicians, restaurant owners, and scientists. They walked to school. They took public transportation. They *rolled* in fifty thousand dollar *slabs*. They rode on the yellow bus. And they got dropped off by Mom. These students shouted in the halls and hollered across the classroom. They whispered when they most wanted to be heard and they came close when they had too much to say. And they laughed.

The public high school, I often recognize, is the microcosmic America in much the same way Kansas has been. No wonder it was so tempting for me to feel at home in the midst of such an environment. In the public high school we can find that idealism and intolerance. We recognize individualism and identity shaping, questioning, and crises. We find America: double distilled.

Swerve

As I explore adolescents and identity formation I think of the styles and routes taken by the students I came to know as a teacher in the public high schools I worked in on their search for their own identities, through experimentation, and in the public high school classrooms we shared. Sometimes, as if traveling on a winding road with no markers or signs, they swerved their way through, changing directions suddenly, or deviating from the direct course. Students in Austin with whom I spent time at various points in our knowing each other, sipped liquid codeine, or “swerve” as they have called it. To do something well or to do it in a manner that is unique and original is, in urban slang terms, “getting your swerve on.” To dance and dance hard is also a way to “get your swerve on.” And, as well, drinking alcohol is also called “swerving,” referring to one’s inability to walk or drive in a straight line. To be cool or in the know, in some youth subcultures, is being “swerve.” As I began to make connections between kids and chemical experimentation, the classroom and the classroom cultures that students become a part of, and the search for identity in which students find themselves I can’t help but think of the adolescent experience as a swerve. They often take an indirect or original path towards something new. They find a deviating way to get from one place to another. They feel the effects of an outside influence on the body. They explore unique and original ways of expressing themselves. This term seems all the more appropriate when we consider the presence of chemical experimentation and influence. And the way the public high school classroom, can at times be a location for unique and extraordinary

exchange. Students write, they analyze, they process, they uncover, they experiment, they exchange, they *swerve*.

Esteem

As a scholar of American culture and specifically of American youth culture, I am most interested in examining the identities within this culture, how they are formed, and the role alcohol and drug use plays within that process of identity formation. In doing so I return to the public high school, the smaller classroom communities within the high school where so much of that formation and exploration occurs, and nine particular students who display and discuss their own evolving identities. Nine students who I organize into three different classifications of identity formation and experimentation will be the focal points of this work. Their self-expression as students in a classroom setting and their various types of chemical experimentation becomes a part of a unique self-discovery.

There are scholars who pursue analysis of the American high school or analysis of relationships within the high school⁶, and there are scholars who look at identity and identity formation via the public school classroom.⁷ There is a wide-ranging and

⁶ Such as Joy Horowitz, David Angus, Edward Krug, Richard Purnell, and James Bryant Conant (among others)

⁷ Ann Arnett Ferguson, Richard Arum, Thomas Newkirk, Pamela Perry, Penelope Eckert all write about various forms of youth identity formation and public schooling.

reaching collection of work about youth and identity formation.⁸ But not enough work has been done to establish the place of alcohol and drug use within the setting of a developing classroom culture and the students' processes of constructing "self" within that context. I hope this work will be situated in the midst of what has already been established and offer a new view of youth, chemical use, and identity formation.

During a course I took during graduate school I began to define and examine the nexus of youth and drug cultures. Having been a teacher, I recognized the delicate and complicated coincidence of young creativity and young drug exploration, between creative expression and chemical-induced expression. I was forced to acknowledge the timing of adolescence, identity formation, experimentation, and high schooling. As Edgar Friedenberg, whose late 1950s classic work on adolescence shocked adults who needed to understand young people in new ways pointed out, "adolescents lack reserves of self esteem"...and that "students are likely to find out that they can only win esteem [at school] by how they look and behave, not for what they are."⁹ Friedenberg explains, "the self is threatened [in a high school setting] while still ill-defined."¹⁰ Despite the fact that Friedenberg was writing in the fifties the issues he raised concerning the role of the

⁸ Nadine Dolby, Anita Harris, Amy Best, Marc Lamont Hill, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Johanna Wyn, Rob White, Gerald R. Adams, Thomas Gullotta, Dan Laughey, Kathleen Gallagher, Raewyn Connell, Jay Mechling, Vendela Vida, etc.

⁹ Edgar Z. Friedenberg, *The Vanishing Adolescent* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1964) 108

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108

high school and the impact of the high school on identity are still relevant. The simultaneous processes of self-identification and of esteem building come at such a remarkable time in the life trajectory of teenagers. During their high school years students become comfortable with various forms of self-expression, refining and defining who they are and how they want to be perceived. And yet in a classroom setting they are constantly assessed. Becoming the focal point for such assessments can limit the willingness of students to share their truest thoughts and experiences.

During my years as a teacher I witnessed this unfortunate scenario of definition and misunderstanding repeatedly. A teacher might make an assumption about a student that is inaccurate and then that teacher shares that assessment with the student. This inaccurate assessment only further directs the student to behave in ways that match the inaccurate assumption rather than in ways that mirror what he or she means or how he or she wants to be perceived. Nathan, a student with whom I grew close in the shoreline high school where I taught in Connecticut, was a thoughtful and inquisitive student. And yet his silence and insecurity in the classroom setting led to many teachers misunderstanding his personality and/or intentions. In my class, Nathan was enthusiastic and engaged, however in math or science, in classes where he did not find a confident voice, he was viewed as complacent, lazy, and disgruntled.¹¹ These assessments further encouraged his withdrawal from participation in those classes. That withdrawal led to failure and Nathan became further isolated from the classroom culture. There is already

¹¹ During several private meetings with Nathan's teachers, I noted these assessments in my teaching notes.

such a precarious balance for students in a classroom setting, between how they want to be perceived and how they actually *are* perceived. In this study, I will explore this balance even further while also examining the role alcohol and drug use plays in complicating the students' processes of finding identity.

Or, another scenario: a student is criticized for a way of thinking, feeling, or projecting while the “way” is still soft and forming which encourages the student to back away from the thought, feeling or projection, or to back away from sharing entirely. Dom, a student in Dorchester, Massachusetts, was coming to terms with his desire to quit smoking marijuana before school in the morning so that he would be better prepared for class. With some courage he shared this desire with his classmates during a discussion of youth culture and expression. A fellow student, Andre, interrupted Dom to laugh with great gusto at this declaration and asked repeatedly if Dom really thought he could handle such a goal. Dom, after being the subject of much discussion and debate, stormed out of the classroom and asked to complete his classwork in the main office for the rest of the day. Dom did not back away from his decision to stop smoking before class in the mornings, but he was less enthusiastically open for the duration of the term and, I noticed, did not walk to lunch with the group with whom he had once been close.¹² While this decision to pull away from the group was not necessarily *only* a response to the berating and teasing in class, it was an indication that Dom's relationship with drug use and his relationship with his peers was intricately linked. He was no longer

¹² These observations and behavior changes pulled from my personal notes, 1996, Dorchester, MA.

comfortable being a peer to his peers, let alone expressing himself openly and honestly with them. His sense of self, while still forming in his own mind, was in flux based on his relationship with drug use and his relationship with his peers. Their assessment of him influenced and altered his projection of self.

For a student, winning esteem is often prompted by the alignment of a student's intended projections of self and the perceptions from others of those projections. As Susan Harter explains in her work on self construction, "For some adolescents, the opinions of selected subgroups, rather than of mainstream classmates, become critical to their self-definition."¹³ In these particular classrooms, a new subgroup was formed. The larger collective peer group was in another realm, outside of the door of whatever room we were in. Inside the classroom, we had forged our own subgroup identity and the students were able to toy around with varying projections and conceptions of self while watching these projections mirrored back to them via the other students in the room. Although the students never spoke of our group as a new and evolving culture, it was a legitimate subgroup in which they often expressed comfort and a willingness to share. In each classroom a specific and particular subculture existed. In various ways we created ways of being and doing that were unique to each class. We shared our inside jokes based on a common history. We developed wordplay and phrases, *argots*,¹⁴ that were

¹³ Susan Harter, *The Construction of Self: A Developmental Perspective* (New York: Guilford Press 1999) 177.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain* (London: Routledge 1993). 43. Hall discusses the presence of an argot, or a "secret" language or code to which only members of the group possessed the key" in subcultural groups. 43.

reflective of our shared experience. The opinions of others mattered to each of the students. We were intimately connected.

In addition to the obvious elements comprising student self-esteem building, many of the nonwhite students I present here were additionally confronting various types of acculturation and assimilation, especially those who were newly immigrated or first generation Americans. The Cape Verdeans in Dorchester and first generation Latinos in east Austin were in the midst of formulating their bi-cultural selves. In her efforts to determine the psychological impacts of biculturalism on minorities, Teresa LaFromboise and her colleagues offers a definition that allows that anyone living within two cultures with ties to both cultures is *bicultural* and that there are five models “used to understand the process of change that occurs in transitions within, between, and among culture...(:) assimilation, acculturation, alternation, multiculturalism, and fusion.”¹⁵ The students who were confronting their own transitions from and within more than one ethnic culture were strapped with those questions of assimilating as they become a part of this classroom culture while in the midst of forming their own personal identities.

Coming to terms with the perceptions of peers is a complicated process for any adolescent. Often, as we all have learned through our own experiences with our peers our perceived understandings of others are often not the same as what others intend for us to perceive, as are the ways in which we ourselves are perceived not necessarily in line with our own understandings of ourselves. There are various ways in which a young

¹⁵ Teresa LaFromboise, Hardin L. K. Coleman, and Jennifer Gerton, “Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 1993, Vol. 114, No. 3, 395-412. 396.

person can win esteem from his or her peers. The students I focus on in this study are all students who, in addition to openly and honestly experimenting with alcohol and drug use were granted a relative amount of esteem or, at least, infamy, by their peers. These particular students were standouts, either because they were in the midst of fusing both bicultural and evolving personal identities, because they were remarkably creative and talented, or because they challenged and pushed ways of being and doing that caught the attention of others. In addition, they encouraged my own interest in what makes alcohol and drug use, as well as various constructions of youth identity, such meaningful topics of study.

The students on whom I have chosen to focus were remarkable students. They were all original thinkers, active participants in their own journeys as American youth and as students despite the fact that many went through various phases of wheel-spinning and consequence paying. What they have in common is that they were all in some form or another rebellious creatures. Deviants. Challengers. Innovators. Convention breakers. In many ways, although they were at times accepted and admired by their peers, they were “outsiders.” People who were not within the realm of “normal” behavior. Or, as Howard Becker describes them, in his work *Outsiders*, they were “people who were judged by others to be deviant and thus to stand outside the circle...of people who make the rules he had been found guilty of breaking.”¹⁶ In this study, the

¹⁶ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York, Free Press; London, Collier Macmillan, 1966) 15.

primary focus is on exploration, the classroom, and identity finding within that context, and yet I must also consider the valid issue of rule-breaking and from whom many of these students were fleeing. Of the students I present here, Neni in east Austin rebels from any adult or authority figure with whom she comes into contact. Dori in Shoreline Connecticut is the counter to her community focused, do-gooder physician father. Sean, also from Connecticut, must face the ridicule and scorn of an entire community in the aftermath of his being responsible for his best friend's death. Davi, a Cape Verdean in Dorchester is the alternative to the stereotypical drug dealer and so attempts to escape that boundary.

Becker claims, "The problems they (the outsiders) face in dealing with their environments, the history and traditions they carry with them, all lead to the evolution of different sets of rules."¹⁷ In this way, the students I present are all relatively similar in that they are forming new rules. Rules that are counter to the rules imposed on them by others, whether through peer expectation, parental control, authority enforcement, or even as a response to old rules that they had once set up for themselves. Becker's point, that "deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it,"¹⁸ is a valid one, here, as well, as we look at student exchange and identity as it is constructed within a classroom setting. Much of the formulating of identity through experimentation and expression of that

¹⁷ Ibid., 15

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

identity within the classroom is rooted in a desire to illicit a particular response from someone, whether it was teacher, peer, or the classroom community as a whole, and thus fits Becker's labeling theory.

It was the case with each of these nine students that their peers knew whom they were for better or for worse, and their identities were intrinsically linked to their experimentation with alcohol and drugs. They were all creative thinkers. At the time of knowing each of these students I was drawn in, certain that each one of them would find a worthwhile path for themselves. But what I hope to establish here is that these students constructed for themselves an identity that was rooted in rebellion and discontent. And that their experimentation with alcohol and drugs during their time in the classrooms that we shared was a key element to their process of finding and establishing their identities.

Rebellion, whether it be in the form of unconventional thinking, resistance to school, shocking words, misbehavior, drug experimentation, law breaking, disobedience, articulated discontent, political protest, or creative expression, has been the backbone of contemporary youth culture and expression. In America, *rebellion* and *youth* have been synonymous. Throughout the dynamic American timeline, the youth culture has often been the voice for change. But often, change comes from a deviation in the anticipated, conventional path. As Lawrence Grossberg in his essays on postmodernism, politics, and culture, suggests, "youth, as it came to define a generation, also came to define America itself." Grossberg argues that youth energy, "its commitment to openness and change, its

celebratory relation to the present, and its promise of the future,” are key elements to the American identity.¹⁹

American youth culture and the rebellion inside of that culture has been the impetus for several national and cultural steps forward. In the early battles of the Civil Rights movement, young people fought over and protested against the segregation and desegregation of American public schools. Families were divided in the late 1960s and 1970s by the younger generation’s objections to American involvement in the war in Vietnam. American Indian activism, such as the rebellion that occurred in the 1973, the Second Battle of Wounded Knee, in which young American Indians fought in support of a more traditional tribal government, is yet another instance of youth-inspired need for change. Paula Mitchell Marks, through her work, *In a Barren Land*, asserts that American Indians found “social ferment enveloping the United States itself, as other ethnic groups...asserted their own rights and ethnic pride, and as “mainstream” youth questioned the values of the dominant culture.”²⁰ Many of the wars waged inside the country have been the result of that youth quest for change and the discomfort that set in in the minds of the preceding generations.

A youth-inspired, rebellious tone to change in America has also been glorified through the words of characters in the American literary canon. In the respective classrooms in which I interacted with these particular students, these were the words we

¹⁹ Lawrence Grossberg, *It’s a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics, and Culture* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988).

²⁰ Paula Mitchell Marks, *In a Barren Land: American Indian Dispossession and Survival* (New York, NY: Quill, William Morrow, 1998) 317.

discussed and analyzed. I cannot help but recognize that our natural and organic inclination to compare and contrast the words of these rebellious, adolescent “heroes” did not somehow contribute to what these students shared in class or at least contribute to their comfort in so doing. In the texts we read we often recognized a call for an unconventional path toward finding identity. The students often commented that the rebellious and devious natures of the characters we analyzed were natures with which they could identify.²¹

When reading Mark Twain we recognized that change occurs by way of the youth perspective. A young narrator, who challenged the conventions proposed by the society in which he was born and raised, ignited a heated debate during our discussion of Twain’s text in the shoreline Connecticut high school. Huckleberry Finn asserted his moral dilemmas with his young and thoughtful voice and the students were drawn in to the text because of Huck’s honesty and self-examining nature.

Sean, one of the students who I discuss more at length in a following section was animated and energetic during our discussion of Huck’s famous declaration. “All right, then, I’ll *go* to hell.”²² Huck is decisive and committed here and then tears up the letter he wrote to Miss Watson that tells of her slave Jim’s whereabouts. In a written response to

²¹ The particular texts I chose were texts that highlighted youth with unconventional natures. It was not my intention to encourage rebellion, per se, but often, I found that many students most connected to texts with young protagonists who showed rebellious natures. As my personal class notes from Dorchester and Austin indicate, the students commented that they recognized struggles within the texts that were similar to their own.

²² Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, C. 1885 and 1995) 202.

this textual moment, Sean writes that he is inspired by Huck's discovery of his own "right" which differs from the "right" imposed on him by society.²³ How much did reading this text contribute to Sean's own comfort level with projecting the details of his own identity formation or the details of his own history with convention breaking and deviance? I will never know the answer to this but the larger issue is that in moments such as this one, there was an expression and element of identity formation that took place in the classroom that was unique and separate from any other moment and that could only have happened then, in that setting, and within that context.

I noticed in several students a similar connection to youth protagonists when we analyzed Henry James' character, Daisy Miller. The societal morals imposed on her by the "class" in which she found herself were the impetuses for her articulating a rebellious nature. Young Daisy allows herself to be escorted by different men on nightly strolls—instigating uproar within her community. Daisy, a young, single, upper-middle class woman with a mind of her own voiced an opposition to society's codes of conduct. Her extremism and break from the norm was inspiring and intriguing to Emma, in particular, who identified in Daisy a similarity to her own path toward finding an identity outside of the one that was defined, in part, by Emma's mother.²⁴ It was intriguing to me that once we read this text in class Emma's volunteering of the intimate details of her journey through alcohol experimentation, whether these details were shared in class vocally or in the reading journals each student completed, became even more graphic, more bold, and

²³ Sean essay response. October, 2005.

²⁴ Emma, reading log and self-evaluation. 2006.

less delicate. At one point during the class discussion, Emma interjected without raising her hand, “See, we all have to break away and act like dicks just to make our way.”²⁵

The rebellious and deviant nature of the students I present here was made even more meaningful, in terms of a study on adolescents and identity formation, once we had read and discussed these and other texts in the classroom. Rebellion, as it is understood on a general level as a veering from status quo or a conventional approach, became the topic we explored in the texts we read and yet it was also the specific element to these particular students’ natures that called to me as a scholar. It should be mentioned that my own role as a teacher, the individual who decided what we read and discussed and how we shared our responses to the text and my role as scholar and writer, someone who was ceaselessly intrigued by adolescent behavior and identity finding, are variables to how these students became more “real” to me. Obviously, the students did not know that I was taking notes on more than just their performance as students, although they did know that I considered myself to be a writer. They did know that I was interested in every detail of what they were willing to share. So did they open up more because of that knowledge? Maybe. That variable and that unknown are worth consideration.

²⁵ Taken from my personal teaching journal, 2006.

Classroom as Location

The three schools at which I taught and grew to know the particular students I share here are located in three very different communities, in three very different American neighborhoods, in three very different cities. What is fascinating to me is that in terms of the high schools themselves despite the fact that they serve very different types of families with varying socio-economic backgrounds, they all suffered from the same basic things: disgruntled teachers, poor resources, wavering community involvement, and uninspired students. There were remarkably bright students in all three schools with their own goals and talent to keep them inspired and directed. There were teachers who tried their best and offered a great deal of thoughtfully detailed subject matter and material. And there were staff members and administrators who cared. But on the whole, it has been my experience in *all* of the high schools I have taught, the plague is more than likely a complicated and convoluted national education system. That must be mentioned before details of the schools themselves are mentioned. In many cases the schools and our system do not properly and dynamically serve *most* students. And it is difficult to determine how much of that failing has anything to do with what the students chose to explore or ignore of the drug and alcohol culture found in so many high

schools, and how much of the current state of public high schooling has to do with the various ways students form their identities while they are in attendance.

If, as such disparate scholars such as G. S. Hall, Anna Freud, Otto Rank, James Marcia, and Eduard Spranger (among others) have argued, adolescence is the period in which many of us form our first opinions and a self-chosen set of values and goals, then certainly the high school is a location where much of that opinion and value shaping occurs. Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, and John Dewey, in addition to other more contemporary theorists, all identify adolescence as the stage in which identity formation occurs. Erikson's fifth stage of development, adolescence, is when individuals form the "who am I?" questions that inspire various types of answer forming and discovery. Rather than being shaped by what is "done to us" this is when, according to Erikson, we are most shaped by what we do.²⁶ Adolescence is when we differentiate ourselves *vis a vi* our peers and when we most begin to recognize our social and cultural roles. The adolescent must come to terms with the processes of differentiation from the family of origin and assimilation into the peer group or school cultures. The adolescent or "growing child" in this search for identity must develop a sense of "actuality from the awareness that his individual way of mastering experience is a...variant...of a group identity."²⁷ As a teacher, recognizing in the students this exploration and self-discovery while maintaining a gaze on the classroom culture and separate group dynamics can be a most exciting and meaningful element of working with adolescents. In each of the

²⁶ Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968)

²⁷ Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985) 235.

classrooms, within each of these schools, I found a different group dynamic and a variety of individual personalities. But much of what I saw from classroom to classroom, group to group, was a similar process and way finding. Students learn to find their own voice and discover their role within a classroom culture simultaneously, often, and it is this strange comingling of self and many, the “I vs. we” that I watched with great attention and interest. Erikson’s argument that the fifth stage of development forces a young person to come to terms with fitting in and finding their own identity while differentiating between right and wrong, was to me an appropriate argument given that I was watching these students contend with finding a place within the classroom community while experimenting chemically. Indeed, I watched these processes played out in “real time.”

Howard Becker recognizes the steps required in an individual’s foray into certain types of behavior, such as deviance and rebellion, as steps that are taken in much the same way as a person might take steps towards a “career.”²⁸ I observed the students bravely and also hesitatingly approach these steps. I took notes on their respective attempts. And I tried not to incorporate judgment or opinion into my notations of their efforts.

While Erikson argues that a young adult, exhausted from the search for and insistence on identity, is eager to identify and merge with the identity of others²⁹, I am most intrigued by those young adults who while searching for their own identity and

²⁸ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, 23.

²⁹ Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 263

place pull away from their peer group and the generalized mode of conduct and expression within that group. The students presented here are all students who while maintaining an active role within the subgroup of the classroom, also maintained a solid position just outside of the group culture, responding to, voicing against, or recovering from the expectations and norms set up by the group.

However, in contrast to what Edward Dreyfus identifies in adolescents with rebellious natures as an alienation that arises from becoming overwhelmed by the demands of adjusting simultaneously to the pressures of internal and external elements of change³⁰ and a desertion of any form of “identity” I noticed in these “rebellious” students less of an alienation and more of a recognized place within the classroom and their immediate peer sub-cultures. Dreyfus argues that those who rebel and then suffer alienation experience a sense of “incongruousness between oneself and the world. There is a sense of estrangement which has no concrete focus.”³¹ But what I saw happening with the risk takers and their peers inside the classroom was an organic process of identification and acceptance rather than a feeling, on the part of the rebels, of estrangement. Often, there were moments for each of the students who I have identified as rebellious or challenging when they felt pushed out of the conventional circles because of their natures or choices but at the same time, regardless of what was happening to them in relation to their place within these communities, these specific students seemed to accept their own identities rather than entirely rejecting an identity. What occurs

³⁰ Edward A. Dreyfus, *Adolescence: Theory and Experience* (CreateSpace, 1976) 20.

³¹ *Ibid*, 20.

within the search for identity for each of these students is most remarkable. And while each of the students I present here had moments of rebellion and unconventional way-finding, they suffered less from “alienation” and more from their own internal struggles. Sean in Shoreline, Connecticut, was faced with charges of vehicular manslaughter and the disappointment and apparent disgust from community members and certain peers. But in my observation of him I saw him less as alienated from the classroom community and larger school community and more as a victim of and often hero of his own journey and searching. Certainly, Nando in east Austin suffered from some loneliness as he was chronologically older than the other students in the classroom and in turn tended to behave more maturely, but his rebellious nature never seemed to derive from or lead to alienation within the classroom or his larger peer group. Rebellion, in both of these cases, seemed to be the result of discontent, boredom, and a quest for various types of expression, rather than as a symptom of an overwhelmed nature or an inherent discomfort with internal and external change.

Experimentation

It would be foolish of me to embark on a presentation such as this one without first offering some discussion and analysis of the paths towards chemical addiction and experimentation. There are a variety of reasons a young person experiments with alcohol and drugs, but none so simple as the basic fact that for many it “feels good.” A 1988 work entitled, *Adolescents, Alcohol and Drugs: A Practical Guide for Those Who Work with Young People*, by Judith Jaynes, points out that “people become addicted, not so much because the drug produces a physical dependence, but because they want to achieve again and again, those good feelings.”³² We can see that many young people enjoy feeling buzzed. They want to be high. They seek new sensations once and then again. But what I hope to examine is how these sensations, or the students’ quest to capture these sensations repeatedly, are linked to the students’ own paths toward establishing their identity. I want to do more than offer the evidence that students experiment or that students enjoy experimenting, or even that students experiment because of such and such reason. I want to provide a student-centered look at the ways in which chemical

³³ Judith H. Jaynes and Cheryl A. Rugg, *Adolescents, Alcohol, and Drugs: A Practical Guide for Those Who Work with Young People* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1988) 6.

experimentation contribute to a student's identity formation within the context of an American classroom.

The path towards addiction is fraught with a variety of contributing factors.³³ In no way do I mean to make diagnoses of these adolescents nor do I mean to minimize the concerning and heartbreaking elements of this path. The students who I observed, especially those who used on a regular basis, kept me up at night. I wondered whether or not I should do more than just observe them and care for them when they were in my classroom. My use of the term experimentation is not meant to offer a diminished analysis of what some of these students were doing to themselves or working towards. Whether or not they were headed towards addiction is beyond the scope of this project and is certainly no less valuable a question.

Diana Baumrind and Kenneth A. Moselle, writing in the late 1980s, in their article, "A Developmental Perspective on Adolescent Drug Use," argue that if by "identity we mean the adolescent's ability to conserve a sense of continuity through the act of validating simultaneously the interest of personal emancipation and the claims of mutually shared social norms, then we would hypothesize that the use of drugs would be associated with a hiatus in identity formation."³⁴ For the nine students on whom I focus here the process of forming an identity was clearly *in progress* not *in hiatus*. The

³³ For a more sophisticated and specific look at the risk and preventative factors of adolescent drug use see Hawkins, Catalano, Miller, 1992, <http://www.unescap.org/esid/hds/pubs/2287/s2.pdf>

³⁴ Diana Baumrind and Kenneth A. Moselle, "A Developmental Perspective on Adolescent Drug Abuse," Judith S. Brook, Dan J. Lettieri, and David W. Brook, eds., *Alcohol and Substance Abuse in Adolescence* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 1985). 56.

students' chemical use might have complicated the formation or clouded the outcomes, but it did not put the formation of their identities at rest. The students were still interested in freeing themselves while maintaining a fair share of norms. They were convention breakers but they were still students, doing the things that students do. Baurmind and Moselle's definition of "identity" is problematic for me. I do not see it as an ability to conserve a sense of continuity through the act of validating emancipation and shared norms. It isn't, for many adolescents a process of continuity. Identity can be a disjointed thing. And the process can be even more disconnected and crooked. Adolescents swerve towards finding themselves and creating their identities. The cleanest summation for me: identity is the combination of internal and external forces that make us individuals.

The Social Identity Theory is a relevant one in that asserts that a person has not one self but several different selves that correspond with varying levels of group membership.³⁵ In the classroom I recognized that students were offering identities that were a bit different than what I saw in private sessions, or at a breakdancing practice, or at a show, or on the streets. I am well aware of the fact that the students were in the midst of a process and that no student had fully formed their identities inside or outside of the classroom. But they were experimenting and processing and sharing. That context is what I am interested in.

Adolescence and experimentation often go hand in hand. While a young person recognizes from within a need for breaking away from the expectations and demands of

³⁵ John Turner and Henry Tajfel devised this definition in the 1970s and 80s.

family members or authority figures, they find ways in which to push boundaries, resist, and participate in “timeouts” from appropriate behaviors and activities at the same time.

Mary Douglas, in her work on drinking that offers an anthropological perspective, reminds us that industrialized society is structured in clock-framed increments.³⁶ There are clear indicators to the phases of a workday. Work begins. Lunch. Meetings. More work. The end of the workday. A commute home. Mondays begin the week. Fridays begin the weekend. The public high school offers a very similar regimented structure. Many of the students I have taught have often commented on the rigidity of the high school routine that is framed by windows of time and the ringing of bells. One student once referred to hers as a “life of bells.” The students are told where to go, when to go, how to go. Often, they go begrudgingly, craving a break from routines. Douglas reminds us of the lines between work and leisure and the ever-clarifying distinction between the two in modern life. “Leisure must be seen in contrast to the demands of work. The different contexts of time are also different contexts of comportment.”³⁷ For the high school student, although there are markings to the beginning and ending of a window of time, leisure time and work time are not always clearly delineated. Work time at the library turns into leisure time at the coffee shop after the library. The school day ends with sports and then with pizza. The weekend is a football game attended with school friends. And yet, the young person must find ways to mark beginnings and endings so

³⁶ Mary Douglas, *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003) 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74

that they don't lose their way in the coming and going. Douglas' contexts of time and compartment are contexts for the high school student but not as clearly marked. A beginning of leisure time might coincide with school related activities. Or, as I noticed, timeout behavior can occur while a student is at school during a bathroom break or a trip to the drinking fountain. Douglas also reminds us that "the great threat to organization is disorganization: the failure to conduct ourselves in accordance with rules."³⁸ It is not so clear for the student to necessarily know when timeout behavior can begin and how best to organize time and conduct. Clearly, what I have observed as a teacher is that some of the most expressive and identity shaping "time" occurs when behavior and organized conduct are foregone.

Many of the students I describe in this work were "punished" by authority figures for their behavior when celebration and experimentation happened on school property or at a school sanctioned function. A dance or a game or an after school club outing do not occur within the frame of the working school day. The students loosen their hold on their workday selves while participating in a school related activity and the experimentation and location do not fit. Students are suspended or expelled or are barred from similar events in the future. Does the punishment lead to more experimentation or more leisure time celebration? Is it a sick cycle that we encourage our students to enter into because the punishments authority figures offer do not necessarily lead a student towards more constructive behaviors? Possibly. As a teacher, I was always struck by the strange

³⁸ Ibid., 75

nature of a suspension or an expulsion from school as a response to student behaviors that are steeped in a desire to flee the confines of school life and behavior. The punishment never seemed appropriate or helpful in mitigating the severity of that desire in many students. And, as a teacher, it was plain frustrating to try to hang on to a student each day and then lose them to a suspension or expulsion. I always felt that what they most needed was more time with me, not more time at home or on the streets doing whatever it was that got them in trouble in the first place.

Douglas reminds us of the work of Edgerton and McAndrew³⁹ who first offered the term “time-out” to indicate a remission from the routines of day-to-day life and behavior.⁴⁰ Drinking, or any drug use, becomes then a moment or pause when one allows relaxation and a loosening of social norms or constraints. Students, eager to flee the confinement of the classroom or their life of structured windows of time or experience, mark the end of their work with various sorts of loosening: wearing different clothing, putting on make-up, showing tattoos or piercings, drinking, smoking, bending curfews. However, those endings are not always an end to connections with the school or school related activities. For a student, a “time-out” isn’t always as clear-cut as it is for an adult in the working world who goes to a “happy hour” away from the office and before they go home to their families.

³⁹ Craig McAndrew and Robert Edgerton, *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation* (Chicago, Illinois: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969)

⁴⁰ Douglas, *Constructive Drinking*, 78.

The term I use to describe these students' relationship with alcohol and drug use is *experimentation* and I do not intend to use the word euphemistically. My decision to use this term, rather than another one such as addiction, abuse, or dependence, stems from my desire to focus on the journey of finding identity, rather than on the complicated relationship between an individual and a chemical. In a somewhat hopeful opinion, none of the students I share here necessarily showed signs of being life-long addicts although I have only discussed their current relationship with alcohol and drug use with a handful of the nine students in this work. The students' behavior and the fact that their hold on themselves and their expression seemed stronger than the hold on them of any one drug or substance were obvious enough indicators of their lack of substance dependence. A more constructive exploration might be the one that speculates on the reasons behind a student's experimentation and how those reasons might merge with their growing and evolving sense of their own identity.

In the 1960s, the typical and more dominant perspectives on deviant behaviors were the ones that focused on structural interactionism and socialization control.⁴¹ L. E. Wells in *Theories of Deviance and the Self Concepts* explains that the scholarly work that was presented at that time were works that focused on the roles of personal events, interactional processes and social structures⁴²as crucial elements on a young person's

⁴¹ L. E. Wells, "Theories of Deviance and the Self-Concept" *Social Psychology* 41: 198-204.

⁴² Wells, 189.

path toward deviance.⁴³ Deviance, as a cultural trend, one brought on by larger social influences, was initially established, a half a century before the 1960s, by Emile Durkheim. Robert Franzese, in his *The Sociology of Deviance*, reminds us that in his *Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim “introduced the term *anomie*, which means normlessness...and that Durkheim argued that deviance can result when the norms and rules of society become less clear and ambiguous.”⁴⁴ Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess introduced social learning theory in 1966 that argued that criminal or deviant behavior was learned through interaction with others.⁴⁵

Beginning in the 1970s many scholars argued that there were more relevant issues of self-esteem in a young person’s tendency towards deviance,⁴⁶ while Akers continued with his learning theory. In 1973, Akers proposed a more fully explicated version of social learning theory, which he applied to a variety of deviant behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse.⁴⁷ In his expanding theory, individuals learned to use alcohol or drugs in much the same way they learned to be deviant—by association, reinforcement, and

⁴³ For example, see A. K. Cohen’s *Delinquent Boys*, which argues that deviance is a subcultural phenomenon.

⁴⁴ Robert J. Franzese, *The Sociology of Deviance: Differences, Tradition, and Stigma* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, LTD. 2009) 34.

⁴⁵ Robert L. Burgess and Ronald L. Akers, *Prospects for an Experimental Analysis in Criminology* (Department of Sociology, University of Washington, 1966).

⁴⁶ See Peter M. Hall and John P. Hewitt, “The Quasi-theory of Communication and the Management of Dissent.” *Social Problems* 18 (Summer 1970: 17-27 and Howard B. Kaplan, *Self-Attitudes and Deviant Behavior* (Glenview, Illinois: Goodyear Publishing Co., 1975).

⁴⁷ Christine Sellers, John Cochran, and L. Thomas Winfree, Jr., “Social Learning Theory and Courtship Violence: An Empirical Test,” Ronald L. Akers and Gary F. Jensen, eds., *Social Learning Theory and the Explanation of Crime* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003) 109.

imitation.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Howard Kaplan, in *Self Attitudes and Deviant Behavior* focuses on esteem, rather than society, and defines self-esteem as feelings that “refer to the emotional experiences of the subject upon perceiving and evaluating his own attributes and behaviors.”⁴⁹ It was commonly held that deviance was an issue of self-esteem, and inside force that led towards deviance, but that deviance was created by society.

During the 80s and 90s, there was a general trend among social workers and theorists toward identifying in young people specific reasons for deviant behavior in the form of chemical experimentation that were rooted in self-devaluation and rejection. As Kaplan (et al) argue in their 1982 article on deviant behavior,⁵⁰ “deviant responses, in general, are regarded as responses motivated by the earlier development of self-rejecting attitudes in the course of normative participation in any of a variety of interpersonal or social interactions, and as functioning more or less effectively to assuage the intrinsically distressful self-rejecting attitudes.”⁵¹

However, I find fault with these analyses because, as Wells points out, “an...issue in the use of self-concept in deviance literature is the tendency to deal with “self” as a

⁴⁸ Ronald L. Akers, Marvin D. Krohn, Lon Lanza-Kaduce, and Marcia Radosevich, “Social Learning and Deviant Behavior: A Specific Test of a General Theory,” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 44 (August 1979) 636-655.

⁴⁹ Howard B. Kaplan, *Self-Attitudes and Deviant Behavior* (Glenview, Illinois: Goodyear Publishing Co., 1975) 10 and 11.

⁴⁹ Howard B. Kaplan, et al, “Application of a General Theory of Deviant Behavior: Self-Derogation and Adolescent Drug Use” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 1982, Vol. 23 (December), 274-294.

⁵⁰ Kaplan (1982), 274

single, homogenous thing, rather than a dynamic collection or organization of separable and distinguishable self-conceptions, each tied to specific situations, roles, relationships, skills, physical features, etc.”⁵² In the cases of these students and their respective behaviors, their “selves” were not just dynamic collections of self-conceptions tied to specific situations, etc., but were also mirrors of the perceptions of them held by the others in the classroom. I argue that the ways in which these students saw themselves in the eyes of their peers had much to do with their own behaviors and interpretations and projections of their own identities. Not only is the self, for these students more than a single, homogenous thing, the self is also a comingling of an individual’s collection of concepts of their own identity and the concepts of others.

For the students in this work, I saw their experimentation and deviant behavior not as indicators of a self-rejecting attitude, but rather as magnifiers of creativity, charisma, or rebellion. More recently, scholars have designated a period of time during which an adolescent participates in experimental substance use (ESU), during which a substance has not become a regular part of their lives.⁵³ The students who I present here were often more linked to their experimentation than simply as “an” experiment. Their use seemed part of a larger *experimentation* rather than as singular episodic experiments. Many of the students used substances every day, sometimes at varying points in the day,

⁵¹ Wells, 196

⁵³ See R. Clayton, “Transitions in drug use: Risk and protective factors,” M. D. Glantz and R. W. Pickens, eds., *Vulnerability to Drug Abuse* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press)15-22., and Petraitis, Flay, and Miller, “Reviewing Theories of Adolescent Substance Use: Organizing Pieces in the Puzzle,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 1995, No. 1, 67-86.

and often not as a “time-out” but more as a way to soften the stress of the “time-in” periods (the periods during which they were expected to follow the normative socially or educationally coded behaviors). Were these students verging on opening themselves up to a potential future of substance abuse? Possibly. But the tendency to use or experiment more regularly seemed less of a symptom of larger use issues and more as key elements to their chosen form of expression or identity.

We must consider the key elements that shape the reasons behind these students’ use, why they chose to use the substances they used, and how these reasons helped to comprise each student’s journey toward identity formation. Petraitis, Flay, and Miller, in their 1995 article on adolescent substance use argue that three distinct influences shape the theories of ESU. These influences are social or normative influences, cultural or attitudinal influences, and interpersonal influences.⁵⁴ And while, generally speaking, these may be helpful summations of the reasons behind general ESU in adolescents nationwide, I do not feel that these theoretical reasons contributed as much towards the journeys for these specific students, nor do they necessarily enrich my desire to uncover the various types of self-expression and identity formation that I observed in the classrooms I shared with these students. But I will consider how the specific reasons behind each student’s use, as much as could be determined by someone in my position, contributed to these students’ choices. We are all influenced by our peers, our circumstances, our cultural heritages. We cannot deny the strength of those influences,

⁵³ Petraitis, Flay, and Miller, “Reviewing Theories of Adolescent Substance Use: Organizing Pieces in the Puzzle,” *Psychological Bulletin*, 1995, No. 1, 67-86

but I want to focus, here, less on how these influences shaped these students' choices to explore and more on how these students' choices to explore contributed to their own search for identity.

For the purposes of this study, I argue that the reasons these students explored chemically were directly related to the finding and refining of three specific identity types and processes that I have defined. These nine students fit into three different categories of identity formation. The first, **Creative Through Chemical** offers three different examples of students whose exploration is specifically linked to their creative expression and experimentation. The second, **Charisma Through Chemical** offers three different students whose infectious and energetic personalities are magnified or heightened by their chemical exploration. And the third category, **Challenge Through Chemical**, offers three students whose rebellious natures and challenges to the status quo were made more extraordinary by way of their chemical experimentation. The three identity types were evident within the classroom and the classroom was where much of the articulation of these identities occurred.

The students who fit into these three categories were not students who necessarily suffered from overwhelming peer influences or who rebelled because they felt in order to fit in to a specific subculture they must engage in deviant behavior. They were not students whose significant other encouraged them to experiment. And they were not students who were told to resist experimentation.

Instead, in all cases, the students chose to experiment with or without peer collaboration or encouragement, with or without parental controls or input, with or

without cultural signals. That choice to experiment was, in each case, directly linked to the type of identity each student was seeking or encouraging within themselves and voicing in the classroom. Nando in east Austin was a prolific codeine sipper because he believed that codeine contributed to his particular graffiti style and identity. He was immersed in a youth subculture that celebrated the music of DJ Screw, a musician who glorified sipping “the drank” or “lean” (liquid codeine mixed with grape soda), but it became obvious to me that Nando sipped more for his creative expression and less to “fit in.” He sipped to find a new vehicle for transformation and expression in an already transformative creative expression. Graffiti is an artistic expression that changes the scope or communicative power within a built structure. Nando’s art was, he felt, even more filled with potential if created in conjunction with codeine use.

Sean, in shoreline Connecticut, drank to excess and experimented in other ways simply because he seemed deeply connected to his need to be and do differently from everyone else and to challenge expectations and predictions. He came from a working class, Irish American family and had a father who drank at the bar watching sports. But, as he explained to me, “the booze was never exposed in our house. No one ever drank out in the open but my sister and I always knew it was done.”⁵⁴ Sean’s peers were peers I would describe as “heavy drinkers.” I knew they drank to the point of consistently vomiting their way through their weekends and that they drank in groups, encouraging each other on. But Sean was different. His drinking, as he has said in many interviews

⁵⁴ Follow-up interview with Sean, September 2008.

since my time as his teacher, “was entirely on him.” No one else pressured or encouraged him to use. Sean simply wanted to push the limit and in the end, pushed a variety of boundaries including his own understanding of what he thought he could live through.

Davi, a Cape Verdean living in Dorchester, Massachusetts, smoked because his occupational success as a dealer was contingent upon the quality of the herb he sold (he had to smoke to know) and because he believed smoking herb helped him to be the even more relaxed, even more easy-going, even more likeable person than he already was. “To be kind you gotta smoke the kind,⁵⁶⁵⁷” Davi once said to me. He was a Cape Verdean who sold marijuana to Dorchester residents, many of them islanders and many seeking the “ganja lifestyle,” but Davi would have smoked in the way he did no matter to whom he was selling. He was a serious businessman and never missed an appointment or a chance to earn a connection or a sale. He smoked in much the same way, as if it was a necessary part of his success and likeability as a promoter of his product and his self. He made others feel comfortable and was as consistently kind, relaxed, and nurturing to his peers, as he was punctual and responsible.

If we analyze the trajectories of each student within these categories we can see the connection between their experimentation and the formation of their classroom and adolescent identities. The classroom, as a micro-microcosmic America, if we view the

⁵⁵ “Kind bud,” “kind,” or “kind herb” are terms used by many marijuana users to describe high quality product.

⁵⁶ Taken from my personal notes following a conversation I had with Davi just before his graduation in June of 1997.

American High School as the microcosmic American identity double-distilled, is the ideal lens through which we can view the adolescent search for self.

Presentation of the Communities, Schools and Classrooms

In this section, I am going to jump away from the topic of experimentation and chemical use in order to firmly establish the three communities within which I taught and the climate of each school and classroom. It is important to recognize the particular relevant historical and cultural details that comprise these communities' past and present in order to clarify from where these students came and all that we had to contend with outside of the classroom and within. It is also worth noting that in each community I was in many ways an outsider. Indeed I grew up in Kansas and attended that quintessential, romantically situated high school and lived on the same street where my parents worked. By way of my own cultural and geographic past, I knew nothing about these communities and what it was like to be a member of one. But part of my learning as a teacher was that slowly realized process of "becoming." In each case, I lived in or very near to the community where I taught and over time became a member of both the residential and classroom communities. For example, my rides on the bus from Jamaica Plain to Dorchester each morning happened to be some of the most revealing and shockingly

stark moments of discovery. I feel that through those rides I gained an access to people and behaviors I could have never gained elsewhere. But for me, different from the students, I had to work my way to that position. Except for the students who were newly immigrated, the students lived and grew up in these neighborhoods and the neighborhood “story” was as much a part of their finding their own identities as anything else.

In truth, much of what I analyze here has to be considered in conjunction with so many other meaningful variables. How each student’s family of origin behaved. What was the ethnic make-up of everyone related to the student and how much of that ethnic heritage was the student aware. What each student did to earn money. How each student related to his or her boss, his or her pastor or minister or spiritual guide? What each student was contending with in body or mind. I will offer some details pertaining to those variables but my focus, once I more thoroughly present the details of the community and school environments, has to be on the ways in which these students found and expressed their identities in the classrooms and how their experimentation with various chemicals helped shape those projections of self.

Dorchester, Massachusetts

In 1996 in the heart of Dorchester, a neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts that has seen a shift in demographics in the last fifty years, one could find an alternative high school for students who had not found success in the traditional public school system. We called ourselves “the last chance” school. Many of our students had been kicked out of multiple Boston public schools and some parochial schools. A handful of students were coming off of stints in juvenile detention. A few dropped out of traditional public schools for other reasons: pregnancies, family trouble, work demands, or lifestyle conflicts.

Dorchester was first established in 1630, one month before its neighbor Boston was established. By 1804 Dorchester was annexed to Boston. During the late 19th and early 20th century, new waves of immigration brought the Irish, Polish, Italian and French Canadian to Dorchester as well as African American migrants who came up from the south. Up until the 1950s and 1960s, Dorchester was predominantly a Jewish American and Irish American municipality with multi-generational families living in common houses and on the same block. During the Great Migration, many more African Americans settled in Dorchester, specifically on Blue Hill Avenue. During this time the crime rate went up, white Americans moved out, and burned out buildings and an increase in police presence changed the face of Dorchester. During the 1970s, when the

busing controversy came to a head in Boston, Dorchester was a location of rioting and anger. In 1974, in response to white-on-black violence towards students bused in to Hyde Park High, African American students at Dorchester High attacked white students and then stoned the buses carrying the white students back to the safety of their neighborhoods.⁵⁸ Families saved to send their kids to parochial schools.⁵⁹

In the last few decades, more and more island immigrants have settled in Dorchester. Today, you can make the walk up Columbia Road to Uphams Corner where the largest Cape Verdean community in Boston exists and stop in for some Cape Verdean cuisine at Ka Carlos. On Dorchester Avenue you can head to Fields Corner where you will find one of Boston's largest business districts. There are Vietnamese noodle shops, Jamaican roti stands, hip-hop fashion boutiques, and Puerto Rican hair salons. These small businesses run by recent immigrants have helped to revive the economy by catering to the many new ethnic sub-communities in Dorchester.

Given Dorchester's demographic make-up at our "last chance" school we worked with students with varying cultural heritages. Some students were of Haitian descent. A few were African Americans. Many Puerto Rican. Several were West Indians. But most were Cape Verdean Americans and the majority of these Cape Verdean students were also either first or second generation Americans who lived at home with *criollo*-speaking

⁵⁷ Steven J. L. Taylor, *Desegregation in Boston and Buffalo: The Influence of Local Leaders* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998) 144.

⁵⁸ http://www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2005/09/18/dot_dot_dot/

parents. Many of the Cape Verdean students were related either immediately or distantly and knew each other either intimately or at least by face. Because of the predominant Cape Verdean population, the school had a definite Cape Verdean vibe. We celebrated the Cape Verdean holidays and read Cape Verdean poets. We danced to *morna*, the traditional Cape Verdean folk music, ate Cape Verdean sweets, and listened to Cape Verdean rap.

One obvious characteristic of the Cape Verdean community in Dorchester was the interconnectedness of the members of the community in Dorchester with the Cape Verdeans still living on the islands and the interconnectedness among family members of the local community. Telma, a Cape Verdean American student, had a child with a man who was still living on the islands. She and her son made regular visits back and forth from Dorchester to Cape Verde when the money was there. I was never certain but I gathered that the father of Telma's child was not allowed back in to the country due to some complicated legal issues and so mother and child went to him. I never learned what became of this arrangement nor whether or not Telma is making the commute all these years later. I did learn, however, that Telma's brother who was for a brief time a student at the school was fatally shot in the back in 2006. The *Boston Globe* reported that his sister (Telma) said, "(Brother) was close to his parents...(he was my) 'mother's

angel....He would do anything for her. He made her soup when she was sick. He wouldn't let us do it. He'd say, 'I'm taking care of mom.'"⁶⁰

Davi's cousin Madelena mothered a child of a Cape Verdean adolescent who was often back on the island with one family member or another. She, too, was engaged in a constant dialogue between those back on the islands and those living in Dorchester. Madelena lived in a Dorchester triple-decker with her mother and father, grandmother, sisters, nieces and nephews. The home was divided into three separate apartments but the apartments all contained members of the same family with the matriarch of the family, Madelena's grandmother, living in the apartment on the top floor. Madelena's mother made frequent trips back and forth to the islands as did Madelena. Sometimes, they brought back relatives with them. Other times, they took with them suitcases stuffed full of items bought in this country that couldn't be purchased on the islands. And, occasionally their visit ended up being much longer than they had originally planned. Madelena recounted a story to me about a past visit to Cape Verde when the family ended up, for what reason it wasn't clear, staying on there for an entire year. These spontaneously prolonged visits happened to many Cape Verdeans living in Dorchester. People just didn't come back when they thought they would.

At Madelena's baby's christening in the spring of 1997, I stood up in place of the appointed godmother who was stuck on the islands and couldn't get back in time for the service. After the service, I was invited back to Madelena's home for a party. Her baby,

⁵⁹ Taken from the Boston Globe article that ran in 2006. Date not included in order to protect the anonymity of the student.

Titi, was passed from one family member to the other while Madelena helped her grandmother with the traditional staple dish from the islands, *cachupa*, a slow boiled hominy and pork stew accented with herbs and made rich in flavor with various sausages. Madelena's mother, with yet another grandchild on her hip, pulled the *pudim de queijo*, a sweet goat cheese pudding, out of the oven without missing a beat. Madelena's youngest sister, who was only a bit older than Madelena's oldest niece, sat on a stool in the kitchen in front of Madelena's aunt who braided the child's hair while recounting stories of Madelena's own christening. In addition to recognizing the ongoing and meaningful connection the Dorchester Cape Verdeans maintained with friends and family members on the islands and at home, that day, and during many other instances, I was also struck by the communal child-rearing that took place within Cape Verdean families. These realizations were meaningful for me, as a teacher, but they also enriched my understanding of the community of which I was becoming a part and the respective paths toward finding identity each of the students at this school were on.

Called *Cabo Verde*, Green Cape, by the people who live there, Cape Verde is an archipelago of ten islands of the coast of West Africa. Despite the name, the islands are dry and rocky. Given its proximity to West Africa, the islands became a crucial element to the Atlantic slave trade and then again, in the search for whales and as a resupply station for other sailing and merchant vessels. The Cape Verdeans who were not mixed blood slaves or the descendants of slaves originally came to New England by way of the whaling industry. Even before the American Revolutionary War, whaling ships were

picking up crewmen from the islands.⁶¹ Many proficient harpooners were Portuguese speaking Africans from the islands. When the whaling ships were in port in New England, the Cape Verdeans set up shantytowns in Nantucket, in parts of Rhode Island, and in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Onboard the ships, the Cape Verdean crewmen were used to a life of relatively minimal racial discrimination and many were accustomed to being appreciated for their efforts and skills.⁶²

In the late 19th century, the US government developed a transatlantic system of support for Cape Verdean immigrants called the “Brava” (named for the smallest inhabited Cape Verdean island) Packet trade.⁶³ This trade allowed many Cape Verdean immigrants to make regular trips back to the islands. Beginning in 1892, Cape Verdeans bought old sailing vessels that had become obsolete and converted them into cargo and passenger ships called packet boats. With the acquisition of these packet boats, Cape Verdean American settlers who owned these ships were able to frequently make the 3500 mile, six-week journey between New Bedford, Massachusetts and Cape Verde.⁶⁴ In terms of a larger communal identity formation, this mode of transportation did not only allow Cape Verdeans in New England to be owners and operators, but it also allowed them to keep open a line of communication between those who were “there” (the islands)

⁶⁰ Raymond A. Almeida, “Cape Verdeans in the Whaling Industry,”
<http://www1.umassd.edu/specialprograms/caboverde/whale.html>

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Darlene Clark Hine and Jacqueline McLeod, *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999) 115

⁶³ Ibid, 115.

and those who were “here” (New England). I see this evolution of a Cape Verdean American collective identity, of being active business people while maintaining active membership within communities both here in the United States and back on the islands, as an integral component to the Cape Verdean American identity still alive in Dorchester, Massachusetts.

The Cape Verdean community was firmly established in Dorchester by the late 1970s. In 1975, when Cape Verde achieved its independence from Portugal, despite a celebratory atmosphere on the islands many Cape Verdeans moved from the islands to the United States. Today, more Cape Verdeans live abroad than on the islands. A second wave of emigration from 1992 to 2002 found 10,000 Cape Verdeans settling in the US, with the majority of them landing in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.⁶⁵ Within Boston, the majority of the Cape Verdeans live in Roxbury or Dorchester. In the last twenty years, more and more Cape Verdeans come to New England to find a better education, as well as to take economic strides forward that they can’t take on the islands. According to Luís Batalha and Jorgen Carlings’ work on the Cape Verdean diaspora, only the children of the wealthiest on Cape Verde could find quality education on another island or abroad for education. As a result, most of the immigrants in the past arrived in the US with what would be comparable to a fifth grade level education. For the first time in the history of Cape Verdeans in the US a significant proportion of Cape Verdean young people are

⁶⁴ <http://immigration-online.org/55-cape-verdean-immigration.html>

receiving higher education.⁶⁶ This commitment to education within the Cape Verdean community was apparent to me because, despite the fact that the Cape Verdean students who I encountered at the “last chance” school were already struggling to find an educational community that would see them through to graduation. They were the most prepared of all of our students and were remarkably mature and intelligent on the whole. They were committed to their work and were respectful of and honest with their peers.

In addition to a large population of Cape Verdean students we also saw a number of Puerto Rican students come and go and these two groups of students exhibited a rapport with one another as well as a bit of competition. The Cape Verdeans and Puerto Ricans have a complicated history in Boston as well as in other major US cities. As far as their respective cultural identities are concerned, Cape Verdean Americans do not see themselves as African Americans but often live in shared communities with African Americans. This distinction from despite their obvious cohabitation with African Americans on the part of Cape Verdeans has been a signifying element of the growing Cape Verdean immigrant communities in the United States and has been an element to their immigrant history for some time.

Cape Verdeans have also had to contend with some confusion in others about exactly what is the Cape Verdean ethnic make-up. This element to the evolution of the larger Cape Verdean American identity is described in Marilyn Halter’s book about Cape

⁶⁵ Luís Batalha and Jorgen Carling, *Transnational Archipelago: Perspectives on Cape Verdean Migration and Diaspora* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008) 39.

Verdean American immigrants. She writes, “Cape Verdean immigrants are continually having to redefine their identity. And it is not simply a matter of changing self-definitions. In terms of successful adaptation, how they are defined by others often has greater social and economic significance than how they see themselves.”⁶⁷ Cape Verdean Americans must contend with being seen inaccurately as members of a particular or even a combination of ethnic heritages; sometimes white, sometimes Portuguese, Latino, Hispanic, and European. The Cape Verdean American adolescent then must contend with those varying perceptions along with the more personally directed identity perceptions that occur in the classroom. The Puerto Ricans in the US have often distinguished themselves as different from other Spanish speaking Latinos and are a part of what Juan Flores, a scholar of Puerto Rican identity, calls an injection of “anti-colonial, Latin American and Caribbean culture into the artery of North American life.”⁶⁸ They are not Chicanos. They are not Central Americans. The children of the new Puerto Ricans living in the United States have the additional burden of finding a way to be a part of dynamic adolescent communities while maintaining their ties to the Puerto Rican identity. As Maria V. Zavala reminds us, “The ongoing attempts of deculturalization and the Puerto Ricans’ history of resistance have dramatically affected the education of

⁶⁷ Marilyn Halter, *Between Race and Ethnicity: Cape Verdean American Immigrants, 1860-1965* (Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1993).

⁶⁸ Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 1993) 15.

Puerto Ricans in the United States.”⁶⁹ Puerto Ricans in the US are in the unique position of wanting to be a part of both the American and Puerto Rican cultures even in light of that history of resistance. The Puerto Rican students I worked with appeared almost desperate to find a voice within the larger American culture while maintaining a strong, Spanish speaking, Puerto Rican voice. The similar and yet specifically distinct Cape Verdean and Puerto Rican community in Boston, and specifically in Dorchester, made for a unique classroom community. Flores has also noted that the shared experiences of ghettoization and marginalization of the Puerto Rican and Cape Verdean communities in the US have formed a “crossing and blending of transmitted colonial cultures.”⁷⁰ With these two groups with the highest enrollment in the school we found a unique school identity that was simultaneously a blending and a distinction between these cultures.

This last chance school was situated on the top floor of a community center in the heart of Dorchester. There was a health clinic on the ground floor and a Boys and Girls Club on the same floor as the school. The school was comprised of three small classrooms, a main gathering area where the students met with each other before and after classes, and a small office that I shared with the other two members of the staff. We served approximately 35 students at a time. Sometimes more, sometimes less. I was

⁶⁹ Maria V. Zavala, “Puerto Rican Identity: What’s Language Got to do With It?” Sonia Nieto, ed., *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2000) 115.

⁷⁰ Juan Flores, “‘Que Assimilado, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao’: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” Mary Romero, Pierelle Hondagnen-Sotelo and Vilma Ortiz (eds.), *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring Latina and Latino Lives in the United States* (New York, Routledge, 1997) 177.

hired as the administrative teacher so it was my job to handle all of the intake and outtake as well as to teach half of the curriculum. The other two staff members were a teacher, who covered the math and science while I covered all humanities and current events, and an individual who served as the school counselor and office assistant. Our school was one of five similar schools in Boston, and, despite the fact that the director of the five Boston locations was a dedicated and well-meaning woman, the Dorchester site, in simple terms, was a failing school.

The stated mission of this school was to help students in Dorchester, who were unable to attend the conventional Boston Public Schools, to complete their high school diplomas and GED's. When I arrived, Dorchester had graduated two students in the previous year and one the year before. There was plenty of work to be done. And as a just turned 22 year-old fresh out of college, I was up for the task.

I remember, during the initial interview in the late 1990s, the director asking me three separate times if I was ok coming "into the neighborhood." I knew about Dorchester. The affluent and young professionals hadn't moved in yet. In 1992 there were nearly 1500 incidents of homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault in District 11 and by 2002, those crimes had decreased by a third.⁷¹ And so I was arriving in the midst of one of Dorchester's most violent eras. I would be riding the bus to and from the school. I would be walking the darker streets to get to the stops early in the morning and late at night because I also took a job at the Boys and Girls Club in the evening to make

⁷⁰ http://www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2005/09/18/dot_dot_dot/?page=3

ends meet. I was tall and blonde and stuck out. “Would I feel safe?” she had asked. “Did I want to consider taking the less interesting, lower paying, assistant teacher position in West Roxbury?” I was ready, I assured her. Everything would be just fine.

In the end, we were better than fine. Obviously, my success as a teacher isn’t the focus of this work or even, really, all that relevant. However, I feel it should be documented that during the year and a half I was at the school, we graduated more kids who went on shake the mayor’s hand at the citywide ceremony held in historic Faneuil Hall than ever before in this history of that Dorchester location. This success rate, in my estimation, was much more about the students and their hard work than it was about any one thing I did or didn’t do as a teacher and administrator. But an additional remarkable element to my time at the school was the open and honest rapport we managed to establish in the classroom where I spent time with the students. Everyone, on the whole, felt entirely comfortable doing and being as they wanted. And maybe it was because of this established comfort level that we were able to succeed in other ways as well.

The classroom where we spent most of our time was a long room that held about ten tables. I hung maps and posters of book covers on the walls, along with some appropriately inspiring hip-hop song lyrics. There was an old-school chalkboard, a TV and VCR on wheels, and a set of loud pipes that clanked and coughed through the cold Boston winter. There were never more than twenty students in any particular class. These would prove to be the smallest classes I ever taught as a public school teacher. And although this school was a charter school, funded both by the city and privately, it was still considered a public school and would also end up being the most “public” of all

the schools I came to know. We were the school that accepted the students who weren't accepted anywhere else. Our unofficial motto was "We will take anyone." Ours was the school that hosted a once a term "Baby Night," rather than the more conventional "Parent Night" because so many of our students were parents themselves. This was the school that offered a "Baggage Box" where students could dump the items that represented their more public personas or identities. When JR, whose mother was Jamaican and whose father was Haitian, wanted to commemorate the death of Bob Marley on May 11th when we had been cramming for the GED exam, we took a break and listened to Marley croon with the Wailers in the song "Hammer." JR smiled an ironic smile as he sang along, "They just keep holdin' me, won't let go, holdin' me, won't let go..." Four weeks later, he broke free from the weight of the GED exam, which he had already taken once that spring, and passed with an above average score.

All of the students at this school had extraordinary stories and the school became for them a place to spend time away from the struggle of their lives in addition to its being a location for learning. In many ways, the school became a resource center and retreat for the students. It was during these months of teaching in Dorchester that I started thinking of what elements of the public schooling system were inadequate for many students. I thought, on several late night bus rides home after spending the entire day at the school and then much of the late afternoon and evening at the Boys and Girls Club, that certain urban districts needed to make public schooling a twenty-four hour, all services at all hours, live-in resource. That design was close to what existed in the building where I taught. In addition to the health center on the ground floor there was

also a small public library and a small café where people could purchase coffee or a donut. I saw students “showering” in the bathroom sinks and was made aware of the fact that often the students hadn’t been home the night before. They arrived at the building wearing the clothing they had worn the day before and pulled out pants and clean shirts from their overloaded purses or backpacks.

The students were generally hesitant to reach out to authority figures. The math and science teacher, who was a Guyanese graduate student in Boston, never fully connected with the students. They trudged through his lessons and voiced frustrations at his not quite gathering what type of instruction worked best in this setting. However, they managed to share jokes with him and had in common certain elements of West Indian culture. They showed great disdain for the woman who ran the Boys and Girls Club given that she often stormed into the school complaining that the students had left their litter in front of the vending machines we shared with the other service-organizations in the building. I mentioned to her on several occasions once the students had left for the day that they might respond more favorably to her if she asked them before she began shouting if it in fact had been them who left the wrappers and cracker pieces at the bottom of the stairs.

The students were, generally speaking, defensive and proud. This self-affirmation in the face of accusation is a common psychological coping device and one that I witnessed often as a teacher of low-income “at risk” students who had been passed off from teacher to teacher, school to school, for much of their lives. In a psychological study of self-enhancement and self-protection, Mark Alicke and Constantine Sedikides

note that, “The self-affirmation process is not a panacea for stress, threat, and defensiveness but, rather, . . . plays a role in the operation of the ‘psychological immune system’ (a term first used by Gilbert, et al., 1998) that people use to protect the self when it is threatened.”⁷² ⁷³ I saw in these students that history of fending off threatening behaviors in others and then the pursuant defensive behavior. Much of the defensiveness stemmed from the fact that for many years of their academic lives they had been placed on the defensive, often in the position of having to explain their behaviors after being accused and protecting their own sense of self. After repeated accusations, many of the students I taught in Dorchester had built up such strong reserves in their psychological immune systems that it seemed they could tolerate any and everything. But still, there were moments when they would break down.

I will never forget the late morning moment on the front stoop of the building. I have written of it many times and name it, in my mind, Aaliyah’s Sermon From the Mount. That morning I had received the news that Aaliyah, an African American nineteen-year-old student who was one of the more responsible and together students in the program, had failed the GED exam by three points. It was tough news to deliver. She was a no-nonsense, hard working, no excuses type of student. She assumed, as did I, that she would pass on the first attempt.

⁷¹ Mark D. Alicke and Constantine Sedikides (ed.), *Handbook of Self-Enhancement and Self-Protection* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010) 146.

⁷² Gilbert, et al, “Immune Neglect: A Source of Durability Bias in Affective Forecasting, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1998, Vol. 75, No. 3) 617-638.

Aaliyah was tall and had a wry smile. Her skin was flawless and polished looking, except for the dimple in her left cheek that appeared only when she smiled or cried. I had seen her do both on several occasions. She made me laugh, too. But that day she was ill humored and impatient. When she learned the results of her exam, she stormed out of the office and clomped down the stairs in her heels and flung open the double doors to the outside morning where people waiting at the bus stop shivered. I followed her, begging her to relax and then watched for a full ten minutes on that February morning as Aaliyah climbed up the stoop and proceeded to rail against all things. She shouted great obscenities to the sky. She pointed her finger at the people at the bus stop who began to listen and nod their heads in agreement. She cried enormous fat tears that dropped onto her bottom lip and then dotted the shoveled sidewalk below. Infuriated, she asked questions to no one in particular. *Who do they think they are? How much more can a women take? Why don't we ever get a break?* Much of her questioning was phrased this way, in we's and they's. It became an us-and-them dialogue that she participated in alone and then more dramatically, with anyone who listened. A small crowd had gathered in front of her and initially women with scarves tied around their heads to keep out the chill answered back with whispered *amens* and hushed *yes, sisters*. It was only a minute more of Aaliyah's shouting and then more people began to call out, shouting back their support. Eventually, they clapped and encouraged Aaliyah on. I heard one man shout back, *Preach on, Preacher* and Aaliyah was charged with more fire and energy. She looked at me and held out her arms to me as if I was one of the unconverted. I came close to her and she shook her head at me almost pityingly and

whispered into my ear as I stood below her, *We tried, Mama, we tried*. The rest of the students in attendance that day had made it down the stairs and had gathered in the doorway. The two police officers whom I had seen patrolling the Uphams Corner area had made their way towards us and so, with some hesitation but knowing Aaliyah had said all she needed to say, I pulled her hand and she climbed down from the stoop. Back inside the classroom she was composed again and lightened the mood by cracking jokes about the format of the exam and the testing proctors who had on the day of the January exam refused to let Lander use the restroom when he said he had to go. “He told them, ‘I have to go, Man, I have to go,’” she said and then the students erupted in laughter.

On her next attempt, Aaliyah passed the exam and she graduated that spring with a smile on her face.

With regards to types of chemical experimentation in which these students engaged, across the board it was marijuana. I saw their red eyes in the morning. I saw them empty their pockets of things and dump them into the “Baggage Box.” Often, there was a blunt, L,⁷⁴ or a beedi⁷⁵ laced with marijuana. The students shared with me the stories of their experimentation in their journals and in the essays I asked them to write analyzing their personal senses of style or expression. Many times, it was the easiest thing for them to write about with any amount of interest. Of course, there were other topics as well: home life, friendship drama, work complications, or emotion-laden trials and tribulations. But they opted to share about their experimentation when I asked them

⁷³A blunt (short for Phillies Blunt brand cigars) or LP or L (short for El Producto brand cigars) is usually an inexpensive cigar emptied out of tobacco and filled with marijuana or a tobacco and marijuana mix.

⁷⁴ A beedi is a South Asian tobacco cigarette wrapped in a tendu leaf.

to write about their senses of self. Or when they were comparing and contrasting their various examples of rebellion with those found in the texts we read. Occasionally, they reported parties at which they drank alcohol but they reported to me several times that buying “herb from Davi” was a lot easier than coming across a believable fake ID. Sure, they snuck alcohol when they could from the adults in their lives and I know of several instances when the students swiped a 40 oz. from a package store or tried to order a “cooler” at a restaurant. Many of the students looked older than I did at the time. I am sure it was possible for them to get away with purchasing alcohol here and there. But they seemed to get more for their money with marijuana. And as for harder drugs, I never saw any evidence of those, although there was some chatter about MDMA and prescription drugs. But again, those substances were more expensive and tougher to find.

The Dorchester students taught me what the tough life actually looked like. Compared to the students I taught in the other schools, they were hardened and faced with remarkable obstacles. They were defiant and courageous at once and their experimentations with alcohol and drugs were not playful and light. Their experimentations were as hard core and the students were and I was more concerned about the reasons behind their use than at any other school. And yet their processing of their own identities and the way in which their experimentations became an experiment for everyone in the classroom wasn't that different from what I observed in the other classrooms. These Dorchester students were unique in that this school was like no other but they were, with some recalibrating of “normal,” kids being kids, sharing in the classroom and learning on a variety of levels.

East Austin, Texas

When I walked through the front door of the neighborhood high school in east Austin, Texas to interview for a job while I was craving an escape from the east coast, I was initially struck by the smell in the halls. Sweet gum, new sneakers, pencil shavings, and Xerox ink. I heard students speaking Spanish, teachers shouting at students to pick up their feet as they walked the halls, hall monitors blowing whistles, and students shouting jokes and insults at one another as they began their day. This was a quintessential east Austin high school made surreal by both its familiarity and uniqueness. It reminded me of where I had spent my own high school years in Kansas and yet it couldn't have been more different.

The rhythms of this school reminded me of a dance. Similar dances can be found in many cities across the country: Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, San Antonio. These are cities in which the predominant urban populations are largely comprised of Latino (particularly with Mexican roots) and African American families. With Latinos becoming the largest minority in the United States⁷⁶ and African Americans a close

⁷⁶ Betsy Gúzman, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-3.pdf>

second⁷⁷, the state of the African American/Latino relationship is even more relevant when analyzing student interaction and identity formation in an east Austin high school.

The partners in this dance were the children from these families who came together in this school in their different ways with their different experiences and pasts. It was at this neighborhood high school where I saw, first hand, a dynamic and unique relationship between Latino and African American students that was built on a significant amount of respect and a good deal of open-mindedness and acceptance. The students here rejected the long history of African American and Latino tension. Often, they developed seemingly constructive relationships with one another that taught ways to downplay difference while emphasizing originality and individuality.

If, as W.E.B. DuBois suggested, the problem of the 20th century is “the problem of the color-line”⁷⁸ then it was also the case for the dawning of the 21st century where it existed in Austin, Texas with the presence of the color-line that was I-35. This is the highway that for decades has been the veil that separates the color of Austin, from the white. Today, that line is blurring. However, in the last two years of the 90s, it was very much still a distinct boundary line. And this distinction was made all the more remarkable in a city that lies in the south central portion of a state that shares a border with Mexico. To me, the division that existed in Austin was reminiscent of the way the Rio Grande separates two very different but proximate worlds.

⁷⁷ <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/profile2000.html>

⁷⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Library of America, C. 1903, 1986) 3.

This reality, the highway that cut through color and culture in Austin, is what inspired me to make my first trip to the border during graduate school. When I arrived in Nuevo Laredo one spring morning, I watched the workers file through the turnstiles that opened up Texas to them and wondered if, every single morning, it felt to them like they were going somewhere different or if it became to them just a series of steps. When I, myself, was on the bridge standing above the river, halfway to there and halfway from here, I stopped and peered into the water, wondering if the river, that had for so long been a cut in geology, culture, and history, might just one day dry up.

On the eastside of Austin (the neighborhood that stretches east of I-35 and south, to the Colorado River), lives a large percentage of Austin's Latino and African American families who reside in small, one story houses and send their children to one of several Austin public high schools. In this neighborhood within the space of the east side of the line, the two cultures live next to and among each another and the youth of these families, it seemed in the neighborhood high school, had found a way to integrate. As I observed them it became clear that they were beginning to recognize that the dancing that they had started, side by side, was one way to blur the line that had been drawn through these two cultures over the previous four decades.

In recognizable ways this east Austin high school was an average high school, full of energy and noise. But it was also a mirror of the city itself. There was a hall that ran from the front doors through the courtyard to the doors of the cafeteria--a line that divided the school in two. On one side of the line was an academy, a magnet program for

college bound students who mostly white and middle-class and who were bussed to school from predominantly west Austin neighborhoods. On the other side of the hall was the other side: *el otro lado*, as it was called by many of the students who attend the “regular” high school.⁷⁹ On this side, the school was a 90-100% minority high school⁸⁰ with Latino and African American populations the majorities.

It was here on that side of the line where the students brought to mind a complicated dance that was taking shape in the everyday of those students’ lives. It was evident in the swaggers of their walks to class as they shuffled down the halls next to each other with their feet hovering close to the ground and their strides slow and smooth. I could see rhythm in the language the students spoke, a blending and borrowing existing in the words and tones. Shared energies and patterns were evident in the students’ style and dress, the way in which these students created each day new versions of their confident selves. And I saw shared tastes in music and shared ways of moving across the gym floor while I sponsored the high school breakdancing squad. While these students made and reshaped the performances of their public selves, I saw a two-ness present, in this youth subculture, that DuBois identified within the African American, in his *The Souls of Black Folk*:

⁷⁹ Much of this information comes from ethnographic research done during the years of 1997-2002. For two of these years, I was a teacher the school. The impressionistic sections come from my personal interpretation only.

⁸⁰ As of the 98-99 school year the school had a 86%African American/Hispanic population, with the majority of the 12% White population existing within the academy. Projected numbers for the 2000 school year were 97% minority and 2% White, without the academy. This information comes from the AISD High School Demographic chart, 1999.

One can ever feel his two-ness, --an American, and a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁸¹

But for these adolescents it seemed as though the two-ness created less of an internal war and had become a way to recognize one's personal and ethnic identities as an American with a specific history and culture while at the same time to identify with a similar but distinctly unique alternative culture. In this Austin high school I was reminded of Dorchester where Cape Verdean and Puerto Rican adolescent cultures had explored a similar coming together.

Patty, a former administrator at this neighborhood high school, mentioned this partnership. "Instead of having a minority school dominated by a Hispanic or African American young people, we are a neighborhood mixing of both, which causes both of these groups to come to a cultural grips with one another."⁸² Because of the historical aspects of the eastside community in Austin and its relationship to the school and the history of the African American and Latino relationship at the school, a unique school community existed.

In yet another way to come together and create an experience together, these students also shared various ways to experiment and celebrate. In east Austin, students

⁸¹ DuBois, *The Souls*, 8 & 9.

⁸² Personal interview with Patty, March, 2002.

smoked herb and drank codeine. Regardless of race or cultural background these were the substances of choice and were easier to find, according to several students with whom I conducted interviews⁸³ than anything else. With the codeine high there was, again, a two-ness that existed. The students explained to me during interviews and informal conversations that while on codeine, in addition to feeling as though they had found a way to capture time and slow it down, they also felt as if they were two different people. There was the person that lived in their mind that managed to formulate creative thoughts and various forms of expression such as through dancing or graffiti art, and then there was the person that lived in their bodies that moved and operated on a different level.⁸⁴ And despite that often it felt as if these two different beings within were on different planes, they integrated and communicated in ways that made dance and art work in meaning-rich ways. Breakdancing was at times disjointed and stop and start (especially through pop-locking and freezes⁸⁵) but it could also be fluid and melodic (in freestyle and flow). Graffiti could be angular and sharp, but it could also be lyrical and soft.

Much of what existed at the high school could have been a result of its significant history and place within the African American and Latino communities on the eastside of Austin. Since Austin desegregated its public schools, the high school had been a place

⁸³ Most of these specific interviews were conducted in the year following my employment at this school, in 1999, while I was at work on a novel in which the two protagonists were Latino and African American adolescents.

⁸⁴ Taken from interviews with several bboys and east Austin graffiti artists, 1997, 1998, 2002.

⁸⁵ These are breakdancing moves that involve a stopping a starting, robotic type of action.

where African American, Latino and White students could dialogue and establish an understanding of one another. In 1964, when this school became the site for some of the first experiments in crossover teaching, the relationship between African American and Latino students at the school faced a new challenge.

As Wilson and Segall point out in their text, *Oh, Do I Remember!: Experiences of Teachers During the Desegregation of Austin's Schools*, many aspects of Austin's desegregation plan were significant factors in (the school's) past and future.⁸⁶ As one teacher notes, Austin "integrated by making the first steps by Blacks with Mexican Americans."⁸⁷ However, this transition wasn't necessarily without struggle. The teachers who participated in this exchange, which involved the transfer of African American teachers from an all-African American high school to other Austin schools, encountered specific hurdles regarding the African American/Latino relationship and as well achieved specific successes. One of the first crossover teachers at the school remembers some of the ways in which she learned and grew as a teacher during this period:

I had never had any interactions with the Mexican American culture before I went to Neighborhood. I had never been to a Roman Catholic church but the kids invited me and so I went. I don't remember having had too many parents—

⁸⁶ Anna Victoria Wilson and William E. Segall, *Oh, Do I Remember!: Experiences of Teachers During the Desegregation of Austin's Schools, 1964-1971* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

⁸⁷ Wilson and Segall, 62.

Mexican American parents—that were hostile. They were pretty open to receiving you as a teacher...Neighborhood was very significant to the Mexican American community...There was the Mexican American holidays—like Cinco de Mayo—as a matter of fact we learned how to celebrate many kinds of holidays.⁸⁸

Other teachers remember the inclusion of the atmosphere at the school and were able to feel comfortable with their place within the community. Innovative problem solving and administrative acknowledgement of students' needs were inherent traits of the new high school community. One teacher recalls a specific incident that exemplifies these unique, yet crucial traits:

One of the big problems that the students had was what kind of music they were going to have for the prom. The Mexican American young people wanted Spanish music and the African American young people wanted soul music. Both groups said they couldn't dance to the music of the other. It became a big problem. (The Principal) solved the problem after meeting with the student council who were the ones trying to decide. He said "We will have half with Spanish music and half soul music." That night when they danced, they danced in

⁸⁸ Ibid., 63.

groups according to their music. The prom came off okay without it becoming a big hostile kind of thing!⁸⁹

While this teacher did not describe a “magic” coming together of the two groups, she did describe a step towards recognizing the other’s needs and interests. This step was one of the first in making the African American/Latino relationship at the school what it was when I was a teacher there: one that allows the two groups to recognize each other, share similar styles and forms of expression, and recognize in each other unique ways of being and doing. It is this interest and dedication of these first crossover teachers who established a respect for and understanding of other cultures that paved the way for this school’s future. These thoughtful considerations and moments of holistic education might have planted the first seeds for the unique African American/Latino relationship that I saw at this same school.

The Latinos at the school, at least those who were the sons and daughters of families who had been in Austin for a generation or two, grew up with the history of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. In Austin, with the presence of the University of Texas, the movement was strong, vocal, and valued by many of the members of the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 71.

Latino neighborhoods on the eastside.⁹⁰ Several students at the high school had parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents who attended the school during this tumultuous time. They had been told stories of the movement and were quoted the words of key Chicano revolutionaries, such as Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, who, through his Plan de Aztlán, argued for a unified Chicano community and encouraged Chicano ethnic nationalism. It seemed to me that this history and this movement towards a strong Latino voice allowed the students on this side of the dance to be able to maintain their individual identities while participating in some aspects of their partners’ African American culture.

In addition to the strong Latino community that existed in Austin, there was also the rising numbers of Latinos in the state, the city and the public high school. These numbers encouraged the Latino student to hold on to their ethnic identity while absorbing and taking in new forms of their urban youth culture. Mike Davis, in his book, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City*, asserts that “The striking reemergence of *mexicanidad* in the 1980s and 1990s...is rooted in massive immigration and the expansion of the Spanish language public sphere.”⁹¹ The wide-spread presence of Latino cultural markers, such as the popularity of Mexican art forms, Mexican food and drink, and the diversity of Mexican music and dance, allowed that *mexicanidad* to be firmly grounded in the identity of the young Latino student during the late 1990s. With more Latinos in the United States, these markers were more common, had a wider reach and provided

⁹⁰ See Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995)

⁹¹ Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City* (New York, NY: Verso, 2000) 17 & 18.

more of a sense of a strong Latino community. Because of these reminders, a young student in this public high school, it seemed, has very little chance of losing his or her own Latino identity.

For the African American student at the high school there was the reminder of his or her own firmly grounded presence in an African American community with deep roots and wide branches on the eastside. This African American community in Austin prides itself in the education, success, and coming together of its members. The churches, the independently owned restaurants and shops, and the existence of a strong African American voice, heard by way of radio stations like KAZI which provides a public forum for the discussion and presentation of issues and concerns relative to the African American community in Austin, as well as a well-rounded window of African American music and dialogue, allowed the African American student to be immersed in that particular culture.

In addition to the support of a strong African American community, in the late 1990s we saw a massive emergence of the African American popular cultural icon. Musicians, athletes, dancers, actors and entertainers became the current trend-setters for the American youth culture. What I saw coming from the popularity of these African American icons was an “anything African American is cool” mentality found within this particular youth culture. A African American teenager could turn on a television and see people not unlike themselves who had similar upbringing, similar struggles, who come from similar urban neighborhoods, now enjoying fame, money and adoring fans. Many

of the African American students with whom I interacted were obviously confident, full of colorful and engaging personality. This confidence and self-assurance was certainly a key to what made many of these students, especially the ones on whom I focus here, so able to create healthy interactions with their Latino peers and was certainly a motivating force to their desire to share within their respective classrooms their processes of finding their own identities through experimentation, as well as within these dynamic subcultures of African American/Latino youth and the classroom.

In his *Magical Urbanism*, Davis points out that many analysts tend to focus on the “rough edges”⁹² of African American/Latino relations. These rough edges are what have kept the two groups in their positions of a static, separate existence in this country, even while sharing many of the same struggles. During the 60s and 70s, what was important for these two groups was a clearly articulated and strongly voiced assertion of their individual and active communities. Nando Donato, who writes of the Mexican American struggle for equal schools explains, “This period of enormous change inspired Mexican Americans to challenge the politics, assumptions, and principles of the established social order.”⁹³ What these sentiments led to was a separation between the two groups.

According to Davis:

⁹² Ibid., 52.

⁹³ Rubén Donato, *The Other Struggle for Equal Schools: Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights Era* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1997) 57.

Failed mobility and reinforced barrioization, together with the charismatic influence of militant Black nationalism, led “Latinos” in the 1960s and 1970s to discard Mexican-American assimilation in favor of separatist claims to an indigenous origin in a southwestern Aztlan.⁹⁴

Austin, Texas was no exception to this nation-wide activity. While this encouragement for Latino nationalism was spreading throughout cities like Austin, the African American community was also articulating a desire for its own place on the separatist “block.” The African American community, as well, asserted its own power. Wilson and Segall note, “the African American community acted as a collective whole, with a collective will during a collective struggle.”⁹⁵

However, since the 60s and 70s, it has been more difficult for the respective members to draw a line through the African American/Latino relationship. Part of what has led to this difficulty is the realization that the dreams and hopes of each of the groups have been strengthened enough so that they may exist as realities. It seems that Davis is correct in his claim that, “‘post-nationalism’ may have acquired its current purchase...because of the massive reassertion...of the physical and cultural continuity of Mexico in the U.S. Southwest.” He adds that, “complex experiments in identity politics—unthinkable in the white-majority 1960s—are anchored in the confidence that

⁹⁴ Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 17.

⁹⁵ Wilson and Segall, *Oh, Do I Remember!*, 40.

Aztlan is no longer nationalist myth but historical fact.”⁹⁶ This confidence certainly has allowed the national Latino community, and in Austin as well, to pull in the reins on the frantic barreling forward of Latino separation.

At the same time, the African American community across the country has been less apt to direct its efforts towards the fear of the dilution and “theft” of African American culture. This anxiety has existed over hundreds of years, and, of course, for good reason. But since the 1980s and the overwhelming success of African American rap music and the arrival of Hip-Hop on the popular culture scene, the fear of African American dilution turned into more of a recognition of African American strength and confidence. For the American adolescent in the late 1990s, this solid stance was comparable to a firmly grounded positively asserted Latino voice. Because of the popularity of African American style and image nationally and within the urban high school, there existed in our school what Tricia Rose in her *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* identifies as a “cultural syncretism.” She explains that the “fascination with black culture is not new, nor can the dynamics and politics of pleasure across cultural ‘boundaries’ in segregated societies be overlooked.”⁹⁷ The fear of the white artist as dilutor and thief of African American culture that Rose discusses in *Black Noise* appears to be absent from the African American youth culture of

⁹⁶ Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 17.

⁹⁷ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994) 5.

the 21st century. More relevantly, and on a more personal level, this fear as far as I could tell certainly did not exist for African American students at this high school in the interactions and exchanges with fellow Latino students.

The ability of each community to hold close in its collective memory, the clearly defined and strongly placed qualities that created their ethnic identities, has encouraged less fear in the communities at large of losing their respective cultures especially given their similarly growing numbers. The current reality that exists nationwide with African American and Latinos finding themselves the majority-minorities also exists in US schools. During the 1996-1997 academic year in 90-100% minority schools which was the year before I began teaching on in the east Austin high school, the percentage of African American and Latino students in attendance was almost dead even, at 35.0 African American and 35.4 Latino.⁹⁸ And in Austin where I taught, although the numbers were larger for the Latino population, both African American and Latino students were outnumbered white students.⁹⁹ With these numbers—proof of their proximity to one another in the urban high school—the presence of the students’ solid and unique histories allowed the students form a union that was tangible to someone in my position who interacted with them on a daily basis.

⁹⁸ Davis, *Magical Urbanism*, 115.

⁹⁹ AISD High School Demographic Chart, 1999.

There is a reason why the instigation and promotion of change occurs within the youth subculture. This space is where style is created and transformed, where language and articulation of ideas evolves, where the modes of expression can incorporate ideas and hints of the past while being manipulated by the participants into tokens of today with a look forward to tomorrow. Larger change takes place within this culture because there is the luxury for the young mind to blend and combine what is known and established with what is new and innovative.

For the teenagers at this East Austin high school, music was one way for the members of the two majority populations to learn from one another. For the African American students, the rising popularity of the Latino musical flavor, due to the successes of entertainers such as Selena, Jennifer Lopez, Ricky Martin and Christina Aguilera, the lives and experiences of their Latino classmates were not foreign. They became part of the public sphere of American experience.

However, where much of this borrowing and exchange of cultural ideas existed for the students was found within the rap music genre. According to Tricia Rose:

Rap music “brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society. Rap’s contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual clarity; they are a common feature

of community and popular cultural dialogues that always offer more than one cultural, social, or political viewpoint.¹⁰⁰

Rose discusses the way in which rap music began as an African American cultural expression that “prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America.”¹⁰¹ However, since the early 1990s rap music has also been a mode of expression for American Spanish-speaking musicians who also communicate with a voice that is rooted in personal experience. Rappers such as Kid Frost, Mellow Man Ace, Hurricane Gloria, Sean Paul and Big Pun have made the Spanish word and the Latino experience a common and familiar thing for their audience. Tricia Rose also explains how groups, such as Los Angeles-based Cypress Hill, “which has black and Hispanic members, serve as an explicit bridge between black and Hispanic communities that builds on long-standing hybrids produced by blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York.”¹⁰²

These two groups in New York were the key players in the birth of the American Hip Hop subculture. Through their expressions of rap, graffiti and breakdancing, the core elements of Hip Hop,¹⁰³ African American and Latino youth have nurtured a significant,

¹⁰⁰ Rose, *Black Noise*, 2.

¹⁰¹ Rose, *Black Noise*, 2.

¹⁰² Rose, *Black Noise*, 59.

¹⁰³ Several scholars of Hip Hop culture have identified rap, graffiti, and breakdancing to be the significant elements of Hip Hop. Tricia Rose, Sally Banes, *Before, Between, and Beyond: Three Decades of Dance Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007); Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Viking, 1998) and others, have noted this in their works.

American relationship. In his writing, William W. Sales, Jr. has noted the intermingling of these two groups:

Black and Latino youth have coalesced at the level of culture for at least two decades. First appearing in the Bronx, this cultural melding has given us break dancing and rap music. There has been much discussion about the political significance of the rap youth culture, but several positive expressions of it have appeared and reflect the considerable contribution it can make to strengthening political coalitions between Blacks and Latinos.¹⁰⁴

This bridge existed in east Austin as a musical link between African American and Latino students. The arrival of Border Rap on the Hip-Hop scene, celebrated the traditional gangsterism found in the *corridos*, or border ballads, of Texas and Mexican rebels. This glorification of personal struggle and survival was also evident in the Gangsta Rap genre of the late 90s which was defined by West Coast rappers such as Ice Cube, Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dog, and glorified by Gulf Coast rappers such as Master P and Mystikal from the No Limit Crew.

In addition to the voice of survival shared by both cultures' rap musician there was also a merging of style and flows. Rap music, as a genre based on experiment and innovation, presents ideas of change and mirrors the larger social condition of the American youth culture. What is evident in both the popular music world and the world

¹⁰⁴ William W. Sales, Jr., "The Political Awakening of Blacks and Latinos in New York City: Competition or Cooperation?", *Social Justice*, V. 27; N.1 (2000), 10.

of the urban high school, especially in the two urban high schools where I taught was the borrowing of, *not* the theft of, cultural expressions. When listening to music with the students, I realized that the Latino ear was drawn-in when popular New York rapper Jay-Z, incorporated Spanish phrases in his raps. The African American students were drawn in when Puerto Rican rapper, Big Pun, who “flows” with many Spanish words and idioms, used expressions that were typically associated with the African American vernacular.

Word-Play

With their close proximity in this urban public high school, both African American and Latino students expressed a familiarity with the words and phrases of the other’s culture. What was even more interesting to me, however, as a scholar of young people, was the step the students took beyond familiarity: the step towards use and understanding. I watched the students exchange the “everyday” words of each other’s cultures. African American students called Latino classmates *amigo*, *hermano*, *chico*, or in some cases, even more specific words such as *compañero*. Latino students greeted African American student with typical African American phrases such as *yo*, *wassup*, and *wad up*, *holmes*. Also, their shared use of nonverbal greetings was meaningful. The high-five, the complicated handshakes, and the bump-bumps (fist over fist greetings) that have been historically understood as belonging to the African American culture were common gestures shared by both groups.

More complicated, though, was the use of loaded words such as *nigga*, *wetback* and *ese*. The African American student, in part because of the abundant use of the word *nigga* by African American entertainers which many have argued stems from a desire found in the African American popular culture to take the sting out of that historically heavy word, used the word freely. The term was often more of an expression that connoted a friendliness or connection one student might have with a fellow African American student, as in: “*This*, is my Nigga!” Also, it was common to hear an African American student call a Latino student *nigga* when respect and positive recognition was deserved. For example, if a Latino student were to speak out against a teacher or administrator an African American student might say, as a sign of support, “Damn, that’s one crazy (brave) Nigga (soldier).”

The word *wetback*, which was typically a derogatory term used by the dominant culture to identify an individual who swam across the Rio Grande into America, has also been taken back. The Latino student in this high school used the word to greet and identify a fellow Latino—even if they did not, in fact, swim across the river. One Latino might say to another as a third approaches, “here comes that wetback” and then, as the third joined the group the three students might grab hands and say to one another, ”wassup, wetback!” Additionally, an African American student might have greeted a Latino student by using this word without the negative connotations with which it was once associated. I saw this happen repeatedly and wondered, often, just how much of a statement was being made. Sometimes, it seemed, the students just said what they wanted and didn’t put much thought in to the politics. Other times, it seemed as though

they said these words as a way to call attention to themselves. And then, as well, it seemed as if they were acutely aware of the history and new meaning they were creating when they threw out this complicated terms.

The word *ese*, which means “that” or “those” in Spanish, or is an allusion to the letters SA which were circled on census forms in the 1970s by individuals who claimed Spanish-American as their ethnic group, was used by African American students (mostly in the form of a noun) as a greeting to a Latino student. Always, this was spoken to a student with whom they were friendly, as in: “*Hola, Ese,*” which was usually followed by a handshake or a bump of the fist. Upon first thought, the use of the word *ese*, calling a person “that” or SA, identifying a person by their ethnic group seemed to me to be a derogation or a belittling. However, the African American students explained they did not use it as such and the Latino students did not take offense.

José Limón, in his *American Encounters*, considers the existence of certain speech forms such as these, to be “evidence of the capacities of such sectors to mount their own alternative or counter-discourses against these forces of the cultural hegemony of the dominant groups.” He elaborates that “it should not surprise us that from these most oppressed and marginal sectors comes the most fundamental critiques of the repressiveness of the dominant culture.”¹⁰⁵ It was enlightening to watch these negotiations and weavings at work. The crossing over of language and language styles in this high school did not only reflect an acceptance of the other culture but was also a

¹⁰⁵ José E. Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998) 100.

manifestation of the merging of two distinct cultures, in opposition to their long-standing struggles into one teenage popular culture.

This school experienced extreme ups and downs since the 1960s. It witnessed changes in student morale, high rates of teacher and administrative turnover, varying degrees of public attention and disapproval/support, mostly poor test scores, high dropout rates, building disrepair, and systemic changes. These were additional struggles for students who already had especially significant challenges outside of school. Issues such as teen pregnancy, after-school employment (again, sometimes illegal), lack of parental involvement, care for family members, extracurricular activities, a drop in neighborhood income, race relations and affirmative action were all factors contributed to this school's overall poor performance on tests, low student attendance rates, and decreasing morale.¹⁰⁶

One important aspect of the state of affairs at this school was highlighted in a local newspaper article entitled, "Hard times at (the school); Once 'The Pride of the East Side' High." This article began with the claim: "(This high school) and its students bear the scars of a neglected child."¹⁰⁷ For a school that has progress and change at its heart why has its journey been so bleak? In 1964 the students came together because they were being attended to. They entered a unique relationship with both their teachers and peers

¹⁰⁶ These factors are mentioned in a series of articles from the Austin American Statesman dating from 1998-2002.

¹⁰⁷ Article in *Austin American-Statesman* (details omitted to protect anonymity).

because of this school's position as a site for positive change. When I was there, the climate of the school had deteriorated to an over-arching frustration and apathy.

A former principal of the school recognized the potential for change. He claimed in 2000 that it would take five to eight years to change the attitudes and behaviors at the school. He also attested to the fact that the school's decline was the result of "institutional neglect and abandonment."¹⁰⁸ In other words, one could say that the school and the students struggled because of discrimination.

Just before noon on April 5th of 2000, a student walkout turned into a five mile protest march to downtown Austin.¹⁰⁹ More than 300 of the school's students (African American, Latino, and White) left classes and gathered in the parking lot. They then began their march with a goal in mind: to speak with the district superintendent. These students were protesting the superintendent's decision to put the school back on a traditional class schedule. Only a core group of 40 students reached the offices but this type of student involvement was remarkable for the school, which had over the past several years been a site of resignation and paralysis. Students demanded a dialogue with district administrator. Interaction and involvement occurred on various levels. The school administration supported student demands, claiming, "We've got a strong American tradition of civil disobedience. If they are willing to take the consequences of

¹⁰⁸ Tara A. Trower and Michele Kurtz, "Students walk out over schedule changes," *Austin American-Statesman*, 6 April, 2000: A1.

¹⁰⁹ Trower and Kurtz, A1.

their actions, then that is enough....”¹¹⁰ Youth interaction and integration expanded through a fight for change. But I was never lucky enough to see the students come together to seek systemic change when I was a teacher at the school. I saw the students with their backs against the wall but without much incentive to create change or at least to fight for it.

During the two years I was at this school I taught 9th graders. I had, on average, approximately 35 students in each class and taught six classes. I was a track coach and helped with the literary magazine. I became the breakdancing sponsor and a mentor to several students who were at risk of dropping out. The ground floor classroom I taught in had a row of windows that opened out to the front of the school and we could watch, and the students often did, the stragglers coming in late or other students leaving early. I was always struck by how brazen the kids at this school were. Many, many students skipped class and did so quite deliberately. The school was so understaffed, when I was there, there weren't enough people to watch the halls and perimeter of the building. I could call out by opening my windows to students who had come to my class but who were bailing on another. “Go back to class,” I would shout, but they would just turn around and smile, flash me a peace sign and shout back, “See ya tomorrow, Miss V.” No shame. No embarrassment. No attempts to hide from anyone.

¹¹⁰ Trower and Kurtz, A1.

I cannot think of my time at this school in the late 1990s and the identity formation I watched take place in the various classrooms and contemplate the effect of chemical experimentation on those identities without thinking of breakdancing. Breakdancing was a signature style and lifestyle for so many of the students in this school and it became incredibly meaningful to me, too, as I spent more and more time with the breakdancers as their mentor and club sponsor. The 90s version was a revamped version of the style that was created in the early 80s by African American youth from the Bronx in response to the breaks in beat that were created by a DJ's performance. The original dance as described by Nelson George was "packed with action and meaning."¹¹¹ The new style I saw taking shape in east Austin articulated by both African American and Latino dancers, was a recognition of the original form, and an incorporation of challenging innovations and twists that moved beyond where the dancers had gone in the 80s. The dancers offered more sophisticated elements of capoeira, a Brazilian martial art; more variations on traditional Mexican dance with quick and difficult footwork that required strength and agility; stylized elements of African American dance with its fluidity and charge.

I knew the dancers left school at lunch to smoke herb or to drink codeine and it was obvious to me that these chemical experimentations had an effect on their dance. There were moments when I wanted to send a student home, when I knew he had smoked, when I smelled it on his fingertips or seeping out from his clothing, but I had to

¹¹¹ Nelson George et al., eds., *Fresh: Hip Hop Don't Stop* (New York, NY: Random House, 1985) 90.

let him stay—so focused and driven and in the zone he was on the dance floor. It was too tough to force some of the heaviest users, who also happened to be some of the most creative dancers, away when so many of the other dancers were hanging on their every move.

Many of the students who were on the breakdancing squad were also fans of a type of music they referred to as “Screw.” They drank liquid codeine or marijuana and listened to this music, creating often at the same time. Two years after I was their teacher, I spent time with a few of my students from Austin and saw first hand the nexus between creativity, identity, and drug use. Both Nando and Rico were a part of that particular ethnographic study and while I present them here, in this work, in different sections (Nando in the Creativity Through Chemical section and Rico in the Charisma Through Chemical section) that experience and what I learned from them those nights as they explained creativity and their search for self speaks to this effort here to establish what it is students explore when they experiment. Both Nando and Rico could fit into all of the categories of identity here. They are both charismatic, both challengers of convention, and both creative. My time with them and what I wrote about that time is a relevant part of the process, for me, as a scholar who is attempting to put a finger on youth and identity.

Outside Night

Nando was the one who first introduced me to DJ Screw. I had been working on an ethnographic project on the eastside of Austin, Texas.¹¹² I was writing about the Outlawz, a local gang whose members were also practicing graffiti artists. For this particular session, we had arranged to meet at Nando's house so that I could accompany them on one of their graffiti nights. Nando and I sat on the front steps of the house, waiting for the rest of the crew to arrive. One by one, the boys pulled up in their low riders¹¹³ and parked, making a line of color and chrome that ran the length of the block. They sat in their idling cars with the engines rumbling a bit husky. Heavy bass beats kicked out from the windows, topped by the droning, sliding rap vocals. I asked Nando what they were listening to. I had heard this type of music coming from the cars in the parking lot of the high school, but I had never been close enough to pick up on the distinct style of this particular artist. It had always just sounded like a blur of bass and mumblings—not like other rap. “That’s Screw,” Nando said, “we be bangin’ that shit all the time.”

Nando stood and walked towards one of the cars, motioning for me to follow.

“Lets ride,” he said.

I knew that these graffiti artists worked in the quiet of the night, under the careful watch of friends who paid close attention to the headlights of oncoming cars and unfamiliar sounds of the street. The sun was going down. It was time to get started.

¹¹² S. Vliet, ethnographic research, November, 1999.

¹¹³ Low riders are customized cars, many using hydraulic lifts to raise or lower the car.

Nando walked up to a group of boys standing around one of the cars and gave each friend a single-armed hug. After each quick embrace, the boys put their fists out and Nando bumped the top of each one with his own. He introduced me to Tomas, the driver of one of the cars and I nodded at the rest of the boys, some of whom I knew from previous meetings. Nando's cousin Rico, his brother Arturo and I were to ride along with Nando and Tomas this night. The other boys hung back as we climbed into the car, standing in Nando's yard with their jeans hanging low around their waists, the pant legs covering the tops of their shoes, their white shirts stark and vivid in the twilight. They gave their wave as we pulled away, their forefingers and thumbs curved into an "O", their other fingers jutting out straight, linked like "Z's".

In the car, Tomas turned the music up loud enough so that conversation was halted and we drove for a couple of hours before Arturo and Nando were to paint, stopping every so often in parking lots or in front of homes, the boys exchanging greetings with others at each place. I sat in the back in between Rico and Arturo who were slouched down low in their seats with their legs opened wide and their knees pushed up against the backs of the front seats. Tomas and Nando were in the front seat passing a two-liter bottle of purplish soda back and forth. Each of them took small sips from the bottle and held the liquid in their mouths for several seconds before they swallowed. The music, DJ Screw, was rolling around the inside of the car like a thick molasses, slow, heavy, punctuated with a constant beat. It sounded like a record played on the wrong speed—off, warbled, almost morose.

“What’s up with his voice?” I yelled to Arturo early on in the night, referring to the rapper.

A smiled sleepily, reaching toward the front seat for the blunt that was being offered. He took a long, steady drag and held his breath for a time, making half-sneezing noises from the back of his nose.

“Ahh, shit”, he sighed, letting out his air in a cloud of smoke, “ain’t nothin’ wrong. That shit’s just Screwed up.”

DJ Screw, also known as Robert Earl Davis, Jr., according to writer Michael Hall, “was one of the most influential musical figures to come out of Texas in the last decade.”¹¹⁴ While he was not a musician per se, he was an artist--using turntables and samplers to bring together the music and raps from other artists, to make a slowed down and manipulated new product. He recorded these songs onto cassette tapes and sold them underground to thousands of people, some driving hundreds of miles and parking outside of his house in Houston just to buy the newest version. What began as small basement project turned into a social and musical phenomenon.

If rap and hip-hop are postmodern forms of music, bringing together elements of several genres and eras of musical tradition to create what Tricia Rose calls a “tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural and political issues in contemporary American

¹¹⁴ Rose, *African American 2*.

society,”¹¹⁵ then DJ Screw’s music could be defined as being post-postmodern. It is a running together, a breaking up, a transformation of a music that was built on a commingling collage of African American cultural expression to create a distorted, redefined essence, one that takes away the catchiness and predictability of the original form. In his article in *Texas Monthly* Hall describes the way in which Screw’s music derails the “flights of beat fancy” of rap and hip-hop. Screw’s music forces the listener, rather than anticipating the movement of the music, to sit back and let the music unwind in its slow and strange way. It is almost as if Screw gives the listener permission to stop thinking, moving, feeling—and just “be”; present in a disengaged kind of way. To DJ Screw’s fans, Screw offers a most desirable invitation.

Many of DJ Screws fans are young African American and Latino males who feel they can relate to Screw’s background and upbringing. They value him for his do-it-yourself mentality and the way he built his own empire and achieved the fame, success and money they so desire on his own terms. They recognize in his words, some of their own stories and struggles and feel he represents them through his music.¹¹⁶ And maybe, what they liked most of all, is that Screw created a way to “slow down time—he had found another world.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Michael Hall, “The Slow Life and Fast Death of DJ Screw,” *Texas Monthly*, April, 2001, 92-102.

¹¹⁶ S. Vliet, ethnographic research, November, 2001

¹¹⁷ Hall, *Resistance*, 96

In order to speak to his listeners through methods beyond the words DJ Screw started a new language in the South, specifically in Texas, that was built on his name and the music he created. There was the proper noun: DJ Screw, himself, artist and technician, or Screw, his specific music. There was the verb: to screw, the process of slowing down and stretching out already popular rap and hip-hop songs. And then there was the adjective: screwed, the state of a song that has been slowed down and stretched out. This new language allowed more people to connect and ignited a wave of musicians who adapted the Screw sound. The Screwed Up Click (SUC), a group of artists and rappers who worked with DJ Screw, brought new artists such as Lil' Troy, Lil' Flip, UGK, Zero, Ghetto, Lil' O and Hawk, to the scene. In addition to the SUC, there were other groups such as Swisha House, who adopted Screw's slowing down and chopping up technique and found both underground and commercial success.

The feeling of time being slowed down, one of the most remarkable responses inspired by DJ Screw's music, is also brought on by the sipping of codeine syrup which is for many Screw fans a common accompanying activity to listening. In much of Screw's music there is a glorification of using the syrup--or "drank," "lean" (what the syrup actually causes the body to do), and Barr (the manufacturer of the purple hued syrup)--to establish a slower pace. As the lyrics to one of DJ Screw's songs go: "Who knows the feeling, how it feels to lean? It's cough syrup or Barr promethazine."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ DJ Screw, "Who Knows the Feeling?" 1996

Other artists have promoted this use as well. Big Mo, also a Houston artist, sings, “It’s the Barr baby, the Barr baby, I got the whole wide world sipping drank with me.” On the cover of his album, *City of Syrup*, which had already sold over 100,000 copies, by the end of 2000, Mo stands above the Houston skyline, dousing it in purple syrup.¹¹⁹

Three 6 Mafia, a hardcore rap group from Memphis, sing:

“I got the wet promethazine, thick orange and yellow tuss, hydrocodone on the hands...knock you out, make you fall asleep when you’re on them wheels/Ain’t no doubt, hit me when I beep for this refill/Once again, on my wicked high, gotta have that drank/Heard my name, Gino, I feel like I’m gonna fucking faint...Sexy thang on my arm, cup of drank in my palm...And for the most I’m steady sippin’ on some sizzerp.”¹²⁰

According to a segment on National Public Radio on the popularity of DJ Screw and other screwed music, the use of codeine syrup skyrocketed in Houston, Austin, and other parts of Texas, spreading across race and class lines. Syrup houses popped up in several cities where one could purchase the codeine for up to \$500 for a pint.¹²¹ A law enforcement agent interviewed during the segment claims screwed music makes fighting

¹¹⁹ The album was released by Mo’s Wrekshop Records, another reference to the broken down element to “screwed up” music. Mo died in 2007 of a heart attack. Autopsy reports indicated high levels of codeine in his body at the time of death.

¹²⁰ Three 6 Mafia, *When the Smoke Clears*, “Sippin’ on Some Syrup,” June 2000.

¹²¹ National Public Radio, “All Things Considered,” Codeine Syrup and Screwed Music, August 9, 2000.

the illegal use of codeine much more difficult. In Houston alone officials seized 1,000 gallons of syrup in 1999.¹²² Because of its medical use individuals felt it was safer than other drugs. A group of fans have explained it is easier to obtain and users can make a little bit go a long way by adding it to juice, soda or wine. And because they both produce similar time altering effects, some believe screwed up music and the syrup high to be the perfect fit.¹²³

Jim Hogshire writes about this syrup trend in his article, “The Electric Cough-Syrup Acid Test” and calls codeine and over-the-counter cough syrup, which is used as a last resort when listening to DJ Screw, the “poor man’s PCP.”¹²⁴ Hogshire writes of what one experimenter called the “warping and folding of the body” caused by the syrup high. He explains how he carried out an experiment of his own only to discovered:

“I had to shave off about a week’s worth of stubble from my face. These ideas were very clear to me. That may seem normal, but the fact was that I had a reptilian brain. My whole way of thinking and perceiving had changed. I had full control over my motor functions, but I felt ungainly. I was detached from my body, as if I were on laughing gas... While I was shaving I ‘thought’ that for all I knew I was hacking my face to pieces. Since I didn’t see any blood or feel any pain I didn’t worry about it. Had I looked down and seen that I had grown another limb, I wouldn’t have been

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid, and S. Vliet, ethnographic research, November 2000.

¹²⁴ Jim Hogshire, “The Electric Cough-Syrup Acid Test,” *Harper’s Magazine*, June 1993, 24-27.

surprised at all; I would have just used it. Looking back, I realize that I had already lost all sense of time.”¹²⁵

Hogshire’s experience is not unlike the experiences reported by those who use syrup while listening to Screw. There is no pain. No processing of unnecessary information. No fear. No worry. Just a smooth and slow flow from one movement to the next. Time slows down. Life slows down. Moments last.

Unfortunately, for some time can slow down to stop.

DJ Screw died on November 15, 2000. The autopsy report confirmed that Screw died of a “codeine overdose with mixed drug intoxication.”¹²⁶

Inside Night

On a cold and wet Friday night in November of 1999, the boys and I meet to listen to DJ Screw under the appropriate conditions so that I could see what real fans do, how real fans act while listening to his music. Nando, Arturo, Rico and I are in front of the stereo at Nando’s apartment, the music loud, the lights turned low, it’s dark outside and we are close and warm inside.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hall, *Resistance*, 98.

The boys are almost grown men now. They are taller and broader, more serious and less shaven than the last time I saw them. They are all sporting gold pieces or gem studded bracelets and tease me for not “blinging” myself. They are soft-spoken and patient, in easy moods, down to earth and almost shy. A few friends stop by throughout the night but for the most part it is just the four of us in sitting in a circle wrapped in marijuana smoke and the sounds of DJ Screw.

Nando, almost 21, was a quiet and unassuming kid when I met him in 1997. He was in my third period class. We spent the year together while I did everything I could to keep Nando engaged. He was extremely smart but older than the other students and already losing interest in high school. Meanwhile, Nando did everything he could to avoid all of his courses except for my own. Sadly, mine was the only course he passed that year, having not attended enough of the others to even be considered an active student. And the next year I only saw him in the halls occasionally. He would stop by my classroom when he had the chance and I would see him at his home, when I went by for visits. His mother and I had grown close after all of our concerned phone calls and visits. Weeks would go by when I wouldn't hear a word from him and then I stopped seeing him on campus altogether. He later explained to me he just couldn't do it.

“You know, Miss,” he had said, “no one graduates from that school.”

He had been such a talented artist. His folder for my class was always decorated with colorful words stretched out and angled in abstract shapes. I had seen some of the

pieces he started in his art class but never had the chance to finish. I had hoped he would hang on to his interest in molding and shaping, design and craft even outside of school. I thought maybe that would get him out, although Nando, unlike his cousin, never claimed to want to be anywhere other than where he was: with his family and friends.

Now Nando is a father. Nando Jr., is four months old,¹²⁷ with the miniature face of his father and a similar demeanor. He is a child who never fusses or cries and seems ahead of the game a bit, able to assess a situation easily and find his place in it. He snuggles into the crook of his father's arm eagerly, lifting his own head often to check who has entered or left the room, to notice how the scene has changed. He already holds his own bottle and moves his hands and arms freely, not in the jerky, stop and start way of some newborns. He doesn't smile freely but when he does it's with great gusto, a wash of delight spreading across his face. And his father, always, is beaming and proud and says more than once this night, "Maybe he will do a better job than me."

Nando and his girlfriend Sesi share this place of their own with the one small front room, the galley kitchen, and the half-sized bed and bathroom in the back. When I arrived, Sesi came out of the bedroom to show me the baby. Nando and Sesi are easy together, like they have already figured out this parenting thing, and joked freely about her mother who had visited earlier in the day, saying she couldn't come back until she brought their boy some gifts. After I feed the baby and pass him back to her, Sesi

¹²⁷ At the time of this meeting

disappears into the bedroom and I only see her reemerge one other time this night to heat a bottle for the baby.

I met Rico that same year I met his cousin, 1997. He was a student in that same third period classroom, struggling with some of the same issues as Nando: boredom, frustration with other teachers, failures in several classes, and impatience with the program. It seemed that he, too, wasn't made for the seven-hour school day and got anxious and antsy often as if he felt boxed in. Loud, full of vigor and excitable, he kept the class active. Often, we spent the first five minutes of class waiting for Rico to get settled in his desk, the class looking on as he readied himself for learning: taking off his hat or headband, shaking his head a few times, stretching out his arms and legs before he took a seat, pulling up the hood of his sweatshirt, as if closing out the distractions. Finally, after much fidgeting and adjusting, he would be ready to begin.

Rico was a dancer and was one of the reasons I decided to become the official sponsor of the high school breakdancing squad--so that students like Rico, who had a special interest in this kind of dancing, could practice during their lunch and perform during the basketball games. It was an activity that kept them coming to school, a way to let loose during the day so they could spread their limbs out and wring the energy from the inside out. Rico was an *incredible* dancer, in the true sense of the word. He could twist and push his body into seemingly impossible shapes and poses, creating an endless flow of movement so that there was no separation from one step to the next, no

separation of body and bone, skin and muscle, arm from leg. When he danced he was nothing but energy and motion and his friends would watch in awe, some of them talented dancers themselves, and call out for more, letting him take turn after turn because none of us wanted him to stop. What he could do with his body to the music—fitting it perfectly into the invisible spaces between steps, to the floor of the gymnasium—making it a blur of color and spirals, to the air around him—pushing it up against the walls so there was nothing but his movement and the hue of his bright pants, and to the eyes of those of us who looked up—keeping them from blinking for fear of missing another amazing move, was like nothing else. He was in possession of a rare gift, and generous of spirit and gesture, too. He spent time with the others, teaching them the slowed down parts they could grasp, walking them through the phases of his transformations, coaching them on their own innovations and routines. I truly believe that these moments in the gym were the only reason Rico kept coming back to school and even that didn't last for long.

In the spring of 1998 Rico was kicked out of the high school for possession of marijuana and an excessive number of absences.

“Weed is a bitch,” he has said, “it screws you up so you can't breathe as deep and last as long on the floor, but it keeps that style (referring to “freestyle”, the most spontaneous and creative element of breakdancing) alive in your head.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ S. Vliet interview with Rico, Spring, 1998.

Arturo, one year younger than his brother and cousin, was my student the following year. He was even more soft-spoken than Nando, less thuggish¹²⁹ than his brother, and a more successful student all around. Also an artist, Arturo listened attentively in the classroom, rarely engaged in conversation with his friends during class, and sketched on his folder taking breaks every so often from his work. That year Arturo passed four classes, two of which were core classes and continued on the following year.

Nando told me that school year, “If any of us hoes are gonna do it, it’s gonna be Arturo. He got the skills me and Rico don’t have. He got the patience.”¹³⁰

However, on this night, seeing Arturo for the first time in two years, I learn that he has dropped out of school.

“Arturo, you were right on time,” I tell him, “so close to the end. What happened?” He smiles sheepishly, shaking his head from side to side. “I just couldn’t handle all those infants up in there,” he says, “they make a nigga wanna crack.”

After a few minutes of catching up, Nando takes out a tray and begins rolling a group of oversized joints. As he finishes each one he sets it on the coffee table, making a neat row along the edge, nodding his head to the music.

¹²⁹ S. Vliet interview with Nando, Spring, 1998.

¹³⁰ Phone conversation with Nando, Spring 1999.

“It’s been a while since I drank the syrup. These days, it’s easier for me to get the herb, you know what I’m saying?” He lights one of the joints, takes a long pull and passes it to his brother. “But yeah,” Nando continues, “when I was younger, me and Arturo be sippin’ that stuff all the time. I had more money then too, you know. No Juniors to feed.”

“Right?” Arturo says and laughs. “That shit’s expensive. The price idn’t worth it. Forty dollars for a deuce, a baby jar full. That ain’t gonna last you half the night.”

I ask what’s the appeal then, why so many people have taken to sipping.

“It’s the Screw,” Rico says. “You ain’t gonna want to be listening to some fast ass dance music on that shit. It’s the lean.” Rico gets up from the couch and swerves around the room. “You be feeling like this,” he says, walking with his upper body tilted at a diagonal. “And the Screw just fits. Makes you go with the lean, want to lean into it more.”

I wonder if it’s an escape then and ask, shyly, not wanted to seem like “one of those adults” who assume drug use among kids is entirely about the desire to flee.

Nando replies. “Naw. You wouldn’t hear none of us say it that way.”

Arturo cuts in. “Yeah, plus, you could say that about any kind of drug use. Syrup’s different. It helps you with the shitty part of your life. Makes you just go with the flow more. Slows the shit down.”

“It’s the wet¹³¹ that helps you escape shit,” Nando adds.

Rico interrupts, “Yeah. For ten bucks, you’re just trippin. Wet, that shit gets you out of your world. With syrup, you know what’s going on, but with wet you never know what’s happening. It hits hard, in about ten second, and then it holds for 4-5 hours. Sometimes, you be wantin’ to kill yourself on that shit. First time I did it, I knew I couldn’t go home. Not until the next day. Screw, he talks about the wet, too.”

They go on to explain how for them, now the herb high is the better high for “bangin’ Screw.” Nando describes the way they are different types of high.

“Syrup just makes you feel asleep, but you’re awake.”

Arturo talks about the way you listen to music differently with each high. He moves his head to the music as he speaks, and bangs his fist on the coffee table to the beat.

“With syrup, you’re just listening to the Screw. Bangin’. With herb, you’re listening to the words—you got a mind to pay attention to the details.”

Nando lights another joint, the third one in an hour and a half.

The boys stop talking and lean back in their seats, closing their eyes. “This is Swisha now,” Nando mumbles. “Sounds pretty much the same.”

Arturo and Rico are both smiling, their eyes still closed. They stay this way until one of them passes a joint. The other opens his eyes to take a turn. Even to me, now,

¹³¹ “Wet” is a term used for embalming fluid. Cigarettes are dipped in the fluid and then smoked.

things seem slower. The music doesn't seem quite so loud and off-sounding, the boys exhale more slowly, as if satisfied. The TV, which is on mute, seems somehow appropriate—the movements of the football players on the screen matching the rhythm of the music. And the outside on the other side of the wall is another world.

We hear a knock on the door and Nando gets up to answer it. The baby cries from the other room and I hear S shush him, soothing him back to sleep. Not for the first time in this night I wonder about the private life of Nando and S. Do they take turns with the baby? When Nando is with his friends, experimenting like this, what does she think? Does she worry about him? Does she ask him to come to her? I am certain she doesn't smoke, too. I remember her from the high school: a good girl. Hard working and polite. What do they share together when they are alone? What do they talk about? What are their dreams? I try not to judge but if I think of the baby and S in the back room I begin to feel flushed. Guilty. Embarrassed. Wrong.

Two of Nando's friends walk through the door and find a place for themselves on the edge of the couch. They ask what's up and Nando tells them we're talking about Screw.

“Ah. That' the nigga,” one of them says.

I ask them if they ever sip the “drank.” The entire group laughs, I imagine, because it's almost a joke to hear the word come out of my mouth. A teacher. A white

woman. A writer. But no one questions why I am there. No one makes me feel outside of the moment. Nando winks at me, implying that their last “sip” wasn’t too long ago.

Charles, to my right, asks me what I want to know about syrup. I ask if many people who own low riders these days sip.

“Yeah. If they be bangin’ Screw. Anyone bangin’ Screw got somethin’ going on. Either they be on wet, herb, or syrup, I guarantee. Screw, without the mess, you don’t really feel it that much. You’re not bouncin’ your head, you know, like you do when you on mess.”

Charles leans towards Nando and passes him a wad of cash. Nando hands him several bundles of marijuana-filled plastic bags and Charles tucks them into his inside jacket pocket. His friend, sitting on the arm of the couch bounces his head to the music, looks at me and gives me a slow nod.

“I heard about Barr from Screw,” he says quietly. “Shit, that’s how anyone knows about Barr. The Screwed Up Click, they just started their own trend of drugs.” He closes his eyes and I think he has finished but he continues on, “Syrup makes you feel real mellow. You can feel yourself walking. Not each step. Just the feeling of moving along the ground.”

Nando lights another joint to share with the guests. After a few passes, the joint is finished.

Rico gets excited and jumps off the couch, “Right?”

He walks around the room as he talks, stretching his legs out into long strides.

“You don’t feel that way on herb.” He leaps circles around the room. “And syrup, you be doin’ all kinds of crazy shit and not caring. You know, like the old drunk dudes in Mexico who walk up and down the street, all crusty and shouting shit to people, calling people ugly and fat and telling their secrets. It’s like no one can mess with you. And you don’t worry about shit.”

Charles and his friend get up and head towards the door. “Later,” Charles says. His friend turns around and holds two fingers in the air, closing the door behind him.

Nando shakes his head. “Sit the fuck down,” he says to Rico.

Nando looks at me and rolls his eyes in reference to his cousin. “Fuckin’ idiot.”

I ask if they think people get addicted to syrup and A speaks up.

“I know a lot of people who drink Barr daily but I don’t think you can fiend off Barr. It’s not like you can live your life. You know, get up early and shit, sip some syrup and clean the fuckin’ house. You can’t be normal.”

The boys laugh in unison.

Rico adds, “If there’s anything to fiend off of, it’s the taste. People get down on the taste. The sweet. If you have the money I can see how that shit turns regular.”

Nando replies to Arturo’s remark. “But lemme have the weed and I’ll clean all that shit.”

They laugh again, having found a new energy, and light another joint.

I ask them about DJ Screw again, wanting to hear from them what makes him such an idol to so many fans.

Nando says he wants to answer first because he knows exactly what he wants to say. “He’s great. Period. You know, like in the real sense of the word.”

“‘Great’. That’s all you can say is ‘great’? Weak, Man, weak.” Nando shoots him a look and continues on. “He’s great because, like we said. He started a trend. He united pot-heads and sippers. Blacks and Mexicans. Gangs who hated each other. Everyone is bangin’ Screw. You want to sip with Screw. Get high with Screw. He got himself a nation of soldiers, the Screwed Up Click, and brought people together through music. You just want to chill with Screw.”

Arturo adds, “He started it. Ain’t no one else screwed it up until Screw came out and chopped it up. He was the originator and everyone else is just biters.¹³² Biters—you can tell. The real shit, there’s a stamp. A kind of sound that is only Screw. And he’ll put his pager number on the tape. Then you know it’s his.”

Nando continues. “DJ Screw bought his own damn shit—did it all on his own. That nigga was always out of his trunk, didn’t want to jack nobody. And he told you about all the shit he got from himself. In his songs—explained the way ain’t nobody but him making the shit happen. And he had the gold and shit. And the people. And you just wanted to be like him. Like if he could do it, then maybe so could you. Know what I’m sayin’?”

¹³² “Biters” is a term used for anyone who borrows or takes another person’s idea.

“We listen to him whenever, too,” Rico says. “It feels like he know exactly what goes down with all the shit we have to deal with. And it’s like he be sayin’ you can get out of it.”

“Or if not get out of it,” Nando says, “just cruise along with it, like it ain’t so fucking hard. You know, like maybe, ‘your baby boy’s gonna be a good man,’ or ‘life ain’t crazy like that’. Like just a reminder that life rolls. It goes along. And you can either cruise with it. Or get all crazy and shit from it.”

A reaches over and punches his brother. “Right?” He nods. “It’s like, really, the herb and wet and syrup and even throwing pops¹³³ and shit’s cool, but really, the only thing you don’t wanna ever do without is the Screw.”

The boys stop talking at this. And lean back again, to give appreciation to the music. Nando leans over and puts a new cassette into the stereo.

“I just got this from the Screw House¹³⁴ this morning. It’s some of his new shit he finished right before he died.”

By now, I had come to almost enjoy the music. It was familiar and easy and made the boys feel good. I felt good. Seeing them look content as they listened could have been the reason for my newfound appreciation of the music but I think it was something more than just a vicarious contentment. I found that even I, who had turned

¹³³ “Throwing pops” is a term used for taking pills or ecstasy tabs.

¹³⁴ A Screw House is a location known by fans, often an individual’s residence, where “official” DJ Screw recordings can be purchased.

down all offers to get messed up, was nodding my head to the music, feeling calm and without worry. Even the anxiety I often experienced over the boys and their well-being, their safety and future, was less pronounced and I could let myself just enjoy sharing this moment with them. Certainly, for this night, in this room with the smoke-filled air and the words they had recently spoken lingering overhead, I couldn't imagine any music more appropriate.

We sat that way for several minutes. Not talking. Not moving. Not watching. And just breathed.

Back to Outside

As I drove home that night, the rain pounded the windshield making a rhythm with the windshield wipers and I thought back to that first night when I accompanied the boys on their night journey. Late in the evening, I suppose when the streets got quiet enough, we stopped and parked at the edge of an emptied out canal. There were streetlights every twenty-five feet or so, most of which were burnt out, but they made just enough light for Nando and Arturo to set to work. Tomas sat on the hood of his low rider, with the music, DJ Screw, playing just loudly enough to be heard, but not loud enough to disturb the darkened homes in the neighborhood.

Arturo, Nando and Rico climbed down into the concrete belly of the canal and I watched from above, sitting on the lip of the shallow bank so that I could see the work as a whole, as it was created. Nando stood back to eye his stretch of empty space and

paused a moment, assessing what wasn't there and thinking, I presumed, of what needed to be there. He shook the spray paint can and began, pressing the nozzle down with an expert finger, to create short and long bursts of paint, stretching and bending his body across the giant letters and designs that appeared. His body was as much a part of the expression as what he was painting. He threw one can down for another paying no attention to the sudden clatter it made when a can hit the concrete. Before our eyes sudden flashes of color washed onto the surface, contained by darker borders in blue, black and brown.

With a nod, Nando signaled to Arturo who picked up a can of paint and began adding his own colors and shapes along the edges of Nando's piece. The two brothers worked this way, side by side, for an hour or so, wordlessly pulling their respective designs together with letters and lines, jagged and smooth.

I watched Rico, several yards off to the side, dancing his own type of dance, "pop-locking" and "freezing" to the music. He was building his own piece to DJ Screw, one movement layered on top of another and another, breaking the music into fragments with his separate moving parts, faster and faster, until there were no separate parts and he was a body in one fluid motion.

And then I remember watching Tomas, sitting on the hood of a car that he had bought in its original state and that was now something new and different--a manipulated version of a previously made product, redesigned with chrome and paint on the outside,

leather and woodgrain on the inside, resting closer to the ground now, hovering inches above the road's surface.

Driving home in the silence, after spending so much time observing, my mind was open to memory and new thought. I couldn't help but think of the way in which all of these things: graffiti art, low riders, breakdancing, DJ Screw, even the effects of codeine syrup, were connected. Weren't they all revisions of an original product, production, or state? Graffiti art was a manipulation of a built structure, a changing of the surface, a painting of a new face, turning something already made into a new made form. Low riders, in this same way, were products of the past, redesigned and revisited, rehabilitated and then recreated. Breakdancing was a breaking down of music and traditional dance forms through manipulations of the body. It incorporated elements of the past with abstraction and new form. DJ Screw took songs that borrowed techniques and sounds from multiple sources and transformed them into something new, breaking down the norms, chopping them up, stretching them out, revising them into new and amended pieces, creations in their own right. And finally, doesn't codeine cough syrup engage the body in a similar transformation that allows for a new physical sense, that allows the mind to be wiped clean for a moment, promoting a type of beginning that inspires a redefined state of being? I wondered about each of these boys, on their quest

for finding creative ways of expression, various versions of themselves and how they all seemed, in that moment, rooted in their strong and meaningful identities.

Shoreline, Connecticut

By the time I had landed in Shoreline, Connecticut, in 2005 I had already started and made my way nearly halfway through my career as a graduate student. Once I had passed my oral exams, I moved to Connecticut and I took what would be the first of several years off, to teach. I imagined that teaching while contemplating my scholarly interests would be a good idea. And the teaching was fulfilling and life-shaping. For the first time in my teaching life I would be teaching at a school with a mostly white student population. In fact, the only students of color who attended the school were the children of the one mixed race family in town and the six female students from Manhattan who happened to be participating in the A Better Chance (ABC) program.¹³⁵ This ABC program took inner New York City students and placed them in high quality suburban public schools where they could learn about a new community and receive a more rigorous public high school education, presuming that the high schools in which they were placed were actually offering a more rigorous education that where the students might have attended in the City.

¹³⁵ <http://www.abetterchance.org>

I had no experience teaching in a predominantly white school. I wasn't averse to doing it but I knew it would be a transition. In the beginning of my teaching career I was dedicated to teaching students who had never been given the very best in teachers and I was determined to be the best teacher I could be. I knew the students at this school had attended high quality elementary and middle schools. I knew they grew up in safe neighborhoods and that they enjoyed one of the best public libraries I had encountered. I knew they were already familiar with the best. And yet, as my mother reminded me, someone had taught me how to think in terms of difference and how to be actively engaged in my own educative journey. I wanted to do the same for these white students.

Once again, I found myself jumping into becoming an active member of yet another teaching community, residential community, and yet another way of life. This time, I was in Connecticut where I have to admit I felt a bit out of my element. I had lived in Boston just after college, but, obviously, living in Jamaica Plain and teaching in Dorchester was a very different experience than living in a well-to-do suburb of New Haven.

This town was something quite different.

First settled in 1639 after being purchased by settlers from a Native American leader and with a population today of 21,000, this town is said to have one of the largest collections of historic homes in New England. Boasting the most quintessential town green in all of New England and the biggest one, too, the town offered many elements of New England culture that were new to me. There were several apple orchards nearby where you could go on a crisp October day and pick as many bushels of apples as you

desired. The town had its own fyfe and drum corps that practiced in an old barn not far from the green and that sounded so colonial and revolutionary it was easy to feel out of place and time when listening. The shore was a few miles from our home and yet we lived higher up in the woods where I often didn't see neighbors for days at a time. I wasn't used to isolation and yet I appreciated the small town environment. I could ask any student any "who is the best" question and I would have a list of options for fixing hot water heaters or refinishing wood floors or dry cleaning antique linens.

There were winding roads that took tourists on lovely shorelines drives. Many of my students had participated in sailing camps during their free summers when they were younger. One student's father was a lobsterman who never learned how to swim. Another student's mother and father were professors at Yale and her sister would end up going to the well-known private school in New Haven for high school instead of this town school where they lived. Both ended up becoming Yale Bulldogs.

Teaching in this environment turned out to be challenging in ways for which I wasn't necessarily prepared. Sure it was a treat to teach Juniors, and Honors students, at that! This experience came after my having taught several courses at UT in the Division of Rhetoric and Composition as a graduate student and so I had a pleasurable enough time exploring rhetorical styles and the rhetoric of American youth with these hard-working, over-achieving students. We tackled some hefty texts in class and I was at home with the Junior English curriculum focus of American culture and identity. I gave them homework and they actually completed it. They asked questions that pertained specifically to the work we were discussing. They requested extra credit assignments and

formed a line outside of my door after school for extra help or counsel concerning any number of things. They participated in several clubs after school. They held jobs in town. They volunteered more than any group of students I had come to know. It was clearly important to them to give back in various ways, to contribute to the lives of others. These were the honors students.

But I was also assigned some of the Level Two courses. These were courses for students who were working at grade level but who weren't necessarily thriving. The students in this class often happened to be students of working class parents. Obviously, there were exceptions. I taught Level Two students whose parents treated them to brand new cars for their birthdays and who had traveled. For the most part those students, the upper middle class low performing ones, did very little to challenge my teaching style or approach. They rarely complained and did the minimum amount of work to get by. But the working class kids, they were the ones who taught me to teach differently. They fought back and fought hard when authority figures challenged them. They questioned and debated and redesigned assignments to suit their own needs. They showed true curiosity by seeking out my publications and life story, at least the bits and pieces they could find online, and then asked me questions in the class that put me in the somewhat awkward position of deciding just how much I wanted to share. I only wished that they had shown that much interest in their own ideas and schoolwork.

These classes, despite being the most challenging and the most tiresome, were also the most fun. They were a spirited group and they made me laugh harder than any group of students I had ever taught. However, I was so ill equipped for the working

class, suburban white boys. I had no experience teaching these students and they were complicated and multi-faceted. I quickly learned that, as Abigail James points out in her work on teaching the male brain, “concerns of teachers in urban classrooms center more on management and on what the children are to do in class, while those of teachers in suburban classrooms center on academics and on the learning process.”¹³⁶ This is a broad overstatement and was not the case for me all of the time. Of course I was genuinely as committed to determining how I could make each classroom I shared with students the very best possible learning environment in the urban settings as I was in Connecticut, but there were times in the urban schools when I simply had to be more focused on what we were doing rather than on how we were doing it.

In this Connecticut school, especially with the boys, management wasn’t as necessary as was determining how best to engage them and what their respective learning styles were. And James reminds us that, “adolescent boys are likely to still be using the emotional part of their brain to make decisions after girls have begun to include their reasoning brain.”¹³⁷ I certainly found this assessment to be true. The boys in these Level Two courses, especially, were jocular and impatient and yet they were sensitive and sweet and much more emotionally charged than any of the girls I taught in Connecticut. Many of the boys marked “difficult” or “struggling learner” by teachers and

¹³⁶ Abigail Norfleet James, *Teaching the Male Brain: How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2007) 165.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 122.

administrators were actually contending with emotional issues more than any specific learning issues. Although the two often go together.

I found that what these boys most wanted was a chance to have the floor on their terms and someone who actually listened to them when they had something to say. I had just read Kenneth Kidd's work on the American Boy¹³⁸ and the other "boyologists."¹³⁹ Kidd analyzes the implications of the sociological trends in boy studies and boy culture since the late nineteenth century and what it means to be an "all American boy." I knew enough to bear in mind what the teenage boy needs and wants that is different from the teenage girl. But I had never taught these big, football playing kids who drank heavily on the weekends and worked in their uncle's marina or pizza kitchen during the evenings. They gave me as hard a time as they could manage and yet they were some of my biggest fans. They, too, made a line outside of my door after school but it was to have their turn with me alone, chatting about their home life or their girlfriends.

As was always the case for me as a teacher, I became more than just the students' teacher. I was their mentor, their advisor, their club sponsor, their yearbook lady, their trip director.

¹³⁸ Kenneth B. Kidd, *Making American Boys: Boyology and the Feral Tale* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004)

¹³⁹ Henry William Gibson, *Boyology: Or, Boy Analysis* (New York: Association Press, 1922) was the seminal text of "boy analysis" and Ken Parille, *Boys at Home: Discipline, Masculinity, and "The Boy-Problem" in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2009) discusses the "Boy Problem."

Working with the Level Two students brought up for me so many questions of socio-economics, authority, and the Protestant work ethic. The boys, predominantly, did everything they could to get out of the required work and argued their way through each assignment asking me, repeatedly, to explain again why it was necessary to do a. b. or c. Some of the other kids in the class, students who came from upper middle class homes, would shout back, impatiently, “Jesus, dudes, just do it and stop complaining.” But that wasn’t enough for the working class kids. They wanted to see the evidence that doing a journal entry or a reading response or an in-class essay would somehow benefit them. I argued that the ability to express themselves articulately and accurately would enrich their lives and senses of self even if they never sat behind another school desk again. I argued that the ability to make words and sentiment or words and argument match would pay off for them on the job or in an apprentice situation or wherever they may end up. This was a high school that bragged about their 95% graduation rate, a 90% college matriculation rate, and that displayed the list of college acceptances each spring on the wall next to the main office. But the Level Two kids, for the most part, were the kids who might not attend college, or who might attend a two-year program. The 5% who might not not graduate. And I found it difficult to respond in the appropriate way when BM, a Junior in the Level Two English class, asked me why in the world he should spend two hours on a night when he didn’t get home from helping his father clean the lobster boat until 9pm working on a vocabulary assignment that asked the students to translate iambic pentameter into basic English.

“Ms. V.,” he said, “This has nothing to do with my future. I like math, first. And second, when I graduate from this place I am taking over the lobster boat.”¹⁴⁰ True, the relevance was a bit ill-defined. Of course mental calisthenics are beneficial for everyone. Minds should stay flexible and malleable. But what did Shakespeare and lobstering have in common? I could stretch it, but really it was no use. He was right. Not a whole lot.

What struck me, though, was that the students were remarkably hard working on the job. Of course the monetary gains were appealing to them so there was that incentive. But I was intrigued by their work ethic. They took their jobs very seriously and respected their bosses. Very different from the working class individuals presented in Lloyd Zimpel’s *Men Against Work*. I had read this text in graduate school and knew the core argument: that higher education and more affluence creates unmotivated and apathetic youth in the workforce.¹⁴¹ This was a text written in the late 1970s but if his argument is an accurate assessment of youth in the labor force then it would seem that the trend he suggests would be even more obvious now, as higher numbers of young people in this country are seeking college degrees. Zimpel furthers his argument by asking, “Who in America ever had the Protestant ethic and when?”¹⁴² I would have to respond by pointing out that in working class communities in New England during the early years of this century, there were many hardworking kids who recognized the worth of maintaining a positive work life and the respect and acknowledgement of their bosses.

¹⁴⁰ Taken from my personal teaching notes., March, 2006.

¹⁴¹ Lloyd Zimpel, *Men Against Work* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Erdman Publishing, 1976) 167.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 166

I spent several afternoons counseling these working class kids on the best way to resolve misunderstandings with employers. Andrew, another student in the Level Two course for Juniors, was close to tears one afternoon when he realized he had failed to make the previous evening an important staff meeting at his family friend's deli where he had worked for several years. I knew he was serious about his work, even protective of it. He had often asked for me to visit him on the job and described for me which sandwiches I would like and how to ask for them. But, he warned me ahead of time that he couldn't talk to me much while he was on the job because his boss needed him to be focused. I did visit him there and the most I got from him was a quick wave when the boss wasn't looking. When I reached the register to pay for the sandwiches I had ordered the boss, who I had assumed had no notion of who I was, informed me that my money "was no good there," and that anything Andrew's teacher wanted was on the house. Clearly, Andrew had prepared for my visit despite his lack of interest in my actual arrival.

Given this dedication to work among these students, I was shocked by the general trend among these working class kids to party as hard as they did. Interestingly, they never partied before or after they worked but I was certain that on occasion they smoked herb or took pills during the school day. I even overheard one student explaining to another that he had to jump in early if they were going to party that day, because he didn't want to be, "wacked up for work." I wondered why they looked at school as more of a "time-out." It was as though they felt there was leeway during the school day for them to loosen up but they had to tighten their grip on themselves by work-time. It was a

mature recognition of job preparedness but a sad understanding of school readiness. I couldn't help but feel slighted although the students often reminded me it wasn't the same in my class. Sean, in the midst of court cases and attorney meetings, made it to my class and reminded me, "Miss V., if I'm on campus I never skip yours."¹⁴³ But just the knowledge that they viewed school as the thing they could fudge made me sad for these kids. They had never been given a reason to want to commit to school in the ways they did to work.

Although his text focuses on working class youth in a British industrial city in the 1970s, Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* offers plenty of relevant analysis for those of us who are interested in picking apart the school and job trajectories of working class students. Willis attests that for his informants, "work...is equilibrated by the overwhelming need for instant money, the assumption that all work is unpleasant and that what really matters is the potential particular work situations hold for self and particularly masculine expression."¹⁴⁴ I saw this tendency in my male students who worked in automotive repair. Their elective courses, sometimes both of the two they were offered, were in the mechanics and automotive department. I had visited them in these courses when I needed to speak with them about an assignment or a deadline because I knew of all their courses they were sure to make, if it wasn't mine it was their automotive course.

¹⁴³ Direct quote, taken from notes, May, 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977) 100.

These boys took their automotive courses very seriously and were proud of their projects. Now that I have a son of my own, I get the strange genetic predisposition that makes boys so enthralled with anything vehicular. I recognize that cars and talk of cars and work with cars, even in a four-year old child, has something to do with masculinity expression. I see my son swagger around the playroom, talking in a lower, more slangy “car dude”¹⁴⁵ voice, pointing out the subtle differences to me between one headlight and the next or a tailpipe position. He is a man in a tiny body in these moments and yet he has been drawn to vehicles and vehicular movement since he was not even a year old. So I get the guys and car thing. Alexander and Hines’s study that suggests that male and female vervet monkeys show sex differences in toy preferences similar to those documented in children, which implies that “sexually differentiated object preferences arose early in human evolution, prior to the emergence of a distinct hominid lineage.”¹⁴⁶ I have read parenting magazines that remind us, try as we might, our efforts to encourage gender neutral toy selection in our children are often useless. But as a teacher, I wanted so desperately to capture that interest and attention the boys showed for their cars and then open it up all over the rest of these boys’ lives.

And the girls? They were another lesson as well. They wanted me to be their friend and yet I could tell they were silently pleading with me to pay attention to them as a teacher and responsible adult would, too. These “Level Two” girls had been labeled as

¹⁴⁵ My four-year old son’s term for anyone car-centric

¹⁴⁶ Gerianne M. Alexander and Melissa Hines, “Sex Differences in Response to Children’s Toys in Nonhuman Primates,” *Evolution and Behavior* 23 (2002) 467-479, 467.

such for many years. Anna, a Junior in a Level Two class, explained to me one morning before school that it was just no use climbing her way out of the Level Two cage. She had tried and failed. Most teachers assume, she explained, that if a student was placed in a Level Two course in the first place it was for a reason. Again, here I was coming to terms with the sad truths that plague our education system. Most of the girls in these classes could handle any of the work I gave them and were able to coast through with an easy A or B. I learned that many of them were content with the A or B in a Level Two course rather than switching to a Level One course and working harder for the A. They didn't have to push themselves beyond their comfort level and despite the fact that some of them knew they could face more challenge, they just didn't have the transition in them by their junior years.

More overwhelming to me was the somewhat catty nature of some of these girls outside of my classroom. In class they were open-minded and concerned about the well being of others. When someone was absent, they noticed. When a student was displaying some difficulty grasping an idea or a request, they made sure I attended to them if I had missed a cue. But I saw them in the halls. Outside of our classroom they could be downright hurtful. They were opinionated and head strong and traveled in packs. I had seen them point and talk about people outside of their circle. Anna, who seemed to be fine with doing her own thing, often scoffed at these packs of these girls with whom she had grown up. I was often made aware of just how creative and intelligent these girls could be as was the case with Emma who I discuss in a later section, but more often I witnessed these girls downplaying their strong sense of

themselves and swapping out their own ideas and identities for the ones that were more palatable to the group ethos.

In addition to not having the energy to fight the group mentality, I recognized that some of the Level Two girls, even given all of their activities and after school clubs, were just bored out of their minds. Often, I noticed these girls backing away from participation simply because the Level Two boys they had been linked with for so long necessitated so much attention. I couldn't help but think of Carol Gilligan, Harvard's first professor of gender studies, and her argument that the adolescent girl was at great risk of disappearing.¹⁴⁷ I knew that other scholars were arguing similar points. In a graduate school course in the Education department, we had discussed some of these texts, such as Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* or Sadker's *Failing at Fairness*.¹⁴⁸ I knew I was teaching in the post-girl-in-crisis-era. I was acutely aware of what the country had been saying about the girls who suffer from feeling "silenced" or "diminished." It was a struggle to watch some of the elements of these author's assessments play out in my classroom.

The Honors students were a different bunch. I still can recall the quiet moments we shared together after an inspired or dynamic in-class discussion. We often found ourselves sitting the silence after such a discussions just breathing in what we had experienced: true discourse and exchange. If ever there were to be a temple built in

¹⁴⁷ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

¹⁴⁸ See Myra Sadker, *Failing at Fairness* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1994), Peggy Orenstein, *Schoolgirls: Young women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), Mary Bray Pipher *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), etc.

celebration of the essence of education it would include a momento symbolizing exchange like this. This group of juniors will stand out in my mind as the most inquisitive and stimulating group of students I have worked with as a teacher. Early in the year, the students gave in class analyses of themselves as members of the American Youth Culture and described their own style and expression. They were open and genuinely interested in giving the most accurate assessments of themselves that they could offer. Many of the students listening to these emotional presentations became choked up. They were supportive of one another and were creative and talented in a myriad of ways. They struck me with their honest introspection and garnered from me as their teacher a deep and enduring respect.

As with all high schools, this one saw its share of chemical experimentation within the student culture. Rumor had it our school wasn't as bad off as the one in the neighboring town. One student joked, "Maybe our parents aren't as bad off because we can't seem to get our hands on the prescription meds they can get their hands on."¹⁴⁹ Prescription medication, alcohol and marijuana use were the most common forms of experimentation. Students ate psychedelic mushrooms they picked up in New Haven and experimented with MDMA (Ecstasy), but the more common activities were drinking, smoking, and pill popping.¹⁵⁰ Once again, I was privy to a whole host of inside information about these students' experimental adventures. The students wrote openly in

¹⁴⁹ Taken from my person notes, Spring, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ Taken from a student journal with student's permission, 2006.

their journals and engaged in discussion in class, as asides from textual moments or details, about their experiences with experimentation. I watched with great interest as these students shared their experiences with one another and, in turn, gave to us all bits and pieces of their own journeys towards finding and asserting their evolving identities.

Processes of Identity

Identity finding and forming is a tricky enough business for some adolescents without having to do it while intoxicated. But for these nine students, for whatever reason finding their unique senses of self was a process they shared in the classroom and was linked to their own experimentation with alcohol and/or drugs. Who knows why some students feel that finding themselves must be done in conjunction with what can, from the outside, be perceived as escaping themselves. This was a question I asked myself over and over again as I watched these students explore. I have read the literature on identity escape¹⁵¹ but escape wasn't what I observed in these students who searched for versions of themselves while experimenting with drugs and alcohol. These students weren't attempting to escape pressures to be like others or to follow through on expected step taking through experimentation with chemical substances. Vivian Seltzer notes in her work on the public and private lives of the adolescent, "escape allows a respite from being the subject and object of the continuing comparison and assessment of

¹⁵¹ See Louis Breger, *From Instinct to Identity: The Development of Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1974) and Vivian Center Seltzer, *Psychosocial Worlds of the Adolescent: Public and Private*, (New York, NY: Wiley, 1989), etc.

adolescents.”¹⁵² I recognized that the kids in my classrooms *were*, in fact, constantly being assessed. But these students were seeking out chemical experimentation and sharing about it to augment their own processes of finding identity. I felt, at times, that these nine students shared their experiences so openly *because* they were being assessed. Although I never wanted them to feel I was assessing their ideas or the details of their private lives, I was assessing them on some level as a teacher. And their peers were, as they negotiated their way through their own perceptions of the these students, doing their own assessing.

As I studied further, listened carefully, questioned more and read and reread their journals and essays, it became clear for me that these students chose to embark on a more treacherous journey because they wanted more out of the search. They wanted a process that was complicated by chemical experimentation or was at least made more complex. Some students were artists who felt that intoxication enhanced their work. Some students were convention breakers who thought, maybe, that experimentation gave them more edge or grit. And some were charismatic and engaging kids who became even more engaging and engaged while intoxicated.

¹⁵² Vivian Center Seltzer, *The Psychological Worlds of the Adolescent: Public and Private* (New York, N.Y.: Wiley, 1989). 164

Creative Through Chemical

The students I share in this section fit, roughly, into an identity type that is based on their creative expression and their creative relationship with chemical. To many adults these students' behavior could be seen as deviant. Often the creative and the rebellious are synonymous or are at least viewed that way by "insiders." Howard Becker offers a thorough analysis of the "outsider" in youth cultures and the deviant behavior of those lying outside of the cultural norm. According to Becker, there are various types of deviants.¹⁵³ He includes, among other labels, those who are *perceived as deviant*, those who are *secretly deviant* and those who are *pure deviants*.¹⁵⁴ When discussing art and artistic expression that merges with deviant behavior, it is difficult to label an individual anything that accurately sums their identities. These three students were obviously creative. They were clearly "outsiders" of the norm. And they often broke rules. But none of them were devious in nature. I trusted each of them. I would have lent them a valuable possession of mine if they had asked and I knew that it would be safely returned.

Some essential aspect of creative output working in tandem with chemical input is to me more than simple rebellion or rule bending. It is a much more personal, private

¹⁵³ Becker, *Outsiders*, 20.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 20.

thing than that. I wondered what these students did with their creative pursuits when they weren't experimenting with chemical substances. Was the output process too frustrating without it? Did the chemical experimentation give them stamina for more creative expression than they had without it? Were they simply bored when they engaged in creative expression during those times that they were creating while sober? There were days when I wished I had been with the students when they were in the midst of their creative expressions, that I was with them for the moments when they were high and when they were sober. I could have seen with my own eyes the differences in the process. But I was privy to the moments of the processing they shared with the class.

In the case of Dori, I was struck by her creative nature and her relationship with alcohol and drugs and I was also moved by her place within what some might call a more masculine culture. Her creativity was evident regardless of whether or not she was performing or creating with males or females but how much of her self expression and her experimentation were linked to her place within the male-dominant band culture in which she found herself? How much of her identity was in response to being a part of this culture and separate from it, at once?¹⁵⁵ But it was her creativity and her various forms of expression of that creativity that was most intriguing to me.

The question I am asking here isn't whether or not there is a better or worse reason for an adolescent to experiment with alcohol and drug use, but rather what role does alcohol and drug use play in these students' search for identity and within forms of

¹⁵⁵ For more on girls studies, see Mary E. Odem's *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States*, Bettis and Adams' *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*, Ilana Nash's *American Sweethearts: Teenage Girls in Twentieth-Century Popular Culture*, and Lauraine Leblanc's *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*

expression? What can we learn about their search for self as they share with us their details of their experimentation?

Lander

On his first day in our last chance school in Dorchester, Lander sauntered into my office and sat down in the chair beside my desk. I had seen him lurking around the perimeter of the building on several different mornings. Twice I had shouted out to him to come up and check out the school. He had the look of someone hoping to find an education. I could see it in the way he gazed up at the building from the sidewalk below with just a glint of hope in his eyes. But he had backed away from me and hopped in to an idling Mercedes both times.

I figured he would be back and so when he finally appeared in my office that morning I was thrilled and I knew it had taken a good deal of courage for him to get there.

It was my job as the administrator of the school to admit the new students in addition to my work as a teacher. I glanced up from the paperwork I was flipping through and observed this new student: the expensive jacket musky and smelling of leather, the Timberland boots unlaced and spotless, the braids in his hair tight and precise. He smiled his gold and diamond smile for the first time and I smiled back. He

wasn't the only student with an "ice grille," but his certainly looked the most expensive.

He shrugged his shoulders at me.

"What's up?" I asked.

"This the school?" he asked. "I heard about a school where you can finish your shit." He scratched at one of his braids and pulled his hood away from the back of his head. "I wanna finish this shit."

"Yes. If you mean get your diploma, take the GED, and finish your coursework, this is the place," I said, nodding.

"You the lady I need to talk to?"

He kept his head down, hesitant to make eye contact.

"It's just you look young and shit. And ain't too many white people in these woods."

I smiled. "I'm the lady."

I asked him the appropriate questions: What was the last grade he completed? How much time had passed since he was in regular attendance? In which school was he last registered? Probation officer? Name? Time spent locked up? Any GED courses in lock-up? Any GED tests taken? Any passed? Any children? Need childcare? Need bus pass?

Lander kept his head down during our conversation. But when I asked him this last question, he exploded in high-pitched laughter.

"People be taking the bus here? Shit. I got my own ride."

He stood up and walked towards the window and put his index finger against the glass.

“There go my ride right there.”

I stood up and walked to the window. Two stories down, double-parked on Columbus Ave., a main thoroughfare of Dorchester, the road towards Boston proper, sat a shiny new Mercedes Benz. The one I had seen idling. African American. Tinted windows. Chrome rims. Hazards blinking.

“Nice ride,” I mumbled. “You better go turn that thing off.”

Lander kept talking as if he hadn’t heard me.

“Shit, who be taking the bus?”

I was surprised. He knew where we were. This was Dorchester. Was he egging me on? A lot of our students took the bus. There were single mothers on welfare enrolled in our school. They took the bus. The kids in the shelter took the bus. Even Davi, who had an “office” in the parking lot down the street and drove a fancy Lexus—hadn’t I seen him on the bus?

“Well, there’s me,” I said. “Number 16. Every morning.”

Lander rolled his eyes. “Damn, Lady. They don’t pay you at this place?” He scoffed. “Shit, I be asking for a fatter paycheck.”

I laughed. “Well, yes. I mean, no. It’s not much.”

He flashed a smile. There was that gold again.

I changed the subject. “See you in the morning, Lander. Bright and early.” I winked. “That means 8 o’clock sharp.”

“A’ight then.” He stood up from the chair and stared at me for a moment.

“Tomorrow you’re going to have to find a better place to park.”

“I got you.” He turned to leave. “And you can call me L, Miss.”

“Ok. L, then. Call me Sasha. No Miss. Just Sasha.”

“Sasha?” He smiled again and looked up at me. “What your mama be thinking? Sasha. Hmm.” He walked out of the office towards the stairs. “Sasha,” I heard him mumble as he headed down the hall and then he laughed that high pitched laugh again. “Sound to me like some kind of stripper name.”

I listened as he clomped against each stair, his footsteps echoing.

That next morning, he was waiting at the office door when I arrived at 7:15, grin intact. I was pretty certain I would see him that day but I hadn’t expected him to beat me to the building. Not even the security guard who monitored the door of the health clinic on the first floor had arrived and he was usually already at his post by the time I arrived. I looked up and down the street, searching for Lander’s car.

“Someone dropped me,” Lander said, knowing my thoughts.

I walked through the main door and up the stairs towards the school, flicking on lights as went.

“You said bright and early. Here I am. Where were you?”

He waited at my side as I unlocked the office door. We walked in and the cold air rushed to greet us. Someone had left the window cracked overnight. I stared into Lander's eyes and could see that he had smoked marijuana that morning. I frowned.

"L," I said. "Really? On the first day?"

"What?" he asked. "You don't know that."

His saying that confirmed my suspicion.

"Shit. That won't fuck me up. I could do it all day long and say some shit that would blow right past you. I'm straight, Sash."

I shook my head. There wasn't much more I could do. I wanted him to stay.

"What's this?" Lander asked, picking up the cardboard box that always stayed just inside the office door. He held it, turning it around in his hands, reading aloud the words written on its side, "LEAVE YOUR BAGGAGE IN HERE."

"That's the Baggage Box," I answered. "You empty out your pockets when you enter the school. Everyone does. We realized it's best to leave all the distractions in here," I said, poking at the pager (this was the mid-90s) clipped to L's back pocket. "People seem to think better this way."

"Get out. You mean like gats and shit? People be leaving their pieces?"

I hadn't seen any guns in the box but there had, on several occasions, been deposited knives and blades and various types of knuckles.

"We don't ask questions. You just empty out your pockets and put your things in the box. Then we lock the office and start learning."

"Shit. You all serious, then, huh?"

I nodded. “Yes. Very.”

“A’ight then.” Lander emptied his pockets. Brass knuckles. Cell phone. Pager.

He took his wallet out and leaned over towards the box, faking like he was going to toss it in, too. I could see several hundred dollar bills peeking out from the folds in the wallet. He winked at me and put his wallet back in his pocket.

“I can keep my Benjis, though, right?” he said. “I ain’t stupid.”

* * *

The following day I arrived after the office secretary, Spencer, who also filled the role of counselor.

Spencer shook his head at me. “You don’t even want to know.”

The door was open to the closet in the office and some of the early arrivals were standing around the Baggage Box, peering inside. I pressed through the crowd and looked down. There, among the normal things--Davi’s switchblade, a few rosaries (which several of the local gang members wore as tags), Heather’s Nokia, several colorful pagers, and a couple sets of brass knuckles--was a handgun.

In my twenty-two years, I had never been close enough to one to touch it. Two things struck me simultaneously: 1. Somebody had brought a gun to school and 2. Somebody had emptied his pockets of it.

I kicked the box into the office closet and locked the door. For the remainder of the day the key burned against my skin on the other side of the pocket. I knew it was Lander's piece and if I could have willed that out of existence I would have.

In the end, I handed Spencer the key and asked him to handle it. He was an elderly African American gentleman who was probably rocked off his feet each day at this school. The students forced him out of his comfort zone on a daily basis, but he took the assignment with grace and confidence. I believe he first checked the weapon to see if it was loaded. It was not. And then he waited until after school and then privately and without fuss handed the weapon back to Lander and asked him to never set foot inside the building again unless he could confirm each morning that he wasn't packing heat.

I always regretted that on that first day when he had asked about people dumping pieces into the baggage box that instead of saying to Lander, "We don't ask questions," I had instead said, "No, none of our students carry guns," but this a. would have been a lie and b. would have given him reason to doubt my understanding of the realities some of the students faced.

* * *

Lander came to school everyday. This dedication to a solid attendance record impressed me. Most of our students did not attend school regularly. And generally speaking, many of the students whom I knew were smoking marijuana came late, missed entire days, forgot their lunch and left in the middle of math class to eat. Additionally, this was a school without many punishments. If they missed class they were further away

from graduating, further away from passing the test. The students knew that, but still there were plenty of reasons to skip class. There was the bad weather (a frequent issue in Boston), the baby's doctor visit, the NCAA basketball tournament, Tupac's death. Biggie's death. Funerals. Lots and lots of funerals.

Our philosophy was: It is your time. Come everyday, you will finish in 9 months.

Even with a solid attendance record, though, Lander just wasn't doing the work. He would enter the classroom, head to a table in the rear, and sit back letting the others raise their hands, shout out the answers and participate in conversation. In addition to his attendance the one other constancy was his smile. Each time I looked his way, said his name, or walked towards his desk he'd flash his but-I'm-not-doing-anything-wrong, full, gold-toothed grin. I would talk to him about his future, about time, about the months that were flying by, about the first round of GED testing, about our upcoming graduation ceremony with the mayor for those who were finished, and he would just smile back at me. No words. No arguments. Just a golden smile.

"L," I would plead. "Come on."

Just a smile.

One time I think I said, "L, come on. You are so *damn* smart. You can do this." For this, I got the regular smile, a chuckle, and "This lady crazy."

Some time during the early part of April, one month from the first round of testing, Paul, the math teacher, asked me about Lander.

“Do you think we should ask him to leave?” he said. “He’s got to want to do it for himself.”

“No,” I said, “We are not asking him to leave.”

Paul just shook his head. “He just sits there. Even when I rearrange the desks. Even when I try to get him involved. He laughs. He gets my jokes. He’s just not interested in the work.”

“I know. He says he wants the diploma. He says he wants other options in life.” I paused. I thought of all the different ways I had tried to get Lander to be involved. But I never had the opportunity to sit next to him, to be with him when I wasn’t teaching. “Paul, would you mind if I sat in on your second period math course today? I’ll get someone to cover my class.”

“No problem, but that guy is hopeless. Maybe he’s just using us as a pacifier for his probation officer.”

I shot him a hard look. There were students who came just to satisfy their probation requirements, but I knew Lander wasn’t one of them. I was convinced that if he really didn’t want to come, he wouldn’t. It was obvious to me that Lander had ways to deter his P.O. if he had wanted to do such a thing.

* * *

I stood at the door and watched as Paul walked around the room, shouting out quick-second number games. The students screamed their answers in reply. “Lander,” I heard him say, “Name a perfect square.”

I looked at Lander. He smiled, shaking his head. His gold stood out against the dull walls of the classroom. I took out a notebook and opened the door.

“Excuse me, Paul. Do you mind if I observe you today?” I asked as I walked into the classroom.

“Be my guest. Make yourself at home.”

I walked through the room and stood against the back wall, ten feet or so away from where Lander sat. I scribbled in my notebook, keeping up with the pretended premise for my visit. After twenty minutes or so the students forgot I was in the room and regained their interest in the activity. Lander stopped looking at me and smiling and I inched a bit closer to his table. Eventually, I was near enough to get a good look at him without needing to turn my head. I watched and listened without making a noise so as not to break the reestablished normalcy. There he quietly sat, hunched down, his chair several feet away from the desk, legs stretched out and crossed at the feet. I inched even closer. Paul kept shouting and I watched Lander for some kind of sign. Nothing.

Giving up on the sneaky routine, I coughed and walked towards the table, pulling a chair over from one of the other tables.

“Hey L,” I said. “Mind if I sit here? I can get a better view from back here.”

“Nah,” he mumbled. “Take a seat. This dude suck, though. Ain’t no kind of teacher.”

“Hmm,” I said. “I always hated math. Kind of a word person, I guess.”

Lander turned, stared at me for a moment, and then turned back to stare ahead.

“Guess I be pretty good at math. Got to be.”

“Great,” I said. “Maybe someday you can help me.”

“Nah,” he said. “I ain’t too good at the explaining part. I always like the history though. I could explain that I bet. Like to watch the History Channel. You get that?”

“No,” I laughed. “Can’t afford cable with my skinny paycheck.”

Lander laughed a little too, showing me his teeth again.

I stopped talking and looked at Paul. “Better pay attention,” I whispered to Lander.

We both followed Paul around the room with our eyes. Lander scoffed a few times when Paul asked an easier question.

“This dog’s a joke,” he mumbled.

A few minutes passed and Lander relaxed a bit. I watched him from the corner of my eye and noticed, finally noticed, what I had been waiting for.

Every time Paul called out a question, very slightly and very subtly, almost unnoticeably, before anyone else even had a chance to process the information, Lander mouthed the answer. It took several runs at it for me to realize that he was always correct, always faster than anyone else in the room, and always smiled brightly after each mouthed answer, letting his gold shine while keeping Paul stooped.

Damn, I thought. It’s those teeth.

* * *

The next day I arrived early, hoping I would be the first and Lander would be second. Around 7:00 I heard a voice at the office door.

“Yo.”

It was Lander.

I was relieved. “L, I’m so glad you’re here.”

I stood up and walked over to him.

“Come sit by me,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder.

We walked to my desk and he sat in the same chair he was sitting in when we first met. I opened my desk drawer and took out the small plastic container I had brought from home.

“L,” I started. “Two things: One, I want you to put your teeth, I mean your gold-piece, in here today. I will lock it in my desk. No one has the key but me, and I promise I don’t have any desire to ‘bling’ your teeth.”

He smiled, shaking his head. “You crazy.”

I noticed that his eyes were a bit weepy and red. His leather jacket gave him away and I knew that once again he had smoked before coming to school. He was listening, though, and he seemed to be considering what would happen to himself if he didn’t have his teeth in class. Who would he be?

“And two,” I continued, “when you come to my class, I want you to be the teacher today. You tell us about anything you want. You can give us a test. You can use the board. You can move the tables. You be in charge. You’re creative. I know you can do it.”

He looked right into my eyes. I looked back into his. I tried not to let my worry show. I feared he wouldn’t go for it.

He thought for a minute.

“Be the teacher...hmm. Stand up and be the teacher....”

I nodded. He scratched at one of his braids and paused.

“...Bet,” he said.

I wanted to hug him.

“Bet. I’m gonna be the pro-fess-or toDAY,” he said, getting up from the chair. “I got some planning to do.”

He clapped his hands and wiped them on the fronts of his jeans. “Bet!” he said, heading towards the door.

“Uh, L,” I said, pointing to the box.

“Damn,” he said. “Almost forget.” He turned back and pulled the gold bridge off his teeth, like it was a retainer. “Here, Yo,” he said, handing it to me. “Watch out. That shit’s dough.”

I stuck out my hand and he dropped it in my palm. I placed it in the container and snapped the lid shut.

“See ya, Teach,” I said as he walked out.

He turned back--not afraid to make eye contact--and smiled with his own teeth shining.

* * *

And did he teach. That day, we learned about China and dragons. Then martial arts, breakdancing, the Bronx. Then more about China, and tea, calligraphy, foot-binding, and bamboo. Things he had learned from his brother who had been in the service. Things he had seen on the History Channel. It was a bit stream of consciousness. A jumping line of thought that was partly drug induced, partly Lander's creative mind.

Lander stood at the front of the room clapping his hands, acting out his own version of martial arts, jumping and kicking his leg out high into the air. He quizzed us and gave us participation grades and moved students who were talking to other seats.

The students saw a different Lander. I saw Lander come alive. They asked him questions. They wanted to hear his high-pitched laugh. They were pulled in to his imagination and his interest. I watched him try and then try again when the students didn't follow. He smiled and encouraged them. He stomped his foot when they interrupted each other. He patted them on the back when they passed the quiz he had given them.

And only towards the end, when he was getting a bit tired and worn thin, did he look at me to see how he was doing. I gave him the thumbs up. I could see he was doing just fine.

As was the case with each of these nine students, despite his recreational activities and illegal behaviors, Lander was a leader, someone to whom the students showed respect, deference, and at times, a kind of fear. I saw that combination of perceptions in spades that day Lander first began to teach. The students, even when he was not teaching, clearly had no desire to cross Lander or to end up on his bad side. And yet they knew just how imaginative he was. They gave him a chance to lead and yet they kept their distance from him. He didn't necessarily have the engaging character that Davi had, but his creative energy could change any room. If Lander was disengaged, the class dynamic changed. Other students carried the weight. But when Lander was engaged the students brightened and they saw him as someone with fresh ideas.

Tyson, one of the students in Dorchester who liked to bring people down rather than lift them up, was not one of Lander's fans, early on. He asked on that day Lander taught the class, "Sasha, why you pick a weridass stoner to do the job? Know what I'm saying? You know he ain't smart."

I saw a flash of fear in his eyes as Tyson said this. It took courage to say anything about Lander. The kids still weren't too sure of him. But then, as Lander taught, I watched Tyson loosen into the opportunity to get to know Lander. He laughed when the

other students laughed. Hesitatingly, at first. And he raised his hand to respond to Lander's questions. In the end, Tyson might have been Lander's turn around case: the student who makes the most progress through the duration of a single lesson. Lander was mine. And Tyson was his.

Lander's creative approach to living and knowledge seeking was what made him an artist to me. Of course I saw his sketches. He drew a complex and detailed dragon and brought it in to class on the day he presented on China. He was fiercely devoted to making that sketch as magical as he could. The morning he originally brought it in to show the class he hung it on the chalkboard, grinning with pride. He had only an hour or so to prepare and so the sketch wasn't complete. On closer inspection, Lander noticed something was missing, pulled the sketch off the chalkboard and rolled it in to a tube and carried it home with him that afternoon.

The next morning Lander had rehung the sketch in the classroom. This time it was shining with added glitter and gold edges. A psychedelic tribute to the dragons of China. I thought quite intently on how Lander might have procured glue and glitter and gold paint and I smiled, picturing him working in a restaurant or a friend's house on this project for school. I am not sure what his process had actually looked like. Maybe he completed the piece in the classroom that morning before I arrived and borrowed the glitter from the main office desk. I never knew. But it was his dramatic interpretation of martial arts and the way he moved around the room while he spoke that drew me and the students in. He was stoned to the moon. And I knew he would leave and smoke

some more. But he found his voice that day and did it so effectively. The students had a better sense of who he was and what he was willing to share with us. The reactions to what he shared only further emphasized Lander's unique take on history and learning and encouraged him further.

Of course, Lander's drug use wasn't always a positive element to his self-expression. Every single one of us who knew him then will never forget the morning of the first round of GED testing. I had rented a city van to drive the students to the testing location. The students were extremely nervous but knew this was the first of many potential attempts. The test, this time, was administered in Roslindale. A section of Boston that was quite different from Dorchester.

We checked in and I said goodbye to the students as the proctor escorted them to their seats. These were 18 and 19 year old kids but I felt as if they were toddlers then and that I was sending them off for the first time into the hands of someone else. I was incredibly nervous for them.

Lander, I had noticed that morning, was off. He was completely stoned, irritable, even a bit belligerent. I asked him if he should go through with the test. Maybe we should skip this one, I offered. But he was insistent. He told me he could wrap this up in a deuce (two hours). I told him before he went into the testing room to wash his hands and face and to button up his shirt so he looked a bit more presentable. He tucked his white undershirt into his low-slung jeans and wiped his hands over his braids.

“What's wrong,” I whispered to him.

He looked at me a bit sadly. “I’m set,” he said. “Just feels weird to be here and I got all these thoughts in my mind. Like I need to go draw or something but instead I have to do this shit.”

“You’ll be ok,” I said. “Just think how happy you will feel on the other side.”

He winked at me and said goodbye.

He was seated near a window and the proctor handed him two pencils.

The second proctor shut the door and all I could do at that point was to wait and hope.

About an hour into the test I heard a ruckus coming from the testing room. I heard the crash of desk falling over. It was quiet for a second and then I heard the scraping of a chair being pushed back across the floor with great force. I had become familiar with these sounds in the classroom at the Dorchester school. The students were big on the dramatic effect. Tables got kicked over. Chairs sometime flew. Oh Lord, I thought, what now?

Then, I heard a piercing screech come from Aaliyah and she shouted, “*What the FUCK?*”

There was the shuffle of footsteps approaching the door and I heard Lander mumbling. One of the proctors shoved him out of the classroom and he stepped towards me as the proctor demanded, “Handle this.”

The proctor slammed the door and I listened as the rest of the students in the testing room laughed loudly for a solid five minutes.

I opened the door to the testing room and gave them the fiercest stare-down I could manage and they quieted.

I shut the door and turned to Lander, who had disappeared into the bathroom. He returned several minutes later with his shirt un-tucked and his jeans slung extra low around his hips.

“Yo, shit. I called my ride.”

He shook his head at me and I let him go.

He was mumbling again as he walked out the door to the sidewalk where he waited to be picked up. “I told that bitch I had to go.”

It was two full days before I had put together the pieces of the story from students, the proctors, and Lander himself. During Lander’s telling of the story he smiled brightly and almost mockingly.

What I eventually learned was that Lander had asked the proctor in the middle of the test if he could use the restroom. She refused to let him out of the room even when he explained it was an emergency and, according to Kadija, another student from Dorchester, the proctor had said something under her breath. Something racist and/or disparaging about Dorchester kids. Upon hearing whatever it was she had said, Lander had pushed the desk forward so forcefully that it tipped over, asked one more time to use the restroom, and then, when denied a second time, had stood up and urinated in his pants.

I could hardly believe any of it. But I knew Lander. He would risk looking like a fool to make someone else look even more foolish.

I knew he could have held it. And yet, he didn't.

It was, despite my own embarrassment, the defending I had to do on Dorchester's behalf when the director found out and accused us of being animals, and the anger I deflected from the proctors at the testing center, a pretty creative way to make a statement. That moment became, in just a short time, a bit of the school's folklore and added an extra dimension to Lander's identity. None of us knew he had that kind of mind or that much investment in such an unconventional and downright offensive way to express himself. But it further enriched our understanding of the colorful way his mind worked. The fact that he had been incredibly stoned only complicated and contributed to the story. I made the wrong choice to let Lander take the test that day, in that state. I should have known better.

But, they will never forget Lander and neither have we.

Nando

Nando, as I have described previously, was a thoughtful and mature student who was at least a year or two older than the other students in the 9th grade classroom he was in when I was his teacher.

On the first day of school he caught my attention when he raised his hand politely when I called out his name for attendance, and then said, “Yes, Miss.” The other students in the class were pretty rowdy and energetic. His cousin, Rico, was in the same class and was already, on the first day, giving us all a pretty good sense of his energy and enthusiasm. Nando wasn’t as socially inclined as his cousin, but I was taken by him right from the start.

He admitted to reading during his free time (something not many of the kids in “regular” side of this school did or admitted). He asked me my opinion about the books we read in a non-confrontational way.

“Really,” he’d say. “I wanna know. Do *you* even, like this crap?”

What he had meant was: did I find much inspiration from the textbook? No. And I did away with that early on in the year.

I remember that third period class because despite the energy of the group, we enjoyed some pretty enlightening conversations. We accomplished what we needed to accomplish, which was a feat in itself, and then we had time to get to know each other. There were several breakdancers in the room so on a Friday when we had enjoyed a productive week, we would push back the desks and make a circle for the dancers. We would spend the last twenty minutes in class watching them dance. Clapping and smiling together as the boys found new ways of moving.

Nando liked to draw. I noticed that immediately when his notes and journal were filled with sketches and designs. Much of it graffiti-like in nature. And I knew most of the other teachers at the school forbade any creative expression on school work that was in the form of graffiti or tagging. But I allowed it. Especially when it was extraordinary like Nando's.

At some point during that first semester, Nando had privately shared his tag name with me and I drove through East and South Austin later on that day in search of his work. I noticed tags in places I had never noticed before. Most of the tags I saw were just that. Tags. Nothing creative or memorable. Just a way for a kid to leave his or her mark. But then I saw Nando's. His simple tags were artistic and then, there were his fuller pieces. More like extrasensory experiences than anything else. And the more I recognized his work, the more I realized just how prolific he was. He was responsible for the wall piece on the barbershop down the street from the school. On the dumpster close to the Fiesta by my house. On the canal just east of the river. On the abandoned trailer near the rec center where many of the breakdancers practiced after school.

And I knew he smoked marijuana. The days Nando arrived to school stoned far outnumbered the days he came clear-eyed. I was told to send the students straight to the Principal's office if I suspected that anyone was "under the influence." I was always shocked by that request. Did they realize, I wondered, just how many students they would have to deal with if every teacher sent every student they suspected of chemical use to the office? Instead, I would turn Nando around by the shoulders and direct him toward the bathroom without saying a word. There, he would wash his hands, splash water on his face, comb back his hair, and straighten his clothing. He, and whomever else I had sent to the bathroom, would return to the classroom and then I would lead the students in a series of stretches and sun salutations to get their heart rate up and to clear the cobwebs. It became our tradition, even on the days that were predominantly sober.

One morning, Nando arrived to class so off-kilter that he staggered across the classroom as he searched for his folder. Each student had his or her own folder notes and assignments were kept. Nando's was covered in artwork. It was easy to spot. I could see it from my place in front of the chalkboard where I stood, waiting. But he couldn't place it. Rico shoved Nando aside and grabbed Nando's folder and escorted him to his desk. I walked to Nando's desk and helped him in it and spoke to him while the other students found their seats.

Did he want the nurse? No.

Did he want to go home? No way.

Did he need some water? Definitely not.

Did he want me to do anything for him? Just stay right there.

Could he put his head down and close his eyes for a minute. Ok.

It's ok, I assured him. You will be ok.

I'm ok, he assured me. This only happened one other time.

Sleep.

Ok.

The students were supposed to give presentations that day on what they had read in the copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* the night before. I knew it was a bit of a risk, asking them to do such a thing. This school wasn't known for its homework success and I rarely gave it. But I had purchased, with my own money, enough copies of the book for each student to take home and the students were enamored of the story.

One by one, the students offered their thoughts on the reading assignment. They stood in front of their desks when it was their turn to speak. We began a fairly stimulating dialogue about the themes within the story. What Scout represented for them. Why she was their favorite character. What does it matter that we relate to one particular character or another? Why do people tell stories? How is this a uniquely American story? What would your story be?

And with that last question, Nando popped up and out of his seat, suddenly clear eyed and energized.

"I'm fine," he said. "I can't give a presentation but I can draw something I have in my head."

"Sure," I said. "Do it."

While FH gave his presentation and we listened to him talk about why he couldn't stop thinking about different types of parents, Nando stood in front of the chalkboard. To my surprise, he pulled from his pocket six very bright pieces of brand new chalk. He had come to class prepared. In that state, he had come to class prepared. And he had done the reading.

What he drew was so...beautiful...and haunting it was days before any of us could erase the chalkboard and even then, when we had to use the board for another assignment, we made Nando do the job.

He had created an eerie reenactment of the scene when Jem and Scout are attacked that night by the father of the girl who was raped. In his depiction, the children are bug-eyed and frightened. For their hair he used a bright yellow chalk and drew it wild and thick around their faces. Nando made their fear a character in and of itself. Fear lurked behind them in the shape of a monster and seeped into the scene in a thick and murky brown. And then, with a soft purple, he drew the presence of Boo Radley as the children's guardian angel, lifting them up and away from the darkness. Boo was a wash of color, a bright and yet softened wash in the midst of that dark and heavy Fear. The color was pulling at the children's arms, gently and confidently at once. The way he captured sentiment and emotion and action all at once stopped us all. When he was finished with his piece, we sat in silence for several minutes and studied Nando's work.

Nando dusted his hands off on his pants, leaving streaks of color and darkness on the front of his usually neat and pressed jeans. He returned to his desk and put his head

down, exhausted again, while the rest of us collected ourselves and jumped in to a dialogue about what we saw in front of us.

Nando let us in that day. We saw inside of him a unique and complicated mind. As we searched for words that could capture and expand upon what he shared, he sat with his head on his desk and listened. Only once did he interject a thought. When we were debating about whether or not Fear was a theme in the text and if so in what ways it was, Nando said, very quietly, “Fear is a theme in everyone’s text.”

And we left it at that.

Dori

Dori was the most diminutive high school student I had ever taught. She stood just shy of five feet tall her junior year in high school, her hands and feet no larger than an average ten-year-old's. She was shy in certain settings and ducked away from interactions with most unfamiliar or unpredictable adults.

And yet when she was comfortable and at ease, with friends or when most in her element, she was possessed one of the loudest personalities I had encountered.

Anywhere. She stormed through the halls of that high school, her head often down, her spiky blue or red or violet hair shocking against the more conservative haircuts and colors of the other students in this, the only high school in town. She wore black, often, and I must admit to sometimes being amused by her dabbling in such a variety of personas. Some days she was Goth Dori. Some days she was Sex Pistols punk Dori. Some days she was metal. Some days she was the walking dead, vampiric with paler than her usually pale skin and stained lips.

And despite the obvious thought that went in to her image she never seemed all that interested in her costumes. Almost as if she sleepwalked her way through

discovering and then donning them, though they were very put together and meticulously constructed.

Her boots, if it was a boot day, were expensive leather motorcycle boots. Fryes. Or Doc Martins, even. But never trashy or cheap. She wasn't falling apart or barely grasping her personas. She just didn't seem to care all that much about the end result. She was tough, resilient, opinionated, big-hearted, often argumentative, assertive, and incredibly talented. At sixteen, she had established herself as a local celebrity. She had been playing the drums since she was eight and was, at the time of our first encounter in an Honor's English course for juniors at the Connecticut shoreline high school where I taught, playing music with a New Haven-based bands with members who were twice the age of her.

Dori's father was one of a handful of doctors in town but was the representative doctor for the town's public schools and so it seemed everyone knew him, and in turn, knew his wild daughter, Dori. They had seen her grow from the quiet and shy girl into the boundary pushing, rebellious teenaged musician. And when her peers discussed her, sometimes it was with irritation (Dori had a way of talking her way out of deadlines and expected behaviors) and often with some hesitation. She was "strange." Her musician friends were "different." And yet I was often struck by how many of the more conventional students wound up at the few shows to which she had invited me and how many of those students cheered in support of Dori with honest enthusiasm and wide eyes.

If it was their first time seeing her perform they were shocked by the power behind her drumsticks and the complexity of her rhythms and lines. She hauled her own

equipment to and from each show. Tuned her drums herself. And waited quietly off-stage and away from the crowd until it was time for her to play and then blew us all away for the duration of the show.

I didn't know many 85-pound musicians who could handle a double bass pedal but she could and she soared through her band's version of speed metal with strength, gusto, and even grace. If it wasn't their first time seeing her perform, her peers watched with wide eyes. I felt a silent appreciation of gravity of the moment in them while I watched them watch her and saw that they felt privileged to be already inside of the knowledge that Dori was crazy talented and that it meant something watching her on stage. That she was on stage meant something. The world was a different place once you knew what was behind Dori's talk about music and even her own abilities. She backed it up and then some.

Behind closed doors, when it was just the two of us chatting about music, life, her loves, or writing, she was passionate and inspiring. She wanted answers to the life questions she was asking herself and she wanted to know about my own discoveries and answer-finding. She was introspective and honest. She was genuinely self effacing and self critical which at times led me to feel we were almost cotemporaries and yet she had the youthful self obsession and self adoration that made me smile and remember she was fifteen years my junior.

She reminded me of the young rocker I had been in high school and college and she became curious about my own musical background and experiences. We enjoyed deeply energetic debates about the British punks vs. what she saw as the softer, "vegan"

DC punks. We talked about Tin Pan Alley and even Bakhtin and the carnivalesque. She was thirsty for theories but even more thirsty for opinions and stories.

With all that talent and energy it was hard to believe that Dori sought out more inspiration through alcohol and drugs. She was certainly chemically creative. And she was creative beyond her chemical exploration. But much of her past and current creativity was linked to her experimentation. She had told me, during this junior year, that she had toned things down a bit, especially since 8th grade, which was when, she confessed, she had been “her worst.” But even now, she explained, without the chemical experimentation she was just as creative, maybe, but not quite as vocal about it and maybe not as influenced by the reactions of others to her creativity. Dori often told me of how wild she had been “when she was younger.” Again, younger: meaning in middle school. This was when she first tried alcohol. Smoked pot for the first time. Experimented with other drugs. I found it interesting that she referred to this time as her “worst” and when she was the most “wild” because she also explained that 8th grade was when she realized just how talented she was. This was when she would party at a friend’s house until 2 a.m. and then return home to her worried parents. She would walk past them, as they met her at the back door, and tumble down the basement stairs to where she would spend the next six hours pounding out drum lines in her soundproof practice room.

She admitted several times that year that she missed playing that hard. That it had been a while since she played until her hands bled. That she split twenty drumsticks a

session. That she kept going until her dad carried her from her drum kit up to her bed so she didn't fall asleep sitting up.

Dori wasn't a student who came to class inebriated or high. But she talked about it a lot and the students in this honors English class grew so tired of hearing about how "bad" she had been that they often asked Dori to talk about something else. We were all, by October, well aware of just how much trouble Dori had gotten in to and just how special she was in that way. And yet, we all listened to Dori with interest whenever she shared her thoughts about music or youth culture or American creativity and innovation. On those topics she was eloquent and provocative. We knew just how deeply she wanted to get in on our exchanges and we appreciated the reading response log entries she shared in class because they verged on essays about the current state of public schooling, or the apathetic nature of today's youth, or the fake and manufactured nature of popular music. She was pretty hard-core in her tastes. Nothing conventional or sappy. Nothing easy to like or listen to.

She was also interested in what others had to say and forced, above all things, honesty in what the other students wrote and shared.

But do you really mean that?

Is that the most accurate assessment you can come up with?

Do you mean beautiful? Or a different word? Don't say *beautiful*. *Beautiful* is as bad as *good*.

On the day that Dori was slated to give her presentation on her own personal rhetorical style and expression, she was eager to jump in and volunteered to be the first presenter. Not only was she uniquely dressed in red suspenders and skin-tight black pants but her hair was newly colored a neon purple and she was showing off a fresh eyebrow piercing. I wondered if she was in the midst of formulating a refreshed identity or if she was especially attentive to her physical presentation due to the in-class presentations.

She began by describing her childhood: one that was filled with the attentiveness of caring parents *and* a permissiveness that allowed her to find her own words and self expression at an early age. She described herself as a miniature batkid who was as obsessed with the old Batman and Robin cartoons as she was with nocturnal activity. She shared a photograph of herself at age four taken from behind. Dori was wrapped in a batman cape sitting in front of a late 1980s era television while the image of the Dark Knight flickered on the screen before her. She used her interest in Batman and the details of that image as a metaphor for her own life journey. She described, in detail, her exploration of drugs and alcohol at an early age and the various elements to her character that were rooted in what was, for her, a palpable twoness. At once, she was rebel, wild child *and* incredibly talented and responsible musician. Her music was a serious pursuit while her more irrational pursuits pushed her into swerving through her various paths as an adolescent.

Dori was more honest than I imagined a high school student could possibly be standing in front of a group of highly opinionated peers who had grown up in the same

small town watching each other grow up. She described the complicated, strange and yet surprisingly sweet connection she felt with her peers who were judgmental and supportive at once. She analyzed the way they had been forced upon each other in their early years in much the same way as children of mothers who are friends are pushed toward each other in play dates and awkward picnic lunches. She explained that the larger incentive behind her chemical experimentation was a direct result of her desire to be free of that proximity to so many familiar faces. Dori was tearful in certain sections when she attempted to identify the parts of her identity and expression that were rooted in fear. Often, she was made acutely aware of the difference between solitude and loneliness and that both of her outlets: drinking and other forms of chemical experimentation and drumming were ways to defeat the creeping growth of a lonely soul. She laughed when she reminded us that we all end our journeys that way, facing the black face of mortality. And she became convicted and stone-faced when she implored of her peers to speak with decisiveness, to be true to themselves and to fight conformity.

As a teacher, I felt a profound respect for Dori's courage, but what was more valuable to me was her meticulous attention to proactive expression and articulation. I had spent the entire first few months at that school wondering what was the motivating factor for the Honors students. They were intelligent, well-meaning and good-natured. They ate up my creative approach to teaching and allowed me my own exploration as an educator. There was an extraordinary give and take between us. But I wanted to know just how hard they would fight to find the essential elements of knowledge seeking and self-expression. I wanted to see them demand change on some level, to fight for

opportunity, to take advantage of every luxury that was theirs from a quality public library to a lovely autumnal sunset at the shore. I wanted them to know what was before them and to ask for more. Some of this desire was a result of my teaching students who had relatively little in material luxuries compared with these students and some of this was a general feeling in me to push all young people to think and feel this way. I never knew whether they would seek out this type of way-finding on their own. But they did. And that day, Dori began a series of open exchange and self-assessment that was revealing to me as a teacher and that was revealing to the students. They had known each other for many years but they hadn't known each other like this.

The process of sharing in this way, especially for Dori, of confessing the details of her chemical experimentation and her creative pursuits, was as much a part of her evolving identity as were the various steps she had taken to get to that moment. This was the purest example of the classroom and how that shared space between students is the only place where this type of exploration and expression can occur.

Charisma Through Chemical

In my years as a teacher, there was no shortage of charismatic students with whom I interacted. Certainly, the most charismatic of the thousands of students I have taught I found in the public schools. There was a period while I was living in New Haven and finding my own mothering sea legs when I taught at a big name private school to high school students who had the very best of the very best. I remember leaving my initial interview at this school and returning home in tears, so struck was I by the stark reality of what some kids have and what others do not.

My first month of teaching at this school was rewarding. I was able to expect more of these students than I had with the public school students because they had every known resource at their disposal. They ate well-rounded, fresh hot meals each lunch. They drank lattes from the café on campus when they needed a perk-me-up. They drove home in expensive automobiles to homes that were in exclusive neighborhoods. There were many students at this school on scholarship and they, too, became accustomed to asking anything of a learning institution and getting it.

So one would assume that these lucky kids would be just as full of passion and spunk as the other students I have taught. But, sadly, I must confess that I was made

acutely aware of the ways in which this schooling had taken something from them when it had, at the same time, given them so much. The next few months of teaching were fine. We accomplished what we set out to accomplish. They read well and wrote well and completed their assignments. But it became more and more frustrating for me as a teacher because I noticed in them a large, gaping hole. They were timid in class, at times, when I most wanted from them engagement and courage. The upper level courses I taught were filled some of the most intelligent students I had ever taught. And I greatly appreciated their intelligence. But there was something missing even there. Where was the energy? They seemed bogged down by the weight of their experience at the school, almost as if the luxuries given to them were too heavy to lug around. And I didn't blame them for seeming bogged down. There were great pressures to "succeed" at this school. Great pressures to behave and perform and wear and speak the rhetorical "we" the school promoted. Many independent schools today promote this type of rhetoric. In an article on the established community of private schools, T. Deal argues that, "unlike the public school where community is regulated through a set of explicit rules, the private school encourages positive relationships among individuals through an implicit, organic commitment to collective solidarity."¹⁵⁶ But in my experience, the promotion of this collective solidarity wasn't entirely positive. Did it leave less wriggle room for students to venture off on their own processes of identity formation? I watched these students self-check and self-limit. They refrained from allowing that uninhibited self-expression I

¹⁵⁶ T. Deal, "Private Schools: Bridging Mr. Chips and My Captain" *Teachers College Record*, 92, 3 (1991): 415-424.

had seen in the public schools. Were they given a quality education? At what cost? Their parents paid each year the equivalent in tuition of a quality college education and the students paid for it in other, less quantifiable ways.

And so, as I sit here thinking of all the charismatic students I have taught I can't help but recognize that charisma is something we should expect all schools to promote. And we can't forget its worth.

My own son is currently enrolled in a Waldorf school that promotes the innocence of childhood, whose primary mission is to preserve, for as long as possible, the precious elements of being a child. They tell stories. They speak in colors and song. They refrain from any conventional forms of learning. All learning at this school is implicit, not explicit. They do not talk of science and math but they cook and build wooden structures with appropriate tools. As it is explained in an overview of Waldorf education written by a supporter of Waldorf education, "In Waldorf early childhood classrooms, we do not seek to produce premature flowers of intellectual learning, much as these flowers might find appreciation. We rather forego such immediate satisfaction, and focus our attentions upon each child's ultimate good, and upon the protection of his/her childhood, with the goal of a healthy, well-rounded adult in the future."¹⁵⁷ My son and I are almost clocking out of this type of schooling. He is ready for numbers and letters and is hungry for more information and less metaphor. But I see the intrinsic value in this type of preservation

¹⁵⁷ http://www.whywaldorffworks.org/02_W_Education/documents/ALookatWaldorfandMontessori.pdf

and it makes me wonder if we ought to, as a society, find ways to do more preservation in our education of young people. Preserve humor. Preserve energy. Preserve laughter.

The students in this section are three students who were unique in their charisma. They were beyond the charismatic norm and they expressed themselves and shared their effusive and infectious personalities in the classroom. Their chemical experimentation was made even more relevant to their peers given their energy and voice within the classroom, and made their personal paths toward identity formation and expression more relevant to this work.

These charismatic students were all leaders in their own right. They inspired in their peers a sympathy and an engagement that was unique and long-lasting. They charged ahead in their pursuits and others watched with a sort of “awe.” In their book *The Leadership Experience*, Richard Daft and Patricia Lane offer that, “Charismatic leaders have an emotional impact on people because they appeal to both the heart and mind...and they are perceived as people who persist in spite of great odds against them. Charismatic leaders often emerge in troubled times...because a strong, inspiring personality can help to reduce stress and anxiety among followers.”¹⁵⁸ In the case of each of these students, there were various times in the course of their respective classrooms during which they were seen as individuals persisting despite great odds. And they did emerge and shine during hard times or during times when others were struggling. But what was most interesting to me is that they emerged as leaders during times when they,

¹⁵⁸ Richard L. Daft, *The Leadership Experience* (South-Western College Publishing, 1997) 359.

themselves, were struggling and trudging through adversity. Their charismatic natures helped these leaders to persevere but were also emphasized through their chemical experimentation and what they revealed to the class about that experimentation.

For Rico, the student in east Austin, a place inside the breakdancing circle was a release from the pressures of the everyday. A tough class or a run-in with a teacher might have set him back a beat or two but the moment he found his footing inside the breakdancing circle he was back in his optimal leadership capacity, regardless of however much marijuana he had smoked before entering that location for exchange. For Davi, the student in Dorchester, a setback on a test or a problem at work that threatened his life might have given him pause, but the moment he was back in the classroom encouraging other students to master a concept or exam question, his charismatic nature brought him to the present moment. And for Emma, the moments when the students saw her struggling through the trials associated with her alcohol experimentation and what she shared with the group about those trials in her energetic and vivacious retelling of those trials brought her more respect and sympathy from her peers. We all felt as though we were traveling through the trials with her and Emma elicited in the students that “awe” because she was so charismatic and her connection to others so heart-warming.

In two of these cases, the classroom was a bit more unconventionally situated. In Dorchester, the moment when Davi’s identity as charismatic leader and chemical experimenter was made most clear to us as a group in the parking lot down the street from the school where he worked and then transitioned back to the school for the final culminating exchange. For Rico, the moment when his leadership nature was

emphasized the most by his chemical experimentation occurred in the breakdancing room. And for Emma, the moment was a more slowly evolved one, beginning at Junior Prom, transitioning through a suspension, and then culminating with her return to the classroom. In all cases, it was during the projection of these students' most refined charismatic natures, among their peers, within the walls of the classroom, relative to chemical experimentation, that we were able to appreciate that evolution of self-expression and identity.

Davi

Davi enrolled after the academic year had begun. We always made exceptions for students who presented with some form of interest and/or honesty. And I didn't hesitate to give Davi a chance from the moment I met him. At over six feet tall he was a formidable presence. His bright smile was infectious. His voice was confident and soothing at once. He was charming. A handsome Cape Verdean with tight buds of hair covering his head. And he was gregarious. He shook my hand with a handshake that my father would have approved of: One strong initial grasp and then a quick, tight re-grasp before disengaging. He asked me questions about my own background and how I ended up in Dorchester. And then, at the end of that first day when I was scrambling to find bus change on the street in front of the waiting bus, Davi pulled up next to me, opened the passenger door and shouted at me to get in. He dropped me off in front of my apartment and then, joking, asked if I needed to borrow any money for the bus ride back to the school the next morning.

I am sure that a bit of my interest in Davi's own journey towards finding his identity stems from how personally grateful I was for his energy. One December evening, late at night after finishing my shift at the Boys and Girls Club, I was walking to

the dark bus stop wearing jeans that were patched at the knee with an old red bandana that had once belonged to my grandfather. I, of course, had thought nothing of wearing these jeans to my shift at the club and walked to the bus stop in much the same way I did each night during when I was physically and emotionally spent: a bit distracted, a bit off guard, and in a mental fog. As I learned, I couldn't afford to be distracted.

As I was about to step on to the bus an arm caught me from behind, around the neck, and pulled me back into a tight gap between two buildings. I coughed and gasped for air and then I heard Davi's voice at the street and then he shouted, more loudly, "LET. HER. GO."

The arm released its hold and I turned around to see two figures race through the dark gap and into the alley that ran behind the buildings. Davi approached me and put his arm around my shoulders and walked me back to the sidewalk and we stopped under a streetlight.

"They just wanted to scare you. Calm down."

I was flushed and coughing, still trying to make sense of what had happened.

"I don't get it," I breathed back. "It happened so quickly but it didn't seem like they wanted anything."

I pulled off the backpack I had been wearing and checked it. Zipped. Intact. Everything there.

Davi nodded. "Yep. They didn't want anything that belongs to you although if they had enough time, they might have sliced your knees." He nodded towards my jeans, indicating the red patches I had used to repair old tears in the denim.

After a second or two of quick processing I realized that I had made a pretty foolish mistake.

“But I am a dorky white teacher. I am the furthest away from an affiliated gang member than you can get.”

Davi shook his head. “They don’t care. It’s a symbol. And you had it.”

I knew about the Bloods and the Crips and the Magnolia Boys and the OPPs. But I hadn’t realized they would go this far. The Bloods got to wear the red bandanas. I, in fact, did not.

And so, from that moment on I paid close attention to Davi and his efforts to pass and where he was in his quest for release from the hold of conventional schooling.

Each morning when Davi sauntered into the classroom, smelling of marijuana smoke and sweet incense, he was “all business.” And he was an extraordinary member of our group. He had that draw. As soon as he arrived students sat straighter in their chairs and knew it was time to focus. There were times when they didn’t even show me or their other teacher that respect. People listened when Davi spoke. The other students admired and looked up to him. And when he asked for a favor many offered their help. I found myself leaning in towards him when he spoke. To be closer. To get a better listen. So that I wouldn’t miss any of his charm.

At 19, Davi was one of the oldest students in the school and his maturity level was obvious. I couldn’t help but recognize that he seemed even older than I was. Newly twenty-two I knew there was plenty that I didn’t know much about and yet I had lived in

other countries, I had traveled extensively. I had found a job just out of college, which was tricky in the late 1990s in Boston where there were so many students and large numbers of the recently graduated. I had helped my parents open many restaurants and learned about real world scenarios in a variety of ways. But Davi? He was such a rich combination of street smart and intellectually inspiring. In those first few weeks of knowing him I learned that he made money. A lot of it. And he was free with the details of just how much money he carried on any given day. When he paid the registration fee for the GED, which we required of the students when they enrolled if they could afford it, he pulled from his hip pocket the stereotypical roll of hundred dollar bills carried by cinematic caricatures of drug lords. I had to suppress a laugh when I saw it. But he wasn't audacious about how much he earned. He just dealt with the excess of it very publicly. He had to, he was a public persona.

All of the students knew where Davi worked and many of the students purchased drugs from Davi. When I walked to the sub shop down the street from the school during my break between my job at the school and my job at the club, I would see the kids clustered around Davi in the parking lot, exchanging full handshakes with him. They would pass him their cash and he would pass them a rolled up bag or a tiny Ziploc of pills or tabs.

I tried to avert my gaze, partially to protect their privacy and partially to protect my own innocence. I really didn't want to know who was buying what and how often they were buying. It was hard enough knowing that they were there at all. Any of them.

And especially hard thinking of Davi being responsible for so many students' acquisition of so many complicated forms of experimentation.

On the day of his first attempt at the GED exam Davi was late and missed the van ride to the testing center. I was devastated. I had thrown myself into preparing him for the exam and even phoned him, along with several other students, that morning to make sure he would be there. He hadn't made it to class for a week or so before the exam although he had left me messages with Spencer, the office assistant, explaining that he had completed the work I had given him or asking for more explanation on a certain exercise. I would phone him back when I had a break and leave him return clarifying messages.

So when he didn't meet us in front of the van I was concerned. I waited as long as I could and then had to leave in order to make it to the exam on time. I didn't want to jeopardize the other students' chances at making it there in time.

We pulled up to the testing center and one student shouted out from the back of the van, "There he go, Sasha."

Davi was standing at the double doors in the front of the center, waiting for us. He was smiling and the students spilled out of the van and rushed to him, giving him fist bumps and high fives.

That day's testing went on without a hitch. The kids were enthusiastic when they spilled out of the testing room and Davi gave me a wink and hugged me goodbye. He explained he would be away from school for a bit because it was a busy time but that the students knew where to find him if I needed anything.

We went back to the school and Davi climbed into his car and drove off in the direction of South Boston for a meeting with an “important dude” that I didn’t really want to imagine.

Later that spring on a crisp Friday morning, I received confirmation that Davi had passed his GED exam. I had determined as well that he had completed and had mastered the appropriate subjects to graduate from the high school. I hadn’t seen him for several weeks but I knew he was in Dorchester, working, and asked the students in attendance that day if they wanted to walk with me up the road to the parking lot where Davi worked. The students were eager to get out of the classroom and do something different.

We walked along Columbus Avenue until we reached the perimeter of the parking lot. I saw Davi, huddled in a group of ten or so and then I watched him put his thumb and forefinger up to his mouth and pull a long drag from a joint. He held his breath for a moment and then exhaled slowly while a smile spread across his face. He said something that made the others laugh and it looked as though they all were moving their shoulders in unison, finding a common reaction to Davi and his words.

One of the students from the school shouted out, “Hey J,” and Davi raised his head and looked in our direction. He lifted his hand up to wave and then saw me, surrounded by the group of students, and coughed into his fist. He was delighted to see me on his turf and I was relieved he didn’t seem embarrassed, ashamed, or uncomfortable by my presence. He pulled his cupped hand toward his chest to call us closer and so we

walked through an opening in the fence and made our way through the cars to the open area where Davi and his friends and customers stood.

A few people who had been standing with Davi backed away when they saw me approaching. Davi shouted out a goodbye to them and the others remained.

“What up, Sash?” he asked as he reached out his hand to me. We clasped fingers and then he did the same with the students I had come with.

I looked at Davi and smiled. He waited.

“It’s my birthday,” he said.

“I know.” I reached for him and hugged him.

“Is that why you came?”

I nodded. “I have a message for you.”

He looked at me with one eyebrow raised and waited for me to finish.

“Happy Birthday, Mr. GED.”

He smiled. And then it hit him.

“What?” he shouted. At first he was calm. Collected. He played it cool.

And then he let loose. He whooped and shouted and jumped for air born high fives from his friends. He ran around the circle of us and then jumped again. He came to where I was standing and lifted me up in a giant hug and said, to me, “Get OUT NIGGA! Sasha’s in the HOOD and I am finished!”

He spun me around and then lowered me to the ground. We all smiled, infected with his enthusiasm.

Davi looked at us and shouted, “Come ON! Let’s go celebrate.”

We all ran back to the school and raced up the stairs. Meanwhile, Davi was on the phone ordering subs from Ideal's. He then phoned his brother and asked him to pick up the subs along with two-liters of Coke and then he hung up and jumped around the classroom.

We listened to Biggie that day. And some reggaeton¹⁵⁹ and ate and talked about what we would do when the summer came. Davi was easy and relaxed with his classmates. Passing out gum and offering people rides home. He was charming and respectful towards Paul, the other teacher, and with Spencer, who offered Davi a gentlemanly handshake.

The students were proud of Davi. They commented on how hard Davi had tried to get to this place. His brother, AV, reminded of Davi of how late he had stayed up the night before the exam, cramming like a "real student." Davi smiled and reminded me of how worried I had been that he might not make the exam.

He said, to no one in particular, "And they said we couldn't do it. We just keep proving them wrong."

In the face of adversity, Davi had survived and succeeded. The students were inspired by his determination. Kadija, a student who was preparing for her third attempt at the exam decided that cramming the night before, like Davi had, might be the answer she was looking for. She kept nodding her head, subtly, as if it were all clear now. She eyed me once or twice and nodded her head at me, indicating that she was ready.

¹⁵⁹ An urban dance music mixed with Latin, Caribbean, and Puerto Rican elements.

Davi was so solidly himself that day. We had watched him in his more public persona out on the street and then we watched his charisma and confidence blossom even further in the classroom. His chemical experimentation hardly seemed relevant and yet it was so clearly, so obviously there. As he had explained to me before, for Davi, marijuana was just part of the gig. “It makes me more of who I am,” he said to me after class one day when I had mentioned his daily smoke. “I do it, but it never messes me up.”¹⁶⁰

I often wonder what his test score would have been had he been sober. Maybe he was so used to how he felt with marijuana in his system he would have made a lower score without it. Or maybe he would have soared through with an excellent score rather than an above average one. But he had, instead, breezed through with just a bit of cramming and, as he reassured me that day he had taken the exam before he left the testing center, he knew he was fine.

“Passing is passing,” he said. And I will never forget what came next. “I got that done. That’s what counts.” He had smiled as he shook my hand in farewell. “A score is just a number that means something to someone else. But me, I don’t give a fuck.”

¹⁶⁰ Taken from my personal teaching notes. April, 1997.

Rico

I am in the school gym. I am the sponsor of the breakdancing club and we practice during my off period. The administration has allowed this period to count as a physical education credit for the students who attend and pass. They perform at halftime during games and during assemblies and are held up to the “no pass, no play” expectation that athletes and debaters must meet.

The breakdancers have finished with their chips and Big Red and are now stretching their bodies in preparation for a practice session. I smell cologne and perspiration and tennis shoes and the dusty sweetness that lingers in the corners of gym-room floors. R and N sit facing each other, their legs spread out in wide Vs, their hands locked together. They take turns pulling each other forward so that their heads come closer to the ground.

Wizz stands close to the wall, his hand out for balance, and pulls his right foot up behind him in a quadriceps stretch. G is running circles around the gym, lifting his knees up high with each stride. The boys show signs of nervousness. N bites his fingernails. Marco repeatedly runs his hands through his hair and then shakes his arms and legs out

like a runner on the line. I know enough by now about these practice sessions to understand that each boy wants to do better than he did the day before. The boys have told me how it works. Each boy anticipates finally landing that power move they have worked so hard to master. He visualizes himself on the floor, picturing new moves and poses, forcing in his mind's eye his limbs into arches and streaks of motion. Each boy imagines himself surprising the group. But he is also careful not to picture too much.

“It’s about being spontaneous,” G has told me. “It’s about letting yourself do whatever it is your body wants to do. You can’t plan it too much because if you do you might fall out. And then you’d have to bail.”¹⁶¹

I am thinking of this spontaneity now as DeeJ, the designated DJ, starts the music and the boys form their circle. For several minutes no one moves into the center. The boys stand loosely in their places, shuffling their feet and easing into their style of footwork. N’s legs are loose, like elastic, and he swings his arms to the music. R rattles off a few quick steps like a boxer and then falls into a low crouch above the ground. Marco is still except for his head which bobs on the offbeat. The boys wait, relaxing into themselves until the first brave soul is ready to move into the center.

Finally, Newz steps forward and starts with power. He leans into the empty space the boys have created for him and throws himself into a barrel roll so that his entire body turns in the air, horizontally. I have seen these boys practice so many times before. But a barrel roll is extraordinary and seeing one is always thrilling. Newz lands on his feet and

¹⁶² Taken from an interview, Spring 1998.

pauses for half a beat, and then he lands another. He slides into several windmills on the floor. He rolls from one shoulder, across his chest, onto the other shoulder, while his legs spread out like blades on a fan. And then he pushes himself up into a handstand and spins on the palm of one hand. The rest of the boys clap and smile and shout out their approval.

“Starting out with the big shit, huh?” Go, Newz. You landed that shit!”

I smile, too. Their excitement is contagious. Newz finishes his turn with a few freezes on the ground. He holds his body in various positions. Balancing on one hand, he bends his arm and sits on his elbow with his legs scissoring off to the side. He lifts his free arm up into the air and holds the pose for several seconds. He moves into a new freeze—a low handstand with bent arms, his back arched, and his legs flopped over to make a bridge to nowhere. He holds. He tries a third one, a manipulated Capoeira with his free hand grabbing one of his feet.

Other boys take their turns and I watch the way they interact with one another. They yell out pointers to the person in the center when he cannot land his move. They offer suggestions. They tease. They collaborate. They back off. They applaud. They laugh.

There is a knock on the back door of the gym and Marco runs from the circle to see who it is. I know they are hoping for Rico, who was energetic and vocal in my third period class today but who I saw walking towards the bus during that class. He knows the rules with this period, though, and he rarely misses the chance to practice with his friends. I am hoping for him, too. It is a treat to watch him move. He brings a special dynamic to the circle. He makes us all laugh.

Marco opens the door and we see that grin. It is Rico. The boys look at me before they open the door wide. I allow him in, even though he has already missed half of the class, and he steps forward into the gym and raises his first two fingers as a peace offering to me. I can see his eyes are hung low. He has sipped or smoked and he avoids making direct eye contact with me even though he knows I will allow him, in whatever state. After class, I will escort him to the bathroom for our own routine. He will wash his face and take a breath mint and I will then escort him to his next class where he will sit and do his best to take in some information.

The boys back off and rather than stand in the circle, they sit on the floor and give Rico all the room he needs. Rico stretches for a minute and then asks DeeJ to switch the music.

“Gimme something I can get hyped on,” he says.

The boys shout and clap.

“Miss V,” Rico shouts over his footwork, looking my way, “what’ll be?”

I ask him to give us something new.

He does. Rico creates and recreates himself on the dance floor and manipulates his body, repeatedly, into unthinkable positions. He makes new moves and re-forms old styles into new images. He is free-styling, letting loose into a groove he finds somewhere just on top of the melody line of the music and he bends and distorts his body in ways that no other dancer is able to replicate. This is how he gains the respect of the other

breakdancers. They are all good, but he is extraordinary—no one can copy his style.

Rico then lands a few power moves that bounce in solid hits off the bass line. He pops up between the breaks in the beat and lands another, and another.

When he has tired himself out, Rico steps away from the open space and sits next to R, his childhood friend. They talk and watch the others who have now been recharged. Time is short during these practices, so the last ten minutes are hectic and the dancing becomes frenzied. The boys rush to get in their final turns and the circle disappears. The boys spread out and throw themselves into as many moves as they can manage.

Rico, now in his instructor role, rushes from friend to friend, counseling on the details of a power move or freeze.

“Try holding your leg up like this,” he says to Marco. “Yeah. Like that. It looks dope.”

Goose is trying out a barrel roll and lands on the ground with a thud. Rico smiles as he watches. “You’ll get it. After you practice enough you won’t wanna fall out anymore, so you’ll just get it.”

Goose rolls his eyes. “Hurts like a mother, though, right now,” he says, rubbing his elbow.

I watch Rico say goodbye to his friends making sure to bump each of their fists with his own. He gives R a one-armed hug. The bell rings and he looks at me directly, finally, now that the buzz has worn off.

“Let’s do this thing, Miss V,” he says. And we walk towards the bathroom together.

“You like my moves today, Miss?” he asks.

I nod. He peeks out of the corner of his eye to see my approval.

“Yeah,” I say. “But you gotta think about math right now.”

He groans and then steps in to the bathroom to clean up.

That day Rico shared himself with his peers in much the same way he always did. He was creative. He was charged with the inspiration he often came to practice with. And at the same time he was inspiring to others. Regardless of whatever state he was in, regardless of whatever it was he had experimented with, he was always the same in charisma and connection to his peers. His identity unfolded on the dance floor and then took a new shape as he became leader and advisor to his peers. He was careful with his criticism. And he had his fair share of struggles. The boys on the breakdancing squad, especially, had seen Rico come and go, through multiple home suspensions and In School Suspensions. They had watched him battle with his math teacher, who often found him during these practices given that he rarely missed those. It became obvious to us that in the midst of his heavier days or interactions, he found release through smoking and dancing and despite the intoxication he was always comfortable in his role as innovator and leader. The boys appreciated his feedback and Rico gave them more, it seemed, when times were the hardest for him. This was Rico’s unique identity and it existed in this way there in the breakdancing class with his peers. Without that, he was a dancer or an adolescent or a pot smoker. But with it, he was so much more.

Emma

Emma was a student in the shoreline Connecticut school. Hers was a class of Level Two students that landed just after lunch. In this sixth period class we read a variety of texts that shared in common themes of American Survival, American Identity, and American Freedom. We had read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The students had responded fairly well to the text and we had engaged in a pretty heavy debate about real vs. “put on” personalities. They were enraged that Douglass had been accused, by many, of “acting white” so that white people would more readily listen to his story. But at the same time, they were angry that white people had set up such a scenario. We then discussed Nat King Cole and his appeal to white audiences. Cole’s super clean image was another topic for debate. Would the white audiences of the 1940s and 50s have listened to him if he had been “all ghettoized” as one student asked?¹⁶² It was a valuable question and the students were in agreement: most likely not. The topic transitioned to Elvis and his borrowing of African American musical styles and then Eminem.

¹⁶² Taken from my personal teaching notes. Fall, 2005.

“How awkward,” one student offered. She was Emma. Her mother was a local psychologist. She was the student everyone in the class missed when she was out sick. The student who was, during class, so sweet in nature that many students shared more when she was around just because she listened and responded honestly to whatever it was that was shared. She melted my own heart, at times, when she complimented me on a shirt I was wearing or when she was genuinely moved by a text I had chosen for class.

And yet, she was also a part of a girl clique that could, at times, bring out the fire in her. These girls were as drawn to Emma as the students in the class had been, but for very different reasons. But what was intriguing to me was that who she was in class allowed those around her to feel safe while who she could be outside of the classroom often made students feel shy or embarrassed. She had power, in that way, and knew it. And she was a leader. She was someone who could inspire and offend depending on location and surroundings.

In her reading logs and journal entries, Emma was honest. Very honest. She shared things on those pages that were intimate and introspective. She encouraged in me a desire to know more, given that she was writing to me while at the same time writing to herself. She asked me questions in those entries. Like: what would you do in this situation, Miss V? How would you have responded? Was it this way when you were my age?

In one of her entries¹⁶³ she explained that she had, growing up, always been a part of a large circle of friends. But that it was the “minis” or the girls with whom she became especially close during her junior year in high school, who opened up more doors of experimentation to her. She had smoked pot plenty of times during her sophomore year and, as she described it, this experimentation caused many a great rift with her mother. But they always made it through these moments. They had an unbreakable bond and Emma explained that their close connection is what always brought them through the tough part of her adolescence.

Emma wrote about her junior year as she was living it. It became clear to me through her journaling that she was dealing with a good deal of depression. Some of that depression came out during class. The students could see it. I could see it. And yet she remained her infectious, charismatic self. What drew others towards her wasn't a generally positive and uplifting nature. Though there were moments when she was positive and uplifting. What made her a leader in the classroom and a friend to many was her openness and her untainted capacity for loving exchange. I knew she wasn't always this way outside of the classroom when she was surrounded by the girls with whom she was close. In the classroom, though, she was so delicate and understanding. She was revealing and never tried to hide her emotions. She asked other's for their opinions and wasn't hesitant to admit her own shortcomings or flaws. I was always struck by how unafraid she was to be forthcoming concerning her struggles.

¹⁶³ Taken from Emma's personal essays and notes, Fall 2005, Spring 2006. With permission.

“I have ADD,” she would announce. “This text was a real challenge for me. It made me want to paint my nails instead of read.”

Or she would confess to her risk-taking. “I should have been reading last night, sorry Miss V, but instead I drank with my friends. Woops.”

The students would laugh and I would roll my eyes. She wasn’t insensitive in this way. She was always apologetic and was often even confused about her own risk-taking. “Why do I get so out of it when I drink?” she would ask one student, hoping for a thoughtful reply. She didn’t mind that we all knew details about her that many people might try to hide. “Should I be embarrassed about that?” she would ask. “Is that bad?”

I would offer an answer or I would leave it to another student. Whenever Emma asked about chemical experimentation in the classroom, I would allow another student to offer a reply. But we never lingered on the subject too long. If her confessions and admissions were related to a homework assignment or a test then I would reply and offer the usual suggestions or sympathy. Sometimes, it seemed all she needed was that: sympathy. And then she would be fine. If she bombed a test I would launch in to picking apart why I thought she had struggled with one section or another and she would cut me off. “No, I’m fine, Miss V. It’s not your fault. I just wanted to say I failed. It felt better to just admit it out loud.”

We became used to her role in the classroom. Emma brought a confessional quality to that period. Because of what she shared and because of how she treated others when they were inspired to share, everyone was more inclined to be revealing and

courageous. I, too, encouraged this in the students. Honest exchange always allowed for more willingness in the students to work through challenging material when we got to it.

We were all aware of how far Emma was pushing it that year with her parents and the administration. Her mother had caught her with a bowl in her purse at one point during the first term. She had even missed school that next day and returned the day after claiming that she was so depressed about the rift that discovery had caused between her and mother she couldn't even make it out of bed. The students offered their condolences and gave her sympathetic looks. They tiptoed around her as if moving or speaking with any force might throw Emma off.

The Monday after Junior Homecoming I arrived at the school amidst all kinds of chatter. By the first bell of the morning, I had learned that Emma had been suspended from school. I was directing a trip that morning for the juniors I taught. We were heading to Salem where we would visit the community that had condemned women with differing opinions or strong personalities as witches. Emma had been especially interested in the trip. She appeared at my doorway, her eyes red and cheeks tear-stained.

"I can't go," she said. And that was all. She threw her arms around my neck and hugged me tight and then she allowed a friend to pull her away and walk her to the front door where her father was waiting for her in an idling car.

I watched Emma from the doorway. She climbed into the backseat and allowed her father to take her away from the school. Her head disappeared and I realized she had collapsed on the backseat. She later told me that moment was the beginning of the worst week in her life.

The rest of the students and I boarded the bus and we ended up having a memorable time in Salem. However, we all felt Emma's absence and we discussed several times that day just how much she would have loved the visit. It was Halloween day. And all the witches were out.

What I learned later on was that at the homecoming dance the previous weekend Emma had passed out on the bathroom floor after vomiting severely for over an hour. The Dean had found her on the bathroom floor and called an ambulance. Emma was taken to the hospital in New Haven and was treated for alcohol poisoning. She was fine. She recovered. But she was badly shaken. The administration suspended her for two solid weeks because she had been intoxicated at a school function.

During the two weeks she was away, she was missed. The students in that class were quiet during the first two days of her absence, and speculated about her emotional state. "I hope her mom didn't crucify her," one student said.

When she returned, everyone was full of questions. I had visited her at her home several times during her suspension, to give her homework and to check on her spirits. She had seemed lethargic and thin throughout the suspension and I was worried about her depression. But she was talking and honest and was working through the aftermath. Once back in the classroom, though, Emma confessed to being the most disappointed in herself for reasons that came back to her mother. Her mother had been away that weekend to "confront her own father," as Emma described it. She wrote that she was disappointed that she had done such a thing when her own mother was going through a life step that was weighing her down already. She told the students to learn from her

behavior and to be nice to their parents. The students laughed at this advice and then responded by telling her to give herself a break.

“All teenagers, suck Emma,” one student said. “Your mom will get over it.”

Emma took it all in stride, though, and in a few weeks she was over the guilt and self-berating. I noticed that the drinking continued for Emma despite how hard she had been on herself. She never really gave up on the feeling she got from being inebriated. She wrote in her journal that drinking made her more hilarious than she already was and went on to write that feeling “alone, was worth it. If she continued to make people laugh.”¹⁶⁴

Emma was the type of student who allowed people to enter into her own thought processes and in turn her own process of finding identity. I am sure she was that way with her friends outside of the classroom, but I also knew that she was even more that way during that sixth period class. She told me once, “I don’t know why I am so open with this group of kids. But I like it.” The other students in that class became a part of her search for herself and even became a part of her coming to terms with the consequences of her experimentation with alcohol and drugs. These roles the others played in her search for her identity and various forms of expression were meaningful to her and to the students. We all felt like we were a part of process of discovery. Emma allowed the other students to be more honest with themselves and they allowed her to be

¹⁶⁴ Taken from journal entry. Spring, 2006,

as free with sharing the pieces of her search as she wanted to be. That freedom existed in a specific time and place. Inside the walls of that classroom.

Challenge Through Chemical

Chemical experimentation and convention breaking is a complicated pair. As I have established, there is an element to adolescent behavior and culture that leads to both. Piaget reminds us that in adolescence, “each new mental structure, by integrating the preceding ones, succeeds both in partly liberating the individual from his past and in inaugurating new activities which at the formal operatory level are mainly oriented toward the future.”¹⁶⁵ While chemical experimentation and convention breaking and challenging behavior are not, by their nature, forward or future directed behaviors, those behaviors are for most adolescents new activities and oriented toward the future. Experimentation at this stage is about choice. When adolescents begin making choices for themselves regardless of whether they are viewed by adults as positive or negative, forward directed or wheel spinning, they are paths towards the future. A future of independence and identity.

Adolescents who experiment chemically experiment for a variety of reasons. Some young people experiment with drugs and alcohol just to fit in or to be a part of a

¹⁶⁵ Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1969, 2000) 150.

culture of use. The students who I present in this section were experimenters because of their desire to break convention and to challenge the status quo or to help them through their processes of rebellion and their desires to do so were directly related to their desire to experiment chemically.

Male and female adolescent delinquents historically, it seems, have rebelled in different ways than they do now, or more accurately rebellion was viewed differently by adults than it is viewed today. Rachel Devlin in her essay on female juvenile delinquency explains that during the middle years of the last century, “although not all authorities believed the problem of male juvenile delinquency could be solved...simply, the causes and cures of female rebellion were inevitably portrayed as subtle, difficult, and elusive.”¹⁶⁶ It may be that in the past, female rebellion tended to be less obvious and direct. There are plenty of articles and studies that focus on female promiscuity or simple voicing of sexuality and the way adults viewed that behavior as inherently devious. There was a trend towards analyzing the roots and consequences of that behavior from the Post War era on. Devlin, in her work, reminds us of many.¹⁶⁷ *Ladies Home Companion* published one entitled “Nice Girls Can Be Delinquent” and showed how “young girls from good homes went terribly wrong.”¹⁶⁸ Devlin cites J. Edgar Hoover, as chief of the FBI, in his article about the wartime lawlessness of children in *American*

¹⁶⁶ Rachel Devlin, “Female Juvenile Delinquency,” Sherrie Inness, ed., *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls’ Cultures* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998) 93.

¹⁶⁷ Devlin, 83-91.

¹⁶⁸ Murray Morgan, “Nice Girls Can Be Delinquent,” *Woman’s Home Companion* Apr. 1955: 48-64.

Magazine. He wrote, “If the violence of boys is alarming, the increasing wartime waywardness of teen-age girls is tragic.”¹⁶⁹ Later studies focused on the acts of cultural resistance in girl sub-communities such as the zine writers,¹⁷⁰ communities of the riot grrls, and the subversive web versions of *Geek Girl*, *Nrrd Grrl*, and *Girls Can do Anything*.¹⁷¹ While I find these studies, especially the ones in Inness’ collection on American girls cultures¹⁷² helpful when contemplating the historical trajectories of male and female rebellion and the various forms of rebellion, they are not necessarily all that helpful when considering the forms of rebellion and challenge that can occur within the context of the classroom and chemical experimentation. Based on my specific experiences as a teacher of these nine students in particular, gender and gender roles seemed to have little to do with the roots of why these students were experimenting and challenging. Promiscuity, or tardiness, or driving under the influence were all side effects or elements of character patterns not necessarily symptoms or elements of rebellious behaviors. What was more meaningful to me when watching the three students who I have defined as students who **Challenge Through Chemical** was the path toward finding identity within a classroom context in the midst of their challenging natures and their experimentation with drugs and alcohol. Those were the relevant details of

¹⁶⁹ Devlin, 89.

¹⁷⁰ DIY magazines in print

¹⁷¹ Mary Celeste Kearney, “Producing Girls,” Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth Century American Girls’ Cultures*, (New York and London: New York University Press 1998) 205-310.

¹⁷² Sherrie A. Inness, ed., *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth Century American Girls’ Cultures*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998)

adolescent expression that to me said more about the students' forming identities than any singular moment of challenge or moment of experimentation. This is a different context I am exploring: the context of the classroom and the others within the classroom and what these students share of their experimentation and how what they share and the responses from their peers shape certain aspects of their identities.

In this section I present an African American student from Dorchester who tested just about every ounce of patience I had as a teacher. She was confrontational, disrespectful even, and yet she pushed the limits of understanding with such vim and vigor I had to appreciate her for that. Her use of marijuana and alcohol did not seem to encourage her boundary pushing. They simply seemed to be a part of her personality and at times, even brought her down from her anger and frustration with authority figures.

And I present a Latina student from east Austin who was the most sexually promiscuous and at the same time most mature female student I taught in Austin. She was a drinker and a smoker and an experimenter in just about every way an adolescent can be. She argued with administrators, shouted in the lunchroom, skipped school on a regular basis, went to bars, smoked in the bathroom, had sex under the stairs in the annex. And she found, she admitted, that drinking and smoking made her "destructive nature" a bit softer. The students in the class actually appreciated the days when she came to class stoned. She was quieter. She made less of a fuss. I was aware of how Neni struggled to be a part of what I would describe as a "culture of using." Her brothers and male cousins drank. She immersed herself into the middle of various boy cultures comprised of drinkers and smokers. She had few girlfriends, if any, and I often wondered what any

girl who is so deeply immersed into such chemically charged scenarios can do but join in. In their work on substance abusing Latinos, Shulamith Straussner, Mario De La Rosa, and Lori Holleran explain this collective use among Latinos. “While individual, familial, and peer group factors are important,” they write, “many patterns of behavior within a given culture or community are collective in nature. The group establishes norms for acceptable behavior, and generally, individuals comply with these group norms.”¹⁷³ I saw this compliance in Neni and yet what was even more striking was her commitment to these norms outside of this collective. I was made aware of the fact, by her admissions and my own observations, that she used while she was alone, too, and maybe not because of her compliance to the norms of the various subcultures she was a part of but because of the ways in which she became reliant on chemical experimentation to make her more comfortable inside of the classroom, inside of a very different collective than the ones that encouraged her to use.

And finally I will share the story of a working class student in shoreline Connecticut who made me want to quit teaching and become a full-time advocate for young people in a different way. I wanted to break apart laws and take away liquor stores and destroy all automobiles just for him. He made other students feel things they weren't sure they wanted to feel. He colored a community with his story and met friends he didn't know he had and made more enemies in one night than any student should have to acquire.

¹⁷³ Mario R. De La Rosa, Lori K. Holleran, and Shulamith Lala Ashenberg Straussner, eds., *Substance Abusing Latinos: Current Research on Epidemiology, Prevention, and Treatment* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Social Work Practice Press, 2005) 7.

All three of these challenging students maintained their identities as rebels and convention breakers through their experimentation and while in the context of the classroom. But the classroom allowed them to find new ways of being inside of their rebellion and experimentation in different ways. The other students' perceptions of them and the elements of the classroom community that allowed them to challenge and view their experimentation differently contributed to their forming identities.

Kadija

Kadija was not a new student when I came to the school in Dorchester. She was beginning her second year at the school by the time I met her which meant that she had taken and failed the GED exam several times the year before and she was...*pissed*. Her attitude was, by any standards, atrocious. In addition to her abhorrence of all rules, requests, demands, and codes of conduct, she also, in her words, “hated all white people.” This set us off on a rocky course. She had formed a bond with Paul, the other teacher at the school, despite the fact that most students thought him “insensitive,” “ignorant,” and “clueless.”¹⁷⁴ I found early on that the best way to interact with Kadija was to give her plenty of room, keep my distance, and compliment her often. On her clothing, her new hairstyle, her sudden choice to write in cursive rather than in her usual block letters, anything.

Kadija was a physically strong, dark skinned African American girl who lived on her own, mostly. I knew that she and her mother often fought and that her mother was on and off medications and recreational drugs. Kadija stole most of the prescription drugs she used from her mother. Many mornings Kadija arrived at the school teary from a confrontation with her mother. She hated her mother to use, was disappointed when her

¹⁷⁴ All details in this section are taken from my personal teaching notes. First week at the school. September, 2006.

mother slipped backwards after yet another attempt to stay clean. She slept on couches at other family member's apartments or with friends when home was too complicated and unsafe. And yet, Kadija used, too. I don't want to speculate about her reasons for using but I do know that often Kadija used to prove to herself that it was her destiny. Almost like if she did it now and did it fully she could work herself out of turning into her mother.

Kadija was not afraid to challenge me or any of the other adults at the school. On four separate occasions I arrived at the school to hear Kadija shouting at Spencer, the office assistant and counselor, in the main office. "You ignorant, old mother fucker!" she shouted once. "How could you be so fucking stupid?" Or, after school one day in November I came upon Kadija berating the woman who ran the Boys and Girls Club, shouting obscenities and accusations while the woman stood in front of Kadija, wide-eyed and silent. The woman had simply asked Kadija to turn down the stereo she had brought with her to the school because it was disrupting the young children who were working on their homework at the Club. Of course, when her behavior was this...wrong, I intervened and did so forcefully, often escorting Kadija down the stairs of the building and out the front door of the school, sending her on her way for a few days until she could return to the school changed and with a written apology. During these escorts, Kadija would put up a fight and wrestle my solid arm off of her shoulder or back, but she would relent, shouting all the while, and then return with the appropriate apologies.

Kadija's drug of choice was marijuana, but she was also pretty committed to her interest in prescription pills and alcohol as well. I found that when she arrived at the

school smelling of booze she was more belligerent and vocal. These were the days that I often escorted her out but I always gave her a fair chance even when I knew she had been drinking. Some days she could contain herself even while intoxicated, but most of the time containing her fire just didn't work. The students even joked about it. They, too, knew the effects alcohol had on Kadija and kept their distance when it was obvious that she had been drinking.

On the days that Kadija arrived stoned we were all a bit relieved. She was more reserved, although that word is a bit of a stretch. She was never really reserved. But high, she was certainly more likeable. Even charming. She would allow herself to be less focused on the affronts and disservices to her of which she seemed acutely aware when she was inebriated. When high, Kadija would talk philosophically about whatever text we were reading, albeit challengingly, and she would enchant the group with her fire and passion for words and words used in the ways that worked for her. She liked political texts. When we discussed *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's Nigerian novel about imperialism and its contributions to changing tribal communities or *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien's series about what happens to men at war, Kadija was angry and frustrated but constructively so. She shouted and pounded her fist on her desk but we saw that at least this passion was directed at something that mattered, relevant to the text, and not senseless defensiveness or confrontation.

The day that Kadija most became her challenging, rebellious self was actually a day that endeared her to me for always because this time her rebellious nature helped to break a torrent of anger inside our classroom that I was unprepared for and the rest of the

students were too caught up in to help put out. We had been discussing all the different varieties of the English language that we had come to know. We talked about the differences in the texts we had read. Casual vs. formal English. Spoken vs. written English. West Indian English vs. British English vs. Dorchester English. We discussed standard vs. slang. And finally, we came back to the crux of that day's lesson: Tupac vs. Shakespeare. We had, that week, begun our unit on *Romeo and Juliet*. That unit marked, for me the first of many times teaching the text to high school students.

The students had shown some frustration with Shakespeare's English. It wasn't just his wordplay and double entendre. Or iambic pentameter or his facility with using words in exactly the way they were meant to be used. I had read somewhere before beginning the unit that Shakespeare had managed to use over 7,000 words only once and then never again in his work. I shared this fact with the students and they were impressed. But once we began reading they were dismayed.

Tyson, in his third year at the school, asked one morning, "Why that nigga gotta say it like that?" This was a question I ran out of the room to jot down into my teaching journal. I knew I would never hear that one again.

Many of the students were worn out by the first twenty minutes of our dissecting the meaning behind the opening pages of drama. I gave the students a break and then I backpedaled and gave them some additional historical overview about Elizabethan theater. They enjoyed learning about the wild audiences that populated the pit where the groundlings stood at theaters such as The Globe and The Swan and The Rose. I went home that night and reassessed my decision to teach Shakespeare at all. And then I

listened to some rap. This was in October. Tupac had been shot the previous month and the students had been devastated by his murder, as they were about Biggie's murder that next spring. Following both deaths, we granted the students a day off given how distraught they were.

By October, I thought the students were ready to talk about Tupac and rap and the particular English usage within Tupac's raps. I knew many of the students considered Tupac to be an innovator and a wordsmith. I had listened to enough of his music to gather as much myself. Tupac was a serious alcohol and drug user and his fans knew of his own experimentation. He rapped about marijuana and sex and boasted about his sexual prowess as most rappers did during the 90s, but he also rapped about social inequality, injustice, racial and socioeconomic divisions. Tupac was fascinated with the history of African American oppression in this country and came from a family of convention breakers. He adopted a "thug life" mentality but he offered an intellectual perspective on being a young African American man in America. The students were crazy about him despite the East Coast/West Coast rivalry that both Tupac and Biggie helped to ignite among rappers and their fans.

I listened to Tupac that night and realized that the lyrics to his popular and remarkably serious song, "Brenda's Got a Baby" would be the most suitable lyrics to use in my newly forming lesson plan for class the next morning. In this song, Tupac raps about a twelve-year-old girl who becomes pregnant and cannot afford to keep her baby and so tries to abandon it in the trash. Feeling guilty, she returns to her baby and then becomes a prostitute in order to pay for her baby's existence. Brenda is killed in the end

by a pimp or a customer. The song is a heartbreaking one but is also one in which Tupac's rhetorical style is on a level of its own. This song became an enormous hit in the early 1990s and was the first song in the mainstream rap genre to explore such an emotional and awareness-raising topic. The students still hung on to this song and I had heard them listening to it on the office stereo several times that month. It was a favorite of Kadija. And I was thinking of her when I wrote out my plans for the next day.

Tupac and Shakespeare weren't all that disparate on some levels. They were both story-tellers inclined to the dramatic. They played with words and word rhythms. They were funny. They captured the art of self-mockery and boasting. They captured an era. A time and place. And offered what would turn out for both artists to be a meaningful and lasting historical perspective.

I began class the next morning energized. The students began class sluggishly. I had written out the lyrics to "Brenda's Got a Baby" and copied them on to sheets of paper for the student. And I did the same for a section from the first scene of Act I in *Romeo and Juliet*, the initial fight scene. I played the Tupac song on the class stereo and then read the fight scene to the students. I then asked the students to translate each piece into basic English.

When we began class that morning, Kadija was not in attendance. She arrived just as the students were preparing to listen to the Tupac song. I was loading the disc into the CD player and the students were shifting in their seats, realizing what they would be listening to as another student passed out the transcriptions. I noticed Kadija make an inquisitive face, and to my great relief, also noticed that she was high. Not drunk. I

hadn't appreciated the weight of that moment at the time. But now, it seems strange to admit that I was relieved she was high. But it was a good thing she wasn't belligerent or angry that morning. Her high is what helped us all to get through what was to come next.

In the end, it was just too much drama and emotion inside of both pieces the students were transcribing. They were immediately engaged with what I had asked them to do, but they were almost overly engaged. I had the students work in pairs or groups of three. Kadija was, as was often the case, the lead voice of her group. She was working with Tyson who struggled with both reading comprehension and writing. With Kadija so high I could barely see the color of her eyes and Tyson so disengaged with words, they made for an interesting pair. But a flick switched in Kadija. She became adamant about the translations. She became a bit more tuned in. She shuffled across the room to look at what another group had come up with and then she shuffled back to Tyson, energized once she had determined they were off to a better start. By the time the groups had completed their work everyone in the classroom was excited to share their efforts. The groups took turns presenting their version of the basic English translations of the Shakespeare section first. For the most part, they were all getting it. Kadija, usually the one shouting out her likes and dislikes, simply smiled and applauded when she agreed with one group's take on the scene.

And then it was time for the groups to present the Tupac translations. Two groups presented and the students argued back and forth about the accuracy of the efforts. I interrupted to remind the students of the difference between healthy argument and ineffective argument so they calmed down a bit. And then it was time for Raj and Nikhil

to make their presentation. Nikhil was an African American 18 year-old with a Haitian mother and a father who wasn't around. He was bright and articulate. Raj was, as well, a thoughtful student. Nikhil was very opinionated, and he and Kadija had argued with one another many times that month. The translation they offered was creative and offered some insight that I hadn't considered. With Tupac's rap, as with Shakespeare's work, there are moments of double entendre that can blossom out, sometimes calling to mind triple or even quadruple entendre. Nikhil and Raj were riffing on this, making even deeper the meaning of Tupac's words. Tyson grew frustrated with what they were attempting to do. He didn't appreciate their poetic license with a "literal" translation and yet didn't seem to grasp that they were offering *all* the ways a phrase or section could be translated instead of just settling on one. Ultimately, it became a violent interaction. Tyson stood from his chair and lunged towards Nikhil, after the two had exchanged escalating anger with one another, and shoved him so hard Nikhil fell back against one of the tables and sent a few chairs spinning. Nikhil shot to his feet and returned the shove, knocking Tyson onto the ground. A punch was thrown and Nikhil held his hand over his cheek as he backed away. Meanwhile, the other students and I were jumping in between Nikhil and Tyson. One student caught Tyson's arms and pinned them behind his back. I rushed to Nikhil.

But it was Kadija who changed the pace and brought everyone to a new reality.

"I am so skunky I can hardly see straight," she began, shouting. "But you haters better pull the shit back down to earth." She was breathing hard and fast and her nostrils were flared.

The boys looked at Kadija as she went on.

“I don’t know if it’s the fucking weelow or what talking but I gotta say this shit is deep and you better not fuck it up with your weak ass pride.”

By now, I had settled the rest of the students down and we all had taken our seats again.

Kadija began to grow teary eyed as she spoke. “You know, I have to fuck my shit up every single day just to get some peace from my mother, or other assholes, but if you think about this, you have to see.”

She wouldn’t look at me while she was talking.

“These dudes both of them is off the chain,” she whispered. “You got one crazy ass white dude who made poor people have a little humor and a little story in their life. And then you have a 1990s nigger saying shit that will blow your mind. And make you feel like you ain’t alone anymore. That girl, Brenda. She could be me. I could be her. Any of us. We all have to face some shit. Makes you want to look out for yourself more. We all know the words to that song but have we ever said them back to ourselves?”

She shook her head and walked towards Nikhil.

“Sorry, Brother,” she said and then stuck out her fist for him to bump.

Nikhil laughed and looked towards Tyson. Tyson kept his eyes on the floor.

Then Kadija walked to Tyson and put her arms around him.

“I love you, shithead,” she said. And the two hugged.

“Damn, Kadija,” Davi interjected, laughing. “What’d you smoke? I don’t think you got that skunk from me.”

And with that, the rest of the class seemed to exhale in unison and we all burst into laughter.

Kadija didn't remain in that state for long. But she was softer as time went on. The next day she missed school and when she returned the next day, she was a bit reserved. There is no telling what it was that Kadija had found during that particular exchange. But it seemed to be a combination of finding a voice inside of her that was new and different and a willingness to share it with her peers and use it to soften the blows doled out by someone else. She was usually the one throwing verbal punches. But that day, in the context of her high, the classwork, and the words of two extraordinary writers, she explored a new identity. A different, softer, more likable one to be sure. And one that she offered up to her peers in that classroom and, I imagine, to no one else.

Neni

Neni was a student in a 9th grade English class the first year I taught at the school on the east side of Austin, Texas. That class will always have a place in my memory as one of the worst classes of my teaching experience. I hesitate using a word like *worst* because I have always felt about classes and students that there is no such thing as *bad*. So when I describe that class as being the worst it's more about the school and less about that group of students. The administrators had devised a broken class lunch plan for 9th grade students that year. They would have one of their core classes for twenty minutes, then they would be excused for lunch, and then thirty minutes later they would return for twenty-nine more minutes of class. For any student this would be a difficult schedule. For the teachers it was a nightmare. The first twenty minutes of class were spent getting the students, who were ready to eat and stretch their legs, to calm down enough to go over yesterday's lesson or the homework and then it was time to release them for lunch. When they returned, they were late, buzzed on Big Red or Coke or whatever sugar and junk they had purchased from the vending machines, and it was another twenty minutes of retaking attendance, gathering their attention, signing passes for the retrieval of forgotten purses or jackets. I used to call that period my five-minute class. And then, to top it off, one of the Vice-Principals had told me that at the beginning of the year that

given my experience and interests, meaning my time in Dorchester and my devotion to “at risk” students, they were giving me this group of eighteen “trouble makers” because a. they thought I could handle it and b. no one else would even consider taking them.

Each of the students in this period had his or her own learning issues. Many were dyslexic and were struggling to read and write at grade level or even close to grade level. I met my first fifteen-year-old illiterate students in this class and that, alone, was eye-opening and distressing. It would be a guess because many weren’t officially diagnosed, but I would say *all* eighteen of these students had some form of ADD or ADHD. Each of them had served their time in multiple In School Suspensions in middle school and then there were the seven repeaters who were coming in as second attempt 9th graders. They each had problems with the law, failing grades in every class, special needs, and family drama that had kept them from passing the previous year.

Needless to say I had to pull out all of my teaching props with that group and I still have nightmares about that class. In these dreams, sometimes I am wrestling Amari’s mother to the ground. Amari was an African American student who showed up on six different occasions with a puffy right eye, a lacerated eyelid, fingernail scratches on his neck, or bruises on his shoulders. All the signs of domestic violence. Amari’s history teacher had told me, when I spoke to him about the signs, that we were obligated by law to go through the proper channels to make an official report. And if I wanted to get the process started I would have his full support. I smiled at his euphemistic way of informing that he would file no such report. In the end, I made the report and then Amari’s mother came to school to find me, during the middle of second period one

Monday morning, and confronted me so violently that the security guards escorted her out of the building and I nursed a bruised hipbone for a week or so from where I hit the lockers when she shoved me across the hall. In other dreams I am screaming at the man who was principal in the autumn of that first year at the school about the realities of the classroom, begging him to take away the broken class lunch period. In the dream, he fires me and then shouts at me, declaring, in the end, that I am the worst teacher he has ever managed. In reality, this was the year that the school went through three principals in one year. It was also the year that I was called to the principal's office twice for reprimanding. Once, it was because I hadn't worn pantyhose that day underneath a long skirt. The principal was a sixty-year old "southern gal" who wore miniskirts and batted her eyelashes through staff development meetings. The second time, I was berated by an incoming interim principal for not sending more students to the office as a response to discipline issues. "I see here, Miss Vliet," he had boomed, "that you have not written a single pink slip since you were hired. Do you realize what kind of message this sends to the students?"

It was true, I had never "written a student up." It wasn't in my teaching nature to do so. Anything that happened in the classroom I determined was mine to handle unless someone was physically harmful or verbally abusive. And even then, I thought I could do the damage control better than the administrators could. Verbal abuse was a pretty common thing at the school. So common that many of us turned a deaf ear to it when it was directed towards us. And the students, they seemed to fend for themselves with minimal effort on that front. But if there were ever a class in which I might be tempted to

write someone up it would have been a student from that class. And if there were ever a student, it would have been Neni.

Neni had been written up by more teachers than any other student in the history of the school. I determined that it became a sort of mission of hers *to be* written up. I realized that once she was written up, she would take the pink slip, leave the classroom, and then begin a consistent cycle of skipping, walking the halls, and then eventually making her trip to the convenience store, the park, wherever it was she went, until the final period of the day, when she would reappear for her walk home with her boyfriends. I had watched Neni that first month carefully enough to recognize this routine. I had even visited her first period teacher to offer some alternatives to the pink slip step in the process. But her gym teacher, the woman with whom Neni started each day, could never allow herself to try anything else, so hurtful were Neni's insults and misbehaviors.

On my off period, before I became the breakdancing sponsor, I began to be something of a Neni stalker. This off period came during the upper class lunch and so I was sure to find Neni with her arm around the neck of a junior or senior standing in front of a car in the parking lot or sitting on the lap of a new boyfriend in the lunchroom. It was during this lunch period that Neni and an upper class boy were caught fornicating under the stairs in the new annex. Fortunately, I wasn't the one who caught the two in the act but it was I who helped escort the two to the main office once the teacher who had discovered them had forced them off of each other and back into their clothing.

Neni was a handful. She used various types of drugs. I knew she took pills and swallowed tabs of LSD. I knew she smoked and drank and celebrated on the weekends

with X and a host of other substances. I had seen her in the backseat of more than one lowrider, cruising east Austin with older boys, drinking liquid codeine and soda. She attended the same breakdancing competitions that I attended with the squad and approached me easily in whatever intoxicated state she was in. Most of the time, she was stoned.

The other remarkable element to her public persona, especially in the classroom, was how much Neni talked about her promiscuous behavior. It was my good fortune or lack of it, depending on how one views such things, that Neni always seemed to make it to my class. Her attendance was due mostly to her understanding of the system. If she came to the first portion of class she would be marked present. Then, all she had to do was sit for twenty minutes and then she could go to lunch and skip the rest of the day. That way she would still receive half-credit for attending part of my course. But I also wonder if maybe she delighted in coming to such a difficult class. She enjoyed stirring up trouble and there was plenty of it in this group. She was not my only difficult case during that period. The entire 49 minutes I was with that class seemed like an eternity of disagreements, discipline, and negotiating through challenging behavior.

Whatever the reason for her attendance, Neni enjoyed being completely honest with our group. I am not sure if she shared so freely in this way to see if it made me uncomfortable or to get the attention of her peers, or to make a name for herself in any way that she could, but her sharing was a regular part of the class. She started the period off, while I was taking attendance, by first describing the partying she had done the night before and whatever it was she had experimented with, and by then summing up the night

with a recounting of her sexual escapades. I would cut her off often and without hesitation but she always got something out. And the students were quite interested to see how I would react to her stories. They had already ridiculed me for being easy to flush. I was probably the only white woman they could talk to so openly and they delighted in seeing my reactions to the details of their lives.

In addition to recounting her experimentation with sexual expression and chemical, she also came to class under the influence of some chemical nearly every day. My usual reaction to drug and alcohol use applied to Neni as well. It was so hard to get these students to attend school that I would take them anyway I could get them unless they disrupted the class. If I noticed they were intoxicated when they entered the room I would walk them to the bathroom, which was directly across the hall from my classroom, and wait for them to return from washing their face and hands. If they were disruptive during class I would send them to the nurse after phoning the nurse to alert her to the timing or allow them the opportunity to rest their eyes at their desks.

During the school day Neni was more inclined to smoke pot than use anything else. I never determined where she found such a profound supply of marijuana but she was perpetually stoned. I am not sure I ever interacted with Neni when she wasn't using something. Her case was more than casual experimentation, and yet it seemed to be, despite the regularity, an experiment that would end in time. I am not naïve. And I wasn't then. I know the difference between dangerous use and less dangerous use. Some would argue that any use is dangerous for a mind and body in the midst of such crucial physical and emotional development. But even Neni would come out of it, I was certain.

My belief in this was due to her level of intelligence although certainly intelligent people suffer from addiction. But her intelligence was one of “knowing.” It seemed she knew just how far to take it and that she had a plan for surprising us all with a sudden stop. She wasn’t foolish although I had seen her wear a cloak of ignorance and brainlessness on many occasions. She knew how to manipulate people and their perceptions of her. She was aware of the fact that many students saw her as a “loose” ditsy slacker. But I had met with her privately and even in an intoxicated state she was extraordinarily wise. To be that manipulative and that able to cope within perpetual intoxication and that wedded to challenge at every turn, she had to have something pretty special going on intellectually. To me, all those displays of promiscuity and experimentation came back to one thing: boredom.

The students in this class, because they were all convention breakers and challengers, were comfortable with speaking their minds. They often shared their speculations about where Neni was when she wasn’t in attendance. “Oh she’s probably banging some dude,” they’d say. Or “You know, Miss, she’s getting her ‘swerve on’.” I took all these speculations in stride, protecting her privacy when I could but also taking in to account what her peers were thinking of her behavior. We didn’t really spend all that much time together. The logistics of the schedule made for an irregular and disjointed period. However, I tried my best to get in some quality lessons and instigate healthy exchange. The challenges were aplenty but the students also became used to me and my approach. In time, they knew they weren’t going to earn a ticket out of class because of

“bad behavior.” They knew it wasn’t going to be that easy for them to shutdown.

Slowly, even with the broken period we found a rhythm.

Then, the real change began. Neni was absent for several days. I began to get worried. I asked the students where she was and they, too, seemed worried. There were few, if any, joking remarks about her behavior. I tried phoning her home. I tried her other teachers. I tried driving by her house and even knocking on her door. I never got any answers that way. My mind jumped to the horrible but real possibility: that Neni was gone. Maybe she had run away, or had been kicked out of her house, or been in an accident. Or maybe it was worse than that. I couldn’t bear to think of the worst. I kept trying to seek her out. I visited her home several more times and no one answered the door. I phoned and phoned and phoned. I even tried the hospitals. No Neni. And then one afternoon when the school day had ended I was summoned to the office by a school counselor.

“In cases like these,” she began, “we find it helpful to counsel the teacher.” I was afraid for the worst. She went on, “We aren’t entirely sure, but we have reason to believe....”

An anonymous person had phoned in: Neni had been sexually abused. The family wasn’t responding. But the school had tracked Neni down via a family friend.

Neni did return to school. It was another week before we saw her. But she reappeared. Even though we hadn’t talked about it as a group in her absence or in her presence, her peers treated her carefully. It became clear to me that they knew. I never learned the details but I treated her carefully, too.

There was no way to know that we were hurting her by being too careful.

One morning Neni arrived to our class stoned and drunk and buzzed on something else. It was a different kind of high than I was used to seeing. But she was that same old Neni she had always been. She flung open the door and stumbled towards my desk and she shoved the papers I had been grading on to the floor.

“You are pathetic,” she shouted. “Grading papers. What the fuck. *Our papers?* You know we don’t give a shit.”

And then she pointed at the students who were filing in through the classroom door. “And you? You are pathetic, too. What happened to your sarcasm?” she shouted. “What happened to your humor? Stop fucking around with me and say what you are thinking!”

I was near tears at this point, watching her flail through her own grief. I pulled her aside and put my arms around her. She shoved me away. Cecilia, another Latina student from this period who had previously shown no sign of connection to Neni, put her arms around Neni, and Neni allowed it.

They two girls walked to the back of the room and took two seats in the last row of desks. Neni didn’t cry or breakdown or continue to show any signs of grief or pain. But she allowed Cecilia’s embrace and they sat quietly together for the remainder of the period.

When the bell rang to release the students for lunch, Cecilia and Neni remained in their seats and the rest of the students did, as well. Usually they were clamoring to get to lunch, hanging on the edges of their seats ten or fifteen minutes before the bell rang to let

them go. But they remained seated. After a few minutes, the boys, mostly, began to rise from their seats and file out of the classroom. Then the girls followed. But Neni and Cecilia stayed seated through the entire lunch period and the remaining 29 minutes of the period. Most of the students returned from lunch and participated quietly in the lesson during the second half of the period. And when the bell rang to mark the end of the period, they filed out again, quietly and with hesitation, as they had before.

No one spoke about that day. No one processed what had happened. But everyone in that class knew something had happened. Neni returned to her previous self. Challenging, intoxicated, vociferous, tardy Neni. But the rest of the year went on with a little less disjointedness. No administrator had changed the composition of the student make up of the class. No schedules had been changed. No lunches had been shifted. But Neni had been through something and she had shared a bit of her growing sense of self with the class. And the class was different because of it.

Sean

I first met Sean when I was a teacher at the shoreline high school in Connecticut. I had heard about him long before our meeting on the first day of school. A fellow teacher had previewed my roster before it had been passed to me and said, “Oh, Vliet, you have him.” Then she went on to tell me the short version of his story. A heartbreakingly dramatic story of friendship, and loss, and alcohol. A story of summer trouble-making and regret, remorse, and recompense. Although there is nothing that could make up for that kind of loss, when I met him, Sean was embarking upon a many year journey into guilt, doing time, broken friendships, and community-wide scorn.

Unfortunately, the story was first told to me by that same teacher, who was known for her sarcasm and her negativity, and her inside information on the students and their private lives. In time, I learned her information was mostly speculation and she didn’t have the care or concern for the students that would come with possessing privileged information. So the story was tainted for me from the start. I knew as she was speaking she was “warning” me, giving me reasons to doubt my success with that particular group of students given Sean’s presence in the room, making me feel uninformed and naïve. Her version of the story was brief, hard, and empty of emotion.

It left me cold and she had known what she was leaving me with when she left it.

“He killed his best friend,” she said. Matter of fact. And then she let out a pinched laugh. She let that settle in my mind for a minute so that I could wonder if it was an accident, a violent crime, a premeditated action, or a fluke. Then, she laughed again. “Of course, he was driving drunk.”

I wondered then when, if ever, I would hear the story from him, because I knew, given my own desire to know as much about the students as possible, that he would tell me. One day. I was sure of it.

Later, through the chatter of teachers and other students I learned more details of Sean’s story. He and some friends had been out drinking and Sean had decided to drive himself and B on to somewhere else. On Long Hill Road, the winding road that ran from the center of town up to the woods that backed this community, they had swerved on the road, skidding into a telephone pole. Davy died. I learned later, once I knew Sean well enough to speak about the past, that Sean had known when he looked at Davy, once he came to, that he had killed him.

When I first met Sean I was struck by his eyes and the way they didn’t fit with his identity as hardened, tough-skinned kid. They were the saddest eyes I had ever seen. Just making eye-contact with him was a test of wills. I often found myself, during the first days of being his teacher, looking away for fear I might breakdown standing in front of 30 students who were hanging on my every word. This was a Level Two class. Fifth period. A tough group with the challenging boys and the complacent girls. The class that

liked to play practical jokes, who liked to see me uncomfortable, but who sought out my story and my writing and who wanted to know more.

Early on, Sean missed class often. There were court dates and meetings with attorneys. There were days when he came for part of the period and was then escorted out of class by a dean or a counselor. It seemed as though he was getting the support from the adults in the school who cared but he later confessed to me that no one really knew what to do with him. During the first months of school it was still so near to the time of the accident. I was becoming Sean's teacher as he was becoming "that boy who killed his friend." It was a situation I had never been in. None of us had been in that situation. Everyone in town knew who Sean was. I knew there were family members and friends of Davy who had, at one point in their lives, loved both Sean and Davy. and now, somehow loving Sean was wrong and they pulled away. He lost so much that year.

It became clear that Sean was exploring all the ways in which his identity was changing, much of it without his involvement in the change beyond what he had done that night Davy died. I watched him become more and more outwardly tough. He kept his hood up even when I asked him to take it down in class. He kept his coat on. He smoked cigarettes all day long. And then he began coming to class with the telltale red eyes and the reeking clothing. The stained finger tips and the cough. I watched him more and more become the Sean he thought everyone else thought he was. He had to be a rough kid, a bad person, a rebel, a law breaker, to do what he did seemed the message he was trying to convey. People began to treat him this way. In the halls I saw his peers

begin to avoid eye contact. Or whisper behind his back. Or step backwards when he approached.

It is appropriate to end this project with Sean. While he fits into the category of **Challenge Through Chemical** it is for different reasons than the other challengers. He is in a category all his own. He is in all categories and he changed my life and the lives of the students he shared that classroom with. Despite the toughening persona he was developing, he also became free with us. For the first few weeks of school he was absent so often and when he was in class he was quiet, hardly speaking a word for days at a time. At other times, he would laugh out loud at a text we were reading. But not in mockery. Almost as if he were saying: this is all so irrelevant. And I would allow a laugh or two feeling as though anything he wanted to share was fine. I asked him to write. About whatever it was he wanted to share. And he did when he was able to gather the energy. I gave him so much freedom that some might say I was doing a disservice to him. But it was all a part of establishing safety and comfort. And we got there. Eventually he was writing about the texts. He shared with me in his journals the details of his risk taking that led to that fateful night. He wrote about how often he was using alcohol and drugs like a protective armor. But he also confessed to using to “see how bad it could get.” It had already gone to a place he never could have imagined. But then, he explained, since it was already so bad why not see how much worse it could get? He was pushing the limits of his own psyche.

There is no one pivotal moment for Sean that changed the course of the term for us or the shape of the classroom. His effort to find his identity was a slow, grueling process. He did not break through his pain and share with us his innermost feelings. He didn't not jump from his seat and shout, "I am freeing myself from this burden and this loneliness. I killed my friend one night. Let's just get that straight."

But I bet if I surveyed each of the students who were in that fifth period class they would all acknowledge what a special place that was. We watched Sean as he lived that painful year. He smoked. He drank. One day he ran from the room holding his stomach. I never found out where he had gone but I always assumed he had vomited in the bathroom. Maybe from alcohol. Probably from pain. And after the first few tortuous months, he began to come to school more. He made his confessions but they were different from the ones I expected. *I read the entire book in one night. That story is dope. I decided that being an American is still about Survival. I wonder is there such a thing as freedom?* His questions to us, once he began to speak in class more, were always short, whispered, said almost as if he didn't want anyone to hear. They were rhetorical questions that didn't lead to dialogue or debate. But his asking them at all allowed the students to see what was happening in his mind, the paths he was taking to find his current sense of self, the ideas he was exploring from what we did in class, the ideas he was exploring as he was experimenting with who he was becoming.

Sean came to school one day in the early days of spring when in Connecticut one can just barely make out the unbelievable truth that there is life there, somewhere underneath the crust of ice and snow. I had cracked a window in the classroom to allow

the sun-breeze to filter in. I was teaching my second period Honors students. We were debating the position of Sandra Cisneros. Whether she should be inside or outside of the American literary canon. There was a knock at the door and I went to answer it. Sean was waiting there with his friend Mikey standing next to him. His hands were in his pockets and he was looking not at me, but down at his shoes.

Mikey spoke first. "He said if there was anyone he wanted to say goodbye to at this place it was you."

"Goodbye?"

Sean looked up at me with his sad, sad eyes. "It's my final court date tomorrow. They are going to lock me up. Mikey and I are going to drink until we puke tonight. But I wanted to say goodbye."

I had known he was working through the legal ramifications of what had happened that night Davy had died. But I had no idea that it would be happening then. That my time with Sean was over. I begged him to come back and say goodbye to the sixth period class. There was time. He shook his head. It would be too hard, he confessed.

I gave him a hug and wanted to say so much more to him than what I said.

"Hang in there, sweetie. You will get through this. I am pulling for you."

We separated and then he leaned in for one last hug.

I held on again trying to send him energy for what I knew he would face. He was tried as an adult. He would be locked up with adults. I couldn't stand to think of everything he would learn in there.

I watched him as he walked down the hall towards the front doors of the school and knew that was the end of my knowing Sean as his teacher.

Later on in the day, during sixth period when I was explaining to the class what had happened during second period, about the goodbye and Sean's next steps, there was another knock at the door. We all looked up to see Sean standing at the window. He shook his head to indicate that he didn't want me to answer. And then he held two fingers up in a peace sign to the students in the classroom. A goodbye, of sorts. I could see that his face was flushed. He and Mikey had already begun their drinking. But he had come and that is what mattered.

Sean pounded his fist on the wood panel of the door and two of the students shouted out to him, "See you on the other side." "Peace, Sean." And then he was gone. The students were silent and after a minute or so I rushed to the door and called out to him one last goodbye but all I heard was the clanging as the double doors to the front of the school closed behind him.

Conclusion

I am not sure if it was a matter of luck or a matter of being in the right place at the right time, or if it had something to do with my nature as a teacher or person, in general. But I was given the privilege of getting to know quite deeply many students over the past decade and a half of teaching. I wasn't sure if I always wanted to know all that they shared and there were times when I knew we were treading on thin ice...that there were things they shared with me that should inspire a more active reaction from me. There were times when I did have to cut them short of an over-share. And often I found myself counseling them, trying not to pass judgment but attempting to open up an honest dialogue about what was too much experimenting or why they thought they were experimenting as much as they did. I couldn't help but analyze their behavior when their behavior seemed to be getting in the way of their finding a more complete sense of themselves. I wondered how much of their experimentation was learned behavior and how much of their leanings towards experimentation were genetic predispositions or a response to cultural expectations.

Mark Smith, a scholar of American Studies who writes about the history of alcohol and drug use in this country, states, in a paper that questions the nature and nurture of alcoholism, "If our history of grappling with the protean beast of alcoholism has taught us anything, it is to beware of simplistic answers and recognize its lasting

power rooted within those very physical and social characteristics that make us human.”¹⁷⁵ We would do well to heed Smith’s advice and bear it in mind when we analyze the role alcohol plays in our human search for self. Alcohol use and addiction are decidedly not simple things and the same could be said for any type of experimentation. To be human is to explore and experiment. To be human is to swerve until we get there. There is nowhere, in my estimation, better suited as a location for adolescent self expression and exploration than the classroom where a group of students comes together to try out new ways of expressing, to mirror one another, and to diverge from prescribed behaviors, if the classroom is one that is rooted in free exchange.

As I observed and wrote about the students, I was also aware of the fact that, sadly, the students were most likely experimenting a great deal more than they were willing to readily confess. I trusted them and their choices. But they were kids. Kids don’t always know when to stop. I often wonder if I had been Sean’s teacher in Connecticut during the year before that fated summer drive would the outcome have been any different. I wonder about how things would have been different for all of the students in this work had we met at a different time or had I stayed with them. And now these feelings are even more amplified with time away from the students. Not dulled, as one might imagine them being these many years later. Are they ok, I wonder. Are they still alive? I often worry about the Dorchester students—my toughest group—who are now adults themselves. They carried guns. They worked illegal jobs. They were hard

¹⁷⁵ Mark C. Smith, “The Nature and Nurture of Alcoholism—A Historical Overview,” American Studies Association of Texas Annual Meeting, San Marcos, Texas, November 18, 1994.

to reach. I have lost touch with most of them. But after learning of the murder of Telma's brother in Dorchester, I wonder how many other students I have known are injured or in jail or struggling.

A valuable follow-up book to this one might be the one in which I return to those locations where I first met these students to seek out the ones with whom I have lost touch. To get to know them again and determine, if they would be willing, whether or not they are still searching or how they feel their experimentation contributed to who they are today. I wonder if Nando is an artist now or if he has given it up for more conventional forms of work or more time with family. I know that Sean, Emma, and Dori are trudging along, all three still living in Connecticut. Sean is negotiating for a clean record. I believe that all charges, including vehicular manslaughter in the second degree, have been expunged from his record except for the DUI due to the fact that he was a Youthful Offender. He was sentenced to eight years in jail and was suspended after three-and-a-half with another three years of probation. When I spoke to him recently to check on him he was just home after a meeting with his probation officer. He has paid for his experimentation in more ways than time. He has shared with me that he has tried to date but many women have found him to be too intense. He worries about everything: what can happen to an unborn child while it's in utero, what his own genetic predisposition to bad knees would do if combined with woman who has her own shoddy ligaments, how his car detailing business is going to survive a New England winter. And he shares that even friends from school with whom he has reconnected find him to be changed. "How can you not be changed?" I ask. When speaking about what he went

through he says, “It’s ok. I’m just glad not that it happened but that it happened to me...most other kids are not strong enough to go through that stuff.”¹⁷⁶ And those words leave me speechless for quite some time. After a pause, we prepare to hang up. He thanks me for staying close. I thank him for sharing. If there were any sign of his having found a true sense of himself it is when he recognizes how he is different from others. That he is grateful that he went through it and not someone else.

But where is Lander? A few years after I left Dorchester I was told about the death of a student from the school. I didn’t have the name but the profile fit that of Lander. I returned to Dorchester from Texas, looking for Lander and a few others. I never found him nor did I manage to find word of him. I know Davi owns a bar in Dorchester although I have not managed to find him for a follow-up.

I wish there were a way to bring together the many students I have known. But that is a wish and cannot be. I feel grateful for having shared with them in the classroom and that they allowed me to know them while they swerved through finding themselves. I am grateful that they allowed their peers in the classroom to be a part of their identity formation and to know about their various experiments including those with alcohol and drugs. As tough as it is to watch anyone in an altered state, doing so meant something to me and to the other students.

I wish, often, that we all could go back to Kansas, to the Kansas that was before the days of the Wild West. Not to lawlessness. But to a time and place where people

¹⁷⁶ Personal conversation, November 2011.

could find their own way in their own time, to wide open spaces and big skies and where nature and geography were our nemeses and our friends, not drugs and not weapons. In the classroom, I felt as if we were creating our own West, a place like the one that Frederick Jackson Turner presented in *The Frontier in American History*. As Turner points out, only the future can “reveal how much of the courageous, creative American spirit, and how large a part of the historic American ideals are to be carried over into (a) new age.”¹⁷⁷ In many ways, the American Classroom is our Frontier. The place where experimentation, identity, expression and ideals can exist. It is the place where change lives each day and where adolescents grow and find. It is our microcosm of the American project.

In his *New York Times* article entitled “The Kids Are Not Alright,” Joel Bakan reminds us of the early 20th century devotion to the protection of the child. It was the beginning of the “Century of the Child” and the government, through reforms and the introduction of new laws that protected the best interests of the child, remembered its duty to protect our young people. Since then, Bakan argues, we have forgotten that devotion. He writes, “The challenge before us is to reignite the guiding ethos and practices of the century of the child...we can---and should---work as citizens, through democratic channels and institutions, to bring about change.”¹⁷⁸ Because I have spent the past decade and a half with other people’s children and because I have a child of my own

¹⁷⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), preface.

¹⁷⁸ Joel Bakan, “The Kids Are Not All Right,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 2010.

now, I can relate to the urgency in Bakan's words. And yet, even more pronounced is my devotion to listening to children and adolescents. To protect their right to feel and be and express and grow in the ways they choose while allowing them to feel the safety of an open mind and a committed heart of an attentive adult. I could write my way towards arguing for systemic change in the American public schools and yet this isn't the forum or the mission of this work. What I most want to convey, in addition to an accurate portrayal of these students, is that we all, in the end, should have the courage to allow our kids to swerve. They will get there in time.

Appendix

For this project I chose to employ an ethnographic method for the research and for the presentation of material. There is a great deal to contemplate in terms of the method itself but before one can analyze the relevant presence and potential future of the sociological research method of ethnography, one must look at the complicated and debated history of this approach and its various applications. While it is true that many scholars have attempted to summarize and categorize this history and argue from behind their respective texts about the validity and relevance of ethnographic research in today's academic community, it appears that simultaneously many of these same scholars struggle with where the ethnographic method fits in both the academic and public works of tomorrow. Some of the controversy surrounding ethnography's past and present, which has led to this uncertainty of its future, is a result of the various definitions and understandings of what, exactly, ethnography means to the many readers, writers, researchers and contributors who are tied to the method.

Before discussing these multiple understandings of and approaches to ethnography we must make the distinction between *ethnography* and *ethnology*. Lodewijk Brunt's general explanation of the way in which the two practices were viewed until recent years is that "ethnographers went out into the field to gather facts, whereas ethnologists, sitting behind their desks in learned libraries, processed these facts into

general theories and took care of scientific progress.”¹⁷⁹ From this definition, it is evident that the ethnographers were the ones who dealt with the documentation of the more human aspects of research: the exchanges, the traditions, the values and social norms, while the ethnologists were focused on making sense of what was collected. Brunt also explains that ethnography deals with the unique specifics of one single human group or society, while ethnology is about the “general and the regularities of human condition.”¹⁸⁰ Anthropologist Paul Stoller explains that the assumption that the ethnographic method was the gathering of raw data and that the ethnologic method was the plugging of the data into an analytical system, devolved from the thinking that European analysis and theory was superior to that of the “ethnographic others.”¹⁸¹ However, since the 1930s, when anthropologists began to recognize that all societies were a part of a complex modern world, the practice of ethnology was replaced by social and cultural anthropology as ethnographic concerns expanded.¹⁸² This expansion sparked many of the more remarkable debates over the various manifestations of the “written representation of a culture.”¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Brunt, 1999, p. 500

¹⁸⁰ Brunt, 1999, p. 500

¹⁸¹ Stoller, 1999

¹⁸² Ellen, 1984

¹⁸³ VanMaanen, 1988, 1

HISTORY AND APPLICATION

The multiple understandings and applications of ethnography are due, mostly, to ethnography's long and colored history. Some people have traced this history back to the Greek historian, Herodotus¹⁸⁴, however much of the modern work didn't begin until the nineteenth century.¹⁸⁵ Long before anthropologists were analyzing the practices and beliefs of various social groups natural historians during the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century were writing ethnographies of pre-colonial West African social practices. Stoller has called this work some of the better descriptive ethnography and goes on to describe that "much of their writing, in fact, paints a rather complex and positive picture of West African peoples."¹⁸⁶ Stoller emphasizes the presence of positive description so that the contrast is evident between these early ethnographies and the work that was to follow produced predominantly by missionaries and explorers. This work, which coincided with the colonial era, was often infused with racist and evolutionist undertones within the descriptions of African "savages" and became the "fuel that fired the intellectual revolutions of scientific racism and Social Darwinism."¹⁸⁷ With the arrival of Darwinism on the anthropological scene came the emphasis on a more scientific anthropology, one that was built on empirical research and representation. Steven Tyler

¹⁸⁴ VanMaanen, 1988

¹⁸⁵ Clifford, 1983

¹⁸⁶ Stoller, 1999. 698

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 698

identifies this form of anthropology as being steeped with a “privileged ...register it identifies as ‘theory,’ ‘interpretation,’ or ‘explanation’.”¹⁸⁸ In order for anthropologists such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Franz Boas to liberate themselves from the racist and evolutionist past of ethnography they felt it was necessary to force anthropological description into a more rigid and scientific method, and an ethnographic realism was pursued. Scientific anthropologists, such as Malinowski, realized that primitive cultures were much more complex than was previously indicated by the colonial era work and began to relate ethnographic information to specific cultural developments unique to particular regions of the world rather than to a more general theory of the evolution of all mankind.¹⁸⁹ This pursuit of a realist approach encouraged ethnographers to follow what Stoller identifies as Malinowski’s model: that of the lone fieldworker working in one village or cluster of villages, using “his or her materials to construct a total culture.”¹⁹⁰

However, with ethnographic realism came a more complex view of the “author” and his or her respective voice. While there was a new movement towards recognizing the ethnographer’s personal experiences there remained an objective distance between the ethnographer and those who were being represented. James Clifford describes the way in which Malinowski’s work inspired the method of participant-observation and the balance of subjectivity and objectivity and claims that while the author’s voice is manifest, “states

¹⁸⁸ Tyler, 1986. p. 103

¹⁸⁹ Ellen, 1984

¹⁹⁰ Stoller, 1999, p. 699

of serious confusion, violent feelings or acts, censorships, important failures, changes of course, and excessive pleasures (were) excluded from the published account.”¹⁹¹ So, while the author is recognized as being the producer of these “mirrors of reality”¹⁹² he or she is simply that: a producer not, by any means, participant in or contributing to the represented “text.”

During this era of realism there were those who focused on a more empirical/scientific approach to ethnography, such as Franz Boas, and there were those such as Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, and Ruth Benedict who saw themselves as “both anthropologists and literary artists.”¹⁹³ While it became more accepted for the ethnographer to write in a literary style it was not respected by those who supported an empirical “four-field approach” that included physical anthropology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, and linguistics.¹⁹⁴ In fact, Benedict and Sapir, both students of Franz Boas, had to hide their more poetic works from their mentor’s “scientific gaze.”¹⁹⁵ Additionally, Mead searched for new methodologies and eventually abandoned those Boasian methods instilled by her mentor. However, her “careful use of minute observation, photographs and films...was not generally adopted and it was not widely

¹⁹¹ Clifford, 1986, p. 13

¹⁹² Stoller, 1999, p. 699

¹⁹³ Clifford, 1986, p. 3.

¹⁹⁴ Clifford, 1998.

¹⁹⁵ Clifford, 1998, p. 4

repeated until recent developments”¹⁹⁶ although she did achieve “a prominent and heroic (image) in the eyes of the general public.”¹⁹⁷

While it is true that during the era of ethnographic realism some more literary techniques were used, the approach was still rooted in a systematic, analytic approach to observation. It wasn't until the 1970s that this rationalism was abandoned for a more interpretive approach. Clifford Geertz, in his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, proposed the idea that culture was a group of texts that ethnographers attempt to decode and that the process of unmasking meaning, rather than the construction of systems of social relations, became the primary focus.¹⁹⁸ Geertz, in his oft-quoted essay on Balinese cockfights, “Deep Play”¹⁹⁹ describes the way in which rapport can be obtained through complicity. Geertz claims that for him getting involved in the more extreme events of a society led to an acceptance that is hard to find to otherwise. He describes how getting caught in a vice raid “gave him the kind of immediate, inside-view grasp of an aspect of “peasant mentality” that anthropologists not fortunate enough to flee headlong with their subjects from armed authorities normally do not get!”²⁰⁰ George Marcus acknowledges that in this way, “deep meanings are derived from the close observation of a society’s

¹⁹⁶ Ellen, 1984, p. 59

¹⁹⁷ Van Maanen, 1988, p. 24

¹⁹⁸ Stoller, 1999

¹⁹⁹ Geertz, 1973

²⁰⁰ Geertz, 1973, p. 416

most quotidian events.”²⁰¹ Marcus, in an essay entitled “The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork” explains that Geertz benefited from complicity by presenting himself as a “naïf” and that this “vulnerability of finding himself on the side of the village against the state...suggests a shrewd and an ambiguous innocence about the historic era in which anthropological fieldwork was then being done.”²⁰²

In addition to this desire to get at the extremes of a society, albeit through a type of complicity that Marcus defines as “neat and simple,”²⁰³ Geertz’s work was also marked with a style of writing that was embedded with detail and imagery, or “thick description.”²⁰⁴ It was Geertz’s thinking that ethnography was more of an art than a science, with the actual writing itself central to the practice. Geertz states that “the ethnographer ‘inscribes’ social discourse; *he writes it down*, (and) in doing so, turns it from a passing event...into an account.”²⁰⁵ Not only was Geertz incorporating a new depth to the writing style of ethnography he also lifted the more personal aspects of creating representation, through the use of narrative, to a more respected level. According to Roger Sanjek, Geertz was far ahead of the field, at this time, in “textual

²⁰¹ Marcus, 1997, p. 107

²⁰² Ibid., p. 109

²⁰³ Marcus, 1997, p. 109

²⁰⁴ Stoller, 1999; Whitaker, 1996)

²⁰⁵ Geertz, 1973, p. 19.

self-consciousness.”²⁰⁶ Anthropologists began to acknowledge the value of making human nature more evident in the voice of the author, beginning, possibly, with what Derek Freeman calls Geertz’s ‘defiant quote’ (of 1965): “there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture.”²⁰⁷

In the 1980s, in response to Geertz’s work, a group of anthropologists who found fault with the way in which thick description ignored some of the power relations in the world and the “ethical dilemmas of conducting ethnographic fieldwork”²⁰⁸ decided to write texts that “gave voice to ethnographic others.”²⁰⁹ Where formerly those being studied were passive and silent they were brought to light and were the core of much of the ethnographic writing of this time. James Clifford and George Marcus, in their 1986 text *Writing Culture*, brought together a group of essays written by anthropologists that were the product of a group of discussions concerning the practice of ethnography held at the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico during April 1984. The seminar took a critical look at what ethnographers do, which is to write, where the future possibilities for ethnography lie, and considered the limitations of the ethnographic approach.²¹⁰ This critique involved the postmodern questioning of Enlightenment epistemology, evident in the works of writers/anthropologists such as Paul Rabinow,

²⁰⁶ Sanjek, 1990, p. 60

²⁰⁷ Freeman, 1999.

²⁰⁸ Stoller, 1999, p. 700

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 700

²¹⁰ Clifford and Marcus, 1986, p. vii

Mary Louise Pratt, Vincent Crapanzo, Stephen Tyler, and of course, Clifford and Marcus. In these critiques of former ethnographies they “cleared space for highly narratized ethnographies in which the presence of the ethnographer was acknowledged, truth was partial, and...the assumptions of the Enlightenment were questioned.”²¹¹

In his work, Steven Tyler identifies the use of allegory in ethnographical work. He claims that allegory “draws special attention to the *narrative* character of cultural representations, to the stories built into the representational process itself”²¹² and that it encourages us “to say of any cultural description not ‘this represents, or symbolizes, that’ but rather, ‘this is a (morally charged) *story* about that.’”²¹³ Here, the more postmodern self-consciousness and concern for the way in with ethnographic authority is used are evident.

Vincent Crapanzano’s postmodernist view leads him to claim that “ethnography is historically determined by the moment of the ethnographer’s encounter with whomever he is studying”²¹⁴ and that rather than recognizing the provisional nature of his or her accounts previous ethnographers call them definitive. In his essay, Crapanzano decides that “ethnography closes in on itself”²¹⁵ because the ethnographer has to make sense of the foreign and therefore has not understood that telling the whole truth is not possible.

²¹¹ Stoller, 1999, p. 700

²¹² Tyler, 1986, p. 100

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Crapanzano, 1986, page 51

²¹⁵ Crapanzano, p. 52

Crapanzano touches on the much discussed issue of the way in which the ethnographer uses (or abuses) his authority, standing above and behind those who “experience” and evaluates the strategies he uses to establish the validity of his work.²¹⁶ Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont, in their essay on ethnography’s past and present, call this moment when anthropologists question the role of ethnographer “the crisis of representation” and claim that the ethnographic text was undergoing a crisis of confidence.²¹⁷ After Clifford and Marcus, this type of qualitative research turned towards a more linguistic or rhetorical approach and ethnographers tended to focus more on the revisiting and manipulation of their field notes, for a more self-conscious text.

James Clifford, in his more recent work, discusses the blurring of the border between anthropology and cultural studies and argues that much of this blurring has led to a moment of postmodernism that Lincoln and Denzin call “a messy moment (of) multiple voices, experimental texts, breaks, ruptures, crises of legitimation and representation, self-critique, new moral discourses, and technologies.”²¹⁸ They identify this moment emerging as a “cacophony of voices speaking with varying agendas.”²¹⁹ Because of the variety of ethnographic methods and the reconsideration of the modes of representation, description, and even the meanings of “culture” and “society” scholars

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, 1999, p. 462

²¹⁸ Lincoln and Denzin, 1998, p. 581.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 409

required themselves to participate in an intense self-examination of their work and approach.²²⁰

This complicated history, especially those insecurities that arose during the postmodern era, has led to a more playful and evolving approach to ethnographic research and presentation. In the following section, we will take a look at the potential weaknesses of ethnography and specific tendencies that some scholars recommend should be avoided.

THE DEBATES

Several of the debates concerning ethnography focus on the voice and writing styles used by various practitioners. Because many ethnographers have taken to using poetics to allow for a more artful approach to their representations, scholars within the various fields who rely on ethnography as a type of methodology have argued on the validity of literary tales. James Clifford in his 1986 work takes note of the popularity of the literary approach in human sciences, and others have recognized the value of literary awareness, since the ethnographer is, in fact, a form of story telling. John VanMaanen claims however that three matters regarding literary tales are especially worrisome to ethnographers. First, many writers of literary tales seem content to allow their accounts

²²⁰ Marcus, 1999

to stand alone with little or no mention of previous work in the same area.²²¹ Second, that “literary tales can be fluff—merely zippy prose on inconsequential topics.”²²² And that this type of literary work can be identified as “scoop ethnography” that is more sensational and audience reaction driven.²²³ Third, that literary tales can be so wrapped up in realistic fiction that they distort the very reality they are attempting to capture.²²⁴ While VanMaanen notes that there are some literary tales that stand up against scholarly critique and might provoke better writing from the more “stodgy ethnographic writers,”²²⁵ he is concerned that the other less sophisticated works might allow for some general negativity directed towards artful ethnography. He ends his discussion on the use of the literary in ethnographic writing by stating that “the best literary tales display a fascination with language and language use...(and are) possibilities (that) spill over into academic worlds.”²²⁶

While many of the postmodern scholars who offer critiques of ethnography are concerned with issues of subjectivity, objectivity, authority, and voice there are other specific considerations that are worth noting. What unites most of this thinking is the

²²¹ Van Maanen, 1988, p. 134

²²² *Ibid.*, 135

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 136

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

idea that the observer/ethnographer should not allow his/her own ideas and expectations of the culture, or his/her own hopes and goals for the end results of their work to interfere with the presentation of that particular culture. As Virginia Nightingale discusses in her article on the role of ethnography in cultural studies there should not be a “co-opting of the interviewee’s experience of the text by the researcher, and its use as authority for the researcher’s point of view.”²²⁷ She places emphasis on the authority of the ethnographer and offers a plea for a fair presentation that is not simply a backing up of the ethnographer’s already established point of view.

Along the same lines, Hammersley and Atkinson point out that “preconceived ideas are pernicious in any scientific work, but foreshadowed problems are the main endowment of a scientific thinker.”²²⁸ However, “if a man sets out on an expedition, determined to prove certain hypotheses, if he is incapable of changing his views constantly and casting them off ungrudgingly under the pressure of evidence, needless to say his work will be worthless.”²²⁹ According to this argument, what is most necessary to understand when producing an ethnographic representation is that the course of the research cannot be predetermined.

In addition to maintaining a sense of spontaneity and experimentation, without too much hypothesis, others have argued that it is also important to not be consumed or influenced by the pressures and anxieties of fieldwork stress. Hammersley and Atkinson

²²⁷ Nightingale, 1989, p. 134

²²⁸ Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989, ” p. 29

²²⁹ Ibid.

remind us of how Malinowski himself in his accounts of his time with the Trobriand Islanders mentions feelings of self-absorption and a “preoccupation with his own well-being.”²³⁰ In addition to avoiding anxieties scholars argue that feeling too much at ease can cause problems for the ethnographer as well and the research setting allows for a sense of familiarity and routine that impedes the ethnographer’s desire to take on what is new and challenging.²³¹

One of the more infamous analyses of an ethnographer’s struggle with anxieties, time, insubstantial research and hypothetical claims is Derek Freeman’s second book on the scandal relative to Margaret Mead’s work, *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead*. In this text, Freeman explores the history and chronology of Margaret Mead’s research in American Samoa, and analyzes the conclusions that led to the writing of her *Coming of Age in Samoa* in 1928. Freeman discusses the many contributing factors of Mead’s desperate search to substantiate a baseless claim.²³² Mead’s desire to please her mentor Franz Boas, her need to justify time spent on other projects, her tendency to make assumptions about the Samoan culture based on her understanding of other similar cultures, that she actually completed very little research at all, and her mistake of

²³⁰ Hammersley and Atkinson, 1989, ” p. 101

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Freeman, 1999

allowing one conversation to be the basis for many of her claims were several of the factors that Freeman suggests were detrimental to Mead's final project.²³³

According to Freeman's description of Mead's experience, which is the result of his recent extensive research in Samoa and on Margaret Mead, the story goes something like this:

Having spent several months in American Samoa, living with white Americans, while participating in and observing many aspects of the Samoan culture, Margaret Mead found herself on the eve of her final departure, still clinging to a claim that had not been substantiated with sufficient scientific research. This claim was related to the sexual practices of young Samoan women and Mead felt, due to her informal interactions with the women rather than any systematic information gathering, that she was close to being able to justify her claim. However, she had no real evidence or proof that her thinking was accurate.

A few days before she was scheduled to leave Samoa, Mead joined two Samoan women on an excursion to a group of smaller islands. Having realized that she had few facts on which she could support her claim, which was that there was, at puberty, no curb on sexual activity for young Samoan women, Mead thought the excursion might be an opportune time to participate in some relevant dialogue with her companions. According to a letter Mead sent to Boas²³⁴ this claim was prompted by Mead's "preconceptions about Polynesian sexuality derived from Melville, Handy and others."²³⁵

²³³ Ibid.

On a Saturday afternoon during the excursion, when alone with the young women, Mead found herself in what she determined to be a good position to question the women. One of the young women later recounted to Freeman that Mead put to her, the “preposterous proposition...that despite the great emphasis on virginity in the traditional *tapou* system of Samoa and within the Christian church to which all Manu’ans were adherents at the time, unmarried Samoan girls were, in secret, sexually promiscuous.”²³⁶ Freeman goes on to suggest that Mead “must have been seeking to substantiate the baseless claim made (in a report to Boas), before she had done any research on the subject, that in Manu’a there was ‘an extensive tolerance of premarital sex relationships’.”²³⁷

Freeman explains that because in Samoa it is unacceptable to publicly discuss sexual matters the young women, overwhelmed by Mead’s brashness, secretly agreed to play along having unbeknownst to Mead pinched each other to indicate their game. The two women even supplied Mead with the embellishment that they regularly spent nights with members of the opposite sex. This “recreational lying” was a common form of entertainment in Samoan culture and happened regularly.²³⁸ Freeman argues that the two young women were able to pull off their trick for many reasons: because the hoax played

²³⁴ Freeman, 1999, 139

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Freeman, 140

to Mead's preconceptions, because Mead was pressed for time and anxious about how her work in Samoa would be viewed, because she was in need of a solution to the "problem" she had been sent by Boas to investigate, because she craved a convincing justification of the great amount of time she had been giving to other ethnological work, or because having only lived with white Americans Mead was not familiar enough with the idiosyncrasies of Samoan dialect and humor.²³⁹ Whatever the reasons for this gullibility, Margaret Mead made a claim that she "*never systematically investigated.*"²⁴⁰ If there is anything positive in any of this, it's that Margaret Mead died without ever knowing that she had been the victim of a hoax, and that this grand misstep, on her part, can be a lesson to ethnographers, in how not to let a project get away from itself.

CURRENT TRENDS

Today, the ethnographic approach appears to be in a state of hybridity due to many ethnographers desires to confront the complexity of our social and political state. Globalization and the presence of what Stoller calls transnational spaces,²⁴¹ has led to a more layered and eclectic ethnographic form. Certain modern advancements have allowed for the issues of time and space that once made ethnographic work obscure and

²³⁹ Freeman, 1999

²⁴⁰ Freeman, 1999, p. 158, emphasis in original

²⁴¹ Stoller, 1999

challenging to become less burdensome. International borders are less pronounced. Travel is less expensive and more direct. Technology has sped up the process of retrieving information and the information is more sophisticated and substantial. Patricia Clough explores the way in which technology is now as significant to cultural inquiry and ethnography as is the realist narrative.²⁴² She claims that science and technology, culture and technology, and society and technology are becoming inseparable and seamless.²⁴³ Large cities are becoming more and more heterogeneous and individuals from differing cultural backgrounds are interacting and mingling. Stoller, who completed his own ethnographic research among West African street vendors in New York City, remarks that especially in North America, it is now “commonplace to see rural West Africans selling Africana—as well as counterfeit trademarked goods—to urban African Americans.”²⁴⁴ Because the global community is becoming closer, smaller and more intermixed many researchers have taken to studying more familiar locales and communities.

John Van Maanen notes that fieldworkers are being drawn to familiar places with the “slightly ironic intention of making them strange...”²⁴⁵ Because the nature of culture is shifting so are the methods of cultural representation. Many ethnographers have turned

²⁴² Clough, 1998

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Stoller, 1999, p. 102

²⁴⁵ Maanen, 1988, p. 126

toward home for observation and study and the method of “at home” ethnography²⁴⁶ has become popular and engaging. Donald Messerschmidt reminds us that if “coming home is the process, then coming to grips with social issues at home is the substance of the exciting changes we are pursuing.”²⁴⁷ He goes on to explain that we (anthropologists and ethnographers) are being beckoned home to apply our skills, methods, understandings and perspectives to the issues our own society is confronting—to create, what he calls, an “anthropology of issues.”²⁴⁸ Because our own backyards are familiar and yet are becoming more and more complex, the ethnographer can feel encouraged to seek understanding of ‘home’ at a deep level. With evaluating the domestic and what is familiar comes an insider status that ethnographers have found to be both helpful and discouraging. Some scholars have claimed that this status has allowed them to be a part of a situation that they otherwise would not have been a part,²⁴⁹ others “acknowledged that there is often a need to engage in an inordinate amount of stressful impression management.”²⁵⁰ Of course we must consider the biases one might have while engaged in “at home” research, the emotionally charged pathos one might be tempted to employ in the presentation itself, and how accurate and objective one can be when producing a work that verges on “autoethnography.”

²⁴⁶ Van Maanen 1988, Moffatt, 1998

²⁴⁷ Donald Messerschmidt, 1981, p. 4

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²⁴⁹ Aguilar, 1981

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21

A PERSONAL APPROACH

My own methods become even more relevant since I have established the complicated nature of ethnographic work. While it is true that I enjoyed my own successes and struggled with multiple trials, I am still certain, even after recognizing the difficulty of completing an ethnography that remains true to those who I was observing and to my own voice, of the importance of ethnography in cultural studies. However, the struggles were meaningful, as well.

First, I questioned my place within the community I was researching. I was the teacher. I am a writer. I am an evaluator of student work and behavior. And yet I became aware of the complicated and sometimes compromising aspects of the students' lives. I never once used any alcohol or drugs with the students. I did not glorify use and abuse and I didn't encourage them to use or even to repeatedly share stories of their experimentation. And yet several of my interactions with the students had elements of complicity in them and often I felt like Clifford Geertz running from the police, whether it was when I rode in a lowrider full of boys smoking blunts, or when I stood looking on as the breakdancers broke into a local community center, or when I visited a student in the parking lot where he sold drugs, or when I hid a gun that belonged to a student in the

school I ran, or when I sat and watched the graffiti artists dress the banks of a dried up canal with their brilliant spray paint.

There were moments, because I had formerly been many of these kids' teacher, that I had to ask myself whether or not what I was doing (or not doing) was ethical. And often I wanted to interrupt some of our sessions by proclaiming that I *did not* advocate underage drinking, or vandalism, or teenage marijuana use, or skipping school, but held back for the sake of rapport, the project, the established comfort on both of our parts, their truth, or whatever it was at the time that seemed more important. I wanted to know everything and sometimes feared that they might sense that I was too greedy for information or that they might feel that hearing of their struggles and challenges was somehow excitement for me...like a movie, something I could walk away from. I never wanted them to feel that since they were also, in addition to being my students, my friends. And that, the emotional investment I had in their lives, the success I often wished for them, and the hope that they would someday be able to break out of what trapped them, is what pushed me to frequently assure them that whatever they told me would be safe and free from judgment. I wondered, since they seemed to value my opinion of them if they would hold back or keep from me some of their deepest feelings or most complicated stories but they did not. In fact, rather than shying away from providing me with too much information I noticed that at times they tended to boast, acting as if they thought that the more drama and action and talent they could share the more engaged I would be. And this is what caused me the most grief, when one boy, who was the most dynamic and athletic of the breakdancers, said to me once, "Yo, miss,

maybe if you write this shit and someone reads it, they'll want me to dance and I can get the fuck out.”

Second, the actual writing process caused me to consider who I was to those I was representing and to reconsider where I might place myself in what turned out to be, in comparison to some of the ethnographies I used as guides, a more literary approach. I had always felt that using poetics when describing culture was common sense. Aren't the aspects of culture that are worth noting the ones that are appealing to the senses, full of colors, emotions, tastes, smells, fears and energies? And so why wouldn't I write about those elements of cultural realities with words that fit, ones that engaged the senses and came together to paint images and sketch characters? But then when it came to sitting down to write I had to ask myself what right did I have to tell a colorful, full-bodied story when individuals were living the lives I attempted to recreate with art and poetry? And then additionally I asked myself what good would any of this do if I was only writing to people behind closed doors, who would criticize the style and analyze the way in which I “studied” “these people? These were the questions that encouraged me to reevaluate what it means to me to learn from people with different lives and what it means to others who read my version of what others experience.

Roger Sanjek claims that losing of field notes and writing from memory is not something to fear and can free the ethnographer up, allow her to write without the

constraints of documenting the specifics.²⁵¹ I might have benefited from ignoring the notes or from losing the video footage and transcriptions. Then my constant questioning of ethics and feelings of guilt would be set free so that I could focus on what led me to the writing in the first place, on what most mattered to me, which was sharing the kids.

FUTURE

Many have made predictions of the future of ethnography. Some have written of the trend of “adjectival ethnography”²⁵² such as educational ethnography, medical ethnography, and occupational ethnography, and have pointed to this trend as an indication of what is to come: more people from different fields representing their understandings of a particular community. Leon Anderson emphasizes the way in which ethnographic work has “stormed the ivory tower and has become more central to academic knowledge production.”²⁵³ Anderson also claims that new approaches such as ethnographic fiction and poetry and “polyvocal collages, confessional ethnography, performance ethnography” and other combinations of such methods, might indicate that

²⁵¹ Sanjek, 1990

²⁵² Van Maanen, 1995

²⁵³ Leon Anderson, 1999, p. 452

the ethnographic approach is certainly alive and well and has a promising and long-lasting future.²⁵⁴

Stach Holman Jones, in “Turning the Kaleidoscope, Re-Visioning an Ethnography,” considers how “novels, travelogues, autobiographies, and other genres traditionally labeled as women’s writing, share the experience of culture”²⁵⁵ and function as ethnographies. Jones argues that while some scholars may claim these writing styles lower academic standards they are remarkably rooted in conversation rather than representation and have value of their own that is “impossible” to judge.²⁵⁶ Because of the variety of approaches to conversation it seems ethnography’s future, if it is to continue in this direction, is healthy.

An additional question that arises in the current analysis of the future of ethnography is to whom ethnographies are written. Leon Anderson, among many, believes that while ethnography continues “to hold great public promise, it seems that...most of us today devote little time and energy to making...ethnographic research interesting and accessible to audiences beyond disciplinary colleagues.”²⁵⁷ Anderson continues by stating his hope that experimentation and diversity within the field of cultural studies will encourage a commitment to spread ethnography into more public venues. He adds that, “like good journalism and fiction, the rich, contextualized

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Stach Holman Jones, 1998, 458

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 438

²⁵⁷ Anderson, 1999, p. 457

descriptions and analyses of ethnography spur imaginative understanding” and can bring what is of “most value from our own experiences to the human conversation.”²⁵⁸

Because there is a focus on a more personal approach to representing culture and a more diverse field that leads to a variety of forms, not only does it seem that ethnography will continue on through many manifestations, as it has in the past, but it will be redefined, again and again, as we redefine ourselves and the many unique communities at home and far afield.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 458

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