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Performances of an Able, Academic Mind

Abstract

Western culture individualizes issues of public health. This is especially clear in academic life, where the structures of the university disable atypical bodies and minds in order to force them to simultaneously perform the roles of scholar, teacher, and colleague. The university not only fails to accommodate afflicted minds and bodies, it also produces more precarity in the process. This project is a performance ethnography of my time in the academy, starting with my life as an undergraduate being disciplined into academic life, moving toward recruitment for graduate school, and ending with events surrounding the construction of this very project. I employ the performance ethnography of Dwight Conquergood, informing it with the works of feminists of color such as women making up the collected anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherie Moraga. I blend this method and theory with intersectional feminist approaches to disability studies, best exemplified by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and, the phenomenological study of emotions articulated by Sara Ahmed. In doing so, I write a project analyzing the ways in which I have been disabled by the academy, as well as enabled at the expense of others attempting to survive within it.

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Performances of an Able, Academic Mind

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Doctor of Philosophy

by

Caleb Green

June 2020

Advisor: Bernadette Marie Calafell

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Abstract

Western culture individualizes issues of public health. This is especially clear in academic life, where the structures of the university disable atypical bodies and minds in order to force them to simultaneously perform the roles of scholar, teacher, and colleague. The university not only fails to accommodate afflicted minds and bodies, it also produces more precarity in the process. This project is a performance ethnography of my time in the academy, starting with my life as an undergraduate being disciplined into academic life, moving toward recruitment for graduate school, and ending with events surrounding the construction of this very project. I employ the performance ethnography of Dwight Conquergood, informing it with the works of feminists of color such as women making up the collected anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* edited by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherie Moraga. I blend this method and theory with intersectional feminist approaches to disability studies, best exemplified by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and, the phenomenological study of emotions articulated by Sara Ahmed. In doing so, I write a project analyzing the ways in which I have been disabled by the academy, as well as enabled at the expense of others attempting to survive within it.

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Chapter One: Methods and Theory

It's another weekend night spent miserable at home. This first semester of college has been filled with one disappointment after another. I spent all of high school feeling alone. Everyone else went to church. Everyone else supported the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those two things may or may not be related. I believed the stories that I always heard about college being a liberal paradise. I have assured myself that here, I would find "my people" (whatever that means). I have learned very quickly how naïve all of these thoughts were.

This naivete is evident in how similar my life is now to what it was then. Over half of my senior class are starting their Freshman year at this college. This university is the nearby affordable state school. A select few classmates are attending the big two state schools which are about two hours away from home. I know even fewer who are attending a relatively expensive private Christian school closer to home. It is very rare to know someone attending school out-of-state. As a result, I've known my roommate since kindergarten. My new home is only twenty-five minutes away from my old home. I visit my father on the weekends, and, he seems locked in place as if I never moved away. All of the things I didn't want to bring with me are still there with him. The room is locked in amber, waiting for me if I want.

I have decided to stay in my new home tonight; however, I am alone. My roommate and all of our friends are at a Halloween party across town. For all of the similarity I've felt, some things feel different, and none of them are good. I hate drugs and alcohol. In a few months, this has gone from something to be proud of to something I feel great shame about. This used to be a pretty easy thing for my friends to understand. They were also naïve. None of us knew anyone who could buy us beers. No one seemed to even understand how to smoke weed (is it like a cigarette?). Now, everyone seems to know someone who knows a hook-up. So, I either go to a party as the only sober person, or, I stay behind as the only person at all.

The other thing it seems has changed is an overwhelming feeling of something being due. My bag is filled with syllabi listing various project deadlines. Some weeks I seem to have three or four things due at once. I have library books which are constant reminders I owe the university. In fact, I began to have trouble breathing the other day when I realized a hold had been placed on my account. Apparently, I turned in an empty DVD case before leaving for the weekend, so now I owe eighteen dollars before I can register for classes. I wonder why being stressed gave me trouble breathing. As I think about all of the stress, I think about being alone. I feel so alone here. I begin to cry.

For some reason, crying causes me to call my mother. I have never had a great relationship with her, but, she always feels like the better option to talk to when I'm upset. Maybe I feel like she knows what being sad is like because of all those times she locked herself in the bathroom and cried for hours. I call her and tell her about how awful I feel. Maybe I should go and drink, even though everything about that upsets me. Maybe I shouldn't have come to college because it makes me so sad.

Mom then says to me something I will hear many more times in my life: “Caleb, whatever you do, please don’t kill yourself.” I respond in the same way I always will: “Of course not. I would never do that.”

Feeling clarity at the thought of wanting to live, I hang up the phone, pack a bag, and drive to my Dad’s house, where he is reliably asleep on the couch. I guess I will figure all of this out later.

Six years pass...

It’s another Friday night. Our professors say we should make Friday nights our social time, because graduate students have to spend the rest of their weekend reading and working. I have tried to set aside Fridays for whatever my girlfriend wants to do. This week, we have planned on going out with a few friends. As we get ready to leave, I begin to pace around the house. My girlfriend asks me if I’m okay. I think (it’s hard to remember) I yell at her before going and laying on the bed. She asks me what’s wrong. I feel the side of my face getting wet. I’m crying again and I don’t know why. She texts our friends and tells them I’m not feeling well (technically not a lie). She gets into bed with me. I can’t stop crying, no matter how many times I try. Our Friday night plans end with me crying myself to sleep at around eight thirty in the evening. As I drift off, I think to myself about how powerless and pathetic I feel. Graduate school was supposed to make me feel like a better person. Instead, I feel weaker than ever. My last thoughts are of how unattractive I feel. I hope she stays with me...

Four years pass...

It’s another Friday night. My girlfriend is now my wife. I’ve spent the last few years telling all of my students that graduate school was simultaneously the best and worst

decision of my life. Not exactly a ringing endorsement. I suppose that's why it's so weird I've decided to go back for my Ph.D. Even stranger, this quest has moved us 1000 miles away from home, about 970 miles further than we've ever been. I suppose my wife has decided this mess of a person is okay, since she married me and decided to uproot everything to come here.

We have settled down for the traditional social time on Friday night before I lock myself up with my reading for the weekend. She has recorded *The Good Dinosaur* on our television. I figure if that's what she wants to watch, then sure, let's go for it. As this is a Pixar movie, it looks like someone is going to get lost in the first act. The hero of the movie is a dinosaur child who gets separated from his family. As he gets lost, I roll my eyes at the inevitability of the whole thing. Then, something weird happens. He gets his foot caught under a rock. He struggles and struggles until he gives up, realizing he's stuck in place. As it begins to rain, the drops on his face mix with his tears as he begins to cry himself to sleep. The tears come from my eyes again. I am the dinosaur; The dinosaur is me. I spend the next hour silently crying through the rest of the movie, trying to hide my tears from my wife as she enjoys herself. When it ends, she finally gets a good look at me and is shocked to see how upset I am. I explain to her what made me cry and apologize for being such a mess. She reassures me it's okay. I manage to get it together before bed this time.

About a week later, we have our regular meeting for graduate teaching assistants. At the beginning of every meeting, we are encouraged to share something good and something bad that has happened to us. I decide to share this story about crying at *The Good Dinosaur*. The professor in charge of supervising us reassures me this is okay, and,

that it is okay to cry. As I write this, I wonder why I felt compelled to share this story. How does it define me for others? How does it affect my colleagues? Am I seen as a man who is in touch enough with his emotions to publicly admit to crying? Does this make me more approachable? Am I seen as another emotional white person who is making the world, particularly my colleagues of color, reassure me for feeling bad? Am I taking up too much space? Further, what did I gain from telling this story? I certainly don't feel better. I know school makes me cry, so why do I keep going back?

We in the humanities often suggest our mission is to produce students who are better and more ethical human beings. I switched my major from the more technical trade of media production to Communication Studies due to the allure of this goal. While I am not equipped to judge if I am a better human being, I can attest that I am a more informed one. I am also a less mentally well human being, in the traditional sense, as a result of my academic experiences. Through information I've gleaned in my professional life, I know I am not the only one. This project seeks to examine how we use our performances as academics to define concepts such as human worth, wellness, and community. Using intersectional feminist theories alongside disability and performance studies, I will explore the role academic achievement plays in assimilating some and marginalizing others through attacking mental health. I argue these theories need each other in order to more fully contribute to questions of academic community, especially if we are serious about fostering a community which is anti-racist, anti-heteropatriarchal, anti-ableist, and anti-capitalist, among other justice projects. This review of literature will provide a theoretical backing for analysis of my personal educational journey, as well as center whomever is reading this in my criticism of my own privilege.

Neoliberalism Defined

Few agree on what neoliberalism means, how it should be employed, and if it is even a solid foundation for theory and criticism. Some define neoliberalism as a way for a capitalistic economic system to survive its own contradictions by continuously shifting blame from structures to individuals (Centeno and Cohen). Often, the solution to the crisis of neoliberalism that materializes is a continuation of neoliberalism (Aalbers). Bockman further defines neoliberalism as a system of thought based in the belief that governments are incapable of creating economic growth or providing social welfare. It logically follows that private companies, private individuals, and most importantly, unhindered markets are the best way to generate economic growth and social welfare (Bockman). At this point, it is important to note that some scholars see neoliberalism as more of an ongoing process than a condition (Aalbers). As a process, “neoliberalism represents an ideology, even a paradigm, of increased productivity through deregulation, commodification, privatization, managerialism and marketisation” (Adam 71). The dismantling of structures leads to theoretical individual responsibility in the success of the market where people are motivated to see the nation succeed for their own well-being, while in reality, people begin to see economic states as representative of individual morality.

Some scholars suggest neoliberalism may have outlived its usefulness as a concept at all, considering it has become a loosely-defined phrase used to describe anything left-leaning people are opposed to (Cahill and Konings). Neoliberalism thrives within liberal and mainstream leftist politics because it makes a ploy toward collectivist ideas, while actually operating to destroy these very same concepts. This makes

neoliberalism a confounding concept to study and critique, as it can be the simultaneous use of ideas such as collectivism and individualism. Since neoliberalism can be so fluid to formations of argument and reasoning, it flourishes particularly well within academic spaces. Neoliberalism is notably felt in the academy through resource scarcity, the commodification of human labor and identity, short term pressures of publishing and performing in the classroom year-by-year, and an overall flattening of strategies across various different student bodies with specific needs (Berg, et. al.). These pressures become the metrics for performing as a good academic, which in turn become the way that we define ourselves by our neoliberal productivity, allowing ourselves and our pedagogy to convert to data points on a quarterly business report (Barbour). This occurs through publishing pressures by preying on the relationship academic minds have with their own work. Pressures of writing and publication produce anxiety and precarity, which in turn can only be alleviated through an investment in one's work (Konings). The neoliberal publishing industry takes advantage of this logic through ideas such as author and university prestige (DiLeo). Academics are expected to find scholarly publications which will allow them to collect prestige by association with these journals. Through this prestige, the academic name becomes a commodity which can bestow prestige on the institution as well. Students who look to do certain types of work are encouraged to find academics who have marketed themselves as authorities in that type of work. Thus, the institution gains a reputation for producing further prestige in these types of work. Humans become their own industries, which logically perpetuates a more corporate educational structure. This argument is articulated through a turn toward affect by Lauren Berlant. Berlant moves toward the realm of feeling through an expression of what she

terms “cruel optimism.” This describes the feeling of promise toward reaching a mythical “good life.” Working toward this life is what motivates us to keep working within systems we know will fail us, thus revealing optimism to be a form of cruelty inflicted upon us. Berlant claims this is a project focused on race, gender, and sexuality, in addition to class; however, I will end this chapter with a frame I believe focuses on identity more effectively. The Good Academic becomes a potential source for The Good Life.

Neoliberal ideas also play out in the classroom itself. Neoliberalism moves students toward viewing themselves as consumers, and encourages them to see educational outcomes as a question of customer satisfaction (Gajparia). As neoliberalism simultaneously pushes students toward consumption and limits the energy instructors can devote to classroom design, textbook publishers have capitalized by providing a toolbox of “instructor resources,” including slides, manuals, test item files, software, even course design materials so that a syllabus follows closely to the text instead of the will of the classroom (Maida). In this model, teachers become a delivery system, with their jobs being limited to finding palatable ways to present a prescribed understanding of a given subject. These pressures are increased by audit systems such as course evaluations, designed to monitor individual instructors to ensure students are receiving a relatively streamlined experience (Berg, et. al.). Under this consumer model, class sizes increase to serve as many students as possible each academic year, despite proof this has an adverse effect on educational outcomes (Preston and Aslett). All of these forces combine to transform the university into something resembling a factory, with students and contingent labor *passing through* the university rather than actively engaged in shaping it

(Maida). This is destructive for newer teachers as well as students. New teachers often fold under neoliberal educational pressures within the first two years of their career (Loh and Hu).

Many scholars suggest neoliberalism is an idea which has distorted a natural academic beneficence. This can take the form of arguing over methodological and disciplinary utility, as the rise of neoliberalism is often attributed to the shrinking of humanities (DiLeo). The shrinking of the humanities is tied to a lack of critical engagement, which is suggested to lead to the rise of the docile academic subject and the fall of a purveyor of academic freedom (DiLeo). In this critique, academic freedom is suggested as the oppositional force to neoliberal academia, although freedom for whom is never specified. Another important effect of neoliberalism on the academy within this salvation project is the death of the university as a public sphere (Giroux). Neoliberalism is attributed to the loss of the university as a safe marketplace of ideas in which intellectuals can engage in public debate. The assertion is first the university falls, and then society follows. If neoliberalism is a progressive project pushing toward a future, these arguments seek to fight it with nostalgia of a public learning institution which was more capable of resistance in a theoretical heyday. Scholars in this vein even argue for maintaining an academic role within the nation-state (Readings). This is a nostalgic desire to return to Enlightenment ideals, and thus, a time when the academy was instrumental in the formation of nations and empires. This work fails to connect that the neoliberal spirit foundational to the imperial university.

Thus far, we have seen work that is mostly premised on the idea that neoliberalism is a process which has recently worked to transform the academy.

Although neoliberalism can be a useful concept and label to identify practices which have happened to us as human beings, and I will continue to use it this way throughout the current project, it is not a useful frame for attempting to encompass the problems of the academy and academic thought. Neoliberalism may in fact be the natural progression of an academic project designed to disseminate Western (White) thought. In other words, many scholars focus on the *neo* as the problem when we should perhaps consider *liberalism itself* as responsible for these problems. Charles W. Mills, in his book *Black Rights/White Wrongs*, works back to the beginnings of liberal thought, notably for Mills the works of Immanuel Kant, in order to examine why the social justice work of the 20th century within political philosophy was able to completely ignore issues of race. Mills identifies liberalism as the political scale which encompasses most of what we identify as the conservative-liberal spectrum seen in mainstream American politics. Mills notes that liberalism is a political system premised on equity and individual personhood; however, these ideals were constructed by men like Kant who believed in a scientific superiority of white men, making them the only true human beings. Thus, discussions of equity within this system will be inherently flawed, as they were never meant to adjust to the personhood and citizenship of anyone other than white men. Mills examines how modern political philosophy functions to ignore these issues while other authors have examined the role academic thought plays in maintaining social injustice.

This injustice plays out in other bodies of work designed to combat social ills. Jodi Melamed asserts neoliberalism functions to separate the lives of subjects, especially racialized others, from their material conditions. Specifically, Melamed suggests neoliberalism is important to examine because the role it plays in draining political and

social power from movements and the people within them. To explore these aspects of neoliberal rationality, Melamed focuses on the history of anti-racist movements. Melamed charts the history of anti-racisms officially recognized and sanctioned by the United States, and, divides them into distinct periods: Racial liberalism (1940s-1960s), liberal multiculturalism (1980s-1990s), and neoliberal multiculturalism (2000s). This framework is used to chart anti-racist literature, scholarship, and activism. Melamed does not suggest these works once existed in a pure political form which was then distorted by neoliberal logic, but, that these anti-racisms are inherently intertwined with the continuation of capitalist market logic. The projects Melamed charts are ultimately more focused on accumulation and participation than disruption. The history of these anti-racisms is just as much about defining political limits as it is about social progress. As we can see, by focusing on neoliberalism as a distorting practice, we deny the possibility that it may be the natural progression of the Western academic project. Access to academic work cannot be the only solution if this academic project is itself an imperial project. With this understanding of neoliberalism and the complicity of academic thought in its construction and maintenance, I will now explore the combination of fields which I believe must be considered with one another in order to ethically situate this project.

Disability Studies

Although the origins of disability studies lie in discussions of medical treatment, it is more accurately conceived as opposed to the logic of medicine. Disability studies is more invested in exploring the social aspects of living with impairment. Disability studies must be understood in the context of inter-disciplines. Roderick Ferguson articulates inter-disciplines as fields of study primarily focused on race, gender, and sexuality. These

inter-disciplines are often understood as the academic branch of civil rights movements. Taken together, this suggests “that disability is a political and cultural identity, not simply a medical condition” (Dolmage 19). Disability studies allows scholars to study physical and mental ability as an aspect of identity within social justice projects. The assertion of disabled identity is in natural opposition to a medical model which seeks to eliminate or alleviate impairment any way it can (Baglieri et. al.).

Disability studies’ focus on materiality can be best articulated through the distinction between the key concepts of disability and impairment. These terms can be thought of as a material/physical body, which is seen as a set of impairments, and a socially constructed body, conceived as disabled in a discursive sense (Donaldson). Social construction comes from environments and interactions with other people (Baglieri et. al.). By focusing on social construction, analysis of disability shifts toward analysis of social reality rather than focusing on the surface level of identifiable bodies and environments. Impairment involves a loss of some form, or perhaps more critically a transformation of thought and movement, and this impairment becomes disability when society creates material barriers (Kafer). If we understand disability as social, then we can see it as the coherence of material, social oppression “stacked onto people *on top of* their impairments, which are real” (Dolmage 97). Here, Dolmage means real in the physical sense. For example, consider a person who moves through the world with the assistance of a chair. This, in of itself, is an impairment. When this person is confronted with a world that insists on building staircases as primary points of access to buildings, transportation, and general movement, or, when governments and businesses fail to

provide the infrastructure to maintain properly flat surfaces for chair use, this impairment becomes a disability.

Like other inter-disciplines, disability studies is engaged in the process of constant exploration and challenge of the identity which it is built around (Taylor). As disability studies is an interdisciplinary endeavor, scholarship engaged with the project comes from a variety of fields. Disability studies scholars can be found in the arts and humanities as well as in law, medicine, and the social and natural sciences. Wherever disability scholars are trained, it is important they start their inquiry from a place of activism. Approaching bodily ability with a sense of detachment and curiosity is what most disability scholars in the field are challenging. A common argument in disability studies is the idea that most people will be seen as disabled if they live long enough is a fundamental truth of human life (Snyder, et. al.). For various political reasons, many critical forms of disability studies take issue with this assertion.

Critical disability scholars in fields such as sociology, psychology, education, and special education make the case for a minority group model of disability. Essentially, they believe “disability is an idea, not a thing” (Baglieri et. al., 270). This is not to say that people do not vary in bodily ability in noticeable ways, “but to call or think of some of those differences as ‘disabilities’ is to make a social judgment, not a neutral or value-free observation” (Baglieri et. al., 270). Thus, critical disability scholars seek to examine the political implications of everyday choices that construct the world against those with impairments by conceptualizing disability. In doing so, they seek to disrupt the ideas that disabilities define human experience, that impairment is always on the path to cure and recovery, and that representations of disability should be defined by pity (Dolmage).

They are also invested in the political nature of seeing a body as disabled. Thus, they tend to resist notions of disability as being a universal experience, instead focusing on the particular situatedness of disability.

Critical disability studies can be conceived of as the product of a cultural turn within the field itself. Bodies are examined within this cultural frame not as medical curiosity, but for how they make and challenge culture (Dolmage). What is gained by this cultural turn is an increased focus on themes and questions that most projects situated against discrimination are built upon. Specifically, the relationship between the constructions of normalcy and difference (Davis). An interrogation of what is to be gained by conflating disability with otherness becomes the central question. A critical approach fosters connections to other projects, such as critiques of late capitalism (Snyder et. al.). Critical disability scholars begin to examine the challenges people with disabilities pose to notions of equality, leading to their exclusion from systems of production. This focus also allows disability scholars to connect the struggle of disability to other forms of oppression through the examination of segregation, dehumanization, and exploitation (Baglieri et. al.). As a social justice field, “disability studies’ project is to weave people with disabilities back into the fabric of society, thread by thread, theory by theory” (Linton, 518). This reweaving is at once an exposing of the construction of difference, and the remaking of the people with disabilities into full citizens who are recognized.

This rethinking of disability studies leads scholars toward opening the project to questions of mental health. Just as the perception of an able body has been the result of years of medical analysis, so too is the idea of an able mind (Aubrecht). A focus on

mental illness diversifies disability studies, but it also forces scholars to examine the tendency to rely on medical thinking in language critiquing that same frame of thought. The tendency to draw hard lines between physical and mental disability is relying on the pathologizing of medical thinking about what is and is not normative. The denial of a desire to “get better” has potential for the mentally ill, and presents our experiences as other ways of living produced by worldly structures. There is a tendency to retreat back into the easy narrative language of “madness” when describing different forms of thought. While there is potential in reclaiming this language for resistive purposes, “the theme of madness subsumes self-expression or governs it” (Kuppers 124). Thus, mental disability is an important bridge to thinking about the performance of health and ability in ever evolving ways.

Mental health disability studies is often focused on the roles academic life plays in constructing disability. The foundational argument is that the academy produces mental illness. Feelings of precarity produce anxiety in academic life (Berg et. al.). Academics are often given institutional tools which force them into an “individualist framework that turns away from systemic or collective analyses and politics to offer instead a set of individualized tools by which to ‘cope’ with the strains of working in the neoliberal academy” (Gill and Donaghue 92). In particular, the neoliberal academy pushes human beings into isolation, “producing new forms of insecurity that hamper sharing and exchange, but instead push us to work harder, sell ourselves better and engage in competition rather than collaboration” (Gill and Donaghue 93). Ultimately, academics embrace this isolation for fear that expressing frustration at the academic system will make us seem ungrateful for our place at the table.

One of the most thoughtful analyses of challenges facing neuro-atypical people in the academy is Margaret Price's *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. Price points toward the contradiction of mental disability and academic discourse. Academic thought is formed around the idea of a rational mind, which leaves little room for an afflicted intellect. Therefore, reason itself is revealed to be an oppressive construct. Using the concept of *crip time*, where individuals are out of step with temporality, Price challenges presence and absence as related to physical presence/attendance as traditionally thought to represent academic participation. This is one of many ways in which disability studies challenges us to create an academic system which rises up to meet the needs of these individuals. Focusing on these as a product of mental ability reminds us that learning styles are dependent on identity. Privileging different forms of expression is always inherent in privileging race, gender, sexuality, class and other identities.

Various scholars share Price's focus on academic spaces. Some scholars suggest that asking students to think about how they fit into conceptions of disability has the potential for equality (Aubrecht). This work not only seeks to allow people with normative ability to see how they can operate in a more just way, but it also seeks to integrate ideas and people into academic spaces (Snyder, et. al.). Some disability scholars along this frame of thought find it to be strategically useful to both engage people with normative ability and help them articulate their own subject positions through frames of disability (Linton). This is a logical extension of the somewhat problematic idea that disability will inhabit most people's bodies at some point. Accommodations are the primary way in which universities attempt to make themselves navigable to people with

disabilities. This essentially works on a deficiency model, in which people with disabilities are responsible for informing educators of the most basic things they need to perform as students. Critical disability scholars argue that accommodation is a concept which obscures the more helpful analytic of access (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson). Through thinking along lines of access, educators can better implicate themselves in their failures within an accommodation model which sees incorporation as a form of hospitality. Imagining education as a practice of access promotes perceiving ability and disability, as well as mastery and learning as fluid. It also asks educational stakeholders to examine how tracking or containment practices both mark individuals as disabled and/or limit their access to curriculum and learning (Baglieri, et. al.). Further, critical disability scholars argue that every course, no matter the focus or discipline, should have a focus on disability studies, which has the potential to transform classrooms into new spaces constantly focused on how they can better operate for all students (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson).

Disability studies is particularly vibrant in communication education scholarship. Some of this research is focused on the framing of students with disabilities as a burden on academic systems by the very service departments which were created to comply with federal regulations in schools (Golsan and Rudick). These foci of disability services are in line with larger patterns of rhetorical formations of academic success, such as individual action, victimization from social systems, or authenticity in which students and teachers gauge their own actions against that of idealized others (Fassett and Warren). Other scholars in communication education have paved the way for the current project by examining the performance of ability and disability as it regards an able academic body

and mind, challenging the division between each binary notion (Fassett and Morella). These foci also redirects the energy of disability studies toward identitarian projects by exploring outward performance of disability in a similar vein as that of gender, race and sexuality. Indeed, when examined from this perspective, politics of passing often considered in regards to whiteness and heterosexuality, among other factors, can be extended to performances of an able body and/or mind.

Still, some disability scholars struggle with how to situate disability studies in relation to other identity politics. Scholars often take pains to separate the struggle of disability from identity makers such as race and gender, despite similarities like binary oppositions and an insistence on biological determinism (Kuppers). Further, there is a suggestion that “unlike race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, disability as a civil rights issue has received considerably less public attention” (Baglieri et. al, 268). Indeed, the suggestion is disability has received less attention, and what little space it has taken in the collective consciousness is always secondary to these other identity markers (Kuppers). This argument suggests disability should be the sole focus of disability projects, because disability is unique in challenging the desire for normativity (Kuppers). Thus, notions that guide feminism and other movements are deemed useless for disability. As a social justice project, it is perhaps easier for individuals with privileged intersections of identity to see themselves as a part of the oppressed in regards to disability. To put a finer point on it, a critique of ableism might allow an individual who otherwise benefits from capitalism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism such as myself to see ourselves as an uncomplicated victim. This is exacerbated by assertions that disability studies is unique in how it challenges normativity. The suggestion disability studies

differs from other identity politics because it challenges normativity is simply false. As I will discuss in the next few sections, disability studies has more political potential when the connections between disability and other social justice fields are embraced.

Feminist Disability Studies

Feminist disability studies begins with the critique of mainstream disability studies, suggesting that many people who do disability work ignore connections to other markers of identity (Garland-Thomson “Integrating Disability”). The blending of gender and ability is founded in the construction of bodily possibility (Hall). Both gender and ability are constructed limits placed on the human body. Feminist disability studies has the potential to reveal “the intersections between the politics of appearance and the medicalization of subjugated bodies” (Garland-Thomson “Integrating Disability” 22). This is not a suggestion that we conflate being disabled with being a woman, which was the standard of thought in Eurocentric philosophy for centuries. What is suggested here is that the intersection of a social model of disability and the feminist analysis of naturalization of gender and sex creates a feminist disability studies which can critique the reductive biological understandings of both gender and disability (Hall). This is an important combination because both identity markers shape all aspects of culture (Garland-Thomson “Integrating Disability”). The concept of the misfit allows scholars to focus on the role of embodiment within disability (Garland-Thomson “Misfits”) As Garland Thomson suggests, “framing the materialization of identity and subjectivity as perpetual, complex encounters between embodied variation and environments, fitting and misfitting can help reconceptualize the reigning notion of ‘oppression,’ with its suggestion of individually enforced, hierarchically structured subjugation” (Garland-

Thomson “Misfits” 602). Here, Garland-Thomson is taking the tension of whether we should center disability or preserve a focus on other forms of embodiment, and, suggesting both are possible. Misfitting does this by analyzing disability through the relational rather than essential identity, taking the conception of disability as something produced by environments seriously. The misfit always exists in context to relationships with objects, people, and systems, which thus opens our understanding of subjugation as a part of these relationships.

A feminist disability studies also better enables discussions of mental disability. Disability critiques of psychiatry explore the patriarchal pathologizing of femininity through ideas such as hysteria, as well as associations between mental instability and infertility (Donaldson). Further, women’s liberation was disciplined through the conception of madness in women, suggesting the desire for equal rights was a product of derangement. Here we circle back to recognition that disciplined bodies (and I will add here disciplined minds) are also properly gendered (Hall). To fit into a binary is to be tamed, and this happens at the nexus of the body. Hidden beneath the surface of feminist disability studies is the equipment for blending social justice projects. If the essential point of the theory is that incorporating disability as an identity of analysis deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory, as Garland-Thomson suggests, then it stands to reason that feminist disability scholars can see the value in further incorporation. As she further elaborates, disability “mobilizes feminism’s highly developed and complex critique of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality as exclusionary and oppressive systems rather than as the natural and appropriate order of things” (Garland-Thomson “Integrating Disability” 18). Further, just as we are pushed to perform and make our

gender, sexuality, race, and class legible, we are also pressured to bring our bodily ability to rational perception. This is in spite of the categories of chronic illness and psychiatric disability (which is our focus here) being illegible by their very nature (Garland-Thomson “Story of My Work”). While it might seem pedantic to make this critique, uses of identity politics and pushes for intersectional approaches must be strategically explicit to maintain their political viability. I turn now to intersectionality, which I believe is key to the overall framework that will allow these projects to coalesce.

Intersectional Feminism

Intersectionality as a feminist term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw during her exploration of the limits of liberal democratic law in providing justice to women of color. For Crenshaw, approaches to structural, political, and representational dimensions of life must occur at the intersections of race and gender. This focus reveals the erasure of women in racial justice and the erasure of blackness in feminist movements.

Intersectionality became a particularly useful tool for examining the prosecution of sexual violence, and how it constitutes this unruliness in black men and women by framing them as the monstrous perpetrators and deserving victims of violence respectively (Crenshaw). Crenshaw’s project was soon taken up by other scholars, seeking to bridge the gaps between race, gender, and other markers of identity.

Beginning from a place of intersectional thought allows us to examine systems of power as the interconnected web they are in a variety of contexts. Again, the academy is one of those spaces. An intersectional frame reveals assumptions of objectivity or knowledge clean of identity are a product of colonial logic which suggests certain ways of living and thought are inherently superior. Understanding this as truth allows a clear

critique of oppression as a function of state power to take hold (Alexander). Sexual autonomy of women threatens the power of the state. If women step out of their roles as the key to reproduction they disrupt systems of labor dependent on human capital. In this way, the state is the ideal patriarch. Here, we can see the importance of looking at identity in order to understand how the various economies shape conceptions of deviance. Imperative to this project is a recognition that all forms of identity must be considered at once. Isolating them into homogenous area studies can resemble neocolonial economy, where the discipline is dependent on the construction of a victim. These projects are not a complete rejection of existing thought, but a language of possibility for new thought against colonialism and a focus on projects from the positions of indigenous and the third world (Smith).

An example of these projects is the edited collection *This Bridge Called by Back*. In this collection, women of color produce thought about the directions and deficiencies of feminism in creative ways which seek to challenge knowledge produced from within a Eurocentric academy of thought. This is primarily guided by the idea of a theory in the flesh where lived material reality consisting of the physical body, land, and desires of a people is the foundation for an intellectual politic (Anzaldúa). This is a foundation based in the idea that political realization comes from personal experience (Combahee River Collective). Authors in this collection suggest women of color must share culture to get past defensive positions toward their own cultures, which is an extension of nationalism learned from colonizing powers (Moschkovich). It is the hierarchy of thought represented by Eurocentric education and theory, which serves as a main point of critique for these scholars.

White male culture dominates the awareness of all, and this awareness is not a two-way street. As a consequence, the experiences of all non-white people are flattened into a homogenous group (Moschkovich). This is especially true in the academy. It is the assumed responsibility of all oppressed groups to educate their oppressors about the circumstances of their lives and needs. As noted, “this is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns” (Lorde, 96). Indeed, the master’s concerns leave little room for understanding the other. The conclusion is that unlearning existing academic frames is paramount to survival. These frames must be abandoned for survival, because “survival is not an academic skill” (Lorde 95). Thus, these projects are united within the productive potential of revealing and denying analysis of oppression from a white and privileged perspective. Oppression is often only realized in adulthood for white people because we are afforded the privilege to come of age without encountering it directly. Similarly, oppression is recognized in stages of late capitalism and post-modernity because it forces white, male scholars to face our potential obsolescence (Sandoval). Despite experiencing gender-based discrimination, white women are not immune to this phenomenon. These activist scholars identify how “little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires, among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture” (Combahee River Collective 218). Thus, white women are both supremacists and oppressed. The original model for colonization was the treatment of white women in European societies (davenport). In other words, white women and their ambivalence toward a multiplicity of feminist

subjects are a consequence of the false promise that there is political capital to be gained playing strictly by the rules of colonization.

Indeed, although there is frustration with white women and all men, the editors and authors of *Bridge* seek a coalitional politics toward reimagining the world. Some argue that coalition is more radical than separation (Smith and Smith). Bridging voices can be a form of violence, but it is also necessary (Anzaldúa). The consciousnesses of women, whatever intersection of identities they may hold, are dependent upon one another (Lorde). Further, class must be considered when building coalitions, for any successful revolution must start with the poor (Parker). Liberation, however, is not a scarce resource which various identity groups must fight over (Canaan). Identity politics are powerful and radical, and a coalition incorporating as much of them as possible has the potential to expand this power (Combahee River Collective). White women can be a part of this movement as well. Even though racism blocks their ability to empathize in many respects, these politics are enriched with a focus on racism as a system of oppression in which we are all implicated, rather than a trait possessed by individuals (Cameron). Thus, a coalition must be formed in which all are responsible for dismantling the system that implicates everyone. The privileged are ethically bound to use their power to dismantle the system. Sara Ahmed's work analyzing the lives and work of diversity workers in the academy suggests certain (non-white, non-male) bodies are still being called upon to both represent diversity and be the only ones to work on diversity (*On Being Included*).

Similar to the restricted movement of diversity work, intersectionality has been the focus of much critical attack. Critics argue overreliance on a black female subject

limits the potential to use intersectionality to engage with the multiplicity of identity as well as risk making the experiences of black women monolithic (Nash). However valid this critique ironically limits the potential of intersectionality, which is the exact move critics wish to avoid. The rush to critique existing theory is a consequence of the neoliberal academy. This speed of criticism created a view of intersectional theory as something that is only concerned with personal identity (Lethabo King). These critiques are often made as a way to disavow the use of intersectionality. Intersectional feminists have attempted to combat this by promoting intersectionality as a fluid subfield of its own. These scholars have reasserted an understanding of intersectionality as concerned about the relationship between power and identity, avoiding a dismissal of intersectionality as a statement of merely personal identity, or the even more limiting understanding of intersectionality being only for black women (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall). This makes intersectionality a field of study capable of “undoing” theory by conducting academic work with attention to empiricism, indigenous knowledges, and equality in participation between researcher and subjects (Namaste). Thus, it is important for those attempting to add disability studies to the larger field of intersectionality studies to both be explicit about their movements and be citational about the theory’s origins, as they are fighting an attempt to erase the most vital tool for examining identity.

Intersectional critiques of feminist disability studies seek to sharpen the field by pointing out how it fails to recognize race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and nationality (Erevelles). Scholars also reveal that the critiques which plague intersectionality studies also affect disability work. Specifically, a contention that people who engage in identity politics do so out of a narcissism demanding all political movement be centered on their

own experience (Seibers). Narcissism is how we pathologize any concern for the self not recognized to be normative. This is not only true for the disabled, but true of any intersection of identities seeking to be heard within political discourse. Disability occurs within human contexts, which means all aspects of humanity must be considered for an ethical disability studies. Erevelles cuts more specifically than intersectionality toward a transnational feminist disability studies, which is identified as “a perspective that engages gender and disability and their intersections with race, class, and sexuality within the postcolonial/neocolonial states” (129). Here, we see a call for a multiplicity of identity that seeks to examine the roles colonialism and nation-states play in the construction of normativity.

This review of literature has examined bodies of thought focused on the problem of neoliberalism within the academy. I have also reviewed disability studies, as well as the critical approaches to feminism which enrich disability studies as a form of a larger intersectional identity project. These bodies of literature inform my approach in methodology for the project I will articulate in the following section. This project will seek to address the following questions, which have been shaped by this theory: How do we define and perform academic worth? Specifically, what are the traits of a “good” student, teacher, and colleague? Further, how are performances of race, gender, ability, and other identity markers tied into these questions? I ask these questions to direct the analysis of my own life as an anxious mind under attack by pressures related to these measures of worth. Further, a focus on social justice and performance ethics will direct my analysis toward my own position as a source of anxieties for others in academic spaces.

Approaching Methods

I intend to explore these questions through the methods of performance ethnography. Before I discuss these methods in detail, I need to outline the ethnographic traditions they come from and work to resist. Ethnography involves gathering observations and interviews from populations with an assumed identifiable cultural cohesion. Autoethnography developed as a term to describe what happens when ethnographers conduct research and write about groups in which the researchers themselves are members (Hayano). Membership is, however, never equal. Mary Louise Pratt discusses how these events take place in contact zones, which are spaces in which we exert colonial and identity power over one another. For example, the current project is focused on the academy as a contact zone. Pratt identifies autoethnography as the response that the colonially violated other has to the reality created by ethnographic European tool.

Within the communication discipline, autoethnography is defined as “a research method that uses personal experience in order to understand and critique cultural experience” (Adams “The Joys of Autoethnography” 181). Authors bring forth recollections of personal experience, often in narrative form, in order to examine the social construction of lived reality. Because autoethnography is focused on deep discussion of specific phenomena, it is situated as a qualitative methodology (Adams et. al.). Qualitative methodology differs from more prevalent quantitative, positivistic methods of social scientific research, which are concerned with gathering data from large groups of people who are supposed to be representative of even larger populations. Ethnography asserts that situated knowledge of specific peoples is just as, if not more,

important that finding larger patterns on a societal level. If ethnography poses these challenges, then autoethnography compounds them by making critique of objectivism a fundamental goal of an approach to knowledge (Hayano). It is difficult to situate autoethnography in terms of specific research method, technique, or theory, as the practice necessarily engages all three of these things at once (Hayano). Autoethnography is perhaps more a position on social research than a defined procedure for exploring communication phenomena (Gingrich-Philbrook). Many scholars argue autoethnography reveals knowledges which are obscured and erased by dominant modes of science, thus critiquing these dominant modes (Adams et. al.).

All social scientific research, to various degrees, is contingent upon self-disclosure. Whether individuals are being personally interviewed, given an open-ended questionnaire, or asked to rate their levels of agreement on close-ended scales, they are being asked to recall and disclose personal feelings. As Adams notes, “Self-disclosure—a topic of much communication research—is difficult to observe *as it happens* [emphasis in original], uninterrupted by the presence of a researcher” (“Ethics” 186). Researchers are trained to develop questions designed to hide their presence; however, one can never truly shake the feeling that the social phenomena being studied are in fact constructed in ways designed to illicit response. Ethics of memory and recall are most prominently discussed in autoethnography, however, all forms of communication research and evidence are subject to these questions. If we extend our understanding to the multiple paradigms of research within the discipline, we see that questions of memory affect all social scientific evidence (Nakayama). Memory is how we develop interpretations of rhetorical texts. Surveys are based on the solicitation of memory of thoughts and feelings

involved in communication phenomena. Interviews ask subjects to recall memory of feelings and give them language. The ethical challenge of memory and performance in writing is not a delegitimization of personal narrative, but a mirror to be held to all forms of research, demanding they consider ethical questions of memory as narrative researchers do.

Many authors conceive of autoethnography as a response to a crisis of representation made possible by the colonial structures governing science (Adams et. al.; Ellis et. al.). This crisis of representation addresses three essential points. First, ethnographic fieldwork must abandon the idea of conducting work under colonial structures, because these structures have destroyed the very populations ethnographers wish to learn about. Second, if we are to embrace diversity in academic knowledge production, we must recognize this means a diversity of where knowledge must be situated. Finally, the growing pressures of neoliberalism within the university mean that it is practical and necessary for these diverse scholars to conduct ethnography in their own homes and communities (Hayano). Autoethnography is theorized as a shift toward listening to the margins of discourse in an attempt to establish space for muted groups of our society in research (Langellier “Perspectives on Theory and Research”). As Corey suggests, the narrative is “a literary form ideal for lives governed by silence” (249). When researchers do autoethnography, they select moments that are made possible by being part of a particular culture (Ellis et. al.). Ideally, this research is conducted from the perspective and worldview of that culture (Smith). In examining cultural construction, autoethnographers seek to look behind the curtain of social life, speaking in and through experiences that are unspeakable within Western frames of thought (Holman Jones).

These moves challenge traditional boundaries between text and context, as well as, story and discourse (Langellier “Perspectives on Theory and Research”). By exploring the researcher as the researched, autoethnography establishes an investment in breaking down scientifically constructed barriers.

Most consequential for these moves is a turn toward being centered on the researcher’s values, rather than an illusion that the researcher is free of beliefs and thoughts (Ellis et. al.). Critical autoethnographers work with the understanding that “all narratives have a political function” (Langellier “Perspectives on Theory and Research” 271). By looking at the world from specific vantage points, autoethnographers seek to put people in motion, a motion in service of social change brought about through the connection and clarity of inhabiting these new vantage points (Holman Jones). Narrative researchers can assume that a postmodern age has produced postmodern audiences who are ready to acknowledge the constructedness of master narratives. Thus, Corey again shows us the path to these audiences: “...the personal narrative is one way of disturbing the master narrative, and through the performative dimensions of the personal narrative, the individual is able to disrupt—and, dare I say rewrite—the master narrative” (250). Here we see that narrative is about disruption, but also reconstruction. These are the reactions to a social science which autoethnography exposes as being at a point of triple crisis (Holman Jones). Crises are here conceptualized as turning points brought about by conflicts which must be resolved in order to allow movement. Holman Jones shows us three crises happening concurrently: representation, legitimation, and praxis. The crisis of representation, as previously discussed, describes the lack of culturally specific knowledges. The crisis of legitimation speaks to the need for dominant modes of science

to constantly reestablish themselves at the expense of alternative ways of knowing. Some autoethnographers suggest there is little value in debating the merits of research, pushing instead for a mere acknowledgment they take a different point of view toward subject matter (Ellis et. al.). Other forms of narrative research suggest a need to survive the crisis of legitimation. Sometimes, this survival entails dropping the quest for legitimacy entirely, in service of challenging legitimacy itself (Gingrich-Philbrook). No matter where these scholars fall on the continuum of legitimacy and disruption, most agree on a move toward a complete blending with political praxis and theory. While critical autoethnographers have begun to attempt to address, and potentially resolve, these questions, another ethnographic tradition seeks to build itself entirely out of questions and contradictions.

Performance

Performance ethnography is a point of departure from autoethnography in which engagement with critical living and praxis is foundational to ways of living as not only researchers, but human beings. Performance, by its very nature, is a contested concept which defies easy explanation (Conquergood “Of Carnivals and Caravans”). Instead of viewing this disagreement as a sign of confusion, performance ethnographers take disparity as a productive platform from which to build. Disagreement along definitions is a step toward unsettling established canons of research (Conquergood “Beyond the Text”). Canons are collections of text which are deemed essential and maintained through political investment in their continued citation. They are established research paradigms, which perpetuate themselves as mutually exclusive through systems of peer-review in which scholars maintain which forms of research belong in various academic spaces.

Both of these levels are disrupted by Conquergood's suggestion that performance represents a challenge to what he calls scriptocentrism, or an investment in focusing only on "found texts" and not the construction of said texts and the researcher's relationship to those texts ("Beyond the Text"). Performance takes proximity to cultures as a starting point, rather than an establishment of epistemic purity. The researcher faces those they are writing about instead of an invented text, whether that be a culture in which they are intervening, or a mirror which reflects their own subjectivity back at them. This is a direct response to centuries of ethnographic and literary research concerned with constructing cultures as other (Said). All of this is in service of centering the body as the site of knowledge production, especially for those who have been denied access and participation into production of canonical texts (Conquergood "Performance Studies"). It is not just in the writing of research, but the doing, staging and restaging of research that meaning is co-created.

The language of possibility is important for the conception of performance, as it acknowledges that performance is not liberation by nature. Only conceiving of performance in opposition to text-based research, paradigms, science, or other dominant modes of thinking risks allowing performance to be co-opted into another kind of binary opposition which performance seeks to challenge (Conquergood "Beyond the Text"). There is a fine line between hegemony and resistance, especially when discussing production of knowledge (Langellier "Two or Three Things"). We are always in the process of balancing these tensions (Holman Jones). However, it is a tightrope we can walk without falling off by keeping focused on principles (Madison "Performing Theory/Embodied Writing"). One principle is a focus on keeping ideas of text and

paradigms close to us in order to consistently interrogate them, rather than abandoning them (Conquergood “Beyond the Text”). We can do this while keeping true to performance by focusing on the joy and gratification of subversion, rather than the ways in which power subjugates (Gingrich-Philbrook). Focusing on the playfulness of subversion highlights the joys of possibility, rather than reinscribing the violence power structures inflict on groups of people. We also do this with a vigilance regarding the possibility of maintaining binaries in all aspects of our work, be it writing, teaching, reviewing, or anything else (Madison “That Was Then”). Establishing an us in opposition to a them is the easiest way to meet the rigors of academic scholarship, and seems the most logical way to build coalitions. For performance, these oppositions are too limiting, and require constant interrogation, or even parody. This inviting nature keeps us focused on the ultimate aim of performance scholarship, which is to affect audiences (Madison *Critical Ethnography*; Pollock). Performance is about moments in writing on and through the page, existing inside and beyond the classroom, and within and through the body. It is a recognition these moments are liminal, as is our understanding of them and the theory they contain (Langellier “Two or Three Things”). Performance approaches to narrative scholarship are an assumption the best we can do is attempt to reproduce the liminal moments of our lives which reveal how cultural power is felt through our bodies.

Performance autoethnographer Ragan Fox combines the investment in revealing structures and the process of finding personal artifacts for his articulation of auto-archeology. In his own words: “Auto-archaeology specifies a process by which autoethnographers use disciplinary artifacts and storytelling to map the discursive maneuverings, or document-based performances, of people in specific institutions”

(“Foucauldian” 232). Fox is focused on the nature of the archive’s power to define social life, which orients him toward the different types of texts available to interpret cultural practices. For Fox’s work, the archive he is challenging is the psychiatric-industrial complex, which simultaneously pathologizes homosexuality while obscuring the homophobia of institutions. As Fox claims, “By foregrounding the role of artifacts in auto-ethnographic recollection, I hope to demystify a methodological process that often proves confusing and complex” (“Tales of a Fighting Bobcat” 140). Artifacts allow audiences to see the method of narrative storytelling play out in recognizably forensic ways. Fox is attempting to write toward an audience which Conquergood would identify as scriptocentric in order to clarify the method. Through this method, audiences can see how traces of this archive are incorporated into the body. Fox has constructed a blueprint through which others can place their own narratives in an attempt to identify (Fox “Skinny Bones”). Fox’s latest work, *Inside Reality TV: Producing Race, Gender, and Sexuality on Big Brother* provides a helpful exemplar for how auto-archeology can situate narrative research alongside other forms of critical qualitative research. In this project, Fox demonstrates how auto-archeology connects narrative to a larger project of critical media and Cultural Studies. When examining the role of *Big Brother*’s audience, Fox pulls texts from online forums and communities surrounding the show. He often breaks from his narrative to show fan-made images which contextualize how he was perceived by fans of the show. This often involves exploring, cataloguing, and describing images which attack him with homophobic slurs, and, frame him as an oversexualized predator of the other, heterosexual men in the house. In doing so, Fox engages in the kind of

critical-cultural qualitative analysis typical of studies usually located in the rhetorical paradigm of Communication Studies.

Where Fox makes a bridge between paradigms is through the auto-archeological method in which he is a major part of the text being explored. Thus, the method demonstrates the adaptability of autoethnography in general to fit within various paradigms that shape approaches to knowledge and evidence. Further, by using narrative writing, Fox endears his study to a wider audience than the typical academic work. Indeed, as a blurb on the back of the book suggests, it can be easy to forget one is even reading an academic manuscript. Fox notes that an earlier version of this study is the most downloaded article in the history of the communication discipline due to the provocative subject matter and relationship to popular culture. Therefore, through the auto-archeological method, Fox demonstrates a double move toward working in academic language by providing tangible text and evidence to augment his personal narratives and presenting these findings in ways that are aesthetically appealing and accessible. I will attempt to mirror this accessibility while blending the various theories and methods of this project.

Intersectional Roots, Justice Possibilities

Performance and critical autoethnography owe much to intersectional works before them. Through an unsettling of their own privilege, authors model an undoing of the ethos of Western/White/Eurocentric knowledge claims using the tools of reflexivity. Many scholars embrace autoethnographic method in decolonial feminist theory. A substantial portion of *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* by M. Jaqui Alexander is dedicated to recounting how a

campus-wide movement based around her employment, promotion, and academic freedom illustrates key struggles for decolonial thought in the academy. The seminal collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* is filled with women telling their personal stories in order to challenge existing theory and build new ways of knowing. Women in this collection use their stories to illustrate struggles of coming to terms with whiteness in feminist movements from Indigenous (Cameron), Latina (Moraga), Black (Smith and Smith), and Pacific Asian (Yamada) women. The stories in this collection are not identified as autoethnography; however, they examine political struggles in personal lives through storytelling, dialogue, and poetry, therefore placing them firmly within a performance paradigm. This blurring of public and private, as well as knowledge and practice, is identified as an ontoepistemic sensibility (Bhattacharya and Keating). These authors are using writing about what they see and experience to explore feelings and possibilities that cannot be catalogued.

Narrative methodology is a point of connection to disability studies as well. Narratives have been extremely important to study of disability. Narrative and illness are intertwined in co-construction, and thus, co-performativity (Frank). Narratives serve the colonial impulse of dehumanizing individuals when they have proven to be incapable of dominant modes of production. Critical disability studies writers often explore the oppressive nature of their classrooms by reporting stories of their own spaces (Taylor; Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson). Like other scholars centering oppression and identity, writers of disability studies make a case for the need to report on the self and fight against claims of narcissism as motivation for advocacy (Siebers). Perhaps most telling is that narrative confession of personal disability is often a starting point for most critical

disability studies projects (Kafer; Shildrick). These projects always speak of the disabled in terms of “us” rather than “them,” necessitating the centering of personal identity as a key to the establishment of political praxis.

Finally, performance can be employed to examine structures of whiteness (Warren; Warren and Hytten). Adapting Conquergood’s stances toward the other, John T. Warren and Kathy Hytten developed a performance schema examining the roles whiteness play in the classroom. Further, Warren’s ethnographic work examining student performances of whiteness when tasked with thinking about performing cultures reveals the whiteness of subjects through their bodily acts. While seldom stating intersectionality as a frame, these projects are nonetheless focused on race, gender, class and other performances of identity in academic spaces. Further, Warren provides a blueprint of implicating the writer/ethnographer in research by providing both exemplars and the fieldnotes they come from. With this move, Warren reveals the choices of omission that have been made in the project, as well as emotions he felt while being a body in these academic spaces. These uses of performance to examine whiteness, particularly the whiteness of performance scholars in their own writing, are a useful tool, especially if they were to be tied more explicitly to intersectionality.

Bringing It Together

Regan Fox is invested in using Foucauldian theory as a point of departure for his analysis. While many intersectional and critical scholars cite Foucault in their own studies (Alexander; Mohanty; Puar), they often avoid the trappings of making his theory the beginning and end of their research. Fox’s investment in Foucault betrays his political goals in two critical ways. First, Fox is unable to acknowledge perspectives beyond his

own experiences without some form of personal trauma or shift. Fox's work is essential for exploring how narrative work reveals the power involved in the construction of a gay, male body, but it often stops there. Fox may be revealing more about himself than he realizes when he suggests that he is able to identify with women of color who have participated in *Big Brother* only after he himself was in the show ("Inside Reality TV"). This suggests that a life-changing experience such as entering the realm of celebrity was needed in order to properly empathize with women of color. Although it is possible this assertion was the product of limited space, academic work and the inclusion of ideas in that work is political. Combining this statement with a Eurocentric body of citations, it seems fair to assert that Fox is invested in writing from a place of traditional academia. This assertion plays out in Fox's other political failure of seeking legitimacy in narrative research. Fox has expressed the auto-archeological method as one which makes its scientific merits more obvious to post-positivist researchers. Fox suggests the use of found texts makes narrative more apparently legitimate. While I agree that using traces of the archive to flesh out one's memories enriches a project, I believe that reaching for legitimacy fails performance studies. It is an attempt to speak the master's language in order to carve out a position within the academic field. It is my hope that using performance ethnography with an eye toward intersectional feminist theory and praxis will keep my project focused on challenging legitimacy, as well as situate it within epistememes that work in logic opposed to a white, Eurocentric, imperial academy.

Chela Sandoval is helpful in articulating the need to pull from these works. Sandoval analyzes the works of Eurocentric scholars such as Frederick Jameson to reveal potential connections across critical theory. Sandoval argues that scholars such as

Jameson lament the existence of a post-structuralist/post-modernist subject because it displaces the European scholar as a coherent subject. Sandoval observes this loss of subjectivity may be a post-modern dilemma for the white, male scholar; however, it is the totality of existence for all other scholars. Sandoval suggests that a constant resituating and differentiating set of principles allows us to see how various critical projects are connected. Sandoval suggests these various projects all use different terminology to describe similar oppressions which are felt across time. In order to break the barriers created out of “academic apartheid,” Sandoval suggests methodology be differential and fluid, moving between and defining different forms of consciousness. I make this brief detour to suggest my use of different theories is an attempt to use the methods outlined above as differential movement. I am aware of the precarious proposition of engaging this body of work as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, and physically able man. It is not my intent to rely on my mental health issues to write myself into social justice projects. Using intersectional feminist theory in conjunction with disability studies as the foundation for this project enables me to continuously look at the ways in which I am afflicted by academia and also the ways in which my presence harms others.

I rely on the work of Sara Ahmed to cohere these projects. I am primarily influenced by Ahmed’s turn toward emotion and contact writing (*Cultural Politics of Emotion*). In this turn Ahmed focuses her work on the creation of emotions as private and public forces. These forces are impressed upon us and leave impressions on us, affecting how we move and feel onward. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed began articulating a turn toward blending philosophy into what she terms “contact writing” to show how the personal and political shape one another. Ahmed herself identifies this focus as a needed

parallel to Berlant's cruel optimism and a body of work focused on only affect, providing a focus on the bodies, emotions, sensations, and problems which are more likely to be caught in the wake of this optimism (*The Promise of Happiness*). It must be reiterated that, for Ahmed, the body which feels these sensations takes priority over the sensations, a critical departure from Affect Theory such as Berlant. This work is also informed by Ahmed's articulation of *Queer Phenomenology*, in which she brings queer and feminist theory to phenomenology. This move produces a focus on direction as a cultural force, where bodies are pushed toward possible lives while being pulled from others. For Ahmed, this is an examination of heteropatriarchy as a force which directs us to the possibility of producing more heterosexuality by producing more children through heterosexuality. *Queer Phenomenology* allows Ahmed to show us how we are born into a world with these forces already pushing us to be normative, and what happens when bodies move against these directions.

In examining the resistance to, and containment of, diversity work through the language of inclusion, Ahmed further uncovered academic frustration with these ideas (*On Being Included*). From this frustration, Ahmed began working upon ideas of will, willing and willfulness (*Willful Subjects*). Ahmed identified a general will which exists in a societal body, which represents the way things are and have seemingly always been. To live a life according to this general will suggests a subject who is both willing and full of willpower. However, if one attempts to move in a different way, they are perceived as willful. Willful subjects are ones in need of regulation, discipline, and perhaps even obliteration. Willful subjects are often unruly, and thus, historically feminine, non-white, queer, etc. This moves Ahmed toward a theory of movement, in which willful subjects

move against the flow of the will. Moving in the opposite direction is how the general will or flow of behavior is felt. To point toward a problem is to make oneself the problem (*Living a Feminist Life*). Following the general will is in service of a happiness which never truly comes.

Ahmed has concluded what she believes is a trilogy of books focusing on the power of terms that started with *The Promise of Happiness* and continued in *Willful Subjects* in her most recent book *What's The Use?*. In this book, Ahmed explores how we not only use terms, but we use the concept of use. This is founded in a critique of utilitarian philosophy of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, which inevitably leads her to critiques of Michel Foucault. She examines the educational structures suggested by these philosophers as a way of putting use into people who were previously deemed useless. This focus on relationships between bodies and structures allows Ahmed to extend her previous work into disability studies, examining the various ways use is a barrier creating disability in environments. Ahmed's conclusion is an investment in queer use, where objects, places, and theories are used in new ways not previously intended in order to further an intersectional feminist project. I believe emotion, will, willfulness, and use as the evolution of the directive forces discussed in *Queer Phenomenology* are the glue which hold the theories and methods of this project together.

Checking My Privilege

Assuming that we write from a place of uncomplicated oppression without exerting power over others in different ways is exactly how scholarship with potentially useful political goals perpetuates oppression and colonization of thought, often following the general will. I am engaging these fields in the hopes of moving in multiple ways at

once, situating myself and my story as multifaceted. We are always at once the protagonist of our own story, and potentially antagonist, secondary, tertiary, or non-existent in the stories of others. As such, we are victim, hero, oppressor, villain, etc. all at once. This project does not assume anxiety and depression excuses my privilege in the academy. In fact, through engaging the questions of academic worth and community, and how they discipline minds and bodies, from the perspectives of various feminisms, I suggest the only ethical way to examine one's struggles is in the context of the oppression one places on others.

With this in mind, I wish to engage in performance ethnography in order to address wider audiences, in particular those who seek to question the legitimacy of narrative research. However, I suggest these same people question the legitimacy of critical projects in disability studies, as well as various feminisms. I believe my work will be more valuable to adversaries invested in maintaining structures of knowledge as they are than potential political allies in the project of resistance. Implicating myself in these power structures and paying attention to how my privilege allows me to move through them and benefit from them can reveal how this academic audience is implicated as well. Here, I position myself not as an academic tourist attempting to incorporate the theory that seems most trendy, but as a gateway researcher who cites these critical theories for audiences who are most likely to maintain ignorance of them. I believe I have an insight into reaching this academic audience, as I was initially trained as a social scientist. In many ways, this project represents my reaction to a frustration with research methodology, and, my attempt to find an ethical way to demonstrate the skills I have learned throughout my short career.

In this spirit, I suggest that all choices of where to begin and end a project will always leave something out, and thus the only way to end a narrative of one's life is to acknowledge that life will always exceed the writing. I also believe focusing on the beginning of academic life is an important addition to the existing body of literature focused on academic depression. Indeed, several scholars have engaged in narrative work exploring how the pressures of academic life have afflicted them as post-doctoral scholars (Calafell "Depression"; Goodall; Jago). I believe that examining the pressures of academic life in infancy of scholarship can reveal more about how these pressures are complicit in preventing participation before it is attempted. Further, autoethnographies of academic space are often crafted from the perspective of the teacher, who, for all of the lack of control they may feel, is attempting to create a room in their own image (Pratt). Examining the chaotic roles of students, and especially graduate students who are often also positioned as teachers, offers a needed insight. I believe this project provides an important testament to the violence academics experience as a result of structures, and the violence we perpetuate and inflict on others by participating in these structures.

In the chapters which follow, you will read the story of a willing young man. Each chapter will focus on a different, yet porous identity performed in the academy. Chapter two will discuss the constructions of mental health involved with seeing myself as a successful and productive student. Chapter three will explore my investment with defining myself as a Good Teacher. Chapter four will explore how the nebulous concept of collegiality affected various relationships in my life. The final chapter will explore the limitations of the current project and possible directions for the future. This young man described in this project followed the path of success laid before him. He attended

classes. He studied for tests and turned in his papers on time. He never reached out to classmates. He spoke too often. He invalidated the thoughts and feelings of others. He filled out applications and went to graduate programs. He considered oppression, but only within spaces and projects approved for such thought. He taught his classes the way he assumed other people wanted them to be taught. This is the story of a willing young man whose willpower never made him as happy as he was promised. In fact, it made him miserable. This project, in pointing toward my willing and implicating how I followed structures in ways that made myself and others more miserable, will be the first truly willful thing I ever do. I hope to raise my arms in defiance and point to my own mistakes as a way of resisting my academic life and circumstances. In the pages which follow, I will examine the performances of academic life. My academic life. In doing so, I will perform a new version of myself as a willful academic.

Chapter Two: Performing as a Student

Academic roles can be confusing. Tenure-track faculty are pressured to think of the essential functions of their position including scholarship, teaching, service, and a somewhat nebulous fourth duty to collegiality (Price). Much of the confusion comes from the impossibility of these duties remaining completely distinct from one another. The chapters which make up the bulk of this project focus on my stress and anxiety related to performing and identifying as a student, teacher, and colleague respectively. Yet, I must acknowledge this division of labor will be as precarious in this project as it is in our lives. We often suggest that our learning is never done as scholars. This makes us all students in perpetuity. Thus, it would be productive to begin this analysis as most of our academic careers did, as students. I follow in the steps of scholars before me in beginning with the pressures I felt as a young undergraduate student, and, the anxiety and precarity which began to take hold then (Calafell “Depression”).

School and Work

As I drove home, I could feel the unease from my stomach out to my hands and feet. I had just finished the second day of my second semester of college. It had been an eventful month. After seeing a movie with some friends who were not attending school, I began openly crying. These friends had moved immediately into the workforce. One of them worked at a gas station, another a factory, yet another worked overnights as security

at a department store. Although my life had started to go in a different direction than theirs these past few months, I felt more connected to them than anyone at my university. The movie, and the friends, spoke to me and revealed that I needed to make some serious changes. So, I moved back home and refocused on my schoolwork. Price suggests there is a proliferation of stories from students and teachers describing themselves as mentally ill. This proliferation suggests two important things: “First, such minds show up all the time, in obvious and not-so-obvious ways; and second, recognizing their appearance is not a yes-no proposition, but rather a confusing and contextually dependent process that calls into question what we mean by the ‘normal’ mind” (Price 3-4). These ways may be not-so-obvious to those afflicted as well. I would think many times of my fits of crying and spontaneous nausea, the latter of which still occurs as I write these very words, when working with my own students. These students would suggest an inability to work with others or have trouble finding the words to express why they did not meet a deadline. Like me, they seemed confused by what was happening to them. In the midst of my breakdown, I struggled in most of my classes. I just barely earned a C in one, meaning I barely earned all of the credits I was attempting. I was labeled an underachiever in high school, and so far, I had been doing worse in college. So, I decided to spend all of my time focusing on school and studying, only hanging out with my non-college friends on the weekends. The entirety of my college experience was focused on academics.

When I finally got home, I had been alone with my thoughts for a half-hour drive. My father had just gotten home as well. When he asked me how my second day went, I broke down into tears. He was shocked, as always. He rarely knew what to do. He still doesn't. After several false starts at explaining myself, I told him that I wanted to drop

out of college. It was too hard and overwhelming. He asked me why. After all, it was only the second day. What could I have possibly experienced that would send me over the edge after just going through syllabi? I took a deep breath and tried to explain.

In the first two days of the semester, I had the schedules for all five courses laid out in front of me. This was a standard load of courses and is the exact median between the twelve and eighteen credit hours full time students were required to take. At eight o'clock on Monday morning, I sat outside in the hallway waiting for TCOM 101. This was the very first course all Telecommunications majors, of which I was one, were required to take. It was a very basic lecture course where the teacher sat behind what looked like a news anchor desk on a raised platform, and told us about the history of media business and technology. From the first day, this sounded like it was going to be mostly information about radio waves and specific trivia about the media (Did you know that all stations east of the Mississippi River start with W and in the west, they start with K? Did you care?). When looking over the schedule for the course, I saw there were 4 paper exams, which I learned was standard for a lecture class, and a project where we were forced to design a webpage over a given media topic. This would make us learn the difference between HTML and FTP, as well as write scripts for web design. Everyone nodded as he said this and I felt like an alien. I was typing on my first ever computer. The email address the school gave me was my first one ever. I never got a Xanga page and I had only thought about getting a MySpace page very briefly. A bunch of the upper classmen kept suggesting that this Facebook thing was better, but I had no real idea what they were taking about or how the internet worked. It would be another four years before

I had access in my home. The feeling of doing all this made me sick to my stomach again.

The gaps in experience with technology were internalized as failure of myself as a student. My high school did not have any audio or visual equipment. I had a few friends who were wealthy enough to have cameras and equipment; however, holding someone's camera for a few shots was not enough to compete with folks who were already experiences with their own equipment and ideas. My assignment to program a small website as a report for my Telecommunications class is one of my earliest memories of assignment-based anxiety. Here, a computer is an orientation object. Being able to see a computer as a device for programming, editing, and production was not an energy I was directed by as a child. I took typing and presentation making classes in high school, but never had any idea to do more than this. My experience as a student in film production very quickly revealed itself to be a continuing pathway for those already filled with certain knowledge, and not a place to gain this knowledge. Ahmed articulates, "phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" (*Queer Phenomenology* 9). I felt this lack of knowledge through stomach aches, light-headedness, and other unlabeled panic symptoms. Every day, I waited for my lack of knowledge, and myself, to be exposed.

I rushed to my nine o'clock Math class. When building my schedule, my advisor pointed out I tested into Calculus. I asked him what the lowest level math class was, the one that University Core Curriculum required everyone to take. He said it was one based on life skills math, focusing on equations used for basic economics stuff. It was called

Math 125. So...the first day of Math 125 was okay. After a four-hour break, in which I worked a two-hour shift at the food court to pay for gas, I went to English 104. This was the writing course everyone on campus was required to pass. My teacher for this class seemed much younger. He insisted that we all call him Mr. and not Dr., so he might be some kind of student? I did not know or ask. This class focused on research. He asked us to turn in four different essays throughout the course. In doing so, he introduced us to research with the library and its computer databases. It sounded intense, especially for someone who only took one high school writing class which was barely taught by a football coach.

After this class, I tried to make it across campus in time for the last class of the day. It seemed like it was going to be impossible to make this walk in ten minutes, so I was late almost every day. This was my first college Spanish class. My major required everyone to take a foreign language at least to the 202 level. I had tested into 102, which was okay, but not great. Much like math, I was told in high school that I could stop taking foreign languages at the end of junior year, so I did. Being a white kid from an overwhelmingly white family in an overwhelmingly white town, Spanish classes and an interest in *lucha libre* had been my only attempts to engage with the language. I was out of practice. I arrived late, which means I had to walk across several bodies to get to a desk on the end. It also meant the teacher had finished with whatever English she had given the students and had begun leading the class entirely in Spanish, something my high school teacher gave up on doing a long time ago. I tried to keep up, despite the fact that I was a terrible student when it comes to foreign languages. Here, we also had to do four exams, as well as daily worksheets. I felt woefully underprepared, as it seemed like

many of the students had a much better grasp than me. Finally, the day was over and I prepared for my final first class on Tuesday.

Ahmed suggests “we learn what home means, or how we occupy space at home as home, when we leave home” (*Queer Phenomenology* 9). Seeing what we are not reminds us of what we are. Being confronted with the forces of technology and the suggestion of learning things like a foreign language forced me to consider the ways in which my life had failed my continuing success as a student. I was 19-years-old and looking back regretfully on things I wished I had done. I wished I had stayed on track in math and language courses. I felt dumb for not being prepared for my foreign language course. I recognize now the embarrassing privilege involved in being able to forget a language like Spanish because I had no one who primarily spoke Spanish in my day-to-day life. Even at nineteen and during the second Bush administration, I considered myself a well-meaning liberal who valued multiculturalism. One of the ways I was able to maintain this value was the total lack of a need to prove it in my everyday life. Although my Spanish teacher was white, I can now see how failing to fully immerse myself in the study of a foreign language as a white, American student is an expression of privilege. Schwartz argues that what they term a “Gringo” version of Spanish “reproduces racist discourse and explicitly elevates English monolingualism as symbolic of how social and linguistic order must be maintained in public, white spaces” (225). This partial engagement with Spanish, always on English-speaking terms, is a reinscription of whiteness and Western monoculturism. My ability to keep Spanish at a distance, only picking up terms useful for tourism, is a part of this larger “Gringoism” Schwartz describes. At the time, however, I merely internalized it as one of the many ways in

which I failed to be prepared for college life. Being a student took a potential moment of reflection and made it another way in which I could hurt myself and my self-concept.

On Tuesday, I took Theater 100. The teacher informed us she did not really like to teach, but she loved designing costumes. Her plan was to use class time to show us film adaptations and filmed performances of some of her favorite plays. All of our points came from out of class work. This consisted of seven different online exams over the textbook. On off-weeks, we were required to read complete plays and take proctored quizzes of them. We were also required to see showings of every single theater performance and dance the program was staging that semester. Finally, we were supposed to organize into groups in which we were to stage a short play that demonstrated we understand dramatic tension. This course required the purchase of eight different text books, eighteen out-of-class quizzes we had to schedule on our own time and many of which had to be taken on-campus, four tickets to shows that all occurred on weekends, and we did nothing but watching old VHS transfers on a wheeled in television during class. Not only was that a lot of work, but it was also a lot of money to spend on one class.

In her book of the same name, Lauren Berlant defines cruel optimism as a relation that “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (1). This is framed as cruel “only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). Optimism becomes cruel as it gives way to a fantasy of a good life. Optimism here is defined as a force that pulls people outside of ourselves and toward something bigger than our own capabilities. It is a way to join a larger society, the assumption of rising to meet ambitions which are provided by

optimism itself. Because of this, the usually positive connotations of a concept like optimism contain a variety of affects from dread and anxiety to curiosity and drive. Optimism is supposedly a value-neutral force, concerned with only perpetuating itself.

Optimism perpetuates itself through a particular affective logic. Optimism provides a series of objects and actions which provide a movement toward the fantasy of a “good life.” This good life is supposedly made possible by these actions and objects, serving as an affective treadmill toward better living. One obvious, but important example of this treadmill is the university system. Striving for a degree is seen as a betterment of one’s life and one’s self. More specifically, a common logic that sustains the humanities is a desire to create better human beings over human beings readier for a given trade. The way many students attempt to engage this system, especially if they are not academic legacies, is through taking out student loans. Thus, many of us have doomed our economic futures in the name of bettering ourselves. It is unlikely my degree will lead me to a career that can offset the impact of a decade’s worth of student loan debt will have on my life moving forward.

I explained all of my college-related anxiety to Dad as quickly as I could. I told him that I just felt like I couldn’t do it. Having all of these things that I would be doing in the next 16 weeks put in front of me at once made me feel like I couldn’t breathe. I also felt like I was being asked to do all of these things that other people knew how to do, and I felt like I did not belong. Through my tears, I explained to him that I felt awful and overwhelmed and I just had to drop out. My father got quiet for a moment. He is a generally indecisive person, but his next sentences came with more certainty than I have

ever heard from him: “If you want to drop out, you can. I won’t stop you. But if you do, you have to immediately come work at the factory with me.”

I suppose I must pause again to give a brief history of my parents’ employment. Neither of them went to college. In Indiana, in the 1970s when they were growing up, going to college was the wrong move. Anyone who knew what was up would find a decent factory to work at, put in thirty years, and then retire before they were fifty. As such, they met in the eighties when they were both working at a steel plating plant. After that plant suddenly closed without notice, they both bounced around other working-class jobs while having me and then splitting up. My mother split time as a waitress and a cashier at a grocery store before getting a better paying job putting together parts for American cars. This job eventually ruined her spine, which exacerbated an addiction to pain medicine. Meanwhile, Dad learned to drive a forklift at a local tomato packing plant before getting a better job putting together Japanese car parts. They did well enough, and, being from white families who knew people involved with both of these factories probably did not hurt. However, they never seemed satisfied with their lives.

My parents labeled me as “smart” from an early age. I was verbal pretty early on. I loved reading, even if it was mostly Young Adult science fiction and horror. I didn’t run fast or have good coordination. A stray pitch once hit me in the ankle, causing me to cry and Dad to give up on my little league baseball career. By the time I found out I needed glasses at the age of seven, my destiny as a nerd seemed fairly set in stone. My parents encouraged this by always letting me know I was “smart,” and that I was “bound for big things.” They would also tell me that I would “never end up” like either of them. My mother is often fond of referring to me as “the only thing I ever did right.” All of these

things are meant as encouragement, and they are supportive. But, have you ever heard a word so many times that it seems to lose its feeling? What was once an exciting idea becomes empty and devoid of energy. What energy it does still contain feels as if it is bearing down on me rather than lifting me up.

Berlant seems to speak directly to me when she examines cruel optimism through the lens of a French film titled *Ressources Humaines* (translated to *Human Resources*). Berlant highlights a scene from this film in which a man named Franck and his father are confronted with the trauma of generational societal advancement, something Berlant labels as *embourgeoisement*. This section of the film sees Franck return from university to work as a manager for the factory where his father has worked for decades. Franck was raised by his family to know as little as possible about the manual labor his family was enmeshed with. He was chosen, from birth, for class mobility. His family poured their resources into him in the hopes he would avoid the precarity of manual labor. Franck's return as his father's supervisor culminates in a scene of public shame. Franck yells at his father on the factory floor, telling him he is ashamed of him, and of his inability to stop work he is no longer physically fit for, as well as the shame Franck feels for being ashamed. The hopes that Franck would be able to live a carefree life as a member of the bourgeoisie have crumbled as the optimism gives way to shame of the past. The connections I feel from the story to my own relationship with my father are probably already apparent. My father, and less so my mother, raised me to see their way of life as a failure for myself. They never gave me a dream, but instead filled me with shame. It was never a statement of what I could do, but a list of things that I should not do. As we shall soon see, this pressure would be repeated by familial figures in higher education.

Further, my parents thrust me into a life they themselves never understood. My father never had a conception of how we would pay for school. I missed all of the opportunities to apply for the 21st Century Scholars program promoted by our school system in middle school. Thus, I was fully funded by loans. Every year, I would fill out all of the financial aid information on my own, only pulling Dad in the room to sign forms or look over the terms and conditions of the agreements he was making. My father also never took great concern in what I did at school, with a blind faith that a degree would translate to a better career. I often said he never understood what I was doing in school, but I was lucky enough to feel an enduring pride no matter his lack of comprehension. I realize these words make me sound bitter. I risk making this writing my version of Franck yelling at his father in front of the factory. I am not ashamed of my father. He is not a fool. I cannot fault him for how he guided me toward being a college student. As we shall soon discuss, he and I were doing the best with the phenomenological forces moving us toward are performance as Proud Father and Accomplished Son.

Before that movement, I want to pause briefly to articulate why I am travelling away from Berlant's theory of optimism and affect. First, Berlant's theory is constructed with a stated focus on the construction of a cultural present. This focus is aimed at critiquing the present as a social construction in which our actions are subsumed into a capitalist logic which perpetuates itself through this fantasy of the present. This is a well-intended focus, and, is certainly not an endorsement of this fantastical contemporary. Regardless of intent, this focus on the present is complicit in the perpetuation of a focus on a constructed contemporary and modernity. Here, I am energized from Denise Ferreira

da Silva's critique of modern thought as a racializing tool. Da Silva shows us that looking forward, or any kind of linear thinking, is a perpetuation of Enlightenment thinking which seeks to maintain structures of thought into categories of powerful and powerless. A focus on the present, even if it seeks to show cracks in that same present, is reaffirming the way things are, the way they have been, and making it likely they are the way they will always be. In many ways, this project will remain imperfect in my goals to break from this cycle; however, I believe breaking from Berlant is a good start.

Secondly, Berlant positions her goals as a movement away from individual trauma in favor of a focus on what she describes as "crisis ordinariness" (10). This essentially recognizes that events we perceive as traumatizing are "simply" something that induces trauma. Berlant sees crisis ordinariness because it acknowledges that history exists in a perpetual state of crisis, and, narratives of trauma exceptionalize constant societal pressures. This is a narrow view of trauma and potentially dangerous. The stories I am sharing with you are not notable for their exceptional events, but are instead potentially powerful because of their quotidian nature. Further, completely abandoning a focus on trauma because of this observation risks a total abandonment of emotion and embodiment. Berlant claims to solve this by suggesting more emotionally focused theories like Sara Ahmed's (who she cites by name) actually exist within her theory. I am ethically opposed to the idea that one theory can subsume the entirety of another. I have taken great pains to highlight relationships between various theories and approaches in this project; however, I try to refrain from suggesting one body of work is *actually* a restatement of another theory. Like everything else, this is not a hard and fast rule that

will apply to everything; however, I find suggesting the entirety of a theory is encompassed in another to be minimizing.

Ahmed illustrates her own critique of an affective turn in the second edition of *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Ahmed suggests we should be suspicious of a body of work such as affect theory that suggests we turn toward affect and away from emotion. She notes much of affect suggests we had to create a new theory in order to address bodily implication, which means we are turning away from decades of feminist and queer work which has already been doing body work. She is not suggesting that theorists are intentionally creating this separation, but that their work carries this implication. She thus has created a body of work focused on bringing together “a concern with how we are affected *by* things with a more phenomenological concern with intentionality *about* things” (Ahmed *Cultural Politics of Emotion* 209). For Ahmed, phenomenology is important because it examines how we are driven toward emotional reactions toward objects, and, this drive provides the social world in which we live.

Ahmed’s phenomenological approach is best articulated in her book *Queer Phenomenology*. This theory is focused on the emotion and energy we put into objects and the emotion and energy those objects put into us. This is an embodied and performative experience. As Ahmed suggests, “bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwellings and take shape by dwelling” (9). Ahmed’s project appears to be primarily focused on bridging these principles of phenomenology with ideas of sexuality. Ahmed suggests the concept of orientation is important to understand phenomenology. Orientation is a way a body is positioned in the world in order to find footing and stand. It is through orientation that our bodies know

where we are, how to move, and how to live. Being oriented also means being oriented toward things. It provides our bodies with a direction to face toward and a way to move throughout our lives. It also denies us the ability to orient ourselves and move in different ways. The synthesis of phenomenology and queer theory is based more than the convenient wordplay of sexual orientation. Ahmed is also clear about how the ways her articulation of phenomenology applies to sexuality are also the ways in which it applies to gender, race, and other markers of social identity. The queering of phenomenology allows us to focus on the forces which shape our bodies, homes, identities, and lives.

We can see some of the phenomenological forces shaping my life at the beginning of my college career. My parents oriented me toward a life in higher education. I was raised with the thoughts of being smart and successful. My father was also operating under the binary distinction of success being related to a life in academia, and, failure relating to a working-class life. Movement toward college is movement toward a better life. The lack of preparation for college life is how we can see the limits placed upon people when they only have directions available to them. I am white, and thus, getting into college based upon merit is an unassailable foundation my orientation toward education is built upon. Once I am in college, I begin to see the limits of meritocracy and internalize this stress as a lack of self-worth.

It is important to note Ahmed is primarily examining these ideas of home through the lens of colonial migration. The phenomenological ideas of home being carried with you, and, marking you as not belonging somewhere else are thought through the experience of racialized others dealing with the consequences of colonial displacement. I only say this because the statement goes unsaid so often in research, but I obviously

benefit from this phenomenology of displacement. Further, my own embodiment of this phenomenology pales in comparison to those Ahmed writes with and for. It is difficult to imagine how these much heavier these energies would feel if I inhabited a different body. The possibility of dedicating myself to catching up with technology was theoretically possible. Further still, if I chose to position myself as a less-technical “on-air” talent, the only thing stopping me would likely be better acne medication. The shame I felt for not being multilingual could remain a merely internal shame. If it reaches the surface at all, it likely presents itself as a pressure for people of color who do speak multiple languages to comfort me for my own insufficiencies. It took almost two decades worth of pressure to succeed for me to hit a wall beyond my own failing mind. When faced with this pressure, my anxiety pushes me to remove myself from academia. I reached this point in my life without having my tenacity tested. This thread of my advantages and privileges is one I will continue to pull upon as we move through my story. The unraveling of this thread is a necessary partner to the tapestry of my life.

All of this recontextualizes my father’s ultimatum. It was either college or the factory. You were either smart or destined for manual labor. My father believed in this binary. My entire life had been structured around it. I never competed in sports, but I was “smart,” so I didn’t need to. I never went outside much, but that’s because I was “too busy reading.” As such, my body is pretty useless for manual labor. Further, engaging in work at the factory would mean I had given up on my mind. If I went to work with my father, I was giving up on my dreams, whatever they may be. When I heard my father’s words, my tears instantly dried up. I lifted my head to meet his gaze and I said, “I don’t want to work in the factory.” He says he knows that. I tell him, “Okay, I will stay in

school.” He hugged me and pat me on the shoulder. I never talked about dropping out again. I wanted to be good. To be good, I stayed in school. Being a good student meant being a student in hopes of being good.

Majors and Disciplines

I spent the past Friday night huddled over an email draft, trying to keep my tears from reaching the computer keyboard. I was pushing through a courtesy message to my Beginning Video Production teacher. He was a young man, not unlike my English 104 teacher. I had since learned that these younger teachers were also students, although I did not quite understand how or why. Regardless, I had to send this message because this class had been eating away at my thoughts and feelings for the past month.

As a student in the production side of Telecommunications, I was expected to produce audio and video projects multiple times per semester. I had been eager to take these classes, as I was interested to learn new skills. I had always been surrounded by people with access to cameras and recorders. I remember being jealous of my friends in senior year of high school because they got to go to a vocational program focused on graphic design. I never had a computer or internet access at home, so all of that felt very far away from me. Now that I had regular access to these things, I was eager to get started. This promise of skills development soon revealed itself to be difficult to fulfill.

I waited eighteen months to get to these classes before I discovered the age of nineteen was too old to get a start in this field. All of my classmates seemed to be familiar with programs like Pro Tools and Final Cut Pro, which are used for audio and video editing. I thought the point of college was to become a pro, not already be one. When overhearing my classmates, I learned they had been at this for years, making video

and audio for their high schools. I remember fighting our school newspaper advisor to update our computers to software from Mac OS from 1998 in the year 2006. I worked hard as a photographer during high school, attending almost every sporting event and extracurricular activity in order to document it. It seemed all of my time and effort was wasted, as I never bought a camera of my own, or learned how to use editing software. I was already very far behind.

Being enrolled in Video Production had given me access to equipment from the school. Every weekend, in order to work on my next project, I had been renting a camera, two lighting rigs, and a tripod, carrying them half a mile to my car, and then attempting to figure out how to use them in front of my friends who have volunteered their time to be in my projects. When working on my second project, I had realized that the stress and the work of trying to figure all of this out on my own caused me to forget to eat anything for about two days. I immediately packed up all of my equipment and drove to a friend's house where I had the internet access needed to send an email explaining I was dropping Video Production.

We can again see the phenomenological forces orienting myself and other students. Ahmed's conception of phenomenology is deeply tied to objects, and how we put them to work. For her, a table is only just a table until we make it work in a certain way. A table can be a place for people to meet. It can also be a place for people to eat meals, together or apart. It can function as a seat. Ahmed finds possibility in how a table can be made into a place of production when we make it a desk (*Queer Phenomenology*). The place of work can also be the place of community. Tables can also simply be places in which we store other objects. A table loses its function as we pile other objects on top

of it. Recall that disability comes from the ways environment stops a material body with impairments (Donaldson). These objects serve as disabling devices on top of the already social norms designed to cure, discipline, or expel those not fitting within the realm of reason. A full setup of video production equipment would be about eighty pounds of material spread across four or five different cases. I would then have to carry this equipment to my car, which was conservatively about three hundred yards away. If you were not able to find friends to help you, this was a daunting task. Although I cannot personally attest to the experiences of classmates with physical impairments, as there were none in my classes, it does not take much energy to see how these objects place undue burdens on potential students.

Further, disabling environments are made up of interactions with other people as well (Balieri et. al.). For the “average” film and television production student, all of these pieces of equipment are supposed to serve as receptacles for generative energy. They are supposed to be the tools that make filmmaking happen. They produce images, lighting, and sound. Production is the literal name of the exercise. For me, they are walls. They are objects I have been given only a few minutes of instruction and direction with. They have confusing buttons and settings I am not prepared for. The editing programs force me to go to computer labs and edit my projects in a communal space. The other students seem to have a much better idea of how to edit than I do. As I continue to be frustrated, I am filled with shame about my lack of skill. I try to hide my work so no one realizes how bad I am. I am not directing these objects, they are directing me away from a possible career. They show how pressure can become a gate, a door slammed in your face.

Price examines the power inherent in needing students to make narrative and rational sense of their mental disability. She suggests that accommodations for mentally ill subjects are only afforded to those who can pantomime rational belief. This equipment is supposed to make digital storytelling possible, yet, I cannot use the equipment without feeling nauseous. The projects which were due every two weeks became a source of anxiety so strong they affected my ability to focus in other classes. As we can tell by Price's focus on rhetoric and the privileging of rationality, this does not position the discipline of Communication Studies as a corrective to these pressures. The pressure merely becomes less explicit. As is important to remind ourselves when examining performance as a site of discipline, different does not mean better.

I ended my Friday night attempting to edit my email through the watery curtain covering my eyes. I was so afraid of offending this teacher I knew nothing about. Even now, I can't recall his name. Nevertheless, I felt great shame at giving up on the class. I spent a lot of time and energy writing this email explaining how unqualified I felt. I even assured the teacher I would be setting up an appointment with my advisor. This was all a lot of energy to assure someone who probably also did not remember my name about my academic well-being. After reading the message several times, my hand would not allow me to press send. As I attempted to eject the words from my drafts folder and into the ether, a sense of dread bounced up and down my arm, between my hand and brain. I was unable to overcome this, and my friend sent the email for me. Strangely, the email I sent to my advisor was much less of a problem. I suppose I was not worried about disappointing her.

A few days later, my meeting with my advisor began with a five-minute monologue in which I unloaded my state of mind. Somewhere among this rant was an expression of myself as a fan of film and television who was incapable of creating anything worthwhile. My advisor patiently waited for me to finish, and told me that she never takes switching majors personally. She then attempted to help me find a new major. When I told her I was interested in photography, she responded that it was too late to join the art program. When she brought up journalism, I was reminded of the 100-level class all journalism majors are required to take in which students are forced to write a 100-page paper. This is obviously a non-starter. She mentioned I could switch to the film and television studies option, but she said that would earn me a degree that she deemed essentially worthless with no job prospects. She paused and told me that I seemed like a “great communicator” and recommended I set up an appointment with a colleague from a department upstairs. She gave me this colleague’s contact information and office number. I left before realizing I had no idea what it meant to be a “great communicator” and I’m not sure my advisor did either.

We can also see how curricula function as orientation objects (*Queer Phenomenology*). The structure of a program guides students through it, as well as away from it. The Telecommunications and Journalism departments both contained early required courses focusing on writing and theory more than actual technical work. These courses were informally known as “weed out classes.” The idea was that anyone who simply wanted to be involved in the media because it seemed fun, or a platform for fame, would be overburdened with work in their first academic year and directed to change their major. The most infamous of these classes was J102, an introduction to news

writing. This freshman level course contained a final project of a 100-page paper, consisting of extensive footnotes as an introduction to the Associated Press style. This course functioned to scare many students, including myself, away from a career in journalism. It was designed to be a wall disabling students who are incapable of written academic work. We also required purchase of technology not provided by the schools, serving as an economic barrier as well. When I changed my major, I had spent hundreds of dollars on equipment I no longer needed. The justification for this curricular structure was for only serious students to apply; however, the reality is they created barriers for those without connections and experience. They directed those of us seeking to learn a new trade away from possibility.

Without thinking, I walked upstairs and saw the Communication Studies professor's office door was open. My desire to be polite was overridden by my desire to alleviate all of my anxiety, so I knocked on the door with my head already breaking the barrier of her office. She was a short and intense woman whose glasses enlarged her eyes, leaving you with the impression she was laser-focused on your every word. She handled my barging in with a certain amount of grace, although I was probably too fixated on my own thoughts to notice her annoyance. She briefly explained to me the field of Communication Studies, giving me a well-rehearsed description of three different tracks to take in the department. This explanation was accompanied with a small booklet describing all of the classes that were offered, as well as a flier with jobs recent graduates had obtained. When pointing out the wide array of jobs, she said she liked to think of Communication Studies as a collection of skills to employ in different ways, rather than training for a given career. I thanked her for her time and told her I would attend the

meeting for new majors in a few weeks. As I was completing my drive home, it occurred to me that I had no idea how to explain this major to my family. I guess I should start by attempting to explain this major to myself.

John T. Warren identifies the ways white students dominate space in his ethnographic account of intercultural classrooms. White students are given the power to recontextualize their actions as allyship and critical learning, while silencing voices of color in the classroom. Alcoff notes that white identity depends on social action and performance to assert itself. We have marked how academic theory is a domain of whiteness, and in my actions of switching my major we can see how entitlement manifests in the experiences of actors with little social power as well. It is surely the entitlement of whiteness that would lead me to believe it was acceptable to barge into an office with a plea for help. Alcoff also notes how the experiences of white people are not uniform, thus accounting for the importance of class and gender differences and the racial barriers to class and gender consciousness. I could suggest my behavior was due to class norms. This would also explain away the informal nature of email communication as a lack of cultural training and awareness of etiquette. However, my relationship to space cannot be disentangled from my whiteness, and my whiteness cannot be separated from my maleness in this regard. This is especially important considering my unconscious comfort in communicating with full-time female professors compared to a discomfort with a male graduate assistant. Here, an open door represents the lack of privacy afforded to many. We should always be wary of the folks who feel they can get away with holding office hours while their doors are shut, because distance has been afforded to them. The ones who have been directed toward keeping their doors open, like the Communication

Studies professor who changed my life, are offering up their time and energy to the mercy of students like me. Students who can intrude upon your space at any minute, as if that space belonged to them.

Undergraduate and Graduate

I've always been in search of direction. That's what everyone always told me. My dad quit going to parent-teacher conferences because he claimed he knew what they were going to say, "You're really smart, but you don't try hard enough." This was never followed with any kind of request to try harder. I cannot recall when I stopped trying, but I know I started again halfway through my Freshman year of college. I had been dodging the question of what I want to do with my life for a long time. What does it mean to "do" something? What does my Dad do? Would the word factory even come into a description of him? How would he describe me?

I had been in Communication Studies for over a year, and I still had trouble explaining what it is. After a year, I seemed to be doing well with it, getting close to A's in all of my classes. I still didn't feel any closer to finding an identity. In our major, you were given a choice of three options: Public Communication, Organizational Communication, and Interpersonal Communication. The first two required an internship of some kind, so I decided to pick the third one out of necessity. Despite doing well, I was not sure describing my experience working with a bunch of business students in a group communication class or answering an essay question about semantics would get me a job. Was I making all of these choices to avoid making a choice?

Thankfully, a teacher decided to give me a lifeline. When I became a Communication Studies major, I was required to take a large lecture style class on

Intercultural Communication. This class was required for us, and for education majors. The class was taught by an enthusiastic white woman. The format of the class seemed to be about introducing kids like me from the Midwestern United States to the ideas of cultural differences. We were asked to challenge our ethnocentrism. The final project of the class involved a partnership with the International Student Center where we were supposed to contact them to be matched up with a student from another country. We would then meet with this student in order to interview them about their culture. We were tasked with writing an essay examining the information about the culture in our interviews, as well as how we and our partner interact with each other. The thought of contacting the International Center terrified me. I am ashamed to admit that the idea of reaching out to people across cultural borders compounded my anxiety. My world continued to grow at a rate my body and mind could not adjust to. So, I instead decided to interview my friend's older brother because he was a Republican and I was a Democrat. When I received my grade, I got an email from the professor. She told me that I had missed every single goal and aspect of the assignment, pointing out that my cultural partner was also white and from the same hometown. Despite all of this, she wanted me to know that she couldn't justify giving me a score lower than 80% because she believed the paper was so well-written. I was weirdly proud of that email, and had it saved at the bottom of my inbox as a point of pride for a long time.

Warren and Alcoff converge in their agreement that whiteness is inexorably linked to our material existence. This goes beyond the physical appearance of one's body, although that is certainly central to this materiality. This physical body does not "appear" to be white by accident. Alcoff traces the shifting definitions of whiteness, a fluid label

which is applied to people based on intersections of class and culture, among other factors. Alcoff points toward the importance of considering variation within white identity, suggesting that racial consciousness and solidarity are not as simple as they may seem. Alcoff suggests seeing white identity as another social formation in the way that we analyze other racial identities is the future of studies on whiteness. I am left to speculate how Warren would feel about this suggestion, although I have a strong feeling he would be hesitant. Warren is primarily concerned with the performative choices we make in order to maintain whiteness as an identity. Performance is an unseen force which compels us to establish our whiteness in ever changing ways. Warren points to the choices one's family has to make over time in order for whiteness to be preserved. These choices involve generations of domestic arrangement, keeping family lines within geographical boundaries that are also racially homogenous. For Warren, whiteness is center to this performative determinism. For Alcoff, whiteness is one of many categories behaving in this way, intersected with class variability. Alcoff sees whiteness as redeemable from white supremacy as an analytic category. To see whiteness as an exceptional category defined by racial domination and superiority is, for Alcoff, giving whiteness another elevated position as an exceptional theoretical concept in anti-racist work. It is impossible to know how Warren would have reacted to this movement, especially considering Alcoff is continuing a performative analytic (in different terms) by focusing on the social and historical repetition of whiteness. I bring the approaches together in order to unpack various parts of my material existence as a 21-year-old student failing to meet the basic requirements of an already problematic intercultural project.

Charles W. Mills identifies how focus on liberal political thought and philosophy has greatly narrowed the European imagination about what is politically possible. Mills points out how the entire spectrum of mainstream U.S. politics is merely a fraction of the complete spectrum of possibility. Thus, while we lament an unreachable divide between the “far right” and the “far left,” the reality is they are both only slightly different versions of what classical political philosophy would label as liberalism. Mills recontextualizes U.S. politics in this way to reveal “both sides” are made possible because of the racialization of labor which industrialized democracy is built upon. This is why Mills suggests all liberalism should be understood as racial liberalism. I have taken this brief aside into political philosophy in order to illustrate the depths of my offense at submitting an intercultural project that merely sought to understand “both sides” of the political system of the United States. I took a project focused on reaching cultural awareness and understanding (which already had limitations and faults) and distorted it into something which would allow me to ignore that goal completely. Further, I was able to earn a passing grade for this project on style alone.

Recall bodies are a site of how we mark difference (Wilkerson). The connection between identity markers in the body and disability provides us a bridge to examine how this project potentially contributes to feelings of precarity and anxiety, both justified and unjustified. I have identified my own thoughts and feelings as an expression of whiteness and perpetuation of racial liberalism in the face of an expanding social world. If all performance is a moral act, according to Conquergood, my performance in this project reveals a moral failing. I put a finer point on this to clarify the following critiques of the project are not designed to shield myself from implication. Recall that critical disability

studies is invested in a reflexivity of trauma in which we notice our particular suffering by also make connections to societal patterns of oppression in society (Harris and Fortney). This means our own feelings of precarity must always be in context of larger patterns. This also reminds us that our bodies are constant laboratories of this anxiety. If my discomfort came from a place of privilege and racial avoidance, there were certainly students whose discomfort came from the precarious nature of sharing space with cultural partners who were highly likely to be micro-aggressive as both students fumbled for meaning. The project, as I took it, was essentially designed to illicit whitesplaining, mansplaining, straightsplaining, cis-splaining, and other forms of cultural identity through the lens of privileged classes. Further, although I was not privy to any reports of discomfort and social violence which made it to the instructor, it seems likely this project contributed to much linguistic othering in the vein of Orientalism as identified by Said. Perhaps these theories converge to reveal the moral choice offered by this project was always limiting and both choices were rife with violence. The choice was to disengage or dialogue on the terms of a Western academic project, which is perhaps the choice we always offer in academic projects of this kind. Students feel anxiety as a result of these projects, and we tell ourselves this anxiety is unproblematically productive, when the particularity of analysis reveals it is never that simple.

My performance in the intercultural class made me fairly anxious to take another class with this professor. She liked my writing, but I think my lack of following instructions and engaging with the assignment offended her. The semester I returned to her classroom was particularly tough. Because I had been rushing through this major in two years, I was taking almost all of my 400 level courses in this term. Not only that, but

this professor's class had a reputation for being difficult. The class focused on conflict, and, we were required to conduct interviews, provide recordings and transcripts of the interviews, and then analyze the conflict discussed in the interviews in a sizable term paper. This assignment was stressful, with the transcriptions particularly making me question both my ability and desire to ever type again. About a month before the term paper was due, the professor pulled me aside after class. She mentioned she was impressed with my work. I thanked her. She then asked if I had ever considered "grad school?"

I didn't know how to answer the question. Not because I didn't have a definitive answer, but out of embarrassment for what that answer was. The answer was no, because I had no idea what that phrase meant or what it represented. I knew that the people teaching my classes in college had gone to school for a fairly long time in order to teach; however, I had never really thought about what that schooling was called or how it worked. I answered her question with a simple, "No, I haven't." She then outlined a plan to get me into our program's master's level. She set up a meeting with me for later and I left feeling excited. This professor telling me I was smart enough for something held more weight than my parents.

In our meeting, the professor laid out her plan for me moving forward. She wanted me to be a Teaching Assistant in the Intercultural Communication class the next semester, despite my subpar performance on the final paper. There, she would show me how a class is run from "backstage." She also wanted me to grade essays, a job she claimed to have never given to an undergraduate before. From there, she said, I would have a good argument for something called an assistantship, where I could teach in

exchange for tuition for grad school. This all seemed like a pretty big honor, so I nodded enthusiastically. Beyond this meeting, the professor stoked the flames of this enthusiasm by calling on me during lulls in class and providing me more and more encouraging feedback. The most remarkable of these moments was when I received the grade for my final project, which came with a final comment that “I wrote like a graduate student.” It seems that at the end of this third semester as a COMM student, I finally had a direction. I was going to be a graduate student, and maybe even a teacher in college beyond that.

The history and culture of my life at this point was entirely confined to two neighboring counties in east-central Indiana. From this point, I would go on to marry a woman I attended high school with. This school contained, at its most during my attendance, around seven hundred students. Further, all of my friends were from the tri-county area. My appearance to this professor recruiting me in school probably connoted my essential qualities of being a “townie” at my local university. I would come to class wearing my personal uniform of jeans and a plaid shirt. I had natural blonde hair that was sloppily styled, and a somewhat neat beard. In other words, I looked like what I was, a country kid trying to perform class mobility. I was the physical embodiment of “potential.” It is difficult for me to assess whether this professor saw me as a worthy project because of my class identity. If I were to ask her, I imagine she would be offended at the idea she saw me that way. However, I have a suspicion that being a “well-meaning” white guy made me an ideal case for liberal charity and goodwill. I believe these ascribed good intentions are what allowed me to be recruited despite underachieving and avoiding the attempts for me to engage with her attempts to make me a global citizen in her Intercultural Communication class. I was fundamentally wrong;

however, my future mentor saw the potential in my ability to perform academic scholarship. She saw in me a willingness to perform.

Sara Ahmed talks of the power we put into the concept of will (*Willful Subjects*). To be willing, for Ahmed, is to follow a general will. The general will paves the road most taken. The more the will is taken up, the easier it is to get more people to take up that will. Yet, to be willful is a linguistic suggestion that someone is disobedient. Ahmed speaks of a parable about a “willful child” who refused to stop raising her hand unprompted. The story ends with the willful arm rising from the girl’s grave, her unruliness exceeding her life. The distinction here is where this will originates. To be willing is to take up the will of others. It is being agreeable. We are willful when we fill ourselves with our own desires, and, these desires are not in perfect step with the general will. Further still, to be filled with willpower is to demonstrate an ability to take up more and more will from others. Willpower is related to persistence, tenacity, and hard work. These are the virtues of higher education. To be a good student, one marked for success, is to be a willing student. Success and personal worth becomes tied to an ability to perform as a successful student.

Despite my relief at this newfound direction, one interaction with another teacher had me doubting the uncomplicated good of this move. When leaving a meeting with the professor, I ran into another of my teachers. This teacher was much younger. I did not know her age exactly, but she seemed to only be a few years older than me. At the beginning of the semester, she told us her class was the first time teaching on her own. She also reminded us to not call her a professor. I found this teacher to be very funny and engaging, even if the class had been a bit disorganized. I thought we got along well

enough, so when I saw her, I excitedly told her about my new direction. I can't recall what she said to me, but I remember the look in her eyes. They seemed to be suggesting skepticism. When I talked to her, I was overcome with the feeling you get when talking to someone with a wry sense of humor. I couldn't tell if she was making fun of me or not. I especially couldn't tell later when she wrote this piece of feedback on one of my assignments for her class: "You write just like a grad student! Just kidding! Good job!" I couldn't shake the feeling that my excitement had offended her somehow. I thought she would be excited for me, like the professor was. I was left with a sense of unease that my excitement with my own achievement might have a negative effect on others. For some reason, my success could be hurting other people.

The Ph.D. pipeline is a lesson in taking up the general will. This will is given to us by our teachers, and, we in turn give it to our own students. I have marked the moment it was given to me. I seemed agreeable and smart. A fine young man looking for someone to give me an opportunity. A teacher did, and I was grateful. A willing white man from the working class with the ability to refrain from talking down to a woman in authority is the idea recipient of the academic general will. I did not recognize this at the time, but, I was happy to have a river to flow down, toward something. The younger teacher, perhaps recognized the political implications of my willingness. While I was being given my own version of the Horatio Alger myth to follow, others were already willful and ready to walk upstream. I did not yet understand how my willingness to "succeed" added more power to that current.

Ahmed's use is also a helpful concept for making sense of my recruitment, as my self-worth begins to be defined by my use to an academic department. As Ahmed infers,

the way people use us in academic spaces becomes evidence of our use to a discipline (*What's the Use?*). Ahmed is speaking of citations in writing, but we can have this use documented in other ways, especially as students. At this point in my life, I was being used as an example for other students. The faculty member who made me think critically about my own happiness had used an assignment of mine as an exemplar without my permission earlier in the semester. I was initially embarrassed about this as an invasion of privacy, especially since my name was not completely phased out. Yet, this quickly subsided because I came to see it as a document of my use to the department. I thought of my duty to grade my peers in the same way. I was thinking of the effect these duties had on my own mental self-worth. They were my scholarly contribution. An entrance into rhetorical space which made my happiness possible.

Dreams and Nightmares

I am startled awake. I felt like I had been pulled away from a freefall. I went from feeling helpless and out of control to being dropped backed into my own body. This had been happening a lot lately. I kept having stress dreams, probably because I was starting Graduate School tomorrow. It had been a strange twenty months. I finished my undergrad (I learned since this is what you are supposed to call your bachelor's degree) in December. I then scheduled something called the GRE, which I had to take in order to apply to grad school. When I met with the director of the grad program, he listed all of the things I would need to do. He mentioned letters of recommendation, an introductory essay, and then he said "you will have to take the GRE" before quickly moving on. I gleaned from this conversation that the GRE didn't really matter, so I did not study for it at all. The day I took it, I discovered a medical situation that required surgery. I have said

that this medical situation kept me from applying to school that year, but, deep down I know I was looking for an excuse not to apply. My family thought so as well.

I still remember my aunt's voice when I told her I was working at a call center. Her entire demeanor dropped. She told me that I could not just give up. She had a sense that working at that center was my attempt to avoid applying. It was almost as if this plan I had, which I had only focused on for a year, became THE plan for me in her eyes. And doing anything else was a bad idea. To her credit, I was miserable at that job. Between the depression and a job where I was sitting the entire time, I gained over fifty pounds in six months. Every day I went to work, I felt like my stomach was going to implode. I walked around with that internal unease for months until my girlfriend happened to take a class with The Professor. I told her to mention me and that led to a lunch at The Professor's house.

She outlined for me a schedule in which I was required to turn in applications as assignments to her. Applying for school became another form of homework. I was enrolled in Grad School 050 for a month with my mentor. I had deadlines with which to turn in my essays. I was required to ask for my letters of recommendation on deadlines as well, with the threat that she would check with her colleagues to make sure I had done so. All of this was in service of meeting a deadline set in March, which I later found out was the absolute last possible moment I could have applied. I finished all of this homework, sent them in with my sub-par GRE scores from the year before, and a month later I received an acceptance letter in the mail.

As soon as I received this letter, I knew I had to quit my job before I did something to get myself fired. Once I had that letter, everything about the job seemed pointless. I

briefly went back to the gas station where I worked during undergrad to make up the gap payment between the letter and school. I spent the whole summer in a state of fear and excitement. I had been given my own mailbox with my name on it. When I visited campus over the summer, I found a huge binder with all of the policies and instructions for my assistantship, as well as a copy of our textbook for teaching. I was told to read the whole binder, which had our supervisor's face on it, and the first three chapters of the text. I did all of that and more within a few days because I felt so activated by school.

Phenomenological forces continue to be pressed upon me, shaping who I was supposed to be (*Queer Phenomenology*). The weight of graduate school is at once a wind that fills my sails, pushing me forward, and, an albatross around my neck which makes everything else I do less worthwhile. My family did not know what I wanted to do in graduate school. I am not sure they could when I myself did not know. They viewed earning more degrees as a sign of intelligence. They have always told me I am intelligent. Thus, I earn degrees to prove I am smart, and, I become smart because I have earned degrees. My aunt warned me against working in a call center at 22-years-old. At this age, a failure to follow my dream is a permanent failure. If I did not act then, I had lost everything. In this way, education involves the belief that choices we make as young people have the ability to forever affect our lives.

When others begin to tell you about your own dreams and the best way to follow them, you are faced with the reality they are no longer your dreams alone. They may have never been. In this way, I realize my dreams of graduate school follow the general will (*Willful Subjects*). I have been given the gift of a dream of life in higher education. I shared this gift with my family, and they have added it to my existing willingness to be a

good student and a smart person. The pressure of this will caused me to collapse within myself. When given the out of a medical procedure in the wake of the dehumanizing experience of taking the Graduate Requirement Exam, I jumped at the change to get out from under this force. I suggest the GRE is dehumanizing because of the intense pressure of standardized testing. Taking the GRE a second time is primarily responsible for the manifestation of my panic-related symptoms. Failing a practice test led me to bang my head against the floor of my living room in front of my partner. She became so worried about my self-harm that she called a friend over in order to ensure my safety. Later, when I took the test, I was shocked to find I had less resources than an online prep book told me. This prep book was outdated, because this was the only version of the book I could find for free online. I could not afford official, current prep books, and, I certainly did not have the money for a prep course. I still remember rushing to the bathroom on the first break to splash water on my face. It was the only thing I could do to stop from fainting. I spent the year at the call center in misery. I became a very unpleasant person to be around. I felt aimless and without a path to follow. I had lost the will; however, I could not see willfulness as an option for myself. Then, The Professor intervened.

The Professor set me back on the path. She took some of her willpower and gave it to me. It is not an accident that the tactics which motivated me to finally apply for graduate school were that of academic structure and deadlines. I crave the structure of the will to make me willing to complete my application. The Professor is generous of her time from a certain point of view. I was grateful and I still am in many ways. No teacher is required to spend their personal time on students, especially when they are no longer enrolled in a university. So, why would she spend this capital, this willpower on me? It is

likely that I still represent an ability to do great things. That I show some form of promise. Promise, like the will, is a force which is only applied to some. There are seen and unseen forces which make me a receptacle of promise. My appearance and the perception of my nature surely count among these reasons. I am agreeable (willing). I take criticism and notes (susceptible to the general will). I have spent time away from academia, and I am therefore persistent (willpower). For these reasons, I am given The Professor's will and am fortunate to have these forces propel me to graduate school.

I also felt a need to impress my new supervisor. She was a professor who had just been hired as I was finishing my undergrad. We had interacted very briefly when I was the co-president of a departmental club and she stepped in as the advisor. I got the sense that she and the other co-president did not like me. They were both very organized and that was not a word I would ever use to describe myself. I was also treating my last semester of school pretty flippantly, as I was just rounding out credits and finishing up my film and television studies minor at that point. These things combined to give both of these women a pretty poor view of me as a worker. I am now working against that assumption by attempting to be as prepared as I can be for this job. Perhaps that is why she had started appearing in my nightmares.

I had been having intermittent dreams about starting school. There was a recurring one where my teeth fell out in the middle of teaching. A quick google revealed this to be my brain expressing a lack of control over my situation. Usually, my brain immediately rejects the details of nightmares, almost as if I am subconsciously protecting myself from my own thoughts. This last one was as clear as could be. In my dream, I was waiting in line outside of my new office. Being a former student, as well as a future one,

my brain mapped out all of the details of the environment perfectly. The benches curved for comfort. The glass walls to keep the building feeling open. The mix of florescent and natural lighting to keep the building from feeling restrictive. Most importantly, the office within, containing thirty-two desks, one of which will be mine. I was at the back of the line, waiting for my new supervisor to let me in. She was holding a clipboard with what I assumed to be a list of names. When she finally got to me, I reminded her of my name. As she checks, I ask if she remembers me.

She looks up from the list and straight into my eyes as she says “It looks like you don’t belong here.”

I fall off the balcony and back into my own body. I had been lying here for hours. School started tomorrow. I hoped I could prove the nightmare version of my supervisor wrong.

Even those who have the road rise up to meet us find whispers of doubt and fear along this road. As scholars, we all feel a particular force of self-doubt so much we have named it “imposter syndrome” (McCallum). This is defined as a “deep-seated insecurity that one is not sufficiently capable of carrying out the task often masking their anxiety of being exposed as intellectual frauds” (364). Throughout many personal conversations I’ve had in my academic career, I have gathered this is not a condition which subsides with experience. There are always new reasons to feel as if we do not belong. This story is the first time I could identify this feeling; however, it was certainly not the first time I felt it. This anxiety is often managed by attempting to perform the role of a successful academic. We discuss how busy we feel. We make sure to post pictures of full word documents next to stacks of books on weekends to illustrate our workload. All in the

name of managing this anxiety. If I am to believe my own body over this past decade, as well as the countless conversations I have had with mentors, these feelings never stop. If anything, they intensify.

Earning and Winning

I had just earned my first scholarship. I kept saying “won,” but The Professor, who was now my advisor, had suggested I needed to start thinking of things as being earned instead of given. Recall that neoliberalism involves the separation of bodies from their material conditions, and that this move is key to the Western academy (Melamed). Suggesting scholarships are earned, instead of given, is a reinvestment in this thought. I applied for the departmental graduate scholarship. I had to submit a short essay describing why I thought I should qualify. I remember telling a friend that it was the hardest five hundred words I’ve ever had to write. She immediately expressed shock at my difficulty, saying “Five hundred words is easy to come up with.” I explained to her it wasn’t the length of the essay, but the fact that I had to say positive things about myself for that amount of space. She responded with, “That’s sweet,” which I think meant she didn’t believe a word I said.

After I submitted my essay, I was picked as a finalist. All four finalists had to interview on the same day for two to be selected as winners/earners. I tried to go as early as possible so I wouldn’t be waiting for anyone else to finish. I was trying to see as few of the other students as possible. I’ve never been in this situation before, where you are competing with people who are supposed to be your friends. It felt awful, as if every move was the wrong one. I sat down to see my advisor, my supervisor, the chair of the department, and a professor I had last semester. They were all of the people who knew

me best. This was a comfort. There was one terrifying moment when I was asked what I would do with the money. I mentioned that it would be helpful for me to have money so that I would have time and energy for the “extra stuff” expected of graduate students. One of the selection committee skeptically asked me what I meant. I referred to things like conference travel and presenting. Things we did not get paid for and are only reimbursed for a small amount after our spending. This committee member suggested I rethink about framing that as “extra” work and instead consider it a fundamental part of the job. I nodded in agreement. I was trying to get a scholarship, so I knew this was not the time to argue. Also, she was probably right. She was a professor and I was just a graduate student. I left the interview with a shaky confidence and the feeling I had a lot to learn.

Later in the day, I went to visit my closest friend in the program at her on-campus job. She was also up for the scholarship. We traded stories about scary interview moments, although I cannot quite recall her story. We expressed mutual relief at the make-up of the committee. Then, she said something truly surprising to me. She suggested I would earn the scholarship because they thought I needed the money more. She pointed toward the fact that she already earned a fellowship at the beginning of the year, and she would probably not get it because they want to “spread the money around.” So, I would likely earn/win the scholarship out of that need. “I mean, you totally deserve it, too. I just want you to know you have nothing to worry about.” I smiled in the moment, and thought about these words for weeks. I felt a sudden sense of unease about our friendship.

In order to manage our own pain and feelings of fraudulence, we hurt others. In order for someone to become the “Top of the Class,” there have to be many others on the bottom. Competition would be inevitable in any circumstance. We often wonder why our graduate programs are so filled with interpersonal drama. We ask ourselves “why can’t the graduate students be nicer to one another?” These answers are knowable. Groups of people, many of whom have only known academia as adults, are forced into a situation where other students are their only social connections. While we are forming these connections, we are fighting intense feelings of imposter syndrome, managing the creeping dread that we are not good enough to be where we are. I remember consoling one of my classmates who was in tears over an 89%, as it represented a clear failure of her entire self. I remember stressing over comments in the margins, parsing how complementary they are to the project. Even now, reading feedback on what I see before me is a deeply ritualistic process of self-care. We then take these anxious students, who are constantly pressing upon each other in a phenomenological sense, and, make them compete for prestige and funding. These students also naturally compare their job and academic prospects with one another. I often find myself thinking if a colleague is having trouble with something, there is no hope for me. We are forced to negotiate whether we should disclose their “achievements” to others, or not. Academic friendships are constantly tested. Despite the most noble of intentions, success of another can feel like your own personal failure.

Scholarships can be another container of the will (*Willful Subjects*). “Giving” a student additional funding is a gesture of institutional energy and resources. By giving this will to a student, an institution assures a student feels compelled to act with the

willpower of the university. If a university backs your goals, your goals become pushed by the university. This often means you are pushed in a direction that is not your own. My classmate expressed the desire of a department to spread around financial resources. On a surface level, this would be doing the most good for the most students, a utilitarian expression of student funding. When looked at through the perspective of the will, we can see this also means spreading the general will of the university to as many students as possible. They may, in turn, sing the praises of the university to their students, and so forth. If there is no such thing as a free lunch, there may also be no such thing as a free scholarship. A scholarship may come with no formal strings, but it's energy can push us to behave. To be willing. To stomp down willfulness.

Ahmed also provides us with a way to interpret our own desires for achievement (*The Promise of Happiness*). Ahmed analyzes happiness through the lens of a promise of something better on the horizon. Happiness is what we strive for, without ever having an empirical definition of what it means. Thus, if we understand happiness is potentially impossible to define, or achieve, we can recognize that happiness is not an automatically positive goal to strive for. Unhappiness may be productive for action. The promise of happiness makes the general will more appealing, as it appears to be the best way to achieve our goals of happiness. Scholarships and awards are supposed to lead us to this happiness. Therefore, we are unprepared for the possibility they will not make us happy. My friend shattered my expectation of happiness before I earned my scholarship. Because of this, I blamed her for my feelings of emptiness for many years. I saw happiness as a resource which she took from me. In the years since, after I have earned more funding and achievement, I now realize, like Ahmed, that happiness often does not

deliver on its promise. My friend, through her years of competing in speech tournaments, and more importantly, her years as a woman speaking in public, likely already knew of this broken promise. I now see our exchange not as a personal attack, but as a survival exchange. She was surviving her own disappointment, and, negotiating her own unhappiness. This would not be the last time one of us hurt the other, or other friends in arms in a graduate program. To be a friend with another academic is to be a friend in unhappiness

Lecturer and Graduate Assistant

I was sitting in my office late on a cold Wednesday night. It was particularly balmy and dark, as it usually is in an Indiana fall. I knew it was too late because the only other person left in the office was my former supervisor. She was probably working on something related to her research focus: Work/life balance. I was once again stuck by the process of attempting to find nice things to say about myself for other people. This time, the stakes felt much higher. Instead of writing 500 words asking for a relatively small amount of money, I was working on different letters expressing my interest in Ph.D. programs.

My former teachers, turned colleagues as faculty, had been coaching me on how to apply. They looked over the CV I had put together and gave me feedback. Three of them wrote me glowing letters of recommendation, two of which I had seen and saved for confidence on my desktop. They gave me encouragement when I retook the GRE for higher scores. They all seemed to be rallying around the idea of me going forward, in their words, to get a Ph.D. They put up a job posting for my current position with the

understanding that I should not apply for my own job. The message was clear. I was being kicked out of the nest, and the tree is being burnt down behind me.

We are pushed in directions as a way to maintain the illusion of progress. Moving is meant to seem as if we are moving forward. Moving forward is more acceptable than staying in place, and, certainly better than moving backward. Ahmed shows us that forward progress and happiness are made to be indistinguishable when examining the emotional forces of capital (*The Promise of Happiness*). For my colleagues, moving forward meant moving on from my position as a contingent lecturer. I was regularly told that I was meant for greater things than my current job. Sometimes, I would take this as a compliment. Other times, I would be annoyed at the idea that I could not keep doing what I was doing. I loved my job as a lecturer. I love teaching and connecting with students. This was basically my whole job. I loved teaching whatever I could, even organizational communication classes which tested the limits of my disdain for corporate structures. A part of me did not want to move on. That part has grown with time. I am ashamed to admit that it has only recently occurred to me how insulting this pressure was to other contingent colleagues. I did not attempt to openly discuss my applications with the other contract faculty, outside of expressions of stress. At the time, I thought I was protecting myself from any anxiety I had related to uncertainty about acceptance. Now, I realize I was also creating and maintaining distance between myself and the other contract faculty. I had been given the happy object, something to put the promise of my own personal well-being into (*Ahmed Promise of Happiness*). In doing so, I made moves to both make unhappiness, and thus a failure to be accepted in a Ph.D. program, impossible to imagine. I also was implicitly telling these colleagues their existences were

unhappy. They were less than me. My mentors had given me the direction of “moving beyond” this job, and, by extension, these colleagues. I internalized this force and took it seriously. I now often think about how insulting it was to consider that reality of other people’s lives as a mere pit stop. Especially as a desire to return to that pit stop grows in my heart every day.

There is something to be said about the Ph.D. pipeline functioning as the general will and directional flow of graduate school. The impetus to publish, and create more people to cite your publications, is a larger expectation of life making up this shared general desire (Ahmed *Willful Subjects*). In my own experience, the process functioned much like a continuously culled crop. One cut would happen a year into our graduate program, when students were forced to choose between writing a thesis or taking comprehensive exams. Another cut happened at the end of the program, when many earned a terminal version of our Master’s program while others earned an open-ended degree. Yet another happened when some were immediately accepted into Ph.D. programs while others moved into adjunct positions. All of these were more extreme versions of the “weed out” courses of my undergrad. The process was long and hard because it supposedly identified the best among us. Those who survive to the end are the ones with willpower, the ability to properly behave with the general academic will. Professors identify and test that will, and, find who among the students can “represent the program.” I was pushed in this direction as a representative, and, made to feel as if this made me better for it. I see now what was identified in me was a willingness to apply. A willingness to volunteer. All while I failed to ask myself why this system is maintained.

The specific tips I was given about my purpose statements was to write about how I would fit in the program. That made these statements easier to write because it was more about them than me. I could write a compliment and express how honored I would be to join a program. I wrote these statements with the cursory knowledge of what the professors at these programs do. I attempted to paraphrase their own statements about their research, and suggested what I wanted to do fits into their mission. Fitting the pattern of my academic life, I was more comfortable as a willing student, able to tell others how I can say what they wish to say. The choice had again been made easier for me, and I was relieved.

My colleagues had been gracious these past few years. There were few moments when I had been intentionally been made to feel unequal. I had been allowed to vote for departmental awards and scholarships. I had been in charge of the same award ceremony in which I received my scholarship. I attended every faculty meeting and been supported every step of the way. Still, I felt like this imposter. I was kept from serving long term positions. I was told I volunteer for too much. My chair regularly reminded me that I was leaving soon. Any expression of positive feeling I had about my job is met with expressions of my worth as a Ph.D. student. "You are good enough to do more than this" is what they told me. As I looked at this office I was filled with doubt about this worth. If given time, I could have made this office my own. But I was not allowed to have time. Not when pushed by the dreams given to me by my teachers. I left my office and locked the door behind me. I told my colleague to "go home," which is how we said good night to each other. I made the long, cold walk past the lot most of my colleagues parked in, the dorm our students lived in, and the construction zone remodeling a nearby building to

where my car was parked. I was going to miss every step of it. All I could hope for now is that these statements I had written enough to win/earn me a place for when I leave.

Here, it becomes important to unpack a different energized word in Ahmed's phenomenology: Use. In her book *What's the Use?*, Ahmed is concerned with what she terms the "uses of use." She suggests there are many different ways we use the concept of "use." There are too many to enumerate here; however, I will focus on the idea of a person's use, particularly in an academic setting, as well as how we use objects. Ahmed explores the concept of "use" to reveal the dehumanization at the core of utilitarian philosophy. The way in which usefulness is attributed to subjects and objects alike is key to this revelation. Ahmed explores the philosophical arguments of who is the most useful and who can make the best use of land and resources as justifications of racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism. Dominance and erasure can be understood as a history of who and what is deemed useful enough to preserve and maintain, and, who is useless enough to throw away. This is the logical underlying the preservation of any given canon. It is also the logical of an academic system which seeks to make students useful as members of society. The question of moving on and earning a Ph.D. can be seen as a question of my own "use" to my academic programs. I become a useful advocate for the program by moving on and spreading the message of how useful I found the program. Anyone who spent any time with me during my Ph.D. program can attest to the amount of time and energy I spent singing the praises of this program. At the time, I credited the program for making me a useful academic. This program instilled the knowledge and skills I needed to be a successful student in other environments. I did not think until now to assess the consequences and motivations behind my becoming useful.

First, why was I chosen to be made useful? Perhaps it was because I demonstrated my usefulness in some way before being recruited. As a first-generation student, I could be useful in demonstrating the transformative power of higher education. Further, I was a local student from the area. What better way to demonstrate a crossing of the “Town and Gown Divide” than by showing the personal achievement of a local boy who did well? But why me? I could suggest that I worked harder than anyone, fought for recognition, and scratched and clawed my way, but these claims would be untrue. My career as a student has been filled with an intense sense of mental precarity. Every assignment, application, correspondence, really every move has been filled with dread. I have been pushed through my experience by friends, advisors, and a romantic partner who cannot stand to see things unfinished. However, being the best does not automatically translate to being useful. Usefulness is eternally linked to our perceptions of race, gender, class, sexuality, bodily ability, and other identity markers. These thoughts and feelings are, as ever, difficult to prove. Still, my status as a local kid must be understood through these lenses. I was someone a department could bring in front of prospective students and parents without feeling “threatened.”

Second, how does moving into a Ph.D. program extend this usefulness? This is the unstated goal of student success. Students move on in order to spread the names and the work of those who have influenced them. Students are useful in how we extend the social network and influences of the advisors who teach us. We send recommendations back to our past teachers, and, we make connections to our current ones. Perhaps more than most professions, academia is also dependent upon these connections for jobs. Every academic department I have been around has contained multiple sets of faculty members

who are connected by graduate programs. This extending of influence should disturb us when we consider how much it resembles colonization. This is more troubling when we consider pressures of professionalism are often expressions of how one can make oneself useful to these academic empires. If we make ourselves useful enough to the schools of thought from which we come, we will be lucky to become officers embedded in this system ourselves. Becoming useful is the how we deny the physical and mental precarity felt as misfits (Garland-Thomson). In other words, usefulness is how we make ourselves fit often as a response to barriers created by the academy. The fear is that by expressing our needs and accommodation, or more specifically here expressing our feelings of dehumanization and stress as objects of use, we make ourselves useless. These institutions may hurt us, but, as Garland-Thomson notes, they are the places where resources exist. Thus, we are always walking a difficult line, needing the very thing which disables us, and, denies us access.

Communication and Culture

The first semester of graduate school was difficult and disorienting both times. Living more than twenty-five minutes away from home for the first time, I was focused on my studies, and my studies felt strange. I had a habit of taking courses which did not complement each other well. In my Master's program, we were required to take Quantitative Methods and Rhetorical Theory at the same time. We literally had fifteen minutes between the end of Quant and the beginning of Rhet Theory. Every Tuesday night became a mental gauntlet, with all of us attempting to keep up with sudden shifts in paradigm and perspective. Both classes were taught by white women with similar easy-going demeanors. Neither of them sought to challenge each other, but for the simple fact

that one asked us to understand the statistical methods at play in finding truth, and another attempted to get us to question ideas of truth and Truth themselves. Despite these efforts, it was a sixteen-week headache which we all barely survived.

When starting my Ph.D. program, I found out early in the first week that I had to choose two of three classes being offered for my first term. I saw they were Quantitative Methods, Rhetorical Criticism, and Cultural Studies. The idea of taking a Quant and a Rhetoric class in the same term again brought up old feelings I didn't like. Quant would be the only opportunity I had to work with any of the professors I mentioned in my letter of intent to the program, so I was informally committed to taking it. That meant I had to leave Rhetoric in the cold. I decided to sign up for Cultural Studies, which I thought I had a decent handle on. I was wrong, and I essentially gave myself the experience I was avoiding compounded several times.

Quant and Cultural Studies also took place back to back. This time, I had a ten-minute break between the classes. One major difference was that I was required to take the seemingly opposed classes in my M.A. with over half of our program. This time, I was taking these classes together on my own. The middle of the Venn diagram between Quant and Cultural Studies was me. This was alienating in several ways. First, both classes were filled with a frame of reference for a second class I did not know or take. People would refer to what happened as if I was there, and I was constantly reminding them of my own alienation. Further, while I had taken a Quant class before and was relatively familiar, I learned very quickly that I knew very little about Cultural Studies. Being the only Quant person in the class quickly marked me as such.

Cultural Studies was one of the most terrifying experience of my life. It was taught by a fairly young, black professor who had a very sizable following of students already in the department. I found out very quickly that many of my classmates were advisees and fans. This class was the most racially diverse class I had ever taken. White folks like me were in the minority, a striking difference from other classes I had taken in the critical tradition. I had met this professor a few times, but I was still unclear on what his research was about. He quickly defined this in class by discussing what it was not, “I fucking hate Communication Studies.” He told us that he didn’t see himself or his work as related to communication. If we wanted to take a Communication Studies class, we should take something else. Further, he explained his grade structure, which was essentially, do the work and get an A, or don’t do the work and get a C. I asked several of the students ahead of me if this was legit, and they assured me he was serious. Immediately, the two things I had used to define my life over the past eight years, Communication Studies and “earning” grades had been removed from this class.

Over the course of the semester, topics get heavier and readings get more and more dense. The list was filled with some names I recognized, such as Karl Marx, G.W.F. Hegel, Stuart Hall, and Judith Butler. It was also filled with many I did not, like Sara Ahmed, Sylvia Wynter, Denise da Silva, Hortense Spillers, Walter D. Mignolo, Cedric Robinson, and Paul Gilroy. I struggled to keep up with the reading. Our professor told us to pick one or two articles a week, but I insisted on reading them all. I spent about three-to-five hours a day staring at a screen and attempting to take notes on the readings, all while locking myself in a room away from my wife. When I was done, the notes never seemed like enough and I never seemed to have a good enough grasp on the material.

Perhaps most confusingly, our professor circled everything back to a philosopher named Franz Fanon, but we never directly read him. I found out later these readings were being saved for another class the next term. For this class, I was left trying to piece together this man's theory from what I heard from everyone in the department, who have been discussing and debating him. I was attempting to jump in the middle of a conversation and I was perpetually lost.

When I entered the room coming from Quant, I felt as if I was a stranger to everyone and myself. Our professor regularly criticized the faults of data collection and research, and briefly paused to look at me to see how I would react. I had no way to communicate to him that I agreed with his critiques more and more every day without seeming to placate him. I did often find myself trying to placate and please him to no avail. One day I came into the room and saw "Black Nationalism" written on the board. I made a joke to him that this would definitely not happen in Quant, but it was cool he can teach this to his undergrads. He responded with all of his critiques about black nationalism and my ignorance on the subject was apparent. I shut up and attempted to listen.

A few weeks into the class, much of this tension was encapsulated with a statement I felt our class had been building to all this time, "Communication Studies is racist as fuck." One of my classmates said this and was immediately met with approval from our professor, which then led to approval from the class. My stomach churned. I was immediately filled with a desire to defend the discipline. Instead, I listened. I thought about my experiences as I heard others discuss theirs. I thought about how this was the first professor of color I ever had in Communication Studies. I recalled the list of

predominantly white names whom I knew and every other name I didn't know coming into the class. I thought about how after the tenth time I taught public speaking, I started ignoring the "business casual" dress-requirement our program established because I found it to be vaguely discriminatory. Policing of physical appearances reveals how feminist disability studies allow us to connect this discrimination to material reality of bodies (Kafer; Harris and Fortney; Erevelles). Further, if we understand classrooms through the lens of crip time, in which certain bodies exist out of time and space from academic structures, we reveal these requirements only exist to disable bodies (Price). A body can become disabled due to physical and mental impairment, but a body can also become disabled because it does not perform the white supremacist and heteropatriarchal normativity we require of students. I see now how these things are linked, and I shut up. My stomach still feels upset, but perhaps this is the point.

This is not to say this class had turned me into a perfect ally for justice. I was still very much lost in that regard. At the beginning of the course, we were given the choice of writing three smaller journals throughout the course, or one larger paper at the end of the class. The long paper would be conference-ready, the journals would be collections of thoughts. Yet, I picked the journals. Perhaps I was scared of the idea of my thoughts informed by this class leaving the classroom. I set up a meeting with the professor before I wrote my first journal. It was to get a sense of ideas from him. I was nervous and wanted to impress him. Perhaps that is why I talked for the majority of the meeting. But I came to hear his thoughts, didn't I? Or did I just want approval for my own?

Perhaps my defining moment in class came during one of our last meetings. I cannot remember what inspired this moment, or how I came to my conclusion. I simply

remember where my statement ended: “This is why I’m not sure I should be doing work like this.” I could feel the frustration that came from my utterance. I could tell you that I was working out thoughts verbally, and I have since come to a stronger conclusion and have turned this into a positive form of not only being a white ally but critical scholar in my own right, but, that is not where these words propel me. This statement marked my failure to understand the weight of these words. I had proven the distrust that came with being a white social scientist in this space. My words marked the failure to take race seriously as an academic subject. My failure of imagination in myself was a perpetuation of academic segregation of these ideas. I had been in spaces where I had to think of myself as a model of allyship based on gender and sexuality. It was not until this moment, with all of these clearly frustrated faces that I realize how devoid of racial consciousness this allyship has been. Classmates have since brought this moment up to me in a way that lets me know it has been talked about several times without my presence. These words are how I broke what little trust I had accrued.

Despite this breakage, I sat at the end of the semester feeling the impression that Cultural Studies had left on me. Even in this writing, I look up and see how long it has been since I mentioned any other classes. I came to my Ph.D. program to try and make social science more critical. I was already questioning if I had ever truly been critical as a student. What new questions had I thought of? I could not shake the feelings of unease this class left me with. I had spent the last year in a state of panic, seeking this Ph.D. program as a way to express a direction in my life. Now, I was left to question that direction. I felt totally lost at the end of this term, and yet I had good grades to show for

it. I ended this term with the sinking feeling that school may not provide me the sense of the direction I desperately craved.

Allow me to briefly contrast a critical experience from my Master's with this class. The aforementioned Rhetorical Theory class was taught by a white woman whom I identified as a critical feminist rhetorician. This class was to give us a survey of rhetoric and the "critical turn." Thus, we went from discussing Greek classics to Burke to Foucault to McKerrow and McGee to finally gender studies work by Butler and Halberstam. Listing those names out loud makes the overwhelming whiteness of this curriculum apparent. One could argue that a first-year theory class holds a responsibility to The Canon; however, that makes the whiteness of this list more offensive rather than less. These are names who write for me, as a white man, for I am the generic intended audience. The names in Cultural Studies do not write for me. They often do not write in my language. I am forced to move toward them in order to understand. I am forced to move toward people of color for the first time in my life. It shocks me in ways that I will forever be recovering from.

Charles Mills questions the utility of political theory created in an environment where all men were not deemed to be equal, and, by men who actively sought to scientifically prove white superiority. Denise Ferrera da Silva extends this critique in many directions, suggesting democracy has been contaminated by injustice such as slavery from its historical starting point in Greece. Da Silva further questions bodies of theory which attempt to reconcile this injustice by moving toward concerns of culture and power, all while retaining the theoretical forms of these past scholars. For da Silva, theory itself is an irredeemable part of the global issues of imperialism and oppression.

Theorizing cannot save us because it is a tool for oppression. Invoking these names is a perilous thing for me to do. This current project does not, and will not, succeed at disrupting existing forms enough to live up to these projects. I invoke them not to suggest my own contribution to them, but instead to mark the phenomenological impression they have made upon me. The impressions I am left with in the wake of this Cultural Studies class weigh upon every word I write. The project before you would be impossible without it. Yet, the impression I was left with from this class is a realization that I am incapable of realizing the change I hope to see in the world from my body. I can cite the scholars who inform me; however, my position as a white, heterosexual man presenting these ideas is inherently problematic. However, leaving these words to be said by others is also insufficient. Thus, I have lived every moment of my life after this class with the knowledge that what I do will never be enough.

My Cultural Studies class was taught by a willful professor, to students who were ready to be willful in turn. Here, I began to see my willingness for what it was, a movement in the general direction of compliance. A desire to find a lane, and, stay in that lane. A desire to cite the proper names. A member of my thesis committee used to respond to research ideas with the question “What about this is communication?” This question was designed to send us in the proper direction, toward a Communication Studies project for Communication Studies scholars. When we consider the willful statement “Communication Studies is fucking racist,” we can see the type of energy this question is filled with. A willing project works within these boundaries, identifying those who refuse the will to be a willful part of the problem. A willful project takes the assertion of racism as a starting point and asks what can be done to transform ourselves

away from that movement. In short, a willing project sees the declaration of racism as the problem, while a willful project sees the racist system itself as the problem (Ahmed *On Being Included*). I have framed this project as an attempt to be willful for the first time in my life. Whether that attempt is successful remains to be seen; however, it should clarify my position here.

When examining the marginalization of voices of color within rhetorical scholarship, Calafell asks, “*Is my voice valuable? Can I make any contribution?*” (“Rhetorics of Possibility” 107, emphasis in original). Calafell asks these questions in the face of a body of scholarship which has proven to question her work and her voice. When confronted with a critical body of work from scholars of color, my response was a perversion of these questions, asking *Should* I make any contribution? This is often the cry of the white liberal ally. We often crumble mentally at the idea we are useless to this particular project. The feelings of any subjugation are foreign to us, and, thus our self-concept reveals itself to be fragile. As Garland-Thomson’s misfit reveals, we are all debilitated in different ways, some more than others. The needed skill to understand the relational and contextual nature of oppression and power is one I as a white person failed to develop before adulthood. I have the privilege of determining whether or not I matter. I struggle with this pull every day, choosing to type words into this very document to fight it. Every word is at once an expression of my position, but also another opportunity to hurt myself. Self-loathing is part of why I entered academic work. Every step I take is potentially another opportunity to paralyze my ability to enter academic discourse.

Critical and Interpretive

I reached the summer of my first year away from home, and, my first year as a Ph.D. student. My sense of direction felt more adrift than ever. Throughout the year, I had been somewhat forced to repeat my initial strategy of taking one interpersonal-based class and another class with a more critical bent. Each time, I found myself happier with the work and reading I was doing in the critical class. The initial shock of Cultural Studies had not faded, and I was left with the feeling of what to do with this sensation. I had been given many opportunities to assist with interpersonal projects, and, it became harder and harder to find the value I brought to them. I continued to find myself as a misfit in these rooms. I did not feel at ease focusing on this work anymore. I tried very diligently, but I found the pull of something else calling me. I just did not know what that was yet. With a month left to go in my first year, I decided to call my mentor. The Professor who suggested I apply to graduate school, and, then pushed me out to apply again. I said to her “I don’t think I’m an interpersonal scholar.” She replied, “Hold up, buddy.” She explained to me that I was about to finish my first year, which was “right on schedule to lose your mind and have a nervous breakdown.” She asked me to finish the year and give myself a few weeks away from the school year to see how I felt. I was unsatisfied with this answer. My ship was adrift and I was being told to stay at sea for a little longer.

A few months later, I met with a research team I was a part of. My role had become someone who searched for tangentially related material which would inform the actual interviews and analysis conducted by the rest of the team. I had grown a bit frustrated with this; however, it felt reflective of the commitment I had put into the

project thus far. In this meeting I discovered the rest of the team was preparing for a presentation that I was not a part of. I asked if there was anything they needed in preparation for this presentation or if there was something I needed to prepare, and the professor leading the team told me they did not see any need for me to be there. I had grown disinterested in the project and the project had grown disinterested in me as well. If I had been feeling the subtle pull toward another direction, I was also experiencing a push away from the opposite side. I called my mentor again and said “I don’t think I’m an interpersonal scholar.” She replied this time with, “Okay, then let’s figure out how you’re going to do this without pissing everybody off.”

I came to my Ph.D. program with a stated goal of working on critical interpersonal communication research. It was a direction given to me by The Professor, and, I attempted to embrace the critical nature of it as I became a more critical person. Still, it was will given to me by another, the logical extension of living an academic life for other people. Eventually, I was forced to acknowledge that taking up this direction did not make me a happy or productive person like I had hoped it would. I was trapped in a situation where no one was going to acknowledge the problem, forcing me to do so. The feminist killjoy is the one who kills the joy of others (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*). This happens by pointing out the problems in our world, lessening enjoyment. As Ahmed notes, when you point out the problem, you become the problem. Years as a white midwestern American have prepared me for how to handle this, thus, I positioned my switch in advisors as a statement of myself as the problem. “It’s not you, it’s me” is the anti-Killjoy anthem. It’s for those of us who still have trouble owning our Killjoy energy. The thing about owning this energy, and becoming more willful, is that there is always a

seemingly insurmountable force pushing you to move in the direction of the general will. The Professor did not want to support a moment toward more critical work. I was forced to persist in order to get her help. I do not know why she was resistant to my move, and, I doubt she would know either. This is how the power of the unseen general will works. It is always pushing us to behave in appropriate ways, and, pushing us to bring others with us in a general direction. I was not willful enough at that point in my life.

I spent the next month executing the plan my mentor helped me devise. The first step was to secure a new advisor. My mentor suggested that I did not want to be out in the cold as a result of my actions. I made plans to meet with a professor whom gave me really interesting feedback on several projects in the past year, as well as providing me with a lot of space to grow in her classrooms. When we met, I asked if she had room to take me on. She expressed surprise at this, but she labeled it as a good surprise. She said as a woman of color, she doesn't get many straight white men who are interested in working with her. I hadn't really thought about that before. I told her that it was their loss. I am not sure I would have gone through with changing my advisors were it not for the recognition of emotional care with my new one. This is the aspect of academic mentorship which does not reach the realm of rationality, and therefore, rhetorical documentation. It does not fit with the job description. Our shared concern with it helped us recognize each other as misfits.

I then moved on to the next phase, meeting with my previous advisor to let her know I'm moving on. I played through this conversation in my head all week. I imagined it ending in so many different ways: screaming, silence, a handshake, a wave-off. As a mother, she has her daughters with her in the summer. They were in the room for this

conversation. This was one more detail that filled me with anguish. I explained that I did not feel committed to her project, despite a lot of respect for what she does. That this was a pull I had felt for a long time, and now, before the second year of my Ph.D. program, I felt I had to make this choice before it was too late. Try as I might, this still sounded like every weak break-up speech in the world. It's not you, it's me. She was very cordial. She only requested that I call the other Ph.D. student on the research team and break the news to her. This reminded me of many times growing up as a child of divorce. When your life is fractured, you have to have the same difficult conversations with multiple people. I was forced to recount the story to colleagues. Was the shame supposed to make me change my mind? What would have happened if I did change my mind? I would have been without a fit, my work finding no place in the department. I would have been denied access to academic space. My uncertainty and need for emotional support would have made me difficult.

When I called my classmate, she did not seem surprised. She asked if I was working with my new advisor by name. Word either traveled fast or there had been conversations about my commitment without my knowledge. As I hung up the phone, I am unsettled by this. It occurred to me that it was never possible to do this without upsetting someone or something. In many ways, this was the first time in my academic life that I have made a choice for myself. Making a choice is not just picking a direction to move, it is also about moving away from every other possibility. At 29-years-old, I had learned something that all of my privileges and desires to please other people have protected me from in this time: Choosing to do something for yourself can be a dangerous thing.

Dwight Conquergood asks all of us to consider the moral and ethical dimensions of our cultural performances. He maintained that every performative move was a moral decision. Further, he asserted that every choice we made as moral actors was also the death of possibilities we did not take. My decision to embrace a more critical paradigm and change advisors was the death of my previous and potential future academic life. Perhaps this is why The Professor was so hesitant to support me. She saw my change as the death of the academic life and energy she had given me. In choosing a new path, I was denying the one I had been on. This, of course, is true of all possibilities in all directions. By staying on the initial path, I was denying a more critical approach. My body and mind spent years telling me to make this move, and it took performance to teach me how to listen to them. In listening to them, I made myself more precarious. In choosing to do this work, I made willful choices. When one makes willful choices, one becomes part of the problem. I am, of course, safer to make these choices than most. This is the life of a killjoy. I have decided to listen to my body and mind. I am happier with my work. This does not mean I am happier with myself. As we shall continue to explore, we are not our work. Our work is not us. Being good and doing good are not the same. Listening to your body and mind does not automatically make them healthier. This is true for us when considering our stances in scholarship. I will now explore how it can also be true of our stances toward teaching.

Chapter Three: Performing as a Teacher

Academic lives are defined along a triad of research, teaching, and service, despite the fact these three roles are ill-defined and haunted by a nebulous fourth component known as collegiality (Price). Fulfilling these various roles within one academic position would logically add to the anxiety and stress of academic life. Despite this, communication research on role-strain often focuses on professional organizations outside of the academy (Cho et. al.; Tandoc and Peters). When we focus on academia and role strain, we often consider our academic identities as coherent identities affected by other aspects of our lives such as family roles (Dillon). One report looking at the roles between student and teacher conflicting for Master's students was focused specifically on students partaking in work as student-counselors, rather than teachers (Shumaker et. al.). Students surveyed for this project reported experiencing stress and confusion related to these roles; however, they were quick to reaffirm their investment in the practical experience as well. I feel much solidarity with this line of thinking in my own teaching experience. I have long suspected the precarity of lacking a defined role as a teacher and a student has been a source of anxiety, yet, I have held on to my time teaching as a life raft throughout my career. Price questions the need for academics to succeed in so many different roles, especially considering how challenging certain requirements such as physical presence and conferencing automatically constrain those of

us with mental forms of disability. I think of myself much more as a teacher than a scholar. All of this can help explain why these roles have been, and will continue to be, porous as described in this project. This chapter will primarily focus on narratives of teaching throughout my young career. I hope to examine the precarity created by closely tying your professional identity to your mental health, and how academic jobs are especially susceptible to this precarity.

Picked From the Crowd

As long as I can remember I've never known what I wanted to do with my life. By that, of course, I mean what kind of career I was interested in. I was almost finished with college, yet, I still felt a lack of direction. I tried other things, notably television and radio production; however, I was too far behind to excel. Perhaps, this is why The Professor's compliments and suggestions felt so good. When she told me that I feel like a "natural teacher," I was relieved. Before this moment, I had never felt like a natural anything. Her offer to be a teaching assistant seemed life changing. I had taken a few classes with T.A.s, including the one she was offering. The T.A. was a mysterious thing to me. In most cases, they were a name on the syllabus whom you saw once. They supposedly graded your assignments and answered your emails. The professor had suggested this was an opportunity to "peak behind the curtain," and, while her metaphor may have been in jest, teaching as a form of wizardry felt very appropriate. Am I forgetting something else about what is behind the curtain?

This offer sent me back to high school. I had a very strange relationship with my history teacher. He was the best teacher in the school, and, really seemed to like me. This was despite the fact I was constantly underachieving in his class. One term, he pulled me

aside to review my grades. I earned a combination of B's and C's, where he asserted I should have been earning A's. Regardless, he seemed to take a shine to me, often picking on me in class. Toward the end of the course, we had a day discussing U.S. American popular culture from the 1950s. Our teacher stood at the front of the room and asked us a series of open-ended questions about the popular culture touchstones mentioned in our textbook. There were questions about figures like Lucille Ball and Chuck Berry. After I raised my hand for the third question in a row, the teacher mockingly asked, "Well, do you want to just come up here and teach the class!" I surprised him and myself when I responded, "Sure, if that's a serious offer." We then traded places with him taking my desk at the back of the class as I stood behind the podium asking and answering questions from my classmates. It felt exhilarating not only to feel like I was sharing what I knew with people, but to also have people who normally wouldn't give me a second glance pay attention to me. I said afterwards to our teacher, "That was pretty fun." He patted me on the back and said, "Thanks for the break."

While analyzing whiteness in the classroom, Warren notes how white identity and whiteness are constantly reconstituted through performative repetition. His research involved conducting fieldwork in a class over several semesters, thus, he saw the same performances play out across different classrooms. Rudick and Golsan explore the ways whiteness operates through ideas of classroom civility, controlling space not only physically but through linguistic and social rules. It should be clear by now when I speak of whiteness, I am implicitly speaking about performances of whiteness from a heteropatriarchal perspective as well. The classroom is a public space, and domination of it is to be understood as constituted by these performative limits. Thus, white students are

constantly performing the boundaries of physical space to reassert both our own dominance, and, the limits placed upon others. This is how we come to understand the political ability of a white male body to step up to the front of a room.

My passion for teaching was born in this moment. This birth was made possible by the mobility and performative power of my whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexual performance. Second chances and pedagogical energy must be understood from these lenses. They perhaps explain why an underachieving student, who had displayed no interest in giving effort in the classroom, was given attention and affection instead of derision and denial. Further, the jest of an offer to teach the class was meant as a disciplining mechanism; however, I was able to convert it into control and power over the classroom. Garland-Thomson reminds us we must balance specific embodied understanding of disability with identifying general patterns of disabling because none of us are disabled by our environments in the same way (“Misfits”). As young as I was, my body and mind had absorbed the messages of my entitlement to classroom space, conflating the ability to control a classroom with the ability to be well. I am not, nor have I ever been a particularly bold person. Yet, I felt able and entitled to flip this history classroom. Here, I begin to tie the privileges afforded to me in a classroom with my own mental health. Interrogating those privileges will become impossible to detach from my perception of my health, worth, and well-being.

I was identified as a smart student; however, I was not in honors classes. Our courses in high school were stratified by classes of intelligence. I had done poorly enough in the honors English courses that they bumped me to the basic course for my Senior year. The only time this bothered me was when a recruiter for a local tomato product

factory came to our English class, and, I found out from friends in the honors classes that we were the only class they visited. The local factory was the logical destination for our class. Although I was applying to college at the time and had the previously mentioned pressure to avoid factory life directing me, the message of my lack of fit within either world was clear. I was made a misfit (Garland-Thomson “Misfits”). Being simultaneously pulled in these directions, being made to feel as if the only way I could be useful was by teaching my classmates, but also told I was destined for a life in the factory, revealed my misfit nature. Existing in these spaces simultaneously began to tear my brain apart. I was at once a teacher and a student. I was also at once useful and useless. I felt as if I was completely alone in a liminal space between these places. This isolation was disabling. As we will see, the investment and identification with teaching became more moralizing and isolating as my career was supposedly solidifying.

Where I saw nothingness before, I now saw a career. These teachers gave me a purpose that I had been unable to give myself for over a decade. I felt grateful for them as I began this journey. Perhaps I should describe it as a dream. A dream given to me, and gladly accepted. Seeing behind the curtain was exciting. I felt very smart and important being given the opportunity to see what a class looks like from the teacher’s perspective. I was given the ability to manage the Blackboard page for the class. I had half of the class assigned to me for responding to emails. Many people came to me for advice on assignments and questions about the class. I was also given a responsibility the professor claimed to have never given an undergraduate before. She let me grade assignments from other undergraduate students. The professor had us begin with a session and do something she called “grade norming.” This involved all of us grading an assignment

independently using the same rubric, and, then coming together as a group and sharing our grades. If we had a grade that differed from the rest of the group, we were required to make a case for this. The professor would then explain why she came up with something different, and then we agreed on a general score. After doing a few of these, we came to a general consensus and feeling about grading. Later in the semester, we both found out we had graded the same assignment by mistake. She thought it was lost, so she graded it herself without asking if anyone had it. I did, and, when we came together, we found that we had both given it within a half a point of the same score. She agreed to go with my grade, since it was slightly higher. I have reflected on this moment much as a sign that grading is becoming something that I am good at.

A week before the first assignment, the professor pulled me aside and mentioned that I had a particular student on my list to grade. She asked if I could pass those assignments to her so she could grade them. She wasn't so much asking as telling. When I asked why, she told me that this was a student she "didn't believe should be in college." She pointed out that he was on the basketball team, while not stating the obviousness of his blackness. This was his second time taking the class. She insisted this student was trying very hard to achieve in her class, so, she was taking it upon herself to grade him on a bit more of a curve than the rest of the students. I was shocked by this; however, it seemed like a charitable bent of the system.

Ahmed again provides us with a map to explain what my teachers were doing for me and with me. They saw a lump of clay in need of sculpting. Ahmed's theory of use identifies the role public schooling plays in the commodification of bodies (*What's the Use?*). Schooling is available to many the moment it reveals itself as a technology for

making students more useful to the State. Trade schools in my area were more affordable, making them able to recruit more students who would earn a two-year degree toward manufacturing or engineering. This was how useless students were directed away from mischief and toward a supposedly productive life. Ahmed employs use to analyze the monitorial schools in 1800s England, where certain students were selected to lead the classes for other students, allowing the teacher to work more as an overseer than active educator. In this moment, my high school teacher first attempted to make me useful by making me akin of these monitorial students. This gaze at other students directs me away from a look at myself. In this way, the monitor identifies with the master. As Ahmed states, “it is by policing others that you police yourself” (*What’s the Use?* 123). This identification with the master becomes a way of survival, for to be deemed useless can be a matter of life or death. The Professor was making me complicit in the policing of educational outcomes for classmates, deeming some as struggling while rewarding me. “Untapped potential” was a phrase I heard a lot from my high school teachers. This belies a view of me as a resource to be used by greater powers. If I failed to be used properly, the blame was placed on myself for not being more useful. Filling me with use was a teacher’s way of filling me with life. My closeness in gender and racial identity to the people who are disproportionately administrators in education begins to clarify why I am chosen to be fill with this life rather than the many young women who were applying themselves and excelling in my high school history class, and, why none of us were unsettled by the overwhelming whiteness of our educational programs (*Condition of Education*).

My teachers were attempting to make me useful. The potential spark of becoming one of them gave them an opening. I was grateful for the opportunity; however, I wonder how many were deemed useless while I was filled with use. I am reminded of the Conquergood's principles of moral performance. By choosing me to be a teacher, how many other potential teachers died? What does it mean to make a student "useful?" When we recruit students to become graduate assistants and teachers, are we suggesting they truly be useful? It feels as though we are reaffirming our own decisions and denying possibility (*Cultural Struggles*). By giving someone else a share of our dream, we are suggesting we have found the best way to make use of oneself. This does not stop at the realm of ego affirmation, for it is also a reconstitution of how to perform education. I was a slacker student who revealed himself capable of performing as a teacher. A radical move would have been to find a way to change education to fit me. Instead, I was filled with use in order to fit an educational system. I was set to walk the often-used path of becoming a teacher in higher education. I did not know anyone at the time with this plan, so I thought I was being novel. I was not aware of how used this path was. I was too focused on my individual performance and control of my life. In doing so, I changed myself and gave up control to the ideas of an educational professional.

I incorporated teaching as a part of my learning process. Toward the end of the semester, I had to spend twelve hours both grading and studying for a final. I had put off the grading of twenty-five short papers until the last possible day, so I had to spend about ten hours working through them. When I had to switch gears to studying, I found that when I thought I had a handle on it, the best way to affirm this was to try to explain it to my girlfriend. As I stressed over the material for a research methods exam, I would

periodically stop to explain what I was reading. She claimed to understand it, and I moved on with the confidence that if I could explain it to another person, I could take a test about it. I later aced that test. For me, my identity as a student and a teacher became further entwined.

Becoming a teacher was not entirely positive. During this semester, I learned that a student had requested to have a different person grade her assignments. Apparently, she was a classmate in another class, and she heard me talking about how I was given the responsibility to grade. This made her uncomfortable, and she asked that I not be able to grade her work. This is the first time it occurred to me what being able to grade meant to other people. This classmate saw me as a peer who had been given control over her, and she was shocked by this. We begin to see how seductive the teaching bug can be. As I began to feel the urge to teach, I became enamored with the growing responsibility I had in the role. Responsibility can be another word for power. Power can be another word for general will (*Ahmed Willful Subjects*). As I take up the will of higher education, the parts of teaching that appeal to me are the ones in which I have power over other people. The feeling of carrying the work of others around before I grade them, and, the ability to sit at the front of the room looking out upon the students was intoxicating. Sure, I had good intentions in my desires to teach; however, we must always acknowledge the inherent power the teacher has in a classroom. I was becoming more willing to teach by the day. If we connect use and will to ability, then the performance of an able mind becomes bolstered by my access to power. Being an effective teacher becomes another form of compulsory normativity were my afflicted and anxious mind can operate and recover (Harris and Fortney).

When we consider the mission of a teacher to “enlighten” students, we are suggesting they help students become more useful. Students can become useful in a variety of ways. Teaching Assistants lessen the load of teachers while working for college credit. Student athletes bring untold revenue to a university with the payment of an education. When considering this story, we must stop to assess the value of said education. What is the value and the judgement being made when a white professor assesses the needs of a black student athlete? This was the dynamic of The Professor asking me to give her the assignments of a student she had determined was not college material. How do we make those assessments? I can only speak from my memory when I say they were related to my classmate’s writing style and grammar. Was this a failure of the system to admit the student? Was this the failure of the student not to achieve? Perhaps the question should have been about the ability of The Professor or anyone else in our department comprised entirely of white faculty to make this assessment. Like my entry into teaching, The Professor had good intentions. She was willing to help the student, deemed willful in his use of writing and grammar. She mentioned to me she envisioned a future of this student dropping out of college, but, she would do what she could to help him along the way. The will pushes us all forward in a general direction, and there is no time for us to stop and consider a different way of moving (*Ahmed Willful Subjects*). For me initially, and for many teachers in higher education, being a good teacher can be about the accumulation and exertion of power over students. In turn, we become the arbiters of willpower and usefulness in our students. The passion of teaching cycles again, unless we understand how to break its performance.

Meeting Your Requirements

The bureaucracy of the university was stronger than I suspected. It turned out that the massive binder full of policies and emergency scenarios for the course were the most telling aspects of my graduate school orientation week. Our course was required of all students at the university, as such, there were several things our supervisor stressed upon us because of the intense oversight the course received. This oversight was mostly impressed upon us at weekly meetings. Mondays were the only days in which everyone was scheduled to be on campus, so, it was the day all thirty-five graduate assistants gathered to be given our marching orders for the week. Often, this meeting consisted of making sure we were all teaching on the same topics in a somewhat similar way. We would go over ideas for lesson plans and activities. If there were assignments in the coming week, we took the time to grade examples together, making sure we were all using the same basic criteria in the same basic way to do so. We were also required to fill out assessment forms for certain assignments. This was to make sure that our students were improving over time. Our supervisor asserted that these forms were important for the continued funding of our program, especially the assistantships. As such, if we failed to complete them on time, we would have our pay docked. Additionally, our supervisor kept track of how often we failed to meet deadlines, and used these running scores to determine the hierarchy of preferences for our teaching schedules.

Energy manifests itself in tangible objects throughout an institution. In institutional life, these objects often form a paper trail, documenting the stated will of the university, if not the university's complicity in the general will. Through her work on racism and diversity in higher education, Ahmed uncovers how diversity can be

contained by documentation. Documents come to contain policies of diversity. The life of the document becomes the life of diversity, it contains the work of several actors, becoming the containment of the political willfulness to change an institution. The document becomes the work in that the work is confined to documentation, never leaving the page and directing bodies. The document gets passed around, never reaching an endpoint. We work on the documents, changing the policies, but never tangibly changing lives. The document exists to be the appearance of change, as it aimlessly flows through a university. This is one way of containing willfulness (Ahmed *On Being Included*).

Assessment can be one of these documents. Assessment is intended to measure student outcomes. You hope to have a tool which shows tangible change in student learning and outcomes throughout a semester. Our assessment of the basic speech course had two levels. The first, which we would require students to participate, was a pre-and-post-test administering of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension scale (PRCA-24) developed by James McCroskey. This scale was designed to measure levels of communication apprehension in interpersonal, group, meeting, and public speaking contexts. Our program administered the PRCA-24 at the beginning and end of a course, treating the basic public speaking course as the experimental variable intervention to hopefully lessen the apprehension of students. This would help to justify why students were required (a kinder version of “forced”) to take the course. This was always done with an acknowledgement that communication apprehension can be treated as a psychological trait, and, that situational intervention may not provide outcomes for those with trait anxiety. The hope was the overall pattern would prove beneficial, despite these outliers. This illustrates the larger problem of mentally ill people being erased from

rhetorical reality. Rationality and reason are key to helping subjects (classically referred to as men, it must always be noted) achieve a level of rhetorical existence. These terms are inherently oppressive, as they universalize our understanding of discourse to that which can be made sense by a “typical” mind, thus privileging “rational” language (Price). All of this is to say the PRCA-24 is an effective tool for measuring how much better students get at reporting their own communication apprehension in relation to their experience, but this is also consequently a measuring of the ability for minds and behaviors deemed irrational to become more rational. In simpler terms, we had an assessment tool designed to measure whether students who could have been dealing with a number of anxieties and fears related to a course forcing them to be neurotypical were able to successfully perform rationality for us and themselves. We were successful as a program if we managed to take these students and make their atypicality disappear. *They* were accommodating us.

The other component to our assessment involved our instructional scoring of our students. We were asked to evaluate their first and last speeches with considerations of general impressions of their organizational, verbal, and nonverbal skills. We were given a norming exercise to do this; however, this was a much more fluid assessment than the other component. I can testify to most of us exhaustingly completing these assessments at the last possible minute. I remember many colleagues devolving into flippantly providing scores for each item on the form. As a local, I was often the last to leave the office during finals week, and, thus responsible for pushing my colleagues through this paperwork. Our end of assessment was undoubtedly less important to the argument for the class than the PRCA-24. I often wondered why we were even doing it. Filling out assessment forms

gave us a purpose to the university. We were documenting our evaluations of our students as a way to demonstrate our connection and use to the university as a whole. The assessment being made was more of whether or not we deserved funding as teachers, it was a document of our utility. The document was less a way to express how well our students were doing, and more to provide evidence we were intervening in the students' educations at several points. The assessment did not exist for the benefit of the students as much as the benefit of the graduate teachers. Further, the PRCA-24 can be seen as a useful document in how it privileges comfort with external forms of communication. By this metric, we were successful if we were creating more socially comfortable students. Students less likely to kill the joy of others. Students more willing to communicate.

Often, our meeting served as a weekly airing of grievances. One particular meeting toward the end of the semester, when we were all exhausted with each other and our students, was particularly revealing. Our exhaustion with each other was often released in the form of the Questions and Kudos Boxes our supervisor read from toward the end of the meeting. At the beginning of the semester, we used these boxes to display support for one another, giving kudos to those who helped, and then being able to keep these slips if they recognized us by name. Questions also started in a helpful manner, posing queries that folks were too embarrassed to ask in a way which wasn't anonymous. This often helped break down the gaps in experience, allowing all of us to save face without owning up to our ignorance. At this point in the semester, both boxes had devolved into containers of passive-aggression. Over time, many people accumulated more kudos than others, turning them into a kind of popularity contest around the office. A handful of people were recognized at every meeting, whereas many who preferred to

stay out of the office or offered support in less public ways went unrecognized. The Questions Box was even worse. Where there were once questions asking about deadlines or classroom dilemmas, there were soon slips with questions like “Can we please keep the fridge clean?” or “Who is using my stapler?” The good intentions of these boxes sadly failed to endure the stress of a graduate school semester. Documents can also be willful. They can also kill joy. Ahmed speaks of the Feminist Killjoy in conversation with the Willful Subject. The Feminist Killjoy is one who is not afraid of snapping. This snap could be a breakage of relationships, silence, or the general will and joy of others (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*). Using this lens, I recognize the kudos and question boxes as containers of killjoy documents. I recognize the issues of these meetings as expressions of snapping. One is pushed to their limits and must speak out. In speaking out, they break the images that give others joy. These passive-aggressive questions from the box are documents of that breakage. If anything, they do not snap enough. Full-on aggression is the true expression of the killjoy. Passivity is not enough.

This specific meeting felt particularly fraught. Several colleagues were seemingly at their wit’s end with students who had been disruptive or disrespectful. I heard stories of lectures being interrupted, students entering the room during their classmates’ speeches, and even grade disputes that rose to the level of instructors fearing for their own physical safety. Our supervisor often opened the floor to all of us to offer help. In this meeting I spoke up a few times, offering advice like “try to be transparent about your grading” or “I find that if I keep it loose and level with students, they will respect the moments when I make it clear they need to be respectful.” This feedback was often taken and then moved on from quite quickly. I did not feel like I was really being helpful at all.

This was when I realized that all of the colleagues who were having these issues had something in common: They were all women.

I spent the afternoon after this meeting rethinking all of the advice our supervisor had given us that I initially dismissed. Tips like make sure you are dressed a few levels above your students, including shoes with hard soles/heels that make a loud sound when you walk, or, always make sure someone else is in the office when you are meeting students for your safety. I thought these were pieces of advice that were either not for me, or, downright obtuse. I now recognize they were weapons for battles which are almost always invisible to me. I was particularly shaken by how my success as a teacher relies on my privilege. I liked to keep things loose, and be as honest with my students as much as I could. It seemed entirely possible these strategies are made possible by my identity as a white, heterosexual man. I have always thought of one of my strengths as a student, and now a teacher, is the comfort I bring as someone who is very non-threatening. I now realize how we perceive threats in the classroom is fraught with politics. Through all of the exhaustion and tension in the room, I walked away from this meeting feeling tension inside myself for the first time. The reality is that I may have been a good teacher, but good is all I ever need to be. Others must strive for greatness. How did my seemingly casual efforts feel to my colleagues who need escorts to walk back to the office after class because they are afraid of a particular student? How did teaching in flannel and blue jeans affect my contemporaries who had to scramble for replacement outfits when breaking heels and ripping skirts? Perhaps more importantly, why did I feel so entitled to offer advice in these meetings, especially when so much of what I have to say comes

from this position? I began the day dreading all of the tension I felt during these meetings. I end it thinking about how I am implicated in that tension.

I see now the discomfort I felt at these meetings is related to the killing of my own joy. I grew to think of myself as a good teacher, tying my self-worth to my ability to connect with students. Teaching, as we are trained to think of it, is a source of joy. Confronting how these skills are enabled by systems of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy threatens that joy. Hearing my female colleagues, some of them women of color, express their frustration with students, and, realizing I have no practical advice to give not only drains me of joy, but of use. As a heterosexual white man, I am faced with a critical decision when I come up against the Feminist Killjoy in a moment of snapping. I can choose to feel helpless. I can also choose to label the killjoy herself as the problem. As Ahmed suggests, pointing out the problem can make one the problem (*Living a Feminist Life*). This is how the Feminist Killjoy and the Willful Subject are linked: They are an undesirable problem in need of straightening out. I can also choose to look inward at how unproductive my joy was. I can embrace the uselessness and find a new way to use my body. I can acknowledge this violence, and, put my body to use in productive ways. I can stay in the office when a threatening student comes to meet a colleague. I can offer to walk between classes and buildings with these colleagues. I can also be quiet at meetings. Sometimes, sitting in the uselessness of myself is the best way to support a colleague. Using a body in different ways can be a way to queer use (Ahmed *What's the Use?*). But only if uselessness is accompanied by willfulness and killing joy. Once you see the problems of your joy, your will, and your use, you cannot stop to seeing

them. They are everywhere, and, to move without considering them is to give into the will.

Awarding Good Behavior

I should have felt proud. Instead, I felt conflicted, if anything at all. I looked down at the reflective, cardinal-red surface of the plaque. If I looked long enough, I could see myself in that reflection, looking over my own name. Above my name it said *Excellence in Teaching Award Master's Level*. This meant that I had been selected out of all the Master's students who taught at the university. I wasn't entirely sure how many students that included. Most of the teaching assistants at the university were Ph.D. level. I knew I was picked to represent our department out of all our program's instructors; however, I was unaware of how many other programs I was up against. I knew that a student from our department won this award last year. She was my peer-mentor, meaning she was responsible for providing feedback and help for me when our supervisor was unavailable. Out of the six students in our mentor group, I could tell I was her favorite. She invited me to parties, commented on my social media, and generally put a lot of her energy into answering my questions. This suspicion was confirmed shortly before her graduation. She seemed very cool and collected, ready for graduate school in every way. Her mother was an English professor, and she went to private school, so it's almost like her whole life had been leading up to this. I looked up to her, and I still do in a way.

One day, I came into our shared bullpen office, where thirty-two of us had our desks, to find her putting together portfolios. When I asked what they were, she told me about the award. Each portfolio had copies of her teaching evaluations, a statement of teaching philosophy, a letter from our supervisor, and a letter from our chair. She told me

I would be lucky to have our chair write a letter of recommendation for me, as the one he had written for her was so fulfilling. I watched her put the packets together and silently committed myself to striving for this award. After all, I had tried very hard for most of the year to identify myself as The Good Teacher.

A major construction phenomenological forces is our sense of morality. We constrain the movement of bodies which are black, female, and/or queer in ways throughout history. Restriction happens because of forces of habit creating a mainstream way of life that becomes so powerful it becomes impossible to deviate from (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*). Bodies are required to live according to gender norms, and, strive for whiteness and heterosexuality as they exist and move through space. Whiteness, and, by association, maleness and heterosexuality become above examination. They are a list of choices so ubiquitous that questioning their power gives a person undesirable energy. Failing to move in the direction which these forces push you also makes you a problem. The word “good” becomes a container for these energies.

Being The Good Teacher was very important to me. I was proud to meet all of my deadlines and never upset our supervisor. I took a lot of pride in my teaching evaluations, which were often full of words like “comforting,” “caring,” “relatable,” and “funny.” I was especially proud of that last one, although I had grown to worry my students left my classes more entertained than enlightened. I was also very proud of working with as many different professors as possible. I hoped that my willingness to teaching anything and everything would be rewarded. I felt very recognized when our supervisor called me to her office and told me she was nominating me. “You’re the best teacher in our department,” she said. Finally, I felt seen as The Good Teacher. Teaching is a profession

based on moral decisions of what is good and bad. Teaching evaluations are a made of up quantifiable scores in which students make value judgments of a teacher's skills. Students are asked to rate things like an instructor's base of knowledge, level of preparedness, and general disposition. Understood through the lens of queer phenomenology, we can see these judgments are tied to race, gender, and sexuality, among other identity markers, in ways which are nearly impossible to see because these forces constantly work to obscure themselves from quotidian perception (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*). My own high evaluations are an intense expression the privilege of benefiting from these forces. I was never privy to the evaluations my supervisor received, although she alluded to them being low many times. I was witness, however, to many of my own students positively comparing me to her in their own evaluations. If they were comfortable saying these things for me to read, I shudder to think what they said to her. These evaluations occurred despite the fact she was perhaps the most organized and prepared person I have ever met.

I asked my supervisor not to say anything to anyone else. In this moment, I felt the full power of what my peer mentor had done a year ago. By putting her portfolio together in such a public area, she was certainly flexing her accomplishment in her classmates faces. I knew for a fact that there was tension between her and another classmate, so much that I had never seen either of them speak to each other outside of a classroom. I put together my portfolio as quietly as I could. I asked both of the professors required to write letters for me to keep it to themselves. I worked on my contributions as quietly as I could. When others noticed that it was the time of the year for the award to be nominated, I remained quiet, hoping my silence would not be noticed. Despite all of this, when it was time to physically put the award together, I gathered all of my materials

around the same public space of our office. I rationalized my actions by telling myself I picked a quiet time of the week, when hardly anyone was in the office. This was only partially true. I was hoping someone would notice me. I could tell them it wasn't a big deal, and that it was just an honor to be nominated. However, I really wanted to brag. As I grow older, I feel that the midwestern American virtue of humility is really just an act. Deep down we have a fragile but high opinion of ourselves, we just don't say that out loud so that people will like us.

The award ceremony itself was very awkward and underwhelming. It was part of a larger presentation where all of the graduate students who earned honors were highlighted. When it came time for the teaching awards, they handed out the Ph.D. level winner first. His advisor gave a very personal speech about him, and he was allowed to follow up with a speech of his own. When he was done, the Provost stepped up to the podium and began introducing me by telling everyone that he knew me. I had served on a committee in which he was the president. This same committee was in charge of picking the winners of this very award. I stressed for them to be impartial. I even abstained from any votes concerning my department and college to show them how much I valued objective evaluation. Hearing this man mention our association in front of a room full of people brought the political weight of that connection crashing down upon me before I accepted my award.

When my name was announced, my supervisor and I both walked to the front of the room. She stepped behind the podium to give a speech, while I stood below the stage, listening to her talk about me. She gave a brief speech about me with a somewhat nervous delivery. I recognized the nature of this speech as likely a reworked version of

the one she gave the prior year, with the specific details and the pronouns changed, but with the format and transitions the same. I suspected she had done this because I heard her share the virtue of a good form email, especially as a professor in charge of over thirty graduate students and teaching over one thousand undergraduate students. I also assumed this was a way for her to get through the speech. She was someone who regularly expressed her anxiety at public speaking. While I understood, it still hurt my ego a bit. Considering I was not allowed to give a speech as the Master's level recipient, the audience was left with a general impression of me as "The Good Teacher"; however, that was all. Margaret Price enables us to understand mental disability as part of the constraints placed upon bodies, specifically in an academic setting. Price engages the concept of crip time, in which minds and bodies fall out of a linear structure of time, which is key to resource management in a capitalist system. If we understand a body and mind can fall out of linear time, we can see the ways normative conceptions of time lose students and teachers. Attendance points, when viewed through this lens, become a force pushing these bodies and minds into a line. We also begin to push the act of teaching away from emotion. We tell ourselves we are not therapists, but instead educators, making the two mutually exclusive from one another. Of course, one cannot be expected to nurture minds without becoming emotionally entangled with them. This is what bell hooks means when she speaks of teaching as a practice of love (*Teaching to Transgress*). This, however, can also be an understanding of time and emotion under the forces of ableism. For a teacher with performance anxiety to give a speech for a student in front of administration with power over her, regardless of the quality of the speech, can be an act of love. My failure to see it as that makes me a disabling device, creating disability

through dialogue with my teacher's speech impairment (Baglieri et. al.). We are all looking for moments of contentment from achievement as teachers that never comes. Instead of blaming our passions, we blame each other and ourselves.

I sat and stared at the award for the rest of the ceremony. I felt strangely empty. It was entirely possible I won this award because I was on that committee. Perhaps, as soon as I was nominated, it was a foregone conclusion because there were so few other applicants. If these things were true, was it possible to say I had won anything at all? Beyond that, I was left with the question of what to do with this award. My first instinct was to display the award somewhere on my desk; however, I was afraid to do so. If my instinct was to hide my application from my colleagues, why should I flaunt this shiny thing in front of them. Surely, if I doubted this accomplishment, they had done so as well, especially in protection of their own egos. I was left with this plaque, and, this vita line. I will carry them with me for the rest of my career, hoping they allow me to be seen as The Good Teacher.

Part of me was coming to terms with these benefits in my own judgment as The Good Teacher. My shame in publicly seeking to achieve was partially built upon this guilt, part of me knowing my award would be scoffed at by my female colleagues in the department. Further, achieving as a scholar and a teacher is supposed to be invisible labor. Ahmed points to the phenomenological erasure of domestic work as it is feminized (*Queer Phenomenology*). Teaching, as experienced in public education, tends to be a predominantly female profession, with 89% of primary school and 64% of secondary school teachers identifying as women (*Condition of Education*). With teachers often providing a secondary childcare role, this gender disparity appears to be part of a larger

pattern of a gendered division of labor. We are asked to encourage our students, provide invisible emotional support, and nurture their supposedly growing intellect. Like much invisible labor, achievement in this way is looked down upon. We want to know people are doing a good job; however, we do not wish to see them actively striving to do well. This would make you a “try hard” seeking approval. This, of course, is much worse when you see a man being rewarded for achieving in this profession. Male achievement in higher education begins to be the norm as the level of prestige and education increases, with the division of representation coinciding with the achievement of tenure (*Condition of Education*). Over 64% of faculty who reach the rank of full professor identify as men (*Condition of Education*).

Despite this achievement, privilege, and power, I saw no benefits to my mental health. Being good and being recognized are supposed to lead to happiness. The award is what Ahmed would term a happy object, “which good feelings are directed toward, as well as providing a shared horizon of experience” (*Promise of Happiness* 21). It is supposed to be a good thing for me career-wise. It is also supposed to add prestige to my department for producing such an excellent teacher. The department’s happiness and use become entangled with my own. I am disappointed when I receive the happy object, which leads to anxiety and self-doubt (Ahmed *Promise of Happiness*). This displeasure quickly moves from the object and is internalized as something wrong with me for not being able to enjoy the object. The organization is also a happiness object, where my success and happiness become impossible to separate from the goals of the department. This makes criticism of the organization personal for me. It means my own mental health is compromised when the organization is under threat. My well-being becomes dependent

upon awards and evaluations. It makes the report of student evaluations a potential personal tragedy. It means being The Good Teacher becomes more important as a survival strategy. Use, as Ahmed conceptualizes it, can be tied to life. To be useless is to experience a death (*What's the Use?*). If I only define myself as The Good Teacher, I only find life and empowerment in being a teacher. Without use and happiness, there is uselessness and unhappiness. They become tied together and tied to me. I do not find happiness in the award, and thus I am unhappy. I do not conclude this unhappiness comes from the uselessness of the award, but from my own uselessness as a teacher. Teaching and personhood are becoming inseparable for me at this point, so failure to be happy with the teaching award becomes the failure to be a person, let alone a person of use.

Offers of Labor

I might have had the most luck of any person alive. I had been offered a job. When I say offered, that pretty much covers the entirety of my job-hunting process. One day, while walking through our main office to check my mailbox, our chair asked me to come into his office and shut the door. “You don’t have any job plans for next year, right?” I had no idea how to answer this question. If was honest, would it make me look bad? But, he was leading me in a specific direction with his question. So, I told him no, and that I would be living in town for at least the next few years because of my fiancé’s scholarship and job. “Well, how would you like to teach Persuasion?” Almost reflexively, I shouted “Sure!” He explained that the professor who taught the course for over 10 years was taking a sabbatical from teaching in order to work on a research passion project. Since I was her assistant the previous year, my name was brought forward in the faculty meeting discussing who would pick up her work. Before I could

object, he called and put her on speakerphone. She also suggested this was a great idea. They told me to focus on finishing my project in time to have the proper credentials, and, then it was settled. I would be starting as an Adjunct Instructor in the Fall.

I left the office elated. My job problems were solved with a literal gift. I was pulled from nowhere to teach this course. I couldn't help but feel concerned from the tone of my chair's voice when he uttered the word "adjunct." I had never heard this word before, so I did a little digging to find out what it meant. A quick search revealed a definition, as well as several personal essays in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from adjunct professors describing the difficulty of their positions. Adjunct seemed to be the fancy academic way of saying "part-time." This reflected the pay scale, but not the work load. Still, this was an offer to work the same course load I had been working in graduate school, for almost twice the pay and no student work. I was lucky to have it.

We must consider the use of the graduate teacher and the adjunct to the academic department. A professor of mine once described the graduate students as the oil in the engine of the university: "Without you, the machine can't grease itself." Adjunct labor is also part of this oil. The way oil works in an engine is it greases the more important parts, being crushed and impressed upon by larger, more solid machines. Oil is also moved around the engine, never able to stay in one place. It is an apt metaphor for the usefulness of the adjunct and student teacher in more ways than one. My adjunct labor made a tenured professor's passion project possible. I have used and been used as a graduate assistant to carry out undesirable grading and attendance record-keeping. As my chair later expressed, we operate in this system with its unfairness in plain view. The most we

hope for is that it eventually breaks in our favor instead of continuing to grind us in the machinery.

I was excited about this offer. So much so, that I broke my “keep your successes to yourself” rule to a colleague, the same colleague who made me feel weary about my scholarship a year earlier. Although I should have been careful to share with her, of all people, I did anyway. Perhaps I was too excited. Perhaps I was trying to make myself feel better, and her worse, in the face of her acceptance into a Ph.D. program two years before I would be able to do so. Regardless, this interaction represented the unfortunate deterioration of our friendship. She congratulated me, and, then quickly mentioned they had created a new full-time position for her “as a back-up” in case she didn’t get into to any Ph.D. programs. She thankfully didn’t need it, but it would have been cool to keep working together. Regardless, the message was clear. Her worst-case scenario was twice as good as my best.

The promise of happiness makes this adjunct labor possible. Teaching is a passion profession, one in which people choose a greater good over financial compensation. For many of us, we learn to do this one thing and dedicate ourselves to it in hopes of some greater altruism. Others hope to continue the power of running a classroom. Whatever emotional attachments we have, they allow us to take less money for more labor. This promise of a better life, and making students better people, is supposed to give us the emotional satisfaction to continue, despite this overwhelming precarity. This labor is obscured from those outside of it, leading us to question our unhappiness with our precarity. My colleague and I had our passive-aggressive exchange less out of personal animosity, and, more out of a shared fear for our own lives.

How does a path become used? Usually, a path becomes used by using that path. The more feet which trod that path, the more the path becomes well-trodden. It becomes easier for those with similar feet, and thus similar ways of moving, to walk (Ahmed *What's the Use?*). The path from graduate assistant to faculty member was a well-trodden path in our department. In my undergraduate career as a Communication Studies major, three of my instructors had been students in the department. By the time I was a master's student, another student-turned-faculty member had joined the department. The year I started as an adjunct, another former student joined the faculty. The year afterward, two more came on board. All of these teachers, save for one who moved on to a better job offer after a year, were white. The one student-turned-faculty member of color was the only faculty member of color we had during my decade in the department. The nature of who gets to walk the path becomes clearer.

There are perilously few ways to talk about this colleague without containing her existence in the department to tokenism and diversity. Perhaps "and" between the two is the wrong phrase, as both can be words exchanged for the other. As Ahmed notes in her work on institutional diversity, a body can come to both represent and contain the idea of diversity (*On Being Included*). The presence of this lone colleague becomes our contribution to the overall diversity of the institution. This colleague also becomes a shield we use to protect ourselves from accusations of overwhelming whiteness. I recall our Associate Dean at a social function referring to the whiteness of our department. I remember my mind automatically drifting to this colleague, clinging to her presence for defense. All of this despite the fact we never had a meaningful relationship. Our A.D. then shifted to discussions of our department as "incestuous." This is how she framed the

student-to-faculty path I had walked like many before and after me. When we think of incest, we can think of taboos and deviance; however, we should also consider the nature incest plays in securing a biological line. Our department was incestuous in the way of European royalty, continuously looking within our family tree to expand the same tree. The graduate student body was always more diverse than the faculty, yet, those who walked the path I did were always white. These paths, this use, these directions do not happen by accident.

On my first day as faculty, I attended my first faculty meeting. We broke into specific committees to serve on throughout the year, including voting for scholarships. I was able to take part in this as an adjunct because the first thing they did in the meeting was vote to give all of the new teachers, including me, voting power as part of the faculty. This was both a blessing and a bit of a curse, as all of the new teachers were then volunteered for the “Event Planning” committee in charge of putting together social events. In addition to serving the faculty, I was also given my own office, a rarity for adjunct instructors. It was the previous office of a teacher-turned-colleague who had upgraded to a bigger office down the hall. The office still had her name on the outside, which I quietly covered with typed page of my name. Everything seemed to highlight the confusion I felt in my new role. I was a teacher, but not a full one. I had an office, but I constantly had to stop myself from describing it as belonging to its previous owner. I had responsibility and power in the department, but lacked the pay-grade to match. I was starting to feel the pressures described to me in the *Chronicle*. Adjunct in title, but never work.

My luck had continued throughout this first year as a teacher. After coming to my chair and telling him I was considering other jobs on campus because of financial pressures, he again pulled me aside with good news. He reminded me of our colleague who suddenly resigned at the beginning of the year. He informed me that his short-term solution was to petition the university to bring me on full-time for the rest of the year. This meant my pay for the spring semester would be double my pay for the fall. When I asked what more work I would need to do, he told me my course load would be no different. “Wow, the system is broken,” I said, somewhat jokingly. With a wry smile, my chair responded, “Yes, but today, it’s broken in your favor.” We shun and scoff at those who fail to properly dedicate themselves to the passion, despite our own unhappiness and anxiety. The colleague who left in the middle of an academic year was derided for how she left, despite making a choice to be closer to family. Her choice personally benefited me, and the system broke her down, in my favor. I continued to find fortune in this job, being saved from the brink of unemployment simply by being there. I would tell myself how my skill as a teacher was being rewarded; however, the overwhelming whiteness of our department, my evaluations filled with privilege, and my willingness to accept whatever scraps I was given all combined to make this fortune. I was a willing adjunct who used a well-worn path. I used that path, while the department used me.

At the end of the year, it was broken in my favor again. With days left before my wedding, I had to visit the office to collect some books for a job application I was filing, since my teaching position would be ending. Again, as I walked through the office, my chair pulled me behind a closed door. He informed me that he would be losing two faculty members for various reasons over the summer. This meant he didn’t know what

he would need me to do in the fall, but he knew he needed me. I told him that he won the prize for best wedding gift. Here, I was lucky again. I got to teach another year in preparation for my application to graduate school. I had felt precarious and uncertain of my position all year. None of that seemed to matter anymore. I had once again been given a job. The work continued, and, I was lucky to be doing the work.

Mentoring, For Better and Worse

I love helping people. It's almost a problem. Every time I received a department-wide email about something the chair needed covered, I responded. He would quietly acknowledge my responses, and move on. When I called him out on it, he told me that there was no point in asking me to do anything long term when I was leaving to start my Ph.D. program. My supervisor-turned-colleague also informed me that this helpfulness and volunteering was something that I needed to unlearn. "In a Ph.D. program, they will eat you and your time alive." That felt cynical, but I understood her point. She and our chair were saving me from my own desire to help. I mention this desire to help others to explain why I think the opportunity to work with four different graduate teaching assistants in as many semesters was the most important thing I did in my two years as a faculty member. Having these students work for me, and, getting the opportunity to regularly talk to them and allow them to seek guidance from me was a joy. I love feeling useful, and, being able to help these students certainly made me feel that way.

If we were to understand an attribute such as being "helpful" devoid of political and social context, we could understand it as an unproblematically altruistic endeavor. Such a sanitized understanding should rarely, if ever, be employed. When helping others is viewed through the lens of happiness and the will, we can see how it serves as an

expansion of systems which subsist on the emotional energy of others to perpetuate themselves. Helping a student achieve academic success often takes the form of making sure that student can better assimilate to academic structures. Helping a student who is “having trouble socializing” often means helping that student find ways to transform themselves to better fit within an academic system. A student who is struggling can be unhappy, willful, and useless. The teacher intervenes to make the student more useful, more willing and happier. This is often in service of the academy, rather than the student’s needs. If a student becomes more productive, they produce scholarship which reaches outside of our departments. When they do this, they bring more attention to our departments. They also tend to sing our praises, thus extending our influence and advice. The will and happiness we give to students is spread throughout the system.

Thus, we are helpful because it is good for us. As Ahmed states, “To show how you contribute to general happiness requires that you create evidence of that contribution: creating trails so you can tell tales.” (*What’s the Use?*, 193). Students become our evidence of happiness and use. We empower them so they may tell stories of us, or better yet, cite us and our influences in their own publications. A tree of advisees exists so that we may trace it back to its roots. This can work in all forms of mentorships. Helping others becomes the way we maintain a reputation of usefulness. As a lecturer, I was not involved with academic citation. I also had very little to distinguish myself from the other contingent faculty, who did things like coach speech and debate or organize the internship program. Thus, I decided being an informal extension of supervision with the graduate assistants was my best line of distinction. Being someone who could lean into my liminal position as student and faculty gave me an advantage of trust with the

students, who were kind and deferential, but likely did not see me as a full faculty member. The energy contained in that trust was mine to take and employ for good and ill.

My first T.A. was a young woman I selected from a list of available students in the department. I made a promise to keep from working with any of the returning students, because they had been my classmates about three months prior. I did not want to be in a supervisory position with any of them. From the list of incoming students, I selected a name I recognized as doing well in the Persuasion course when I was a T.A. I was excited to work with her from our first meeting. She was kind and enthusiastic. A few weeks into the semester, I felt like we had a pretty strong interpersonal relationship. It was so strong that she would ask me for graduate school advice outside of our class. The most important of these questions came when she was fielding a job offer. Her favorite internship had offered her a full-time job. In order to take it, she would have to become a part-time student. This meant she might have to give up a part of her assistantship. She asked me what she should do. She said I was the first faculty member she came to. The fact that I had just recently been a graduate student made it seem like I was a safer choice. I was incredibly moved by this. I pointed out that she used the phrase “dream job” to describe her offer, so I felt like she knew what she wanted to do. I told her I didn’t want to lose her as an assistant. I also didn’t really need her to be physically present in class in order to grade, so I offered for her to take that information into her meeting with the chair in case they could work something out. They eventually did, and she remained my T.A. remotely for the rest of the year. I was very happy to be able to help her through this, and, I felt this help was rewarded by her good work and friendship.

An assistant is one whose work is in service of another person. The teaching assistant does whatever the teacher requires. Some of us manage to be kinder to our assistants than others; however, this cannot overcome the directional force. Being the assistant means your primary goal is to assist. I was the assistant for many professors as a graduate student. Some of them gave me lots of work, others not so much. I was always identified as a man working with a woman. I say “working with” because I was not always identified as an assistant. I remember a few times when faculty from other departments approached me as if I were the professor and my mentor were the assistant. I would respond by deferring to my professor and emphasizing the word “DOCTOR.” When it was my turn to be the teacher with an assistant, all of my assistants were women. Our department had recruited an overwhelmingly female body of students for the graduate program, thus the likelihood I would end up with female teaching assistants was high. Still, I picked many of my assistants, mostly out of familiarity. The first three were all former students in our undergraduate program, furthering the incestuous pipeline I benefited from. Perhaps I was also subconsciously directed by a general will suggesting I should have female assistants. I certainly believed that proving I could support these women made me a good ally.

While my first T.A. was working remotely, I was presented with a new opportunity in terms of course content and a T.A. While my first T.A. was offered because I had a large lecture class which traditionally had a T.A. attached, my second T.A. came because she was interested in the material and we had the space for her to work me. In my second semester, I was tasked with teaching an important course about privilege and marginalization that was only offered once every two years. The course was

usually taught by a colleague who was on sabbatical. In order to restructure the coming semester, our chair sent out a spreadsheet with all of the courses we offered in the Spring. We could indicate something we wanted to teach, would be willing to teach, or would not like to teach. Apparently, I was one of only a handful of people who indicated a willingness to teach this course. When our chair came to me with this information, I offered that a feminist rhetorician on our faculty would be more qualified. He agreed; however, he informed me her teaching load was too full. So, we charged forward with the idea that a class about privilege taught by an inexperienced, heterosexual, white man would be better than no class about privilege at all.

To help me with the task, the chair recruited a T.A. who had expressed interest in the course content and topic. She was an advisee of the aforementioned feminist rhetorician, and she was interested in looking at race, gender, and sexuality in popular culture. I admitted to her that I was a bit in over my head, so I wanted her to think of us as co-instructors, rather than her as my assistant. I laid out an expectation that we would lead discussions with a 70/30 split of the energy, and, in exchange, I would focus on grading and exam writing. We also collectively decided to change the last half of the course as it was previously taught, as it focused on the methods and function of hate speech. The course had recently been renamed Rhetoric of Marginalized Voices, so we agreed to center discussions around that idea instead. I suggested we divide the second half of the course around different points of privilege and marginalization, focusing a week on race, a week on gender, etc. She pushed back, expressing that this didn't recognize something called "intersectionality." I had never heard this term, so I asked her to explain it to me in one of our private meetings. Five years is not a long time, and yet,

this story and project stand as proof it is long enough to go from complete unawareness of a body of work to a stated focus on that body of work. She used herself as an example to explain, describing how her status as a Latina was best understood through this lens. This was the first time I was aware she was not white; however, I kept that revelation to myself. I agreed to learn more about this theory, and, attempt to use it when leading course discussions. In return, she asked if she could lead discussions during the gender week.

I was of use to my colleagues in many ways as a mentor to so many graduate students. My training of these students meant this was emotional labor which my colleagues could avoid. My teaching of a class focused on privilege and marginalization also provided labor they could avoid. I heard informally this class was something that could drag down a teacher's evaluations. It was a prime candidate for students venting their political dissatisfaction with course material as the failings of an instructor to separate teaching from political action. Teaching is always a political act. The lack of teachers volunteering for the course was also an expression of the lack of diversity on our faculty. The overwhelming whiteness was an issue; however, we only had one tenure-track faculty member among us who listed feminism or any form of social justice as a part of her research program at the time. Several other lecturers would also have been more qualified; however, much of their feminist pedagogy took the form of the speech team. It was decided that their energy should be diverted there, where they could earn physical trophies to show the dean. Thus, a first-year lecturer was given a woman of color as an assistant and asked to give it my best shot.

Teaching the class together required a tremendous amount of mental and emotional energy. The course had twenty-five students, and only five of them were students of color. Further, as I offered to my T.A. after a particularly rough day, because of our university's position in the rural Midwest, we had a lot of white students who could probably count the people of color they interacted with before coming to college, as I could. Our class was probably the first time many of them were required to engage the concept of privilege. It was for me when I took it was a student. When discussing this stress with a colleague, she suggested I think of myself as a model for behavior. Someone who holds a tremendous amount of privilege and attempts to confront it. I converted this advice into a speech at the beginning of the semester where I listed my identities as part of an exercise with the class, suggesting that if I can embrace these concepts, anyone should be able to. What I didn't think about was how this would affect my T.A.

Throughout the course, we had a somewhat strained interpersonal relationship. I would attempt to chat with her before class like my other T.A., but, our conversations were much more stilted. To make matters more difficult, we were both regularly confronted with student behavior that shocked and appalled us, and, we had to attempt to come together in these moments. We developed a semi-regular tradition of keeping it together just enough to make it back to my office, where I would allow her to vent frustrations with our students. I often attempted to do what I thought was grounding the conversation toward their inexperience and ignorance. As she said to one of our students in class, "people don't know what they don't know." We were both exhausted by the end of the semester, and, the cracks in our relationship as co-teachers began to show. She seemed exhausted with me, as well as the class. One day, she requested that she miss class

because of an appointment to color her hair. I agreed; however, I passive-aggressively admitted to some students after class that's why she was absent that day. This was not the mentorship and support I claimed to offer.

When the course was over, I began to understand the different ways I had let this TA down. Displeasure with her showed up in my course evaluations. Some students attributed the positive aspects of the course to me, and, the negative aspects of the course to her. These were evaluations which only I had access to. I vowed to never show her some of the comments deriding her. At the end of the year, I was left wondering about all of the moments where I could have supported her in class. I was too anxious about my own performance that I neglected to give her the support and space she needed. I was frustrated we didn't get along, when perhaps she was telling me she needed someone to show up for her in more tangible ways than interpersonal connection.

I have thought much of the violence I inflicted on my graduate assistant in this class. A deepening understanding of various feminisms has also deepened my understanding of how I've failed her. Surely, having to explain to the teacher who was to lead you in discussions about race, gender, sexuality, class, and other social identity markers what intersectionality was an exhausting moment. As was the nonverbal shock I expressed at her race and ethnicity, as it belied a lack of engagement with the politics of passing. Further, the dynamic between us in the classroom was that of a passionate assistant and a calm, diplomatic instructor. At the time, I believed I was protecting our students and attempting to manage the room as best I could. I now see the problematic cultural identities we were perpetuating, with she being evaluated as an "angry woman of

color” and myself as a “rational man.” I used her for cover just like the more senior faculty used me.

At the time, I was frustrated with her for how “difficult” she was. Difficult can be another way to describe willfulness (Ahmed *Willful Subjects*). I was frustrated by her lack of will to play the part of an emotionally supportive assistant and teacher. Difficult is a word that often comes up within institutionalized diversity (Ahmed *On Being Included*). I expressed frustration in for failing to project the will, use, and happiness that I had come to strive for as a teacher. I wanted her to become the monitor of her fellow students, not realizing the desire how this was tied to a latent desire of mastering over the use of them all (Ahmed *What’s the Use?*). I warped this mastery into the identity of the emotionally supportive and nurturing teacher, and I wished for my students perform the same way. The two assistants I found willing were women whom I could see aspects of my personality. One grew up locally to the university, as I had, the other was identified as coming from a similarly working-class background. A cisgender, heterosexual white man hoping to be an effective part of movements for social justice by only supporting women whom he can personally relate to is an abject political failure. I had come to value my own place within the academic system, and, when I saw others moving in opposing directions, I was unable to find value in them. I wanted to be able to see my positive affect on them, I denied myself the chance to learn how to be willful like they were.

My third T.A. and I worked for a brief time with relatively little problems before she moved on, meaning I was scrambling to fill the position for a final time. A few colleagues recommended I meet with a specific student in order for her to be my new T.A. for the class. One colleague specifically mentioned this student “needed someone

who could give her some emotional support like you.” When I asked why, my colleague told me about this student’s background from a rural, working class family. She was a first-generation college student, like me. Thus, she was struggling to meet the social demands of an academic world she had only heard of. Therefore, the sweet guy who teaches wearing flannel shirts seemed like a good fit. When I asked my third T.A. about this student, she replied “she’s nice” in a tone that made my eyes narrow with suspicion. I got the vibe my new T.A. was being bullied by her classmates. When I met with my fourth T.A., a lot of the secondhand knowledge I already had of her started to make sense. She was an intense conversationalist. She was a little loud when she spoke. She would hold eye contact with you more intensely than you expected. She would laugh a little too loud at something. All of these traits seemed to be off-putting to her classmates, but, I recognized them as symptoms of performance fatigue. She did all of these things because she was trying very hard to meet the expectations of “graduate student.” I did my best to ease that pressure in how I talked to her, and, the support I offered before and after class.

One specific day, the pressure became too much. She was absent from class that day, so, I carried on the lesson without her. Right as I ended the class, my phone rang. It was a colleague from the office next door. “You need to get up here because your T.A. is outside your office weeping.” I ran up and met her, leading her into my office. I handed her the box of tissues I kept at my desk for students who are particularly distraught (usually over grades). She explained that she forgot to switch her clocks for daylight savings time, and, it wasn’t until she got to the office to find my door locked that she realized she was an hour late. After letting her cry for a bit, I told her it was okay; that I

wasn't upset. She didn't let anyone down. If she was going to make this mistake, I was glad she made it during my class instead of missing one of her own lectures. I told her it would be okay. I offered for her to take the rest of the week if she needed the self-care time. She said that was one of the nicest things anyone had offered to her. As she walked away, I thought about this possibility. Was that truly one of the nicest things anyone had done for her lately? The prospect of this truth left me feeling angry with everyone else, rather than proud of myself.

At the end of the year, I helped put together the departmental awards ceremony, as was the responsibility of the Event Planning Committee. When we voted on the awards as a faculty, I only really cared about one potential winner: My second T.A. for Best Teacher. All of the other faculty who worked with her agreed, and, so it was done. After the ceremony, I found her with her mother, who had come to support her. I told her I was really thankful for all of her help with the Rhetoric of Marginalized Voices. I told her that it was important to us that she be recognized. She seemed somewhat shocked by my earnestness. After she thanked me, I said what I hoped would be filled with as much meaning as a sentence can hold, "I couldn't have gotten through that course without you." I hoped she understood all of the acknowledgment behind that. That I knew I was in too deep. That I recognized it was unfair that she had to teach me new things as well as the students. That I didn't use my privilege to help her as much as I helped myself. Remembering her mother was there with us, I quickly ended the conversation by turning to her and stating "Your daughter is awesome. Thank you for coming." As they walked away, I got the feeling that sentence was my best chance at an apology. I was lucky to work with all of these women. I am certainly no one's mentor, and, they may not think of

me as a friend beyond our time at this program together. I suppose the best I can hope for is that the positive moments outweigh the negative. That the help is greater than the harm of graduate school for all of them.

Failure to mentor becomes another failure to find happiness in work. Our students can also be happiness objects. When they disappoint us, they become another source of unhappiness and failure. This is another way in which the promise of happiness causes us to behave by remaining a promise on the horizon (Ahmed *The Promise of Happiness*). By investing ourselves so heavily in the happiness of our students, we take their failures personally. When they are unwell, we become unwell. Instead of showing anger at an academic system which disables our mental health collectively, we often express this unhappiness as disappointment in each other. When the end is happiness, we look less closely at the means. Price identifies that mentoring is often a process of assimilation, where those who have learned to perform for the institution share the strategies of this performance with less experienced members. Mentoring makes our happiness tied to the assimilation of others (*Mad at School*). I was happy with my assistants who I felt I was helping by providing them the advice to assimilate into academic life, and, I saw failure in students who refused that assimilation. Always, the success of their assimilation was tied to my use and worth as a teacher. When a student does not wish to assimilate, we rarely experience this as an important critical move. Instead, we see this as a source of unhappiness, and we do what we can to expel it from our lives. We label them as willful, disrupting our way of life (*Willful Subjects*). If we were to see the productivity in unhappiness, we would be forced to examine our own unhappiness and our complicity of the unhappiness of others.

The Death of The Good Teacher

For most of my adult life, I wanted nothing more than to be in a Ph.D. program. Now I can't wait to get out of one. I'm so very tired. This exhaustion has affected all aspects of my life. I have less patience with my family. I feel as if I have no energy for social interaction. Most shockingly, my teaching, the thing from which I draw energy, has suffered. I now feel as tired at eight in the morning as my students do. I tried to pull together a reading list to supplement our textbook, and I was ashamed at its mediocrity. Teaching had become the last site of control over my life, as it felt everything else was upended by a decade of college courses. On a literal level, my own classroom was the space in which I had control of thirty other people, who were my students. My own anxiety about school became channeled into more anxiety I created within my undergraduate students. This can be how the energy of the general will of the academy trickles down (Ahmed *Willful Subjects*). Being willing in the academy can involve being willing to sacrifice your own mental health. There always seems to be more anxiety in the positions above you, which flows all the way down to your students. We invest in this anxiety. We tell ourselves this anxiety will lead to good work. Many of us have scoffed at the notion many undergraduate students perpetuate that they do their best writing under pressure. We suggest this is the thinking of a person who has yet to learn how to manage their time. Never mind the idea of managing time as a finite resource is a way for us to deny the presence of people with disabilities, whose minds and bodies are always out of step with this temporal structure (Price). Yet, by taking on service positions, volunteering for committees, drafting research projects, proposing special topics courses, and various other duties as assigned, we are creating that same pressure for ourselves. We

do so for the promise of that joy of teaching. The promise of happiness which our classrooms will bring. When that promise is not met, we devastate ourselves.

Where I'm from, when people meet you, they ask "what do you do?" This is never a question of your hobbies, your personal politics, your home, or anything else about your life. It is always a question of what you do *for work*. Your work is the most important thing a person can learn about your identity. It defines you. Your job becomes the foundation upon which your identity is built. Phenomenological forces are pushing us toward these jobs, toward heterosexuality, and toward performances of able bodies and minds in order to maintain production for a capitalist system (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*). I came to define myself as not just a teacher, but a good teacher. I had an award, years of evaluations, and stories of connections with students to prove it.

Perhaps my identity had been killed by The Meeting. This is surely how many of us who were present will refer to this experience for years. The Meeting feels as if it will have an extended stay in my psyche. Every time I get an email about an upcoming appointment, I remember the discomfort of The Meeting. When I'm asked to evaluate my strengths and weaknesses, I think of how I felt about myself during The Meeting. There will inevitably be moments in which I recognize the need to support fellow teachers and other colleagues, and I will think of the darkness of The Meeting. Will I answer the call or will I be a bystander in these moments? The Meeting seemed to come from nowhere, though there were mysterious warning signs leading up to the date. We had not had a meeting for over two months, despite the fact these meetings usually occurred every other week. This was a turbulent time in our department, with professors resigning from various roles or outright leaving the university. As such, no one really wanted to come

together as a department and be forced to shove this uncertainty below the surface. As we all sat down, waiting for The Meeting to start, several of us attempted to chat casually. It was a difficult time in the department, but those of us downstairs in the graduate student office had something of a silent agreement to attempt to keep the tension and uncertainty upstairs in the faculty office. Deep down, we knew these attempts were impossible. Thus, we tried to maintain as light an air around The Meeting as we could, dreading the eventual clock striking noon.

The Meeting began with pleas for us to listen, and, not interrupt. The Chair of our department began The Meeting by reading a prepared statement. Her voice shook as she read about problems regarding keeping office hours and class sessions, citing the university policy. She highlighted the importance of keeping the university standard, and, the threat we could lose funding if we did not adhere to these requirements. All of that seemed not only fair, but a statement of the absolute least we could do as teachers. I felt bad for her, as she seemed so nervous and mournful that she had to do this. It was like being grounded by someone who hates discipline. When she finished, I was filled with a mixture of pity and confusion. Pity for the reasons listed before. Confusion, because I had been required to attend a meeting which is apparently addressing teaching issues which did not apply to me. The Chair added this caveat before her statement, saying this was not a problem with everyone. I wondered, then, why was everyone here?

After this introduction, a professor, a queer woman of color from another department stepped up to lead discussion, with another facilitator adding in on speakerphone. They led us in activities about teaching philosophies, and, challenged us to justify our choices as teachers. This seemed helpful enough, but, it struck me that it

would be a great session for training, not something to introduce at the end of the academic year. While we were doing some break out discussions, a colleague began asking all of us why this felt so weird. “It feels like we’re in trouble for something that we don’t know about.” This colleague resolved to say something, and, when they did, tensions exploded.

From this moment, The Meeting became a blur. Partially because I sat back, listening from ears that grew hot and watched from behind eyes welled up with a layer of barely contained tears. The meeting facilitator from another department asked why we don’t believe there were problems with our teaching. We were told they have the evaluation numbers to prove this. They say this over and over again, pulling us farther and farther away from our Chair’s insistence that concerns do not apply to everyone. My colleagues expressed a desire to get better and asked for clarity. We were met with rising anger. We were not listened to, and, also told we don’t listen. One particular colleague who suffers from PTSD was brought to the brink. She burst into tears, before succumbing to trauma and leaving to save herself. She was instantly portrayed as someone who could not handle the truth of our situation. The woman on the phone shared with us all of her personal trauma as a way of minimizing our colleague’s pain. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was designed as a way to standardize access and accommodations for people with disabilities working and living in the United States. As with much legislation, the language within it is simultaneously vague and powerful. A specific section in subchapter 1 (“Employment”) has much definitional weight: “The term ‘qualified individual with a disability’ means an individual with a disability who, with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the

employment position” (Americans with Disabilities Act). Price correctly questions the vague and loaded nature of the phrase “essential functions of the employment position.” Price examines the nature of assuming the entirety of the research-teaching-service triad of academic positions are essential functions, while pointing to the particular precarity of involving something as dubious and ill-defined as collegiality. My colleague leaving to protect her health, as well as all of the times I searched for an excuse to avoid our weekly meetings for my own mental health, draw the notion of presence as an essential function into scrutiny (Price). My colleague leaving becomes the topic of conversation around whether or not we can handle the harshness of academic life. An adverse reaction to stressors, exacerbated with issues of mental health, then become a failure to perform essential functions. We must ask ourselves, what does the word “essential” do here? It assumes presence at this meeting was a fundamental part of our jobs. Yet, the most useful thing to come out of the meeting was access to an online training module. If anything, our presence at the meeting was detrimental to our performances as teachers. Failing to imagine life outside of kairotic spaces is another kind of death sentence. It is the killing of mental well-being. It is the death of a career.

At different points, we expressed a frustration with our department. We tried to explain to our facilitator that she was entering an environment she could not understand. One colleague compared it to starting a novel in the middle. We expressed the precarity and tension we felt from a department in crisis. We were told, in no uncertain terms, that we were to blame. Not for the problems of the department, but for not accepting them as normal. There is an entire academic world filled with this precarity, and, we were not tough enough to survive it. It’s our fault for wishing things were better. We might be

inclined to understand the faculty expressing the pressures of the academy to us as killjoys. They certainly killed the joy and hope many of us had for teaching and academic life. However, they did not come to the same conclusion the Feminist Killjoy would. A feminist killjoy would plant herself in these meetings and point to a different way of moving. The Feminist Killjoy does not discriminate in whose joy she kills. She does not direct her killjoy energy in merely one direction, down at those below her (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*). Our identified inability to accept the academy as it is can be understood as an expression of willfulness. Each hand raised in The Meeting was like the hand of the willful child, raising from the grave. This willfulness, as it always is, was met with discipline. Our hands were slapped back into the ground (Ahmed *Willful Subjects*) From The Meeting onward, we were all faced with the choice of becoming willing, or, ending our academic lives.

I sat back for the entirety of this meeting, which had ballooned past its allotted two hours and was approaching a full third. I had listened to my colleagues attempt to calmly explain their positions, and heard them shouted down. It was rare for a graduate student to speak a full minute without an interruption from our facilitator. It would be disingenuous of me to paint us as a student body united in friendship. The tension had indeed reached us. We had been as cruel to each other as we had been kind. The past few years had been full of side-eye during class discussions, ghostings of parties and plans, and attempts to make each other feel bad about our successes. In this moment, none of that mattered. We had been united in this room for hours. Although I had not spoken aloud, I felt closer to all of these people than I ever had before. I was strangely proud of us in this moment. So, I finally spoke up.

I began by offering an apology to the facilitator. I pointed to a colleague to reiterate her point about coming into an environment without being prepared. I expressed that this is not fair to the facilitator or us. I also reiterated a point about our collective desire to improve as educators. I made it clear that everything I have heard my colleagues say on this day was an expression of frustration and confusion about our positions. Then, it occurred to me that I had spoken for over two minutes without being interrupted. I looked around this room and saw my colleagues. The vast majority of them were women. More than half of those women were women of color, some of them with accents which immediately labeled them as “international.” I attempted to say the quiet part out loud. I pointed out I had yet to be interrupted, and, the fact that I was the one who gets to speak this much should lead to some serious soul searching. Whether the facilitator heard my point I do not know. She ended the meeting after I spoke for another meeting across campus, making sure we know it is with other faculty. We had taken up enough of her time. As a consequence, and despite my protestations, I was allowed to have the last word.

I have spent the past year processing The Meeting. I don’t know if I will ever be done making sense of it. Personally, the worst part of it was the timing. As that school year ended, I was done with classes and done teaching. I have spent the year since working on my dissertation. In the best-case scenario, it would be at least 15 months after the meeting before I taught again. In the worst case, I will never teach again at all. Throughout the past few years, I have held on to my teaching as a site of control. When everything else has seemed impossible to handle, I have had a few sessions a week when I am in control. I have done my best to keep my students from feeling what I feel. I have

tried to be fair, and, advocate for them when I can. I love teaching. Although I was told certain things from The Meeting do not apply, how is it possible for me to walk away without feeling that I am bad? People tasked with leading me have attempted to replace my joy with their cynicism in the name of survival and success. They say I am wrong for pushing against the worst aspects of the academy. If I want a job, I must comply. Failure to comply feels like my personal failure to bear.

Ultimately, this meeting will live in my memory as the revelation of how precarious happiness can be, and thus, how it is likely, and always possible, to fail to fulfill the promise to us. I have lived my life like most do, with happiness as the end goal. Teaching was believed to bring me the happiness I sought. It became my only means of happiness. My life reveals why happiness is a useful subject of study in how we understand capitalist systems (Ahmed *The Promise of Happiness*). I went into great personal debt and geographical relocation for the promise of happiness. Over the years, this joy of teaching became so precarious that a single meeting was capable of destroying it. This meeting expressed what many of us feel to be true in our bodies: Not all are welcome here. The Meeting expressed no understanding of how crip time can operate in academic spaces, leading to a value of physical presence in the face of mental inability to do so (Price). Further, the gap between our desires and the institutions was made clear. The thesis of the meeting was how our bodies and practices do not fit within the academic system, and, our goal was to make ourselves fit. Here, Ahmed and Garland-Thomson provide a way forward, if I am willful enough to take it. Garland-Thomson suggests the misfit is needed because disability studies needs both a disavowal of academic spaces as usual and the resources of those same spaces (Garland-Thomson

“Story of My Work”). Similarly, Ahmed’s ultimate point about happiness is that our singular focus on it leads to a denial and failure to prepare for the possibility of unhappiness (*The Promise of Happiness*). Both of these ideas speak of possibility. The possibility of the misfit is the productive nature of the tension of not being able to make our bodies and minds fit. The possibility of unhappiness is that it is always potentially on the horizon. This is not a suggestion that unhappiness is necessary or actually good, but instead a realization that unhappiness simply is (Ahmed *Promise of Happiness*). An academic profession can be a happy object. We become so invested in it, that we cannot see our lives outside of it. My time as a teacher has brought me great joy and great despair. My investment in the joy of teaching has prevented me from seeing anything but unhappiness beyond my time in the classroom. It is perhaps time to embrace the possibility of unhappiness, and, consider whether the way forward should only be toward that joy.

In her discussions of use and uselessness, Ahmed speaks of resignation. Resignation is a state of feeling for some people. It is the giving up of movement, the denial of a way forward. We try to press against a wall of oppression, and, we resign ourselves to our inability to move beyond it. This is another way we come to be swept up by the general will. However, resignation can be necessary. As Ahmed states, “closing a door can be a survival strategy” (*What’s the Use?* 190). Resigning your position can be a willful act. Removing one’s body from the labor force can be defiance. In this way, we can make our bodies useless. Ahmed intends this strategy for the survival of bodies deemed willful from birth. This is the survival of women, people of color, queer folks, people with disabilities, and other willful subjects. I am on the precipice of my graduate

career contemplating the potential for resignation of a body such as mine. I wonder if I will find happiness in that resignation. I realize it has been over a decade since I seriously contemplated the possibility of a life outside academia. I wonder if there is power in the removal of my body from an overwhelming sea of whiteness. I wonder if this is the way to preserve my mental health. I wonder if my resignation can not only be a strategy for my survival, but also the survival of others. Regardless of our positions in the academy, we are all compelled by an unspecified force of collegiality when considering other people. The next chapter will explore this fluid role.

Chapter Four: Performing as a Colleague

When I was 12 years old, and preparing to enter middle school, one of my mother's brief boyfriends offered an unsolicited piece of advice. In between sips of his beer and drags of his cigarette, he explained that I would find people sort themselves into three distinct categories: Leaders, Followers, and Loners. According to him, I wanted to be a loner. Leaders "think their shit don't stink" and Followers "have no self-respect," but Loners manage to keep their integrity. I hated all three of these options. I nodded, secretly resolving to not fall into any of these categories.

Academia is filled with our own vague concepts and terms we expect people to live their lives by. One of the more pervasive of these vague terms guiding us is that of collegiality. Collegiality is often conceived as a form of interpersonal pleasantness. Definitions of it often include the ability to collaborate on projects (Freedman). A part of this definition which is often lost in practice and translation is that of shared and equal power (Freedman; Haviland et. al.). The concept of shared power is often dropped in favor of less value-laden language focusing on sharing of information and space. The goal of collegiality, when it loses a stated focus on equal power, becomes centralizing various individuals who would be working autonomously if not for this gravitational force (Haviland et. al.). This use of the term is obviously still an expression of power, serving as a disciplining and civilizing force across departments. Collegiality often is

used as a weapon to harm faculty who are seen as difficult to work with, providing a language to deny their movement and success in academic spaces (Cipriano and Buller). Further, collegiality, as a socially constructed term itself, defined by social presence, adds additional barriers to those of us struggling with mental disabilities of various kinds (Price). As we will investigate, social spaces are nebulous and tricky for the afflicted mind to exist within. As scholars are likely to do, the suggested solution to these actions is often to seek a standardized definition of the term, which everyone can clearly understand and use (Cipriano and Buller; Freedman; Haviland et. al.). The logic here is that we can find a way to contain this meaning, and use it to direct individuals and institutions toward progress and innovation. I am skeptical of this solution. This chapter will focus on my role as a colleague, examining the ways in which I failed to perform as a colleague and friend, often due to ever-growing anxiety. Being a good colleague, as we will see, is a matter of perspective.

Friends as Colleagues

What should be apparent at this point in the project is my skepticism of our ability to contain the power of words, or even comprehend this power on a linguistic level. Collegiality is another container of use, will, and happiness (Ahmed *What's the Use?; Willful Subjects; The Promise of Happiness*). Those who fail to be good colleagues are marked as willful, useless, and unhappy. Further, we tend, as scholars, to assume that words belong to us. Collegiality is only spoken of in terms of academic professionalism. This reveals a forgetfulness of the liminality of our time as students, or, more accurately, a desire to mark a time when we are done being students. Collegiality becomes a way to examine all of our social relationships. These relationships are not mutually exclusive.

Collegiality is the performance of how we treat others in academia, and, this determination becomes another vessel of phenomenological energy which determines our social reality.

The social pressures of middle and high school, as I had been trained to think of them, were somewhat modified by the minimal size of my social world. In a town of only one thousand people, and a school gathering only seven hundred students across six grades from the surrounding rural areas, a lot of the popular culture I absorbed about teenage life was simply not reflective of my own. White kids of my generation, in particular, use a scene from the film *Mean Girls* to make sense of social categorization. In this scene, high school life is described as a tour through the cafeteria, analyzing all of the different tables that people could sit at to eat lunch. As the different tables are described, we are introduced to social groups consisting of jocks, burnouts, nerdy and cool Asians, unfriendly Black hotties, sexually active band-geeks, and women with various relationships to food. My social world never feel this way for a few large reasons. Most glaring, but honestly only in retrospect, is that my high school never contained enough people of color for there to be distinct tables full of any group. I am fairly certain I can list all of the people of color in our school at the time of my graduation, and I don't think I would need all of my fingers and toes. The second distinct reason my world never matched this was because there were so few of us, we were often fulfilling many of these categories at once. I knew lots of burnouts, nerds and athletes who were at least two, if not, all three of those things. I had a weirdly distinct place in this social system, as I was one of two to three photographers in the school for most of my time there. As such, I

knew almost everyone in school, and they knew me. When I started dating my girlfriend (now my wife), she proclaimed that she had never met anyone with so many best friends.

Having friends from a small town, my life was filled with quiet people who wanted me to do the talking for them. For this reason, I was so excited to meet people in college. I was eager to meet other people who could hold their end of a conversation. I was also thrilled to meet people from anywhere outside of my town. Although I had very little comparison level for it, the overwhelming whiteness of my hometown was always creeping in the back of my psyche. I didn't know much, but I knew enough that when the most vocal cultural divide around me was between Catholics and Protestants, this was like having no cultural divide at all. I was ready to meet new people and experience new things.

A few years in, my college experience had not lived up to this hope. I was certainly surrounded by a greater diversity of people, and a much larger amount overall, but I never felt more alone. I had different classes with different people every hour. There was no consistency. Once I shed my high school friends, I didn't really have anything left. I learned a lot in the first eighteen years of my life, and, how to make friends was not one of them. I can try to blame this on the fact that I hate alcohol. There are many paths one can take from a childhood affected by substance abuse. I took the road labeled "militant abstinence." Not only did I not drink, but being around others who do would set me on edge. What little comfort I had disappeared under the presence of alcohol. I tried to find different ways to express this when invited to parties. None of them made me sound anything more than a buzzkill. Every Monday, I overheard stories of what everyone else did during the weekend, and, I would feel as if I'm missing out on the

fabled “college experience.” I would often sit alone on the top floor of the campus library. I found a corner near a window, pulled up a comfy chair, and opened a book or my computer for the hours I had between classes. I would go all this time without saying a word to another soul. I used to be the person who knew everyone, but I became a hermit living in a cave made of books and florescent light. I suppose a silver lining to all of this was my grades had gotten better. I came to college with lots of friends and a middling to bad GPA. I barely made it in. As I lost touch with my friends, my grades improved dramatically. After a few years, I had much less friends, but I was making the Dean’s List. I was very proud of that, even though it felt as if I didn’t have many people to share this with. Being isolated had made me a better student. Perhaps this is the way it was always supposed to be. You could have your friends and parties, I had studying to do.

In public secondary education, I came to believe that social happiness and academic success were mutually exclusive. If I wanted to apply myself for academic achievement, I would do so at the risk of friendships. I lived this social life, barely earning high enough grades to be accepted into college. When I got to college, I realized my established patterns of barely applying myself were not going to be good enough. Thus, I moved in what I assumed would be the opposite direction, shunned a social life in favor of academic achievement. I did this for the promise of a different kind of happiness. The happiness that comes from earned grades, which was supposed to automatically translate into a better economic existence beyond high school. I turned myself into a willing subject, one who believed in the virtues of following classroom structures. I went from someone with shoulder-length hair who would slouch into his chair toward the back of the classroom, to someone with a traditionally masculine haircut who always made

sure to sit in the front rows of the room. I wanted to believe college was the time to prove I could make myself a useful individual. I believed this was the way to prove all of the teachers I thought had let me down in high school that they were wrong about me. In actuality, I was proving their belief in a supposedly transformative power in academia to be correct. I believed that all of the focus on a social life would make me a bad student. I invested my will and happiness in letter grades, assuming they were my ultimate goal. I soon discovered the energies of social networks which were never opened to me before. I learned the power, will, and usefulness of these networks were more important than academic achievement. Further, I would learn that I not only made the wrong decision, but also that any decision I made was likely irrelevant in the face of a job placement system in which I had little investment and no control.

Classes as Colleagues

I didn't grow up thinking about money. That's not to say money was never an issue for my family. I was just fairly insulated from the struggle. We moved around a lot, and lived in some pretty small places. We referred to one particular two-bedroom apartment, which was responsible for housing my dad, step-mom, three step-siblings, and myself depending on the weekend, as "The Shoebox." Both sets of my grandparents were involved in my life, and, I was lucky enough to have a large support system to fall back on. I never lived in anything resembling poverty, but there were distinct markers of the working class. Growing up, we always knew whose parents had things like cable television or internet access, and those were the houses you wanted to spend the night at. As we all became old enough to drive in the mid-00s, every person I knew started showing up with a used car from the late-80s to mid-90s in various states of disrepair. I

didn't think about any of these things until I came to college. They were simply markers of the life I led, and, almost everyone I knew dealt with them. I didn't really experience much class consciousness. I was aware there were people in the world with much more (and much less) money than me; however, I primarily knew this from watching television.

Coming to college made me more aware of my advantages and disadvantages. Much is written about the feelings of precarity first-generation and working-class college students face when entering academia (Byrne; Rogerson and Rosetto; Rudick and Dannels; Stuber). These analyses range in foci and recommendations. Some suggest strategies to help these students further integrate and mobilize themselves for a global workforce (Rogerson and Rosetto). Some seek to raise awareness and community by writing of their own experiences as liminal working-class academics (Byrne). Interviews found working-class students find issues of socioeconomic identity to be more salient than their more privileged classmates (Stuber). When extrapolated to larger theories of oppression, this conclusion is not particularly revelatory in a contemporary sense. Existing theories of critical education in which education's capacity for empowerment and oppression along lines of race as well as class have analyzed these questions of consciousness for decades (Freire). Further scholarship has added issues of gender, sexuality, bodily ability, and other identity markers, putting a much firmer foot in the idea of community to discuss these issues (Collins and Bilge). A citation trail and body of work can be the raising of your own consciousness as well. While not finding solidarity with my classmates I was made aware of my working-class identity during a visit from the career center. This visit had a strange tone, as it was occurring in a class designed as

an introductory course for Communication Studies, yet many of us were third-year students who changed our majors midway through our undergraduate. The advice from the career center came with much more urgency for us than other introductory classes. Adding to the urgency of this meeting was that it took place in the Fall of 2008, in the midst of a financial collapse. I remember being a Freshman in 2006 and being told about an entire world of possibility. Two years later, a career center representative was saying “I’m going to be honest, most of you aren’t going to get decent jobs.”

A significant part of this talk involved setting expectations, or more pointedly, deflating them. A specific detail was the discussion of average salaries. As we were told the average yearly salary for a college graduate was \$45,000, groans let out across the room. The representative launched into damage control, expressing this was just an average, but we needed to be aware of our situations. As I watched as many of my classmates interrupted this speaker, I quietly reflected on this information. \$45k a year was more than either of my parents made in the factories, as far as I knew. More astounding to me was the discussion of the word “salary.” In this moment, salary meant a guaranteed amount of money. It meant compensation not contingent on the number of hours you were able to get from a given employer. This concept was such a seemingly unattainable goal to me at twenty years old. This was the first time I was thinking about it as a real possibility, all while being surrounded by classmates bemoaning how this future was not good enough for them. Phenomenology works its power in the ways we are identified by others. A child is told they look like their parent, and this implicitly tells them they should perform their gender and sexuality as this parent does (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*). I indeed look like my father. I express my gender and the sexuality the

same way he does. This can logically be extended to class. Despite constant pressures forcing me to “better” myself with a college career, it was nearly impossible to see myself outside of the class realities I had been given. Yet, it was possible for my classmates. Educational pipelines become the way in which we set children on a path based on unspoken strata of race, gender, class, and other forms of identity (Collins and Bilge). I remember a friend was told by our guidance counselor that they were not smart enough for college, and recommended they join the Air Force at the age of sixteen. I was a curious student, getting mixed messages about applying to college or not; thus, I experienced two different pipelines from our school. As a working-class white kid from a rural area, I had already learned of several different pipelines more resourced than mine in my two years of college. This moment revealed the different places these pipelines were expected to lead. In many ways, an affordable state school is supposed to be a beautiful place of diversity. When diversity becomes charged with power in the academy, it leaves behind other concepts such as “equality” and “social justice” (Ahmed *On Being Included*). Being near students of various identities can be debilitating and violent. We can take this violence, and make it our own personal failing. We can use it to blame ourselves for our precarity.

I never said a word to my classmates about these realizations. I think I knew from this moment on I couldn't trust them to have an honest conversation about our career prospects. That is if I felt like I could be honest with them at all. This is the day I learned about what it meant to be a first-generation college student. What it meant to have expectations of your own success, and, what it meant to truly just be happy to be somewhere. I resented my classmates for making me feel bad about my own satisfaction

with less money than they did. In this moment, I felt disconnected from the room, more so than my social practices ever made me feel. At the same time, I was losing the connection to my hometown as well. A local cop started coming into the gas station I worked at and referring to me as “college boy.” People started telling me that I was destined to leave my hometown and “do bigger things.” This was not always said with a positive tone. Two different social worlds felt as if they were pushing me away from each other in opposite directions. I felt like I was losing sight of who I was. When you are a first-generation college student, it is easier to know what you are not than what you are.

Family as Colleagues

I grew up as an only child, with my parents fighting over my attention after their divorce. I also grew up as the youngest child when my father remarried a woman with three children. I was also the youngest of nine grandchildren on my father’s side. Although I’ve had a few different sets of step-siblings in my life, my nearest-in-age cousin has always been the closest thing I’ve had to a sister. I am only seven months younger than her. She often jokes that she doesn’t remember what it was like before I was born, but she can feel in her bones how much I messed up all the baby attention she would have gotten otherwise. Our families always engineered time for us to be together. I would spend the night at her house once a year. Our grandparents always offered to watch both of us for a week in the summer. Every family gathering, I would find her and her side of the family, mostly hanging out with her mom and her actual siblings. My aunt thought I was the funniest person in the world, and I loved to make her laugh because she had very loud and raspy guffaw. I’m sure my feelings of closeness are much stronger

than my cousin's, as she had actual siblings to grow up with, but I know she appreciated having me in her life.

We both started school at the same time, and, thus, experienced a lot of the same milestones together. We were both excellent students in elementary school, each earning a stockpile of gold and silver pencils for making the honor roll. When we started middle school, I developed the idea that caring about education wasn't cool, while she kept focused on studying. Because of this, our grandmother would always mention how well my cousin's grades were in an attempt to motivate me. I think it would take a saint to not become resentful of someone in this situation. I am not a saint. My cousin was eventually accepted into a special academy for gifted students for her last two years of high school. The academy was run out of the laboratory school connected to the teacher's college of a nearby university. This university was much closer to my house than her family home, so I started visiting her much more. The students in the academy lived in a dorm just on the edge of campus, and, they were taught by a mix of teaching assistants and professors. It was basically junior college. This meant that my cousin experienced the rush of college parties two years before most people did. I noticed some changes in her behavior right away. To list all of the details would make this sound like a cliched after-school special, so I will just say it was clear she was a bit out of control. She would later brag to me that she was intoxicated during her entire graduation weekend. Regardless, her presence at the academy moved her quite a bit beyond me in our grandmother's eyes. She earned a full ride to the university by virtue of her graduation from the affiliated academy. I barely got into the same school. So, in the Fall, we would both be freshmen at the same institution.

Being so close to each other was great until it wasn't. While my cousin had learned all the best places in town to party, and, all the best people to let you do that kind of thing underage, I had started to label myself as "straight edge." I vowed to never drink or do any kinds of drugs. This was at odds with my cousin's theory of college. When I introduced her to my friends from high school, who were also attending our university, they took her side. As a result, I spent a lot of weekends alone while my cousin and my friends had some kind of party I wanted no part of. After a while, I moved out from living with one of these friends because it was so depressing. My friends quit speaking with me, but my cousin still answered my calls. She assured me that we were family, and just because I didn't want to hang out all the time didn't mean we didn't love each other. I tried to connect with her at least once a month in college. I would often go to her house and watch wrestling. Her houses were always a mess, with trash piled up everywhere. She always had three to four roommates, mostly from the academy. When I would visit, I was pretty sure I was the only sober person around. I remember during one visit, I was wearing a shirt that said "Straight Edge" on it in support of my favorite wrestler. Someone I had never met, who I later found out was a drug dealer, saw my shirt and asked if I was actually straight edge. I meekly, but sincerely responded "...yeah..." We sat there for ten seconds of tense silence before he replied, "That's cool," and never talked to me again.

While my cousin was embracing the fun side of college, I was becoming a good, well-behaved student. After moving back home, I started to improve my grades. In my second year, I made the Dean's List for the first time. Dad made me attend the ceremony for it so my grandparents could celebrate. This meant that my grandparents came to the

university to celebrate me without visiting my cousin. While I was getting good grades, she had developed a penchant for seeing how many classes she could skip and still pass. She came to college with the goal of getting a degree in elementary education, and changed her major upon hearing she would have to avoid a criminal record. “Let’s face it, I’m going to get arrested at some point in my life.” A clear shift in the dynamic of our relationship happened. My grandparents started asking me about her, and, telling me to “look out for her.” I remember one time she needed a ride to a party, and, when I asked her about what was going on she jokingly called me “Dad” before she left the car. Almost every weekend, I would get a drunken phone call from her late at night, filled with all kinds of details about something that happened at a party. I would always answer, staying on the phone and offering advice when I could. I was worried about her, but, looking back, I think part of me was glad to be the one “in control.” The thing about giving advice is that you are suggesting you know better.

Paternalism is a phrase often used in a political and economic sense to describe state involvement in what are supposedly personal decisions like spending and domestic behaviors (Pykett). This language is often employed with little input or consideration for how it reifies gendered structures of labor and thinking. It is often used by western cultures to maintain superiority over othered cultural structures on the untested assumption they do not contain proper rights and treatment of women (hooks). Indeed, what little feminist discussion there is of this term points to a mind/body and rational/emotional gender divide of labor perpetuated by this language (Pykett). Thus, a theory of governance perpetuates language which connects fatherhood and male domination to the authority to have choices over one’s body. Phenomenology helps us

understand how this division is constructed. Gender is an ongoing process of energy and identity which “is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another” (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology* 59). If we understand bodies, space, and objects all occupy one another and give each other shape, we can extend this occupation to roles in our identity. This is to say; academic achievement is combined with gender to fill my body differently than my cousin’s. She took this energy and did essentially nothing with it. I take this energy and I assumed paternalistic control over her life and her choices. I was also happy to become a monitor of sorts within our family, being a grandchild who was happy to take on an elevated role concerned with parenting her in some way (Ahmed *What’s the Use?*). The energies our bodies come into contact with, and which they are filled by, are essentially impossible to control. I was surrounded by objects enforcing the superiority of my gender. I was essentially a masculine sleeper agent, waiting for the opportunity to be activated in my control of the women in my life. I would soon learn of the disastrous consequences this would bring personally.

One day, near the end of our third year, I visited my cousin at her house. Her mom had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. I wanted to check on her and see how she was holding up. After a while, she mentioned she was dropping out of school. She said her mom needed her, and, she couldn’t be away from her. I have regretted my response every day in the decade since. I told her it wasn’t fair to use her mom’s illness as an excuse for her own failure. She said she couldn’t believe I just said that to her. I couldn’t really either, but it had been said anyway. We sat for a few minutes in silence. I

left, telling her I would help her move out if she needed. That was the last meaningful conversation we would have for three years. My aunt would be dead by then.

I can only remember a few conversations with my aunt after she got sick. She never wanted people to see her much during treatment. No one outside of her immediate family and the hospice caregivers saw my aunt for the final year of her life. She didn't want anyone to see her that way. As a result, none of us in the extended family recognized the person we saw in the casket. I talked to my cousin briefly, but our relationship was strained and she had a few hundred people to see. There would have been little to say anyway. When someone dies, we think we can find something meaningful to do or say, but really, we're lucky if we can remember anything from that time. In the intervening years, my cousin had become a single mother. She intentionally kept her son's father out of the picture. My uncle was happy to have something to focus on aside from my aunt's health. It's one of those annoyingly poetic circle of life things, I guess. A consequence of motherhood meant that my cousin became involuntarily straight edge. She would later tell me that she never felt like she had to keep it together for herself, but she knew she had to keep it together for him. On the other hand, I had graduated from college with the intent to go back and get a Master's degree.

A few months after my aunt died, my cousin and I had another funeral to attend. A mutual friend, one I had introduced her to from my high school, had died of a drug overdose. We agreed to attend the funeral together, basically functioning as each other's out for leaving when we got uncomfortable. I was on speaking terms with a lot of my friends, although I barely saw them. My cousin didn't really want to be in a funeral for too long after everything with her mother. We both left after the service, electing not to

go to the funeral. We breathed a collective sigh of relief when we got into my car. After a little while, I tried to apologize to her for what I had said. I wanted to tell her I should have been there when her mom was sick. I wanted to tell her that I took the position of success our family had given me and used it to hurt her in a way she never did to me. She stopped me from saying anything. She told me that we were family, and that meant we didn't have to apologize to each other. This was, of course, total nonsense. We both knew she was adding her own flair to that old "love means never having to say you're sorry" line that we had both absorbed through popular culture. But sometimes, nonsense is all you need. Sometimes you just want to forgive someone because you miss them, and, you work backwards to justify it. I'm still not sure if I deserved that, but, that's kind of the point. That was never my decision to make. It was always her choice, and, she was tired of me trying to tell her what to do.

Grief is also an orientation object. As Ahmed suggests, queerness is felt in the family as the loss of heterosexual possibility, or the loss of a family line (*Queer Phenomenology*). If the family does not extend in the way we expect it, we grieve the expected way of orienting ourselves. My cousin's life as a single mother, with no father in her child's life, can also be a queer existence, one which she and our family are directed to correct in some way. She does this by becoming her ideal of a mother: getting sober and living her life for her son. I was already in a committed heterosexual relationship at this point, one which was on the way to becoming a marriage. Yet, I still felt as if I was missing something. Thus, I felt the grief of a lost aunt and friend, and I made graduate school my orientation object. I made academic achievement the way to prove my existence. I used academic achievement to drive myself away from depression.

We both cannot make sense of our loss of her mother, and thus, we need ways to orient our bodies towards expected futures as the smart children our families raised us to be. She was a resourceful mother, and I was a dutiful academic. The logic of paternalism drove us to these places. My investment in academic achievement was a denial of my cousin's life. My insistence on seeing her as a classmate and colleague almost destroyed our relationship. It would destroy many more.

Graduate School Colleagues

I never had to really think about what it meant to be a colleague before graduate school. I suppose I had classmates, but aside from answering their questions about assignments before and after class, I never really spent time with them. My aversion to parties was a big part of that. I have definitely had coworkers before, working at a gas station down the street from my house for almost five years. All of these coworkers were women, and, most of them were middle-aged to elderly. I was basically the "helpful young man" who would go outside in the cold, clean up the worst spills, lift the heavier boxes, and do most of the other dirty work. I never had to think about more than that. I didn't have to think about how my actions and presence affected others. In graduate school, I became painfully aware of this.

Entering my MA program, I immediately felt the existing tensions in the room. Certain students were always sure to be as far away from each other as possible. By the end of welcome week, I was aware that the student I was assigned to as a peer mentor was in fierce competition with the student who was assisting our supervisor. As someone who had quickly found my peer mentor to be a helpful and comforting presence, I picked a side without really knowing or thinking about it. I would regularly laugh and smile

when she mocked colleagues for their appearances and outfits. I would also complain about certain things that classmates did around the office. We mocked a classmate for a collection of plasticware he kept in his desk from the nearby food court. We rolled our eyes when others spoke in class. This, I learned, was how you treated each other in graduate school.

When analyzing the supposedly essential functions of an academic position, Price untangles the various kairotic spaces of academe. These spaces include the classroom, committee meetings, and conferences, among others. These spaces are described as kairotic because they are the only spaces in which academics are allowed to be rhetorically legible (Price). Essentially, you only exist in an academic position in ways which can be converted to your curriculum vita. These spaces all privilege physical presence. The demonstration of one's teaching is always carried out in a physical classroom. Committee meetings are always carried out in person, making them dependent on the scarcity of space and time in the university. Conference attendance is mandatory, regardless of how far one needs to travel in order to do so. These essential functions of the position make performances of fluency in these spaces impossible for those with conditions such as severe depression or agoraphobia (Price). While the distinction is made between these more tangible conditions and the mere presence of awkward behavior, the concept of the misfit and misfitting allows us to extend this conversation (Garland-Thomson "Misfits"). The concept of the misfit is concerned with a material body rather than a generic disabled body, emphasizing "context over essence, relation over isolation, mediation over origination: misfits are inherently unstable rather than

fixed...” (Garland-Thomson “Misfits” 593). These concepts can allow us to expand the barriers of disability to both unstable and invisible concepts, as well as beyond diagnosis.

The colleague who was placed in a position of ire from my peer mentor and many of us had many embodied details which were a supposed deterrence to successfully perform the role of a graduate student. Discussions of her involved physical traits such as an ill-fitting wardrobe, or, a loud voice which was compared to Kermit the Frog. These details made her social life very difficult, which was then associated with an inability to be an effective colleague and academic. Often, assessments of collegiality can be stripped down to feelings of personal affection and individual accomplishment (Price). This classmate was a victim of poor social skills, which were then immediately identified to all of the incoming students. Further, for those of us attempting to negotiate our own precarious identities, we were pressured to minimize our own faults in order to fit in. One of the best ways to do this was to participate in the mocking of this classmate. Here, being a good colleague meant making fun of the right people.

I was no better in how I treated my classmates. When I won (or is it earned?) the university-wide teaching award, I assumed that I would also earn (win?) our departmental teaching award at the end of the year. As the award ceremony drew closer and closer, I became filled with more and more dread. I had not received any kind of email about earning awards, and, the ceremony was less than two weeks away. I tried to reassure myself by suggesting maybe they were late in organizing the event. I kept all of these things inside. The only thing worse than wanting something is revealing to your peers that you want something. A few days before the ceremony, I noticed a stack of folders on the front desk. These were recognizably the packets containing the awards. I checked my

mail, hanging around a bit before I was certain no one was paying attention. I flipped through the folders, my name nowhere to be found. I was not our department's best teacher, that award went to a coach of the speech team who only had time to teach one section a semester. I literally taught twice as many classes as she did. Yet, our faculty had decided she was a better teacher than me. She had also earned the top student award. I had spent two years behind her every step of the way. She had always been quick to let me know my scores are not as good as hers. In this moment, I felt I had learned she was right. I felt tears welling up in my eyes, so I quickly retreated to the bathroom across the hall.

This award was the tipping point for much of the inferiority I had felt in comparison to this colleague. A year earlier, she took whatever joy I felt from a scholarship by telling me the likely politics involved in my earning over her. In the intervening year, I had felt as if she and another colleague had been placing themselves above the rest of us. They are the only ones applying to Ph.D. programs that year. They seemed to act as if our classes were no longer worth their time, regularly messaging each other during class. I was unable to apply that year because my fiancé had to keep living in Indiana due to her own scholarship and job offer. I told myself that they were looking down on me unjustly, unreflexively perpetuating their own logic.

Awards are meant to function as happiness objects, keeping us on a productive path (Ahmed *The Promise of Happiness*). When we fail to obtain the happiness object, we are supposed to be inspired to keep obtaining. The promise of happiness is that the award is always possible, always just out of reach. The unspoken dark side of this is the inability to prepare ourselves for the unhappiness of failing to obtain the award. To live

through this unhappiness is supposed to be an expression of perseverance. Those who give in to unhappiness and despair are deemed weak. Weakness belies an inability to do the job. Thus, collegiality is supposed to involve a denial of our own unhappiness. Grin and bear it is a collegial motto. Further lost in this turn is the recognition of different ways of doing things. An assumption that scholarship, teaching, service, and collegiality are all essential to the academic job can also be complicit in the assumption these are easy to define and thus reward. An overinvestment in this structure means an overinvestment in what teaching is supposed to look like. My view of teaching at this time was heavily influenced by kairotic spaces recognized only in traditional models of education (Price). My belief in myself as the best teacher was couched in teaching evaluations, lectures, classroom activities, and previous awards. These only account for one type of teaching. My denial of my colleague's skill comes from an inability to see coaching speech and mentoring students outside of the classroom as effective teaching. I was attempting to lay claim to one form of teaching. For all of my struggles with emotional and mental health in my academic life, I often turn to privileged ideas of education to reaffirm my own well-being. I happen to be an afflicted person capable of performing as an educator in the classroom. I give good lectures, thus I am able to see myself as functioning in an academic space. This also means I am able to devalue classmates who are not recognized as good lecturers. Lecturing is a rhetorical skill and an inherently masculine one. Thus, all of this creates inflexibility in which I equate my own well-being with my ability to perform as a masculine educator. Awarding my colleague as a better teacher is a political act. It kills my joy. As we have noted, if one seeks to embrace feminism, they must recognize the killing of joy as a communal and productive

act (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*). I was not able to be a killjoy then. I am trying to be one now.

Of course, none of this was necessarily fair. Fairness is relative. Colleagues had been championed by professors, but so had I. I was only there because of that mentorship. I had been given light deadlines on my thesis because my advisor liked me. She softened her usual writing sample requirement because she “believed in me” and “already knew I was a good writer.” While some of my colleagues had been stressfully applying to graduate school once more, I was offered an adjunct position merely because two professors advocated for me during a meeting. I had not been given an award, but instead a job, with little effort of my own. I benefit from unfairness more so than these colleagues.

A few years later, when working as a lecturer in the same department, I was able to help determine the same awards which caused me so much grief and anger. In this meeting, when discussing who should earn the Best Researcher award, two colleagues disagreed between two students. When making their respective cases, a professor-turned-colleague suggested one should win the award over the other because they were applying to Ph.D. programs and could use the additional line on their CV more than the other student. That argument quickly won the day, and we moved on to the next award. In this moment, the small universe of departmental awards revealed itself to me. My colleagues from when we were in school were right to feel as if their aspirations were above the rest of us. Not necessarily because that is a universal truth, but because our professors were quietly supporting that outcome as well. Moving on to a Ph.D. program would bring more prestige to our program, which in turn helps enrollment, funding, individual

professors' promotion and tenure files, among other benefits. I began recalling advice I had received in this vein. My mentor recommended that I write a thesis if I wanted to be seen as a serious candidate for graduate school, remarking that comprehensive exams were essentially worthless. Comps were the option chosen by over two-thirds of our department. I was also warned off an Ed.D. program on campus that was recruiting me out of my M.A. under the suggestion that earning all three degrees from the same university was career suicide. It was also suggested that no one would take my Ed.D. seriously. So, I declined a program which I would have been able to complete without needing to move across the country.

Pipelines are established from the beginning of a student's life and work to stratify achievement based on race, gender, and class among other markers of identity (Collins and Bilge). In public education, this is often maintained through school choice, where wealthier and disproportionately whiter parents are able to send their children to schools outside of geographical boundaries, thus perpetuating the inequality of educational resources. More prestigious schooling at one level leads to access to prestigious schooling at the next. Within our academic departments, we still find ways to perpetuate these pipelines with students who have reached a similar level of success. In my experience, students were given different resources and attention based on their perception of achievement in a Ph.D. program. Students who were thought to move on were given more prestige and awards than others. Further, I was pressured to seek a Ph.D., as that was deemed to be more prestigious than an Ed.D. Years later, I question who was more of a beneficiary of this prestige, especially as I apply for jobs which seek formal degrees in education over the one I am on the verge of obtaining. We make

decisions every day concerning awards, fellowships, projects, and our overall time and energy which place students in these various pipelines. We usually make these decisions based on who will be of good use to our program, and, which students we believe we have properly filled with our own ideas of useful scholarship (Ahmed *What's the Use?*).

The Ph.D. pipeline moves at a current which sweeps us all with it. Every choice we make while moving with the flow is strategic. We choose what looks good on a CV, and, others make choices for us in this regard. In a moment of pure jealousy, I invaded my colleagues' privacy and raged about awards which were one of these many lines. I had come to expect that all of these things were for me, and any which went to other people were a slight against me. The truth may be harder to take than this. These choices were not made with me or my colleagues in mind at all. They were made out of academic survival, leaving our feelings of worth in their wake.

Doctoral Colleagues

While I was applying to graduate school, a professor in our department told me a very sad story about their experience as a Ph.D. student. They were very excited to be accepted to one of the largest and most highly regarded communication programs in the country. In their letter of intent, they expressed that they were particularly excited to work with two faculty members. When they were accepted and managed to move across the country to this program, they discovered these two professors were not speaking to each other. In the four years they were in that program, a new chair was elected twice. They explained to me that I had no idea what I was walking into, and, that I should make my plans navigating a new program as fluid as possible. I had no idea what everyone

thought of each other. I felt nothing but sympathy for this colleague when they told me. I had no idea how much I should have listened.

In many ways, I was removed from a lot of the tension of my Ph.D. program. I can only speak to what I heard, and how I heard it. Regardless of what you know, your body has a way of telling you that it feels precarious. Sometimes, you walk into a room and immediately feel the tension hanging in the air. When you're entering a new graduate program, it is unclear what feelings are related to the stress of newness and what stress has been lingering in the spaces which you have just entered. That is how all of the warning signs get dismissed.

A week before classes started, my wife and I decided to take a walk in a local park. I had trouble finding things to say, instead looking out at the mountains nearby. We had decided if we were going to abandon our lives and move out here, we were at least going to find a place with a decent view. She asked me what was wrong, specifically wondering if I was intimidated by schoolwork, or teaching, or homesick. It wasn't any of those things. I looked at her and said, as a 28-year-old man, "I hope I make friends at school."

I didn't immediately make friends. I never do. Luckily, my first-year cohort came with a feature perfect for my non-partying lifestyle, almost everyone was older than me, and they had children as well. Although I was distant for the first term, we were all pleasant enough with each other around the office. I had bonded with one particular student who was the only other white guy in our cohort. We had similar taste in popular culture, and, looked somewhat similar as bigger guys with beards. I recognize now how related the last two sentences are; however, at the time it seemed "natural." When using

gender, race, and sexuality to analyze phenomenological philosophy, Ahmed reveals how we are all directed to performances of ourselves as gendered, raced, and oriented beings.

In her words:

Directions are instructions about ‘where,’ but they are also about ‘how’ and ‘what’: directions take us somewhere by the requirement that we follow a line that is drawn in advance. A direction is thus produced over time; a direction is what we are asked to follow. (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology* 16).

This describes how we come to perform a gender binary, as it existed prior to our expression of gender. This also helps us explain the political implications of keeping our social worlds homogenous. Of an entire diverse cohort of people, I am drawn to the nearest fellow white guy. We were directed toward one another, whether or not we actually had more in common than previously thought. When understood through queer phenomenology, we can see our social choices as political choices. For someone of my identity, I can see the power and oppression of these choices as they look from the outside. I understand the frustrating inevitability of a friendship such as this. It was not until after the whole cohort returned from the month-long holiday break that I realized how much I missed *all* of them, and the feeling seemed to be mutual. I quickly bonded with three other students: the aforementioned white guy and two women of color. We began regularly ending our days with coffee and lunch together.

As I became closer with my cohort, it was clear they were privier to the tension of our department than I was. While I felt some weirdness, I had, by that point, dug a pit of narcissism so deep that I assumed my feelings were related to my own inability as a student. My friends would often allude to things they knew about issues between faculty and existing students. I would try to stay away from these conversations; however, the

best thing about a secret is often letting other people know there are things you cannot tell them. As such, every lunch was met with some allusion that I would take with me on the drive home, haunting my commute. We can recall the tenet of disability studies suggesting environments are disabling in their social construction (Baglieri et. al.). We can extend this discussion beyond physical constructions of stairs and walls and into constructions of division of labor and ideas. The department was divided with barriers before our arrival, only giving us certain ways to move. We can interpret this as more added precarity leading to mental illness, all courtesy of academic structures (Berg et. al.). We developed things we would say to each other in order to combat the creeping dread of our program. We would repeat that “success is not a zero-sum game.” We would also highlight how different each other’s research was to mitigate feelings of competition. At the time it felt like we were healthily coping. Now it feels like we were gaslighting ourselves to avoid the inevitable.

Freire’s influential pedagogical theory was founded in the idea that coming to a critical consciousness about social inequality, as well as one’s place in that inequality, could be a spark for personal and collective action and political empowerment. Communal raising of consciousness about oppression was also key to the empowerment of political action during what we now refer to as feminism’s second wave (hooks “Feminism is for Everybody”). An instructive word in this conversation is “could.” Feminism is, in its healthiest critical form, a challenge to universal understanding of reality which is couched in a well-worn, privileged explanation from someone else (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*). Consciousness raising has the potential for failure. Lunches between classes where we collectively made sense of our academic program

were our form of consciousness raising. However, this communal activity was in direct conflict with the academy's tendency to push human beings into isolation (Gill and Donaghue). These mantras and attempts to take care of each other eventually fell under the power of the anxiety-producing of the academy.

The faculty in our department noticed our closeness. During an informal lunch with one faculty member, myself and my white male colleague were told that we had been pegged as "leaders" who could help bring the department out from some undefined darkness which pre-dated us. Toward the end of the year, when we were joking with each other during a class, another professor proclaimed "I'm so happy with how good friends you all are." Our friendship suddenly meant more to our success as a cohort and the success of our department. This was a social pressure that was, in retrospect, unsustainable. The faculty were giving us a direction, one which was needed much before our arrival. The statement of looking like your same-sex parent can fill you with the phenomenological energy to perform a heteronormative life (Ahmed *Queer Phenomenology*). Similarly, statements of your friendships and relationships fill you with the pressure to maintain those friendships. Suddenly, the social pressures of collegiality become an integral aspect of the health of our department. I would feel a tremendous sense of guilt when feeling frustrated with my cohort. I would begin to spiral, thinking that my inability to be emotionally available for them all of the time, or their failure to do so for me, meant the uneasy peace of our department would crumble. This reliance on our friend group became a way to extend the individualized set of coping strategies often used as panaceas for academic anxiety (Gill and Donaghue). We begin to see our social

relationships as personal failures at collegiality, and thus, personal failure at being able academics.

Toward the end of the year, I was having coffee with one of my friends. I began to launch into our list of mottos about how great our cohort was and how great it was that we weren't competitive. She replied with "Well, most of us aren't competitive." She then pointed out how often she felt belittled by our mutual male friend because he had a way of offering research advice unsolicited. He also regularly quoted readings none of us had read during class. We then began trading complaints, which lasted longer than our coffee did. These complaints stuck with me throughout the summer. I began dreading our group message thread, which would fill up while I was working shifts at a part-time summer job. Between having partners with more lucrative careers and having children to care for during the summer, I was reminded that school was perhaps the only thing I had in common with my friends. I was particularly annoyed with the other white guy in our group. Over the months, everyone in our department had developed a habit of calling me by his name. It felt as if, to everyone else, I was the *other* white guy, a pale shadow. I started to realize how often I was apologizing for him in social situations, or, I was the one who he would listen to when someone needed to tell him he was being rude. He even told me that he needed me to tell him when he messed up. I wasn't just responsible for my own whiteness and maleness, I was on the lookout for his as well. I resented this. I resented him and everyone else for mistaking me for him all the time. He began to represent everything I didn't want to be as a colleague, fairly or not. Whether he realized it or remained oblivious, we all drifted away from him, and in turn barely kept our own friendships together. The truth is that I would never be able to shoulder the burden of his

privilege-laden mistakes, because I was becoming more aware of my own. I began to think about how much I spoke in conversations and in classrooms, and actively attempted to shut up more and more. This was not enough, and, I soon realized I was confused for my friend because we both exhibited similar pressures on people. We both also regularly failed to advocate for our classmates when it mattered most. I quickly learned that the Midwestern politeness I entered the program with served the dual-function of giving me an excuse to do nothing with my own body. While my friend seemingly ignored this truth about our position as white men, I turned inward into self-criticism, self-reflection, and more often than not, despair.

Our first-year love affair as a cohort was doomed for many reasons. We quickly buckled under the tension of feuding advisors, moments where we let each other down in class, feelings of academic competition no one really ever conquers, among other things. We were never going to live up to our promise as leaders. Perhaps I am making excuses for myself; however, I'm not sure any graduate cohort can be fairly expected to transform a program the way it seemed we were. The nature of a graduate program is that the students are temporary, but the dynamics between faculty and the residue of what students do are what stays. Even if we had managed to spend three years as the best of friends, establishing a system of love and compassion for each other and our new students, we would have left and trusted that tradition to continue. Emotional labor and infrastructure of our department became another thing that was thrown down the ladder to the lowest rung. We failed before we even got there. I failed the moment I stepped into a classroom as an intruder. I did make friends at school, for a little while at least.

Conference Colleagues

I've grown to hate conferences. They are a part of the job I've had trouble finding value in. I remember being introduced to the idea in my first year as a Master's student. Suddenly, in November, the entire department shut down so that faculty and students could go to the National Communication Association annual conference. In my first year, NCA was held in Orlando. I thought it was telling when everyone who returned had more to say about Disney World than anything that happened at the conference. Earlier in that semester, our supervisor pushed all of us the day of the Central States Communication Association deadline. She was a big proponent of conferencing, and, she worked herself almost into a mania as she urged us on. She told us that it didn't matter if we thought our ideas were good, ending with a rally cry of "You submit! You submit! You submit!" I hear her voice every time I see a button labeled submit on a conference website.

When I was working as faculty, my colleagues urged me to take advantage of travel funds I received and to use them to scope out potential Ph.D. programs. During my first year of teaching, NCA was only a few hours away in Chicago. I drove up there with a few graduate students, and scheduled myself a few full days of conference panels to check out different programs. I was always jealous of our chair. When he would come back from conferences, he would describe being energized by all of the panels he attended. His experiences would fill him with new ideas and provide him with new potential directions. I wanted that as well. After my sixth panel of the day, I never wanted to attend a panel again. I caught up with him in the lobby after my long day to share our experiences and told him of my schedule. "Why would you do that to yourself?", he asked. I was too embarrassed to give him the truthful answer "Because I thought that's what you would do."

I have developed into a reluctant conference goer. I always travel alone, and, I try to stay at a hotel that is away from the conference site. A professor once told me she was alone in her own hotel room considering giving me a call because I was probably the one person she could rely on to also be alone in their room. She was not wrong. Knowing that everyone in my hotel is a potential colleague or employer keeps me from sleeping at night. I often feel relief when I am walking alone through a city, away from the conference and toward my bed. When I enter a conference lobby, I see people who are all dressed better than me, performing the act of working hard better than me, and who have more academic friends than me rushing around one another. Some folks have reached a vaunted status in our field to the point where it is impossible for them to walk through a conference without being noticed. Graduate students go to conferences with the goal of finding ways to interact with these people, and, then brag to their colleagues when returning home. I like walking a long way through conference hosting cities because it reminds me that outside of the given convention center or hotel, those people do not matter nearly as much. In fact, the lanyard bearing their name may be more of a burden in the city-at-large than a status symbol. It marks them as a tourist who does not belong. Perhaps that is why people often stay close to the convention hotel. They are afraid to confront that reality. The hotel functions to keep the academic conference as another kairotic space, one that is a physical embodiment of academic time throughout an often-multilevel hotel (Price).

From the beginning, my experience at the most recent NCA was a source of stress. The pressure of conferencing while trying to complete my dissertation seemed particularly daunting. I also had very little conference-ready work, as most of my energy

had gone toward completing my comprehensive exams. I was very close to not submitting anything when my advisor reiterated the importance of attending the conference in this year, saying in so many words that I didn't have a choice. I converted two of my comps essays into conference papers. One of these essays was focused on methods and was probably the strongest part of my comps. It represented the culmination of a years-long paradigm shift in research and articulated my understanding of my new ethics and goals. The other essay I felt less certain about. It was an attempt to blend various theories which had captured my imagination together: Disability studies, intersectional and decolonial feminisms, and performance studies. My committee agreed with this skepticism when I defended my prospectus, urging me to consider the importance of taking decolonialism seriously as a movement, rather than a theory or metaphor. I agreed, and, I moved away from this aspect of the project. Naturally, this essay was the only one selected for the conference and I was put on a panel addressing decolonialism in disability studies.

I was faced with staring down a conference presentation about an aspect of my project which no longer existed, and, which I had serious ethical concerns about my participation. I privately weighed many options. I considered not attending the conference at all, but, then I thought of all the times I had seen people fail to attend their own presentations and how frustrated everyone was with that. Then I considered attending the panel, but ceding my time to my fellow panelists. I shot this option down for fear of seeming disrespectful as well as the impracticality of spending all of the time and money to travel, just to symbolically not participate. I opted to go and make sure I

made acknowledgement of the issues of using these kinds of theories a part of my brief presentation. It was a lot to cover in 12 minutes or less, and doomed to fail from the start.

I did indeed invest money (which I did not exactly have) and even more time into traveling to this conference. The pressure to travel to conferences has always been more financially precarious for me as a graduate student than it was as a faculty member. This is not just an expression of the differences in pay between a student and faculty member, and it bears mentioning I was a lecturer making just above our department's base salary. This is also an expression of the differences in travel reimbursement. As a Master's student, we were all reimbursed for expenses up to \$500. As a faculty member, I was completely reimbursed for the price of my complete hotel stay, travel, and any cab fare I accrued while in the conference city. This totaled close to \$1,500 for my initial conference as a lecturer. Funding was even tighter in my Ph.D. program, with reimbursement and paperwork fully being the responsibility of a student organization, which pulled money from various sources in the university. For most conferences, this reimbursement would max out around \$300. When discussing funding with colleagues in my doctoral program, it became clear that many of us had been trained to find any source of reimbursement acceptable. I know nothing of the systems in place for faculty in this program; however, the class stratification between faculty and students seems apparent. I often tried to find affordable ways to travel while maintaining a healthy social distance for my psychology. In the months preceding, I had moved from Colorado to Tennessee, making me much closer to the Baltimore location of the conference. I opted to rent a car, instead of flying, as the Knoxville airport is not a hub and tickets were quite expensive. I booked a room at what appeared to be a nearby Holiday Inn for one night. I woke up

early the morning before, paid for my rental car, and drove northeast to my hotel for nine hours. After I checked in, I discovered I was more than a mile away from the conference. By the time I got to the conference center, I was drenched in sweat from a combination of performance anxiety and cardiovascular exercise. I dropped my bag off in the presentation room, and quickly retreated to the bathroom in an attempt to get the sweat under control. I settled for less visible.

As we sat down, I could not help noticing the outward able-bodied appearance of our disability studies panel. None of the presenters or the chair needed any physical accommodations in the room. Before the panel started, I assisted our chair in making rows that that would be wider to accommodate audience members moving with additional parts of their bodies such as chairs which needed more space. No one who needed these accommodations attended the panel. Perhaps the conference goers who would have benefited from this set-up were already disabled by the venue. This particular conference was spread out across four different buildings on each side of an intersection of streets. By the time I had found our room, I had to walk up four flights of stairs, back down another to a skybridge crossing above the street, and around sharp corners with low visibility to find our panel session. As an able-bodied man in his early thirties, I found the room overly difficult to reach. Conferences make often make accommodations for disability; however, they are almost always designed for issues of mobility, sight, and hearing, if they exist at all (Price). This particular conference ranked very low in accessibility on the list of ones I had attended. No one involved claimed a disability as a part of their identity during presentations either. Our chair, who was the only professor involved in the panel, noted this lack of noticeable disability toward the end of the

presentation. Even within the disability interest group, there exists a tension with invisible and mental forms of disability. Many forms of technology designed to be adaptive to the needs of mental disability, such as coexisting textual chat spaces, are deemed to be the epitome of rudeness by those comfortable with existing structures (Price). Beyond these accommodations, conferences inherently privilege native languages and extroverted personalities in their social construction. I have often weighed the costs against the benefits of making a statement highlighting the lack of physical disability on our panel. It is inarguably important for us to problematize a disability studies space that may not include people with disabilities. However, this also puts pressure on those with invisible disabilities to publicly disclose their identities. Throughout this project, I have maintained a discomfort with using language of “us” for fear that equating issues of anxiety and emotional flux with other forms of even mental disability is politically problematic. Thus, this attempt to perform responsible scholarship also has the potential for isolation and alienation. It is here that we can see the limits of collegiality when pressured to accommodate, with the assumption that academic participants are not attempting to engage to the best of their abilities inherently failing to meet the standards of respect we demand of each other (Price). The one needing the accommodation is assumed to be the bad colleague. Pointing out the problems of academic space once again makes one the problem (Ahmed *On Being Included*).

Another important factor was the overwhelming whiteness of this panel on decolonialism. Most of us were white-passing students, many of whom had projects which only vaguely touched on decoloniality. Unlike the callout of a lack of disability, this went unspoken on the panel. There were levels of discomfort that the predominantly

white and able-bodied room was willing to tackle, and, discussions of race were silently more difficult. The only student of color on the panel had the most decolonial project. Her work focused on records of schools educating indigenous students as a way to explore the failures of white allyship. It was a tremendously vital project which made me feel even worse about my participation on the panel. I felt pangs of discomfort and shame throughout my presentation. When I would say something that would get a positive response, I would look out to see those responses would come from other white men. Reactions like these in academic spaces often make me uncomfortable. We had time for questions and answers at the end of the panel. Most of the audience interaction came from a woman up front, who appeared to be there to support the student with project about indigenous schools. The two women exchanged thoughts that rightfully highlighted the importance of this project, as well as gently criticized the nature of the rest of ours. One specific criticism mentioned the dangers of listing decolonial theory as just another source of research among other theories, and that it is a practice and political mission. This echoes much discussion of the efficiency in academic theory to co-opt and then quickly move beyond bodies of theory discussing issues of race (Christian). This has been a strategy employed on many forms of theory seeking to center race and colonialism. Intersectional theorists have fought this pull by asserting an independent field of intersectionality studies, with a denial of being merely incorporated into existing fields (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall). Decolonial scholars have similarly fought the tendency for their political project to be incorporated as simply a metaphor to bolster existing racial justice projects, instead of a movement specifically aimed at the return of land to indigenous peoples (Tuck and Yang). My colleague on the panel and her friend

embodied these fights. They became embodiments of the feminist killjoy, pointing out the problems of our projects and the reception in this academic space (Ahmed *Living a Feminist Life*). The supposed joy of my own project was at stake, so I spoke up to suggest I agreed with them and found little joy in my own project. I pointed out this project had since shifted focus due to those very concerns. I pointed toward the indigenous schools project as something important. As I looked at my fellow panelist, I did not see the acknowledgment of solidarity in her eyes. Instead, I saw anxiety and fear of what I would say next. I quickly finished, and then it was time to end the panel. I had forced myself into having the last word. Instead of myself being a killjoy, I helped to further support the walls to disable their voices.

As I gathered my things, I resolved to speak to my colleague after the panel. I apologized for being defensive. I reiterated the importance of her work and that I was excited to see where it would go. She responded that she didn't think I seemed defensive. We wished each other a good conference, and parted ways. As I walked alone through downtown Baltimore, I thought about the ways I had failed. Key to criticisms of whiteness is to let go of assertions of intent. In other words, "just because one does not intend to oppress others with an utterance or nonverbal expression does not mean that [they are] not responsible for the effects such communication messages have on others" (Warren 55). Attempts to rely on an intent to be good are often just another way to let ourselves off the hook. I knew I should have said nothing. I agreed with the criticisms, and, the best things I could have done to help them stick was to be quiet. Instead, I further pressed the issue, implicitly seeking for the victim of my oppression to erase the difference in an attempt to validate my contribution (Warren). In other words, I messed

up and then continued to dig a hole for both of us to fall deeper down. There is always this force inside of me, fighting to shout. This force wants to be the center of attention. This force wants to make it about me and my experiences. This force doesn't want me to think about myself. This force is very fragile, and, any crack it sees within itself causes it to lash out. Some days, I can fight it better than others, but many days, I don't know how to fight it. Academic pressures are rarely interested in fighting these impulses. Instead, the pressures of conference spaces to demonstrate our abilities of able, academic minds suggest we assert our voices at any opportunity with arises (Price). Thus, I must work against all the academic forces in order to find a space for the reflexive, white male academic.

I had a nine-hour drive to wonder to myself about the utility of speaking on my experience. I questioned the importance of my own voice and contribution. What could this project do? This question has halted my progress on many days since. I write these words not completely knowing the answer. I suppose, not knowing is why I write. The writing is part of the living. The living is the only way to get closer to the knowing. This does my brief colleague in the panel no good, but she doesn't need my help anyway. Perhaps that is the most difficult thing to recognize. I am not the protagonist of this story, although I was raised to believe I am. I spent money and time to enact the ritual of whiteness and maleness. To speak, and, apologize, putting the burden of my apology on my colleague. I am certain this ritual was performed many times throughout the conference, over and over again. Many men like me were likely putting this burden on people in the name of professional development. So, I sit here and write alone, hoping someday I can turn this into a manual of how to help. Because silence can be helpful, too.

Chapter Five: Limitations and Directions of Possibility

As I attempt to find an ending for this project, I wish to make a brief detour to discuss a film which spoke to me as I have been working. The 2018 film *Madeline's Madeline* centers around a teenager as she becomes more and more involved with a group of performance artists. We discover throughout the movie that this teenager, a dark-skinned, multiracial girl named Madeline, has been diagnosed with an unspecified mental illness. We are never clear of what has afflicted her, we only know that she has frequent mood swings, is prone to pretending to be animals and inanimate objects, has a lack of social awareness around triggers like sexuality and verbal aggression, and has a medical prescription which she frequently does not take. We are also introduced to her mother, whom wildly oscillates between being over protective of Madeline and being ready to give up on taking care of her out of exhaustion. Because of this strained relationship with her own mother, Madeline becomes very personally invested in her relationship with the white woman who directs her performance theater troupe.

As their relationship deepens, the theater director, Evangeline, begins to push Madeline to explore her own trauma for her art. She pushes Madeline to recall times when she and her mother were in conflict and use them to perform as her mother as well as other people, animals, and objects through her performance. Evangeline continues to do this, despite the fact it has become clear Madeline's attachment to her as a surrogate

daughter is beginning to have an adverse effect on her mental health. The climax of the film comes when Evangeline is ready to reveal the play she has been working on to the entire troupe. She pushes Madeline into a performance of her mother in which she recites all of the negative things we have seen her mother say to her throughout the film. The performance ends with Madeline collapsed on the floor in tears. Evangeline looks on proudly, explaining that her play will tell the story of Madeline and her afflicted mind. The theater troupe looks on in bemusement, verging on horror. A member of the troupe speaks for the audience (one hopes) when she pushes back, saying “So you’re going to tell the story of the inside of her brain?” Evangeline insists that they can make this story belong to all of them, before leaving to take a phone call. The last ten minutes of the movie are ambiguous in their reality. What we are shown is the troupe rebelling against Evangeline by locking her out of the rehearsal space while they spontaneously put together a performance with Madeline in which she expresses herself and rejects Evangeline’s protests. The final images of the film show the troupe dancing joyously in the street as Madeline walks away and out of focus.

In his article discussing writer/director Josephine Decker and her collaborative relationship with actress Helena Howard, who plays Madeline, film critic David Ehrlich explores the autofiction at play in the film. Decker was inspired to make the film after years of growing frustration with her role as a documentarian and narrative filmmaker. Decker wanted to explore the ethical nature of telling other peoples’ stories after co-directing a documentary about bisexuality and making a narrative feature with an ex-boyfriend about their relationship. She felt these projects both attempted to fit the lives of their subjects into a recognizable narrative. After meeting Howard as a judge for the then

15-year-old's high school performance competition, and crying with each other at the end of the performance, the two formed an artistic collaboration about the precarious nature of their own collaboration. *Madeline's Madeline* is the result of that partnership. It is an attempt to engage with questions Hollywood rarely asks itself. Decker became a filmmaker unable to create without interrogating the notions of authorship. Ehrlich himself puts Decker's self-imposed dilemma succinctly, "It's hard to be a curious person with a powerful conscience" (Ehrlich).

Although he is not mentioned by Decker, Howard, or Ehrlich in this article or the body of the film, the work of Dwight Conquergood echoes throughout this collaboration. Indeed, if one were to take mentions of the Hollywood film industry or documentary-based filmmaking, and, simply replace them with discussions of the academy and ethnography, these ideas could have appeared anywhere in Conquergood's work. Conquergood believed in performance ethnography as a form of ethical praxis in which ethnographers and the cultural members they sought to understand co-performed as simultaneous subjects and objects. This is in opposition to presenting the researcher as detached and controlling of fieldwork. Decker decided to collaborate with Howard in the same way Conquergood collaborated with Chicago street gangs, tenement residents, and Hmong refugees, among others. Decker and Howard created fictionalized versions of themselves to point out the horror of the detached researcher/artist merely touring a person's life for personal gain. *Madeline's Madeline* is not only about performance, it is performance.

This connection occurred to me as I was immersed in this work. Despite days where I shamed myself for a lack of productivity, this project and the connections I make

with it have been living with me for over a year. My entire life is has become this project. Ahmed suggests that once you become a person who notices racism and sexism in your life, it is impossible to unbecome that person (*Living a Feminist Life*). This is true for all aspects of our life, and, inherently tied to our questions of research and ethnography. I am now a person who engages with and values performance while rejecting scriptocentrism. I am now unable to be anything else. I have not made this connection to celebrate the victory of performance ethnography. In fact, I believe it is the opposite. Decker and Howard made their film over a decade after Conquergood died, and, more than thirty years after he began to make these ethical connections. It is entirely likely that Decker and Howard have no idea who Conquergood is, and, came to similar conclusions through their own unidentified forms of co-performative work. This is despite the fact Dwight Conquergood is one of the most accessible academic writers I have come across. I would be comfortable sharing his work with anyone from my family or hometown. This missed connection speaks to a larger gap in conversation between artists, academics, and so-called “lay people” who have been convinced they should not see themselves as artists or academics. The inability to acknowledge each other’s stories as sites of theory is the key theme to understanding this project, as well as the limitations and directions for future work I will discuss from this point. Keep this in mind as we move toward our approaching endpoint.

Limitations

The current project has many limitations that would be identified by various paradigms. Considering my goals as a researcher, I would like to put forth the following limitations as ones that trouble me the most as the author. In this section, I will discuss

the limitation of the current project's containment to my perspective and privileged identity. I will also discuss the lack of a definition about my own mental disability. Finally, I will discuss the problems of a leaky structure in which narrative seems to overtake theory throughout. It is my hope that acknowledgement of these limitations is not an endorsement of their failings, but an understanding of my own bounds.

At the beginning of this project, I laid out the importance of intersectional theories in regards to all projects seeking forms of justice. I made the argument that no analysis of identity is complete without attempting to create a full picture discussing race, gender, orientation, class, religion, and bodily ability among other identity markers. I made this argument by pointing to a body of narrative work from women of color, many of whom were queer folks, to examine how work like this predated the definitions of both autoethnography and intersectional theory. Despite my stated reverence for this work, and, my insistence upon it as a theoretical frame, my project was always going to be constrained by my own identity. Using this theory has been a precarious move throughout the project. I have been constantly on the verge of devolving the current project into an ever-growing list of my own privileges. One could argue that a true investment in the power of intersectionality and critical disability studies would be to maintain their purity by refusing to engage with them from my view point. For reasons I will express later, I disagree with this point; however, that is not an outright invalidation. This project was always limited in its focus on my life and my story, which is not an obviously intersectional story if we are to understand the theory from an aesthetic point of view. I can only hope the words contained in this project answer the ever-creeping question of “why use these theories?”

More specifically, I have been invested in using forms of social justice theory with each other in order to expand their foci. This has generally been in service of a project focused on mental disability. My focus on mental disability throughout this project has also been precarious for personal reasons. I suffer from general anxiety, emotional instability, and symptoms of depression. That is all I can accurately provide, as I have never been formally diagnosed with any specific mental disorders. The closest I have come to a formal diagnosis is two different therapists suggesting I have a newer form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder which has not yet been accepted into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for psychology. Further, none of my therapists have been psychiatrists capable of prescribing medication for mental stability. Thus, I have never actively taken medication for any of my mental disorders. My hesitance and inconsistency in describing myself as someone with a mental disability has likely been apparent throughout the project. I have conducted this project with an ongoing skepticism about the political utility of understanding myself as someone afflicted with a psychiatric disability. This move can be diluting of existing movements for disability rights. Further, it can move us to a world where everyone being treated by therapy can see themselves as disabled in some way. This can be debilitating for disability rights, especially as we seek to move into kairotic realms like national politics, public policy, and academic rights.

Finally, this project is limited by its tenuous division of narrative and theory. Sections of this work go without a citation, and, often concepts from work being cited are mentioned as understood terms. In narrative writing, there is a constant push and pull of being work that is too citational and not citational enough. Often, folks engaged in narrative work lose the thread about what constitutes research. Further, work invested in

exploring the self can be dangerous for privileged people like myself. We tend to take powerful experiences and make them about ourselves. Any project seeking to demonstrate an understanding of privilege can easily turn an expression of that privilege. As white people, men, heterosexuals, able-bodied people, or any combination of those identities, we are on the verge of colonizing narrative research for our own purposes. Those who seek to use narrative research for political resistance will recognize an attempt to dominate and assimilate. Those working to further maintain the distinction between narrative and research can alter this critique to further “prove” narrative work is an act of narcissism. Thus, failing to do this work properly endangers the health of the project. As explored throughout this project, I am still relatively new to this form of research. I am constantly negotiating this shift in paradigm, which is coming to a form of research skeptical of the entire idea of paradigms. This project has been written on the edge of a cliff, with the potential to fall always a possibility.

Directions and Possibilities

I began my limitations section with a discussion of the political limits of my own cultural identity as a site of investigation for social justice work. Here, I will be a clear about the possible future directions to be mined from that limitation. It should be evident I am a long way away from the student in that Cultural Studies class who would recommend a move away from this work. Alcoff has recommended we shift to thinking about whiteness as a socially constructed ethnic identity as a way to further analyze it. Her assertion is that whiteness work is not the flipside of anti-racist work or race studies, but another aspect of this body of work. If we consider this thought with Conquergood’s ever pressing assertion that withdrawal from political action is itself political action, we

can see that white people are always making decisions about analyzing race, whether this is present in our work or not. This can be extended to intersections of identity as a whole. I instead suggest the vital need to see more narrative projects analyzing mental health in the academy from all positions.

What is often lost in the call for intersectionality, especially as it was conceived of centering around a black feminist subject, is the specificity of positionality within the body of theory. White critics of intersectionality may be unable to understand the call for a centering of this black feminist subject as an addition instead of a negation. This is because that is how whiteness often asserts centrality, through the negation of cultural others. The dichotomy suggesting we can focus on a generalized, meaning in this case white, male, straight, etc., subject or a subject with “specificity” such a black feminist subject is a false one. It is my assertion, guided by intersectionality, that we can focus on many specific positions. This must be done so with the respect to the black feminist thought which guides us in our specificity. This project would not be possible without the various women, many of them women of color, who chose to write about their precarious life in the academy before me cited throughout this work. These citations are important. As Ahmed suggests, they leave a trail.

Thus, it is my suggestion for a multiplicity of stories of academic disabling across various intersections of identity. Collective raising of consciousness is key to any social justice movement. I am calling on all of us to tell our stories from our specific intersections. I believe this is the best way for us to recognize each other’s pain. I have written this project with the assumption many potential readers may exclaim “You’re sad at school, so what? We’re all sad here!” It is my hope we come to recognize collective

sadness and frustration as a site of possibility rather than negation. This is not to say academic life disables us all in the same way. Obviously, my anxiety and depression are not the same as gender, racial, and/or sexual violence experienced in these spaces. A flattening of experiences as merely “all bad” is far from my goal. Instead, I hope that we can recognize the academy harms us all in different ways and to different degrees. It is my hope this move will push us beyond being satisfied with experiencing the least oppression and toward the possibility of being free.

Tied to this goal is my recommendation we make invisible forms of disability more visible through the writing of these projects. Similar to the hypothetical negating statement I have listed above, I have learned in recent years that we all know many more people in therapy than we think. “We’re all in therapy” can be dangerously normalizing of mental disability. As disability studies scholars have suggested, mental and psychiatric disability can be fluid and difficult to define (Garland-Thomson; Price). Being vocal about these disabilities is difficult, as it must be done in a way that does not negate other, potentially more embodied, forms of disability. As we have explored, it is 2020 and still accessible ramps, sidewalks, doors, and office spaces are rare. It is my hope that more narrative projects about ill-defined mental disability can give us all a greater pool to work from. In a better academic world, this doesn’t flood an existing market of disability studies research, but instead expands a field. I am not so naïve that I believe this world is imminently possible; however, more honest work that reflexively explores the different ways disability presents itself in different bodies and minds could bring it about.

Finally, I have mentioned the dilemma of finding ways to define performance ethnography when it fundamentally seeks to challenge definitions. I previously

mentioned submitting two of my comprehensive exam essays for NCA, with my methods essay not being selected for the conference. This essay was a statement of my position as a performance scholar which I had been sharpening for over a year at that point.

Feedback I received for this essay was overwhelmingly negative, suggesting I had cited all of the wrong names and my understanding of performance was offensive. I am not relitigating a conference submission, but instead pointing toward the nature of academic logic to survive in our various paradigms and disciplines. This experience led me to feel as if performance studies has become another academic field in which one needs to cite the right names and know the right people to write toward. Dwight Conquergood said a great many uplifting things about performance but perhaps his most important statement was “performance does not proceed in ideological innocence and axiological purity” (67). For all of the possibility Conquergood saw in performance studies, he understood the necessity of constantly interrogating our positions as researchers. This interrogation never stops. We cannot be comfortable coming up with a prescriptive set of strategies for our writing and works cited lists to follow. This is not an excuse for my own project’s limitations, but a call to further push the caravan of performance to move in new ways. This opens the possibility we can make connections to the latent artists and scholars walking every street.

I end this project as I began it, with a story of academic anxiety and sadness. Every part of this project has been painful, often in ways I do not realize. Recently, when looking over a section I thought was too boring, my wife exclaimed, “No wonder you’re sad all the time.” I am sad all the time. I cannot help but think of the choices I could have made which would have made me happier. Months ago, when starting to write my

narratives, I felt the depths of despair. Now that I near the end of this project, I can see the ways in which this despair can be a possibility. It is my hope we can all be more honest with one another about the despair we feel in this academy. If we do that, maybe we can begin to stop hurting each other and instead turn that energy on the systems which afflict us.

Everything I have done has been an attempt to prepare me for this project. Since I've started work for this dissertation, I've cycled through three different side jobs, watched the two professors who've influenced my shift leave the department, worked through two different iterations of my committee as a result, and moved across the country again. Every paper I've written, book I've read, hour I've worked to make rent, and conversation I've had has been judged by its effectiveness toward helping me with this project. Coffee with a friend: Nice, but do I feel more equipped to write afterward? Working at the hardware store: I have to pay rent, but I did I really get any research done on my break? Moving to Tennessee: Sure, this is your wife's dream job, but can you finish your work away from school? I now see this is the pinnacle of education. There is the work, and, there is what you do in your life that keeps you from completing the work. And I am so very tired.

I was drawn to this project because, above all else, it seems one of my most useful skills in writing and learning is self-reflexivity. Indeed, I am aware of myself to an intense degree. This allows me to be aware of my failures as they are happening. I'm told this is what might make me a good writer in this regard. I have begun to see it is also what makes me afraid to talk at parties, afraid of losing my loved ones, afraid of citing the wrong sources, afraid of writing, afraid of applying, afraid of living, and the list goes

on. I have been given several pieces of advice about the dissertation process. One friend's words seem both optimistic and cynical. She said I should appreciate that this is the last time people will have the energy to care about the quality of my writing. This is likely the final time someone provides feedback with the intent of making my work better, so I should seize this moment. This is good advice for someone who lives in the present. I am currently stuck in the past and imagining a bleak future.

The past haunts me as it is the basis for this project. The more I am in school, it seems the most profound effect it has had on me is to break down all of my coping mechanisms. I grew up afraid to try new things because of the potential for failure. Someone told me I would be good at school, and I believed them. What I was not prepared for were all of the sources for potential failure as a college student. Missed the registration deadline? That will be a huge fee and a hold on your loan refund. Wrote an email that seemed too informal or contained a grammatical error? You've lost the respect of your professor. Admitted to ignorance of a certain theory? You've lost all credibility with this classroom. Failure is all around us. Although failure should be productive, no one has the time and energy to view it as such. We are all on deadlines, after all.

Further, the past now seems like a place of longing and pain. I think back on what got me here and I get angry and sad. My life as a student now seems filled with moments of being directed toward something for someone else. I went to and stayed in college because my father wanted to push me away from the factory. I applied to graduate school because a professor wanted me to go. I left a job I was satisfied with because everyone else saw it as a step toward greater things. Even now, I write these words somewhat because other words like them are the things my professors have responded to the most. I

seem to have missed several exits along this road. Now I am here and afraid to step on the gas.

The future also fills me with dread. If this is the last time someone else will take a great interest in my writing, then what lies beyond this? Surely, the future feels full of rejection. Rejection of manuscripts. Rejection of job applications. Rejection is something we are trained to get used to. A colleague once listed all of the reasons he thought my ideas were bad, unsolicited. "Iron sharpens iron," was his justification. What strikes me about this statement now is the sameness of the metal. We are trained to deal with rejection because rejection is the disciplining of difference. Standards exist so that we can maintain them. At least, this is what I tell myself when the rejection comes. The rejection comes from myself as well. I reject the ideas and words as they come from my brain and out my fingertips. Every letter is met with hesitation. I read book after book, hoping it will feel like enough. All a book does is introduce you to more books you need to read. It will never be enough. You have to learn that eventually, you stop the reading and begin the writing. Which is why I always have trouble stopping the reading.

Eventually, emails and shame and shame from emails cause me to part the stacks of books in front of me and begin typing. I sit in the office we have set up for me. It's a room filled with all of the things which bring me joy, so my writing may bring me joy. Instead, I turn the pain of writing onto these objects. Of course, I love my Marvel comics figures like every other stunted white boy in the America. I must see all of these decorations invoking Indiana are a smaller version of nationalism for a conservative segment of our country that has its colonialism baked into its name. I should be ashamed of the Teddy Roosevelt quote my mentor gifted to me because it's about individualist

achievement, and I hate those ideas. This room has no comfort, because it is filled with me, and I believe I am bad.

This project is about my life. At the end of the day, I am left with myself as a subject of study. I am afraid I am a terrible writer, so I do not write. I am afraid my presence hurts others, so I make myself scarce. I am afraid I am unemployable, so I do not seek employment. Every day goes by and I fill with a bit more fear. Mostly, I'm afraid I've made a huge mistake. I am afraid this project is a mistake. What does another narrative about a sad white boy do for the world? Who am I implicating? How do I have a conversation with someone about how I'm wrong and don't deserve their sympathy? And how can I avoid that? Further, I question every citation I make. I love feminist theory, queer theory, anti-racist theory, disability studies, and all kinds of combinations of these things. I question the ethicality of using them in my work. I have been accused of using these things because they are "in" and "fresh." I am afraid that every word and citation is another piece of academic violence. Further, I am afraid that my pain is not enough to matter. So, school makes you sad? Who cares? Also, why would you expect all of the people who don't have your privileges and advantages to care? Every step fills me with fear.

Indirectly, I am afraid this life is a mistake. What have I learned about myself? What has school really taught me? A long time ago, I remember hearing a professor say humanities are about making students better people. I am probably a better and more ethical person, but, these things have also made me miserable and poor. I think back on my life as a student and think about all of the lives I've been directed away from. A film and television studies degree could have set me up to become a pop culture writer.

Focusing on getting a job out of my undergraduate might have given me a decade head start on my finances. Staying at my first teaching job would have made me happy with my work and kept me from moving away from home. Staying in interpersonal communication might have made me more marketable for jobs. I have no way of knowing if these things are true, but their possibility is paralyzing.

Every day, I wake up and my body aches. These pains remind me of how much older I am now than fourteen years ago when I started college. I think of all the time I've spent and how uncertain my future is. It scares me. Before I know it, another day has passed and that fear has won. So, I sit in this room I have filled with self-loathing, and, I write these words that I hate as soon as they are done. I am almost done being a student, and I feel like the main thing I have learned is that none of us have learned enough. I know more about myself than I ever have before. I know more about writing and reading and researching, but, most importantly, I know that I will never know enough. Instead of filling me with relief, this fills me with dread. Dread that these words will never be enough. Dread that more than a decade of being a student has led me to a project I cannot bring myself to finish. Being a student used to feel like a needed direction and drive, and, now it feels like a tremendous burden that I will never truly shake. Nevertheless, I am out of time, so I must write. After all, there is only the work and the things that keep you from doing the work.

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