

DRAFT*

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Degrees of Separation: An Ourstory About
Working-Class & Poverty-Class Academic Identity

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PRESENTOR & CONTACT INFORMATION:

Kelly Clark/Keefe, Assistant Professor
Reich College of Education
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC 28608

Phone: 828-262-7508

Email: clarkkeefeka@appstate.edu

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FROM THE AUTHOR**

Degrees of Separation: An Ourstory About Working-Class & Poverty-Class Academic Identity

Kelly Clark/Keefe
Appalachian State University

This autoethnographic (Ellis, 2004) text invites readers into identity work at the interstices of growing up working-class and becoming an academic. Influenced by mystory scholarship (Denzin, 1997, 1999; Magolda, 1999), the author has crafted a performance-oriented “ourstory” that blends academic, personal, biographical, and popular culture discourses. Following an introduction, the author presents four-scenes chronicling her own and one research participant’s moments pre-college through present day. Assisted by what Ellis (2004) calls the “back and forth autoethnographers gaze” (p. 37), the text invites readers to look through a wide angle lens at the social dimensions of being a first-generation college student/academic. In proximate existential moments, readers also move inward, being exposed to two vulnerable, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory “selves-in-process,” which are being shaped by, resisting, and transgressing cultural interpretations. A critical text reflecting the belief that the ethnographic, aesthetic, and political can never be neatly separated (Barone 2005; Denzin, 1999), it seeks to generate critical debate about how this and other forms of interpretive inquiry can provoke us to deconstruct the degrees of separation between private troubles and public issues.

In this world there’s a whole lot of trouble, baby.
In this world there’s a whole lot of pain.
In this world there’s a whole lot of trouble
but a whole lot of ground to gain.
Why take when you could be giving?
Why watch as the world goes by?
It’s a hard enough life to be living.
Why walk when you can fly?

(“Why Walk When You Can Fly?” M. C. Carpenter, 1994, track 1)

Scholarly Community: What is going on here?

Kelly: What is going on here is that ethnography is crossing a sensory threshold where the scholarly text is no longer separate from its performance.

Scholarly Community: Meaning?

Kelly: Meaning, what you are reading is an “ourstory,”¹ a text designed to simulate and stimulate the experience of curiosity and invention (Magolda, 1999), one that won’t stay

¹ I developed the term “ourstory” to signify a feminist relational conceptualization of the “mystory” form of interpretive ethnographic writing (Denzin, 1997, 1999). Denzin and others talk about mystories as “montages” that juxtapose strands or fragments of personal narrative with popular culture and scholarly

put. It is a text born as a curiously “alternative” dissertation, an odd infant-turned-tenacious toddler that simply can’t or won’t be still.

Scholarly Community: What are your intentions? Why *this* style for *this* work?

Kelly: My intentions? Well, that’s complicated. At the macro level, I work to construct texts that reflect the belief that the ethnographic, the aesthetic, and the political can never be neatly separated (Barone, 2000, 2005; Denzin, 1999). It has become important for me to create performative pieces that simultaneously show and ask how people improvise life, enacting and constructing meaning about self and other within a complex web of cultural, historical, political, and economic circumstances. When engaging in the interpretive business of asking *why* identity work takes certain turns, I believe it too risky to claim-stake the alchemy of power, difference, desire, and dissonance, especially in between social classifications.

Academic Community: Then does the work actually tell us anything? Or is this an example of analytical avoidance in creative clothing? Are you asking *us* to work hard, too hard, to create our own interpretation of your work (Bishop, 1999)?

Kelly: At the risk of slipping into epistemological solipsism; for some I’m likely to tell too little, for others, perhaps I say too much. Questions of analysis avoided or interpretive workload shifted are as much questions of scientific judgment and aesthetic

discourse (Magolda, 1999). This genre acknowledges that “academic discourse does not occur in isolation from other discourses in which we conduct our lives” (Ulmer, 1989, p. 16). My use of “our” in place of “my” is not a reckless dismissal of Denzin’s careful treatment of the ‘Other’ in his explanation of this and similar forms of interpretive, critical, performative texts. Nor is it a misreading of arguments centered on the impossibility of a researcher’s “pure presence” and the “crisis” surrounding attempts to represent others’ (our) lived experience (Lather, 1993). Rather, this “ourstory” takes the representational crisis to heart and reflects the spirit of Denzin’s (1999) call for ethnography that holds a feminist moral ethic central. It honors the one indisputable truth about the work, that it was constructed from the relationships formed with each of the research participants. It is *my* version of our story, but its sacredness, its truth telling, and its dignity is lodged in the interdependent, co-creative “our” that remains. Denying the “our” feels morally and epistemologically discordant.

appeal as they are questions of morality. Have I done right by the research participants, by other colleagues in the field of social science inquiry? You asked earlier; Why *this* style for *this* work? In an effort to provide the grounds for more deeply attending to wonderings about effectiveness, legitimacy, and the like, I would like to now turn to the more local premise of my intentions.

Background

Beginning in 1997, I asked to be invited into six women's lives; their lives composed as academics, and their lives as children, daughters, young adults, students, caregivers, and sisters from working and poverty-class backgrounds. They graciously agreed and nothing has been the same since. They talked. We laughed. I remembered. Everyone cried. We all went home, all the way home, to our past, and worked to make collective meaning of the present. With each other's help, we came back, tired and different.

Back from the field and at my desk, I worked with the "transcribed" version of the women's lives. I read, coded, cut, and ordered what I saw in print; their stories about mainly the two contexts of home and education. Forcing myself to stay present with the text, connections were made between and within each of the women's narratives. New insights were teased from reflecting on these connections in relationship to scholarly literature in different disciplines. Themes were wrestled (apparently for some, they emerge) from every corner of the discourses before me and were nailed neatly in bold, deliberate font to the computer screen:

- Concerns Around Family Finances & The Shifting Of Personal Class Identities
- Attempts At Reframing Pre-College Knowledge
- Shades Of School-Based Mentoring
- Negotiating Relational Connection/Disconnection

- Desiring Difference/Invoking Resistance
- Relational Dimensions Of A Knowing And Able Academic Self

I convinced myself and important others that these themes sufficiently captured the social, psychological and cultural meanings born from analyzing and interpreting the women's narratives. Yet, truth be told, I always felt that there was more to the story, to our story, than I was able to tell. You may think it a bit odd, but I could swear I felt something push back whenever I attempted in my writing to represent the spirit of what I understood the women to be conveying. It was as if their stories resisted being captured between the mandatory 1-inch margins of the ordered page. I do not mean to suggest that it was a situation where the meaning of the women's words escaped me or the various analytic categories I was working under. Rather, it was that their stories seemed to have so little to do with the typewritten words of the verbatim transcript and final text that stared back at me and much more to do with the illusive, impalpable textures, the physicality of their lived situations, and the emotions that were evoked through and in the telling. The layers of feeling and tacit form embedded in their voiced experiences kept calling for expression that was non-referential, evocative and in a voice that "yield[ed] only reluctantly to a translation into sequence" (Arnheim, 1969, p. 23).

So, even now, for this manuscript, I try, I try, believe me

I try
to write,
just write
what I think I "know"
in polished,
 stable,
 academic prose.

And then it happens
I start to move.

The next thing I know;
ENTER: my muse.

These women, their ways,
they tap on my heart
again, it's all over;
my passion, my art.

I hope you'll stay with me as I begin to perform, a text, an "ourstory," about being torn.

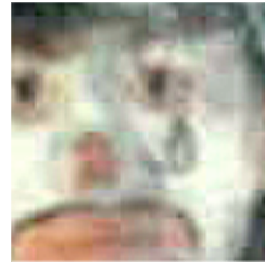
Scene 1

Getting There: Admissions Information

The Cast

Mom: A 40-year old woman who is afraid about what she doesn't know about getting her daughter to college.

Kelly: An 18-year old daughter who is just beginning to develop a sense of what it means to want to go to college.



The Setting

The scene opens with Kelly and her mother sitting across from each other in the kitchen at the family's small Formica table. It's 1983. The sounds and smell of ground beef sizzling in an iron skillet permeate. A stack of glossy college brochures, financial aid information sheets, and detailed application forms balance precariously on the yellow vinyl seat of the chair closest to Kelly.

The Script

Mom: What do you think?

Kelly: I don't know. What do you think?

Mom: How much is it?

Kelly: What?

Mom: Going?

Kelly: Oh, uh... I think it says something... I remember reading somewhere... something about the two times you go in a year.

Mom: You go two times?

Kelly: Yeah. I mean, not “times,” I mean—oh what, you know, the blocks of time—they call it—I go once then I come home for Christmas—It’s awhile that I’m home. Anyway, then I go back again. Semesters, two semesters. I go back after Christmas, maybe it’s not even until January. That’s the second time and then I go until summer.

Mom: It ends earlier than high school though, right?

Kelly: You mean earlier in the summer?

Mom: Yeah. I think you said you thought you could cashier starting in May.

Kelly: Yeah. I think—At least that’s what it looks like here. I don’t want you to tell Louise that though, until I find out from someone who knows, you know, for sure.

Mom: And the other work is still gonna work?

Kelly: Yeah. Bruce and Michelle said they could use me full-time—or you know, however much time I can, with cashiering at both places.

Mom: So, will that be enough? How much did you say it is for both times?

Kelly: Well, it looks like here, that the first semester is more—it costs more—there’s fees—something like what they’re calling a ‘student health fee’ and, uh, an ‘activity fee.’ And that’s when, first semester, that’s when I have to buy a meal card. (*shuffling through papers*) There was a separate letter from some company about that...

Mom: (*now standing up, facing the stove, scraping at the ground beef stuck to the skillet*) I don’t like that you have to pay for all this food before you eat it. You

probably—well, you probably could end up eating less than some other kids—you know, if you had to. *(pause)* But, I guess they don't let you do it that way?

Kelly: What?

Mom: Pay just for what you eat?

Kelly: Uh, I don't—Oh wait, here, Marriott Food Services. Here's that note, uh *(pause)*... It's expensive.

Mom: So how much for everything? *(sitting back down at the table)*

Kelly: First semester?

Mom: Yeah, I guess.

Kelly: Uh, like three-thousand, almost four-thousand ... I think, with everything.

Mom: And you pay that two times, in one year, for how long?

Kelly: Well, it's a little less the second time that I go back—But yeah, so that, both times and if I stay in the whole time—it would be for four years.

(long pause)

Kelly: So, what do you think?

Mom: I don't know. What do you think?

Writing about her own experience as a first-generation college student from a working-poor background entering Stanford, bell hooks (1994, p.178) notes:

It only took me a short while to understand that class was more than just a question of money, that it shaped values, attitudes, social relations, and the biases that informed the way knowledge would be given and received.

Seldom seen
A scarecrow's dream
I hung in the hopes of replacement
Castles tall
I built them all
But I dream that I'm trapped in
the basement.

(“Scarecrow’s Dream,” D. Fogelberg, 1990c, track 9)

Scene 2

Three Vignettes about Coming and Going

Almost Being There: Owed to Arno

His voice barrels over my left shoulder, “*Start from the middle Kelly and use the whole page!*” I shrink, not letting my eyes leave my drawing. He continues, “*Don't try to make it look like anything right now. It is important that you become comfortable with a mess!*” I throw a quick glance over to my friend Ben standing at the next easel. He grins, eyes remaining on his own work. Earlier that hour, he too had been at the receiving end of Arno’s sharp tongue and free-wheeling pencil. I roll my eyes, trying to give the impression of joining in Ben's smugness as we both watch Arno, our 78 year old drawing professor shuffle off towards the next suspecting undergraduate. Long after Ben’s attention returns to his work, my gaze remains fixed on Arno. I’m pretty sure I can see his blue veins pulsing just under the surface of his right hand, his #4 sketch pencil poised and ready to deliver his genius.

Arno’s aged hands strain to keep up with the instructions he’s sputtering vigorously to the student. He stops talking, or I stop hearing. Either way, silence befalls the studio. Don’t



these people know that after two years at this place, I depend on words to keep me present? Say something, somebody.

Almost Leaving There: Owed to a Chevy

My left hand tethering me to my easel, still I'm drifting, back to the two-bay garage where I stand with all my eleven-year old intensity focused on my Dad as he works on our 1971 Chevy Nova. He gestures a nod toward the central supporting beam in our garage. That's my cue and I move swiftly. A dark orange droplight illuminates the guts of the engine. Sliding to the other side of the vehicle, I work to position myself between the front metal grill where my Dad leans in and the red Craftsman® tool chest I know he'll need. *"Watch it!"* I silently scold myself in reaction to my renegade foot clumsily nicking the old mustard-yellow dishpan. Grit between the plastic and concrete sets in motion the dense odor of recently drained crank-case oil. Ripples of the murky, black film lap from side to side, taunting and eventually resettling. Sweet relief as I watch my Dad's gaze shift from the close-call to the circular chamber which moments ago housed one of the car's six cylinders. Waiting for any low, gruff request to slip past the unlit cigar stub between his teeth, I tell myself; *"be ready or you know he'll get it himself."* The dark evening's mood of quiet connection and anticipation is momentarily pierced by the twang rising from the spring attached to our back-porch door. Mom's voice harmonizes with the intrusive chord: *"Kelly Ann, are you comin' in sometime tonight?"* She pauses... *"You still need to wash your hair for school tomorrow."* *"Yeah,"* I reply, my eyes shifting from the cylindrical well to my Dad's eyes which remain sharply focused on the pitch-black space demarcating where his fingertips become directly connected to his imagination. He looks down hard at nothing as he

follows his deeply veined hands' deft actions in his minds-eye, seeing the repair unfold. Three-eighths inch, standard deep socket wrench now poised, ready to deliver his genius, I sense Mom's still standing there waiting for a more detailed response to her request. "We've almost got it. I'll be in a little while," I say. My eyes shift momentarily away from Dad. I know he'll soon lower his left shoulder and give me that look; that look that will say "*listen to your Mother*"—and a look that I know (or secretly hope) means "*It's okay with me if you stay.*"

Being Here and There: Owed to Arno II.

Arno's abrupt comments disrupt the silent space of disconnection (or is it connection?). He is at another student's easel and again, my eyes are fixed on his aging hand as it glides swiftly and meticulously across the work in progress. This stern old man with his thick Dutch accent is a master, producing the wisest and most beautiful lines I have ever seen. Damn! He can really make a drawing hum, I mean work well, aesthetically speaking. I want desperately to know him, to understand him and to connect with his way of viewing and rendering his subject matter.

Stuffing charcoal smeared rags into my tackle box, I check the floor around my space for others' slightly tattered smudge sticks, broken vine, and stubs of conté crayon. Hoping no one is watching, I think to myself: "One man's junk is another man's treasure," my Mother's mantra as she schlepped her three children through yard sale after yard sale. A small cluster of my classmates are discussing plans for meeting up later this evening. I drift between hearing them and seeing Arno's hands. His ways, his words, churning over and over, I fashion them into my continuing story; "*I'll start in the middle, use the whole page and learn to become comfortable with a mess.*"

John Shotter (1992, p. 192) on the cultural politics of belonging:

In this new politics what seems to be at stake is not the possession of material property as such, but access to opportunities to give shape and



form to one's own life, that is, access to what earlier I called 'a political economy of developmental opportunities' that limits who or what we can become. For we cannot just position ourselves as we please; we face differential invitations and barriers to all 'movements' we try to make in relation to others around us.

Scene 3

Being In-Between: Researcher/Researched on the Borderlands

The Cast

Isabelle²: A 41-year-old female professor, Isabelle refers to herself as Hispanic-American. Until she was a teenager, Isabelle lived in an economically impoverished community on the Texas-Mexico border. She is among the first generation and the only one of her eight siblings to attend college.

Kelly: A 32-year-old doctoral candidate. Kelly is European-American and from a working-class background. She is among the first generation in her family to have college experience.

Identity: An analytical character whose theories about the growth and development of "self" are sometimes "grounded" and other times "Grand."

Education: A sometimes-practitioner, mostly-theoretician who embodies widely-held North American ideas and ideals about what constitutes "student," "knowledge," and "success."

² Pseudonym

The Setting

The scene opens with Kelly sitting across from Isabelle in her small, windowless faculty office at a university in the southwest. Isabelle is the third of six women that Kelly engages in several in-depth interviews for her dissertation.

The Script

Isabelle (to Kelly): In the seventh grade, my father passed away so my mother was left with nine children and really no way to make a living. So, you know, she was just doing what she could to keep the family together and, you know, all of us were just kind of on our own. And that was fine, I mean you know, with nine children you kind of just take care of each other. (*pause*) ... I was never a high achiever and I was never a strong student. Nor was I one of those students that typically brought anything to the -- to stand out. So, far back, I saw education more as a chore, something I had to do...I learned early on that there were certain students that did receive a lot of attention and other students that didn't and it was based largely on ethnicity and largely on class...And, well, by middle school, I had totally disengaged in school.

Kelly: Disengaged?

Isabelle: I was, well, I was a pretty rebellious student. I was real rebellious. I was what typically one would conceive of as a conduct disorder now...I was into experimenting with drugs and alcohol— (*shrugging*) a lot of us were at the time.

Identity (*from backstage, call out*): Kelly, this should remind you of the urban girl's voices that helped researchers Tracy Robinson and Janie Victoria Ward (1991) develop their understanding of how marginalized youth employ risky behaviors as “quick fixes,” strategies “to cope with life's exigencies (p.95).”

Isabelle: I was in the eighth grade when one of my middle school teachers that I had for speech and drama would leave books out for me. Because he never knew where I was, he would just give me books and he was encouraging but non-pressuring...If I had poetry and if I had anything to read, I was okay...

*(clearing throat, **Education** walks to center stage, standing behind a chair)*

Education *(shaking head back and forth)*: The limited information that is available on students who are among the first generation in their families to attend college and who originate from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds paints a very bleak picture. Whether sociological or psychological in perspective, findings from studies that attempt to explain the educational experiences of this student sub-population indicate greater problems of transition and retention than for higher-SES students whose caregiver(s) have had college experience (Richardson & Skinner, 1992).

Kelly: What are your memories of preparing to go to college?

Isabelle: I don't know how I applied or when.

Kelly: No?

Isabelle: No. Uh, I don't really know—it just happened.

Kelly: I don't remember either. I think I remember my mother looking at catalogues and asking me questions. But I don't...

Isabelle: Yeah. I don't really remember how I got to that space. I don't really remember how I took my SAT's.

Kelly: Me neither.

Isabelle: I don't remember even thinking about it. I think I was scared—that was part of it... But no, I don't really see any of it—I vaguely remem... no. Nothing.

Education: Most studies that focus on the adjustment of low-SES first-generation students highlight their low standardized test scores, their over-representation in remedial coursework, and their high rates of attrition (Brooks-Terry, 1998; Terenzini, et al, 1995).

Isabelle (*standing and speaking strongly to Kelly*): I, I *do* remember, when I got there, taking an interest or an ability inventory because we had to—those of us on the so-called “provisional list.” We had to do this inventory. And I remember then receiving a real strong message that I may be in the wrong place—as far as even coming to the university... And so I remember, early on, I remember thinking; *go to hell!* I didn’t say that to them, but kind of saying, you know; *I’ll be damned if you tell me I can’t do this.*

Education (*addressing the audience, trying to look empathic*): The challenges first-generation, low-SES college students face has become enough of a concern that many colleges and universities are now making several serious efforts to help these students make-up for their disadvantage and counter the difficulties posed by their decision to enter college (Ackerman, 1991; Chaffee, 1992; Gardner, 1996; McGrath & Galaviz, 1996; Padron, 1992).

Isabelle: I remember thinking; *go to hell!* ... And, I really excelled.

Education: Terenzini, et al (1995, p. 16) is worth quoting at length regarding how the situation for first-generation college students has historically been framed:

Compared to their traditional peers, first-generation college students are more likely to come from low income families, to be Hispanic, to have weaker cognitive skills..., to have lower degree aspirations, and to have been less involved with peers and teachers in high school, probably, in

part, because they also worked more hours. First-generation students also had more dependent children, were expected to take longer to complete their degree programs, and had received less encouragement from their parents to attend college... [F]irst-generation students are also known to come to college facing a number of psychological and emotional obstacles, including anxiety about their ability to succeed and stressful changes in their relations with family and friends...Overall the portrait is one of students at risk.

Identity: The trouble with saying that first-generation and low-SES students are a “high-risk group” for which “colleges must provide a range of programs and services to counteract the weaknesses many of them bring to higher education” (Hsiao, 1992, p.3), is that such statements assume that the problem lies inherently with and in the student.

(now standing, pacing)

This perspective does not consider the complex role of external sociopolitical forces at play either within the college admission process or within these student’s lives. This and other deficit-based explanations of first-generation college students’ experiences imply that the connection between assimilation, academic achievement and positive, stable identity development is an immutable one—a relationship so obvious as to be unworthy of serious consideration.

Isabelle: Even though it wasn’t in *my* reality, in *this* high school, they *knew* they were going. They knew which college... I knew I was different but it didn’t bother me. I had grown up with this tough-girl act and I had these teachers spending time with me. It was not that syndrome; Oh, let’s save this minority child or let’s save this poor child. It was a

mutual respect. It was [Isabelle], you have a fine mind. If you can get this—and this is just something you need to learn—there is no limit.

(curtain closes)

Imagination gives us images of the possible that provide a platform for seeing the actual, and by seeing the actual freshly, we can do something about creating what lies beyond it. (Eisner, 2002, p. 4)

Sliding into a third, weightless hour of interviewing, Isabelle and I remain intensely focused on the task at hand; making meaning in conversation (Tarule, 1996). Her expressions now slow and direct, she weaves my attention into the fabric of her perceptions about her current positioning in academe, her formative background experiences, and her attempts to negotiate the seas ‘in-between.’ I have felt and seen the texture of this space ‘in-between’ with some of the other women I have interviewed. It is a space that, earlier, Kaye³ had metaphorically referred to as a geographic “fault line.” I sit back in my chair, giving Isabelle’s voice and emotions as much room as they need. Her tone and her gaze fill the small office as she responds to my request of helping me understand some of her thoughts and feelings about the influence her decisions to become college educated had on her relationships with others who have remained in her community of origin:

It's been really hard. I think that's been the most difficult thing because I'm seen in a different arena. I have no contact with my birth mother... I did, off and on,

³ Pseudonym

but I remember... I went to go visit her... and, well there were all these negative things like, *oh you're a big shot now*, you know? I went back to where I had grown up... partly just to see the place, and I really tried to connect with some of my high school and middle school friends—especially one in particular... And when I went [to find her], I found out that [she] was in a mental institution, that she had been prostituting and, you know, into drugs and alcohol. Which, you know, was not unusual for this group that [I] hung with—We were all experimenting. We were all doing things that we probably shouldn't have done. But, I think it was a real sort of resistance... And then there was Gil⁴ and some other people, just not feeling that connection... And me feeling like I don't know how to make this more comfortable, you know? And them being afraid to tell me what their lives have been like, you know?... I think they felt that I couldn't relate any more. Here I had moved out of the neighborhood—moved in with this teacher and, you know, just really had no more commonalities. Had I stayed in the neighborhood, been a waitress, you know, then my life would have been real connected... I don't know how to bridge that. I have a real hard time bridging that, to say, you know, *these degrees mean something but they are not the core of who I am as a person. Who I am is still real tied to who you are and how we grew up*. And I don't think um, I don't think they under-, I think *I* have a hard time. I won't blame it on them. I think *I* have a hard time communicating that and they have a hard time believing it... So they have in their mind what my life is like away from where I grew up and, yet, it's not real... Through all these interactions, I think there were messages of distrust. Like somehow, I sold out... So I think

⁴ pseudonym

there is a sadness thinking I lucked out. I had the opportunity because I had those adults who had helped me along the way and yet these people were just a bright, just as creative and just as able and yet they didn't have the systems in place for people to help them. So I think, um, you know... there is a sadness there. I'm going to get sad... I made conscious choices to get out... It's a yearning—It's such a strong desire to get out that **that** becomes a focal point. Where, as now, as a forty-year old woman, to go back—well that's not my neighborhood any more. That's not my reality any more and for me to assume that it is—is wrong. I may try to ask to come in but they are certainly in a different space and they don't have to let me in. And you know, I think there is an embarrassment on both our parts, you know? For them because of what they have not done or what they did that they're not happy with and for me—the dilemma of having made it out when so few did.

C.A.S.A.

a yellow house with a tile roof...
on an emerald lawn with a turquoise pool...
in a pretty town where a schoolgirl walks
taking little steps so as not to spill

this splendid world that the words construct
as she rounds the corner towards the two-room shack
without windows, paint, or a finished roof
--coming into view

(excerpted from J. Alvarez, 1995, *The Other Side/El Otro Lado*, p. 127)

Reflective Interlude

I read Isabelle's and the other women's stories and I can't stay put. It is as if I am experiencing actual context, their context. The text bumps up against me, my story, and the women's words begin grinding out a rhythm, a steady pulling and then a push at anything potentially generalized. Analyzing the location and degree of separation between the engine's block and the chassis, I am hoping Dad can tell me if it's worth fixing or if insurance adjusters would consider it a total. The women's words and their ways of telling bring me back and forth, a dance of dissonance, pressing me to consider the ephemeral attributes of my upbringing, their selves, our experiences. What would Arno do?

I had no way of knowing just how many selves I would meet on my own journey through higher education. Nor did I understand how complicated it would be to live with, in, and between the ambiguous contradictions that arose and continue to arise between my fragmented identification with both the working class and middle class. It is as Diane Reay (1996, p. 453)



notes:

Becoming an academic is simultaneously an erosion of working-classness... While my working class identity increasingly lacks authenticity, my veneer of middle-classness feels like a façade; a pretence which continually carries the risk of unmasking.

Scene 4

Back at the Easel

I'm with Isabelle's story now, the repair unfolding in my mind's eyes. Attempts to express her sense of her self are beginning to involve rendering through form, color, and line, her many selves; her "full woman" analogy, "no restrictions." There are figural components to rendering her story, ourstory. There would have to be. Transformation of the "data" will need to demonstrate a circuitous rhythm with a surrounding landscape of people and places. "My current sense of self?" asks Isabelle. "It's about a bringing together" of some things separated by time, place, people, and events. "It's about looking and feeling good in [my] skin."

I remember now, in written and sketched field log entries, I began "writing up" (Wolcott, 2001) Isabelle's expressions by combining her allegorical reference of "full-bodied women" with what I know to be one of the best (and I believe most relevant) examples of metaphoric art; the painting titled *Blue Nude* by Henri Matisse (see Elderfield, 1992, p. 167).

Using this specific work by Matisse as a basis for re-presenting Isabelle's self-as-rendering-of-a-full-woman analogy, I'm now trying to re-create the image with several purposeful changes. One important change: use a smooth, definitive edge to outline the referential elements (this is in contrast to Matisse's rugged edge). This better reflects Isabelle's "time of growth" and her intentional movement toward experiencing her 'self' as a process analogous to the "goddess images" who feel and "look good in their skin."

I want her biographical rendering about 'self' to indicate the strength and courage she sees as having emerged from "where all of these people are coming together." Now

I'm bringing in elements of another of Matisse's figural representations, *Dance II* (completed 1910, see Elderfield, 1992, p. 204). Worked into the background, these elements help ensure that "somehow you're being touched by each one of them." I'm working the



pigment hard, especially the crimson, reflecting Isabelle's radiant energy, her desperate efforts to move across any perceived distance between figural elements. Does the surface come alive around the figures as if sparked by their connection? Do my efforts to translate the text-bound sense of her self into a rendering so animated in its colored and contoured surface help her overflow the limits of any attempts at being framed?

Dance of Dissonance

My blue-collared beliefs
meet academe
bashful, mingling
on the fringes of crimson desire
for a chance encounter
with the discordant sights and sounds
that pull and pull.

What I knew
inconsistent with
what I do
clashes with
what I need
to know
moving across the floor
beyond recognition.

Slide home again
and now, going back
my rearview mirror
clicks off the miles between
objects that appear smaller
than they actually are,
subject
to one's views
about everything
and nothing can stop me
from returning
over and over
to this dance of dissonance.

Academe, academe
sublime and seductive
you draw me in
and let me out
only to know
that soon I must go
home again
and now, going back
my rearview mirror
clicks off the miles between
subjects that appear smaller
than they actually are.

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