Football Wishes and Fashion Fair Dreams:  
Class and the Problem of Upward Mobility in Contemporary U.S. Literature and Culture

by

Sara Appel

Program in Literature
Duke University

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Kathi Weeks

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Through an analysis of contemporary films, novels, comics, and other popular texts, my dissertation argues that upward class mobility, as the progress narrative through which the American Dream has solidified itself in literary and cultural convention, is based on a false logic of “self-made” individualism. The texts I examine tell a new kind of mobility story: one that openly acknowledges the working-class community interdependence underpinning individuals’ ability to rise to their accomplishments. My work spotlights distinctly un-rich communities invested in the welfare of their most vulnerable citizens. It also features goal-oriented individuals who recognize the personal impact of this investment as well as the dignity of poor and working-class people from “heartland” Texas to Lower East Side Manhattan. American-exceptionalist stories no longer ring true with popular audiences faced with diminishing access to economic resources and truly democratic political representation. The growing wealth gap between the corporate elite and everyone else has resulted in a healthy mass skepticism toward simplistic narratives of hard work guaranteeing the comforts of a middle-clas life. The archive I have identified displays a fundamental commitment to the social contract that is perhaps the greatest of U.S. working-class values, offering a hopeful vision of collective accountability to readers and viewers struggling to avoid immobilizing debt, foreclosure, and the unemployment line.
Acknowledgments

As my mom and other wise people have said, “Relationships are really all that matter in life. Everything else is icing on the cake.” I could not have survived the past nine years without the relationships that continue to sustain me, professionally and as a human being committed to a lifetime of personal discovery and social change.

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To Deborah Warnock, Michele Fazio, Jack Metzgar, Michelle Tokarczyk, and the rest of my friends and colleagues in Working Class Studies, thank you for helping me
understand what it means to be a “laborer in the knowledge factory.”¹ I could not have made it through graduate school without the acceptance I found in the community we know and love. I am honored to continue building our field, our professional association, and a more class-conscious world with you in the years to come.

I am also grateful for the department staff and research librarians who put up with my bouts of melodrama (usually involving a copy machine or scanner) over these many years: Tiwonda Johnson-Blount, Karen Bell, Pam Terterian, Maria Maschauer, Melanie Mitchell, Carson Holloway, Lee Sorensen, Greta Boers, Danette Pachtner, Dave Mundeen, Yunyi Wang, and Ken Wetherington. Your infinite patience is much appreciated. Special thanks to Lillian Spiller, who provided me with opportunity after opportunity to teach in Women’s Studies—work that sustained me for years, both financially and intellectually. I would also like to thank the cleaning, maintenance, and security staff of Friedl building for vacuuming up my crumbs, fixing the air conditioner, keeping me safe late at night, and refusing to touch those dirty dishes that lazy grad students should take care of themselves. Without your hard work, the third floor might have caved in by now.

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Shilyh Warren, Grover Wehman, Mitali Routh, Casey Jarrin, Calvin Hui, Solomon Burnette, Cheryl Alison, and Heather Epes—with an intensity to match my own, each of you have helped deepen my understanding of not only the questions at the heart of my work, but of why I do the work that I do. Thanks for all the mind-melding richness.

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supreme—but I’m sure as hell glad you made it all the way to San Diego, and on up north. You’re the rock that just keeps on rolling.
Dedication

For my mother, Kathy, and the 99 Percent.
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Introduction: At a Wake, No Longer Alone

“There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody.”
--Massachusetts Senate candidate Elizabeth Warren, August 2011

Over the past couple years, I’ve grown accustomed to hearing something resembling the following when I tell people I’ve been writing a dissertation about upward class mobility stories: “But isn’t upward mobility dead? Is that even possible anymore?” At first, this reaction unnerved me. Was this proof that my work was already hopelessly irrelevant, concerned with a topic that would barely register in significance with exactly the kind of everyday working-class folks featured in the stories I discuss? Or worse, might my investment in the topic be little more than a solipsistic reflection of my own experience as one of the inarguably privileged few (growing fewer by the second) who managed to make a go at “getting out” of poverty? Weren’t most people in the U.S., now as ever, more concerned with just doing their best to get by—working hard, keeping their chins up, chugging along—than courting achievement? After all, if Donald Trump, who inherited millions of dollars and a good amount of know-how from his real-estate mogul father, can claim to be a “self-made” man, how much social currency could an idea like upward mobility hold?

1 From a stop on Warren’s speaking tour in Andover, Massachusetts.

2 And by “people,” I mean academics as well as regular people I meet on the street.

3 In The Self-Made Myth: And the Truth About How Governments Help Individuals, Brian Miller and Mike Lapham discuss Trump’s self-made claims. Citing a speech from the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference in which Trump boasted about how he had “fairly but intelligently earned many billions of dollars”—a feat he further described as “a scorecard and acknowledgement of my abilities”—the authors point out how, in 1990, Trump was nonetheless saved from bankruptcy by a government bailout pact allowing him “to defer nearly $1 billion in debt and take out second and third mortgages on almost all of his properties.” San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2012. 29-30. Print.
Taking a deep breath, I thought about this reaction again, what it assumes and implies. For upward class mobility to be dead, it had to die, which means that at some point—at least as a product of the American cultural imagination—it was alive. If not now, at a juncture somewhere in the past, Americans with no connection to the Trump dynasty felt is was possible to “make” oneself. Moreover, if we take it at face value that upward mobility is in fact deceased, it is also the case that dead things rarely disappear easily, or with few complications for the living. Someone must deal with the corpse; if not properly disposed of, this carcass can make life unbearable for those forced to breathe the rotten air it leaves behind. When a death has meaning—and I assume that the death of upward mobility would be meaningful for some—there is also expected to be an effort made to provide a public experience of mourning: a funeral, or wake, or celebration of life. Even if these rituals are properly observed, there is still no guarantee that the dead won’t continue to haunt the living well beyond the grieving period. There will be memories, springing to life despite one’s best efforts to forget; there will still be dreams, or nightmares, to contend with.

Perhaps I was compelled to write a dissertation centered on contemporary American stories that struggle to come to terms with the death of upward class mobility—stories that, additionally, all try to move on from this death in significant ways—because I’ve been standing at the wake for a good long while now, staring curiously at the corpse before me. It looks so alive; but it is dead, right? The texts I examine in my dissertation—for a time, the closest thing I have to company at this wake—remind me that it is. Some of these stories treat the corpse with more skepticism than I, wondering if it was ever alive to begin with. Mildred Peacock, single mother of five and protagonist of Terry McMillan’s novel Mama (1987), just shakes her head and smiles, leaving to get to Strawberry Lane (where she cleans houses for rich white people)
on time. Tim Riggins, now a has-been from the perspective of his high-school football stardom on TV’s Friday Night Lights (2006-2011), cracks open a Budweiser tallboy and hands it to me. Standing at the wake for as long as I do, I start to get anxious (the Bud helps, though). I think about the pile of student loan debt I’ll be leaving graduate school with; how my mother is getting her hours cut when she should be getting a raise; how my sister Chelsea, with her women’s studies degree, is delivering pizzas. But just as I’m about to panic, I look around and notice that more people are starting to gather at the wake. Many of them are students like me; but I also see more single moms, and some libertarian-leaning “good ‘ol boy” construction workers, and domestic workers, and all kinds of people who are out of a job, underemployed, uninsured, drowning in unpayably high mortgage premiums as foreclosure threatens—and everyone, including me, is getting so ANGRY now that someone even kicks at the corpse (gotta watch those pesky anarchists), and then it hits me. This is what a wake for upward mobility should look like; this is what awake looks like.

The canon of texts I assemble in my dissertation, “Football Wishes and Fashion Fair Dreams: Class and the Problem of Upward Mobility in Contemporary U.S. Literature and Culture,” all speak a resounding “I told you so” to a U.S. cultural moment at which the logic granting upward class mobility its ideological potency—the idea that anyone who works hard and follows the rules can achieve a comfortable level of middle-class success (if not fame and fortune)—is revealing its many false premises. I credit Bruce Robbins for helping me pinpoint upward mobility as the thickest thread linking my project’s objects of study. Naming the upward mobility story a genre in its own right, Robbins nonetheless claims that such stories are “not an ideal way of talking about class struggle or class solidarity” since “by definition they follow selected
individuals up and out, leaving the majority behind.”

Though the stories I look at all focus on goal-oriented individuals with whom readers and audiences are provoked to identify, the protagonists struggling to “get out” of their poverty or working-class conditions in these cases never fully succeed at this, or fully break away from “the majority” cultures and communities from which they come. One might therefore conclude that my dissertation focuses on failed upward mobility stories. However, by problematizing and critiquing the premises defining failure and success in the struggle to “rise,” these stories reveal how upward mobility functions as perhaps the most powerful weapon with which the capitalist system wages class warfare on U.S. workers: destructive, precisely because it is a weapon that so often gets deployed as “friendly fire” by those fighting on the same side of the battle.

There are therefore two ways one might look at what the canon of films, novels, television shows, comics, and other literary and art objects I examine are doing with and to the concept of upward class mobility. From one perspective, these texts—most of which were created between the inaugurations of presidents Reagan and Obama—could be viewed as charting the decline of the potency of this weapon, or the lessening of its material and psychological effects on the working classes. My first chapter, “The Bed They Said She Made: Educational Access and the Comic Hero in Katherine Arnoldi’s The Amazing ‘True’ Story of a Teenage Single Mom,” follows Arnoldi’s autobiographical heroine Kathy as she pursues a dream correlated more strongly with upward mobility than any other: a college education. However, the very enormity of the struggle she undergoes to reach her modest goal of enrolling in an open community college program wages a critique of the lack of resources and support available to teen moms—a

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demographic that, as Kathy’s arduous journey reveals, public liberal arts education has not been designed to include. Mildred Peacock, the star of my fourth chapter (“’What I’m Up To’: Upward Mobility as a Radical Act in Terry McMillan’s Mama”), has always worked her ass off, within a racist socioeconomic system that continually devalues her labor. As a single black woman raising children in the 60’s and 70’s, following the rules by which white middle-class capitalist society operates is not a viable option for her; she was never invited to join the game in the first place (unless cleaning up the messes made around the card table counts as being in the game). Mildred’s survival, both materially and affectively, therefore requires that she break such rules. Despite her desire to see her children leave poverty behind, Mildred’s indifference toward upward mobility’s seductive promises of inclusion is a powerful weapon in her fight to support her family and maintain her dignity. Arnoldi and McMillan’s stories expose the hollow ideological core of upward class mobility as a process that, far from being accessible to virtually anyone with a dream and some “pluck,” is limited by its demarcation of who has been deemed a proper subject to begin the rise out of poverty—and who, owing to her status as marginalized, stigmatized other, is to remain on clean-up duty.

From another perspective, one might see my dissertation as not so much marking the decline or death of upward mobility as bearing witness to the mutation of the concept into something different, and potentially libratory. The stories I look at dislocate upward mobility from its association with competition, privatization, and resource scarcity, recalibrating its weaponry toward more collectivist goals. At every turn, a reader of my dissertation will find a character who could have made choices grounded in a philosophy of meritocratic individualism—but who instead choose, not without ambivalence, to forge ahead with a riskier, alternative vision of success based on a commitment to something more socially accountable than securing one’s own slice
of the pie. Katherine Arnoldi realizes she never would have made it to college without the support of working-class allies—waitresses, truck drivers, factory workers, and others committed to spiriting her in the direction of her dream. She therefore pays her raised class-consciousness forward, investing her artistic and activist energies in “(helping) single moms pursue their rights to an equal access to education.” In the TV series *Friday Night Lights* (the subject of my second chapter, “Where We Left Off Yesterday: Class and the Reclamation of Small-Town Community in Friday Night Lights), Coach Eric Taylor and his guidance counselor wife Tami are continually faced with choices pitting their middle-class desires and liberal “interventionist” values against the prerogatives of the high school football-loving community they serve in their professional capacities. Yet instead of turning points of narrative conflict into an opportunity to display the superiority of the Taylors’ worldview, the show focuses on the cross-class solidarity cultivated between the Taylors and the small Texas town on which their material livelihood and symbolic status as middle-class aspirational figures depends. The films I discuss in my third chapter, “Your Friends and (Possible) Lovers: Working-Class Masculinity Turns to Feminism in Peter Sollett’s *Five Feet High and Rising* and *Raising Victor Vargas,”* feature a cast of Dominican-American teens from Lower East Side Manhattan, most of whom will not be experiencing anything resembling conventional upward class mobility (or “rising”) as either actors or characters. Yet rather than focusing on the bleakness of generational poverty by portraying protagonist Victor as a stereotypically misogynist working-class male in-the-making, Sollett turns Victor’s coming-of-age into an opportunity to revise the hypermasculine scripts through which his identity is taking shape in a decidedly feminist direction: a process aided and abetted by Victor’s cultivation of genuine friendship with his also working-class female love interest.
In all of these cases, the failure of upward class mobility to thrive, from the standpoint of various protagonists who remain intimately connected to working-class communities and other forms of sociality, presents an opportunity to question and revise the motivation for “getting out” of poverty—or, in the Taylors’ case, for clinging resolutely to middle-class values and aspirations. Such stories demonstrate, in the way Judith Halberstam has discussed, the clear connection between failure to achieve traditionally-conceived success as capitalist subjects and the “(refusal) to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline.” Regarded as such, failure becomes an agential form of protest rather than a passive acquiescence to the status of “loser” in the competitive marketplace. By setting out on a quest to find a girl simply so he can learn more about what it’s like to be her—a working-class Latina trying to stay safe and find her place on the streets of Lower East Side Manhattan—Victor protests the idea that commodification of and “traffic” in women, where other forms of social and economic capital remain scarce, are necessary to avoid failure as a man. This protest opens up a whole range of possibilities for what relationships between working-class men and women—who poverty compels to remain personally and economically attached whether they like it or not—might look like.

Moreover, the embrace of failed upward class mobility as an opportunity for critique and transformation of structures of power is radically different, as both a political act and mode of representation, from the “tragic” upward mobility tale ubiquitous in American literary and cultural studies. The young male protagonists of Jack London’s *Martin Eden* and Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* both project their very understandable desire to leave poverty behind onto the bodies of moneyed

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6 I discuss Gayle Rubin’s foundational article and use of this concept in chapter three.
female love interests who represent the alien life of security and ease that they long for. Self-effacing shame in their working-class roots is part and parcel to this projection; in Dreiser, so great is Clyde Griffiths’ shame in his working-classness that he’d sooner murder his pregnant factory-worker girlfriend than have their association revealed to the wealthy social set to which he dreams of belonging. *Five Feet High and Rising* and *Raising Victor Vargas* present no such opportunities for class-aspirational projections of desire; all the girls Victor meets, though ranked in terms of a racially inflected “prettiness” standard, are resolutely working-class. Yet Sollett’s films refuse to equate working-class realism with the cynicism, despair, or circuitous “death drive” often representationally tethered to a lack of access to socioeconomic mobility (John Singleton’s *Boyz in the Hood*; Larry Clark’s *Kids*; Harmony Korine’s *Gummo*). No promises of college, marriage, fame or fortune loom large for Victor or his love interest (named Amanda in one film, “Juicy” Judy in the other). These films, however, project a hopeful optimism radiating from within the working-class community portrayed on-screen rather than a presumably superior, longed for middle-class outside to be accessed through acquiescence to the anti-communitarian logic of the marketplace. Though life assuredly remains a struggle, there is nothing tragic about the fact that Victor may always remain working class.

On this issue of hope my work parts ways with Halberstam’s account of the revolutionary potential of a discourse of failure. Halberstam calls failure an explicitly queer concept in that it stands in contrast to an “equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope.” Paraphrasing Lee Edelman’s

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8 Halberstam, ibid (106).
assertion that “death and finitude are the very meaning of queerness,” she further characterizes hope as part of a “forward looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics” that “animates all-too-many political projects.” From this perspective, the very impulse to hope is grounded in a desire for legitimation according to a normative standard of social inclusion. My work, however, reveals the degree to which hope is a subversive act when felt by those stigmatized as not having “earned” the right to express such a sentiment. Hope combats the immobilizing shame that leads poor and working-class people to accept their pacification as members of a low-wage, underemployed workforce. Mildred’s upwardly mobile daughter Freda has always dreamed of sending her mother on a tropical vacation. When, as an adult, she finds herself with a little extra cash, she excitedly informs Mildred that the time has come to follow through on this plan. Mildred, however, rejects Freda’s offer; “All I want to do is get to the Ebony Fashion Fair if it ain’t already sold out,” she tells her daughter. Mildred’s hopes are grounded in a localized investment in relationships, community, and everyday pleasure that is also an empowered response to the limitations that poverty and racism have imposed on her life. Hoping for something other than an island paradise subverts the capacity of that “carrot” to lead working people toward uncritical acceptance of their place as disempowered laborers (the “stick”), diluting the ideological power of the market order that Halberstam critiques.

Smug in his self-isolating middle-class bubble, Death of a Salesman’s Willy Loman believed his privileged status as a “well liked” straight white male would be enough to help him weather the dehumanizing effects that come with the stick. However, as

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9 In a state of failure-induced delusion following the loss of his longtime job in sales, Loman ends his life in what appears to be a car crash (Miller keeps the circumstances somewhat ambiguous, indicating only a stage direction for “a frenzy of sound, which becomes the soft pulsation of a single cello string”). Loman’s hope was to redeem his broken sense of self by leaving his family a $20,000 insurance policy. New York: Penguin Books, 1949. 135-36. Print.
Loman’s final act of desperation reminds us, the protest impulse at the heart of failure is more effective as a collective rather than individual expression of dissatisfaction. Which brings me to a quintessentially working-class mode of political expression connecting every aspect of my work, from my choice of topic to what motivated the writers and artists I focus on to tell the stories they do: populism. As someone involved in the Occupy movement, it occurred to me that the impulse that drew me into the streets last October was the same one guiding my choice of the texts I bring to my dissertation. These texts are all by, for, and about the 99 Percent, as broadly and messily conceived as that idea has been in its recent and profound emergence. Returning to the wake I describe above, I call populist anything that strives to connect with or build a broad-based coalition of politically like-minded people. Having failed to either achieve or maintain the American Dream that upward class mobility was supposed to facilitate, the folks at the wake hold power in that they are beginning to not only see the corpse for the dead thing that it is, but they are turning to each other and sharing their stories. These stories look remarkably similar to that of a football coach who lost his job and had to take a less lucrative gig at a crumbling school across town (Friday Night Lights); an author-artists with a several published books and a PhD who asked me if there were any adjunct jobs opening up at Duke that she might apply for (Katherine Arnoldi, no joke); a popular black author who takes to her Twitter account nearly every day to talk about Mitt Romney’s money train (Terry McMillan); and a kid who’s sister laughed in his face when he told her he might become a police officer if “this acting thing doesn’t work out” (Five Feet High and Rising’s Victor Rasuk). The impulse to find common ground through sharing stories helped folks who “came out” as the 99 Percent accomplish two things that are essential to building a radicalized popular political movement in the U.S. First, it helped those accustomed to seeing similarly-situated folks as competitors begin to see
each other as allies in the fight against the wealth-hoarding One Percent trumpeting the false refrain that socioeconomic resources are scarce; and second, it lead this new populist coalition to begin formulating a sense of what its demands for change might look like.

The texts I bring to my dissertation prefigure this populist class-consciousness raising. These stories were all “out” before the safety-in-numbers of the 99 Percent made it ok for Americans to begin discussing their failures as a social rather than personal problem. Significantly, the authors, artists, directors, and producers behind these works faced nearly as many struggles getting their creations noticed as their protagonists did trying to prove themselves “dependency-free.” Due perhaps to both the artistically youthful status of their creators and the spirit of status-quo resistance at the heart of the narratives they weave, my research objects all found themselves lingering on the margins of acceptance by popular audiences. Terry McMillan, herself a single mother when she wrote Mama, is famous in the publishing world for the lengths she went to while self-promoting her first novel to working-class black women readers. Though she made her graphic memoir as a “how to survive the process of getting into college” guide for single moms she taught in GED classes, Katherine Arnoldi recalls never being sure whether the women to whom she distributed photocopied pages of her story “read the pages, or just threw them away” on their way out of class, rushing to work or back to their kids. Stumbling over hurdles on the path to mainstream legitimation, Friday Night Lights was nearly cancelled twice throughout its 5-year run; only an impassioned internet fan campaign and a fortuitous move from network to DirecTV kept the show on the air.10 There is a strong connection between these works' struggle to be taken

seriously within their own mediums and the difficulties such stories have being told within sociopolitical and market climates hostile to radicalized perspectives on the lives of everyday Americans. *Mama* found itself in initial mass circulation during Reagan’s drive to pin the blame for the ballooning national debt caused by deregulation on poor black mothers like Mildred Peacock. As Clinton promised to “end welfare as we know it,” Katherine Arnoldi was marketing a book telling single moms to “bring your children with you to the classroom” in the absence of adequate day care. To be accepted by popular audiences, C.L.R. James once said, stories like these “must represent some of the deepest feelings of the masses but represent them within the common agreement—no serious political or social questions which would cause explosions.” Though the “common agreement” now apparently includes room for explosions (which may of course be quickly diffused through paramilitary intervention and pepper spray), the thirty or so years preceding the very recent, still ideologically fragile emergence of a class-conscious U.S. populous was a difficult time for texts daring to tell their “99 Percent Story” ahead of the moment to come.

And speaking of moments to come, I hope my work will contribute to the emerging field of working-class cultural studies: a field that has struggled to articulate itself over the last 15 years largely because, as Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo have said (rather simply), “class is a difficult topic to discuss, both personally and

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11 In *American Dreams*, Jason DeParle gives a fascinating account of the emergence of this notorious expression, which Clinton first uttered during his speech at Georgetown University on Oct. 23, 1991 (given a mere few days after Clinton declared his presidential candidacy). “The speechwriter, Bruce Reed, came from a prosperous family in Idaho… With bookish parents who treated their children to European vacations, Reed couldn’t have spent his formative years any further from the ghetto. He was trying to jump-start a struggling campaign when he set down the resonant phrase ‘end welfare as we know it’.” New York: Penguin Books, 2004. 101-102. Print.

intellectually." The most hopeful cultural shift to have come out of the events of October 2011 was how average working people, not just scholars and policy makers, began talking about class in terms more sophisticated than “that rich person over there who I want to be” and “that poor person over there who I hope no one thinks I’m with.” Thus far in U.S. society, aspiration and shame have been the two strongest impulses structuring mainstream class discourse. Suddenly and fortuitously, and with more intensity than any time since at least the 1930’s, inequality has claimed a vociferous third voice in the conversation. It is perhaps fitting, then, that one of the defining features of working class cultural studies has been the hybridity of disciplinary entry points one can take to both jumpstart and deepen conversations about class, which until recently have been approached primarily from social scientific and (to a more limited degree) journalistic perspectives. Unlike with race, gender, and sexuality, there has been little scholarly or popular engagement with the artistic and cultural character of class. A main reason for this is the assumption that class is best approached as an objective, measurable phenomenon. Class is viewed as a status that can move and change, and therefore the province of indexes, graphs, and surveys rather than more abstract concepts like identity, affect, and desire. Even when the goal is to get “the story,” journalism can provide only a limited account of the truth of how class affects people’s lives. As literary works by Dorothy Allison, Anzia Yeziersaka, Dreiser, and other such writers have problematized, people lie about class with frequency, to others and themselves.14


Again, the dually-reinforcing language of aspiration and shame structuring conversations about class is what leads to the topic’s discursive “difficulties.” Sociologist Edward Flores based his 2008 study of upward mobility in Los Angeles Latino gang communities on the unexamined assumption that “re-orienting” troubled youth from “oppositional” black and Latino cultures toward the white middle-class mainstream is always the right goal. The solution he provides to facilitate this process—that church leaders should darn the clothing or “look” of oppositional cultures to entice young parishioners to accept their assimilationist message—is individualistic, and based on a lie. The true threat of the oppositional stance he discusses, it seems, is its insistence that gang involvement is a reasoned response to systemic inequality rather than a petulant, irresponsible “rejection” of mainstream values. In their 2003 examination of a topic they call “vast, amorphous, politically charged, and largely unknowable,” The New York Times is to be commended for its desire to uncover the reality beneath the appearance of the lived experience of class in the U.S., and for problematizing the “widening gulf” between the affluent and everyone else. But for all the revealing profiles its Class Matters series collects, the project remains more descriptive than confrontational, rarely questioning the authority of the “rules” one must follow to make upward mobility happen. Angela Whittaker’s climb from the projects to nursing school is presented with traditional deferral to the logic of the nuclear family. Her success is largely portrayed as due to having met the right middle-class man, an influence whose absence the story implicitly blames for her two oldest sons’ frequent incarceration. Though she grew up living in a two-room basement apartment and sharing a bathroom with two other

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families, Linda Chavez takes her experience to be representative of the whole: “Today, because this is America and you are not destined to remain in the class into which you were born, I live in a house with four bathrooms, and there is always hot water.”

Concerned more with how class issues are represented than objective measurements or accounts of experience, the literature and art I examine in my dissertation bring the structural inequalities inherent to capitalism into clearer focus than the aspiration/shame double bind allows for. Literary and cultural texts, despite their lack of objectivity, call on their readers and viewers to dig for the truth beneath the well-crafted lies appearing on the surface, forcing an honest interrogation of the assumptions framing class discourse. By refusing to be shamed by their lower-class status and (consequently) over-invest in what mainstream society is telling them they should want, Mildred Peacock, Victor Vargas, Katherine Arnoldi, and Tim Riggins create an opening for that third point on the class discourse triangle—inequality—to be given its time in both the representational and political limelight.

Finally, I want to take a moment to define exactly what I mean when I use the word capital, as I deploy this concept in significant ways in every chapter of my dissertation. Capital, as I see it, is anything functioning as an asset or resource within a given social system in which this thing has been deemed to have value. I additionally make a distinction, in the way Pierre Bourdieu does when discussing habitus, between working-class and middle-class capital. As Donna Beegle, Ruby Payne, and others have pointed out, middle-class capital tends to be more socially valued, or perceived as worth

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17 Class Matters, ibid (202-233; 242-243).

18 I delineate Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in greater detail in chapter 2 when discussing the similarities between the Taylors’ middle-class lifestyle and that of members of the working class community they serve in their professional capacities.
more from the perspective of mainstream class discourse, than working-class capital. An example of working-class “social capital,” as I use it in my chapter on *Raising Victor Vargas*, might be something like a young man’s reputation as a ladies’ man who bags a lot of “dons” (pretty girls), or the “big fish in a small pond” status of *Saturday Night Fever*’s Tony Manero as the neighborhood disco dancing king (where being able to dance well functions as social capital). Other more specific, perhaps unique to my work examples are things like “care capital,” an expression I use in my chapter on Katherine Arnoldi’s memoir to refer to the babysitting traded between Kathy and other single moms, as well as the empathy and concern another waitress shows Kathy when she’s having a hard day on the job. “Shame capital,” an idea I also coin in this chapter, is a bit more nuanced, being capital that working-class people attempting to pass in middle-class social and educational environments use to keep their typically working-class behavior or mannerisms in check (not necessarily the most self-affirming form of capital, but useful nonetheless). I also frequently reference recognizably Bourdieuan forms of capital; intellectual and educational capital, for instance. Due to the effects of the trillion-dollar student debt crisis, it is debatable whether and to what degree education

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21 More on capital, from Bourdieu: “The different forms of capital, the possession of which defines class membership and the distribution of which determines position in the power relations constituting the field of power and also determines the strategies available for use in these struggles—birth, ‘fortune,’ and ‘talent’ in a past age, now economic capital and educational capital—are simultaneously instruments of power and stakes in the struggle for power; they are unequally powerful in real terms and unequally recognized as legitimate principles of authority or signs of distinction.” *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. 316. Print.
can continue to serve as a form of middle-class capital likely to facilitate upward class mobility.\textsuperscript{22}

Chapter 1: The Bed They Said She Made: Educational Access and the Comic Hero in Katherine Arnoldi’s The Amazing ‘True’ Story of a Teenage Single Mom

“I always say, when I speak to teen moms, that we need to, with compassion, try to bring society and institutions up to our level of responsibility, our level of caring for others and good citizenry.”

--Writer/artist/activist Katherine Arnoldi1

In one small, not particularly distinctive panel from her comic memoir The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom, Katherine Arnoldi sketches a sloppily put together “list of possible careers” with a caption above it reading, “What all my dreams were leading to” (Figure 1). Like most teens, her dreams were perhaps not entirely as solidified as the caption might indicate. Bleeding off the bottom left edge of the panel, we see occupations like “Doctor,” “Teacher,” and “Law” listed—the last being crossed out, perhaps in a moment of better judgment. At the top, however, sits “Medical Illustration,” an idea still under heavy consideration. It is easy to see why Arnoldi’s autobiographical namesake, Kathy, might be drawn to an artistic career that, even in today’s economy, promises both an “excellent” job outlook and solidly middle-class salary ($63-77,000 in one estimate; as much as $150,000, in another).2 A single mom who had recently ended her arduous journey to community college with an acceptance letter and financial aid package in tow, Kathy found herself, oddly enough, in the employ of an entomology department. The hand-drawn sketches of insects she was asked to make as part of her work-study job, she explains, “Would be used to help farmers identify


pests; [their] purpose was to lower the use of pesticides” (160). Sharing a reprinted copy of one of these creations—an impeccably crafted, nearly photo-realistic sketch of a dragonfly—Arnoldi reminisces: “Every part of my life now seemed important to me” (Figure 2).

Figure 1

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3 A quick note on Arnoldi’s comic memoir: The text is not paginated. I therefore had to write in my own page numbers, which I will refer to throughout this chapter in parentheses (as I did here). I use footnotes to reference page numbers for standard sources and throughout the rest of the dissertation; this is a deviation from that form.
As an upward class mobility stories go, Arnoldi’s may appear to have it all. A protagonist one might rightly call an orphan, rejected by her birth mother and other family members in the wake of her pregnancy; a proper sidekick in the form of her baby girl, Stacie, perpetually along for the ride like Batman’s Boy Wonder (short haircut and androgynous outfit included). Aside from silent Stacie, Kathy is, quite literally at one point in the narrative, the “lone wolf” in the Arizona desert, concerned only with surviving the night after fleeing an abusive boyfriend. She works multiple jobs—whatever she can get, it seems—to support her child and finance her eventual education. Despite obstacles, setbacks, roadblocks, and hurdles, she never loses sight of her dream of a college education, and makes it happen. Not even Mitt Romney, with his
proclamation that single moms should always choose “the dignity of work” over staying at home with their 2-year olds,⁴ could find fault with her.

But despite her artistic promise and the aforementioned lucrative nature of her top-of-the list occupation, Arnoldi didn’t become a medical illustrator. Taking a second look at that perfect dragonfly, we see it encased within the brazen, hastily-drawn line of a cartoonist: a young artist who, much to the chagrin of the Bain Capital crowd, also saw her college education as an opportunity to “make a contribution” to a cause in which she was personally and politically invested (163). Gently drawn into Kathy’s world through the simultaneous childlike simplicity and existential profundity of the author’s Charlie-Brown cartoon style, a reader comes away from Arnoldi’s memoir with a sense of the irony framing the project: that, considering the laughably modest nature of Kathy’s dream— not to go to Princeton, or even a middle-of-the-road State university, but simply to be admitted to a community college—she sure did undergo one hell of a difficult journey. Drawing from the iconography of adventure and heroism for which the comic medium is known, Kathy’s upwardly mobile success story takes on epic, if not superheroic proportions. Arnoldi could easily claim what Bruce Robbins has called “bragging rights” over her ability to achieve a college education when the deck was so heavily stacked against her.⁵ But in the years between Arnoldi’s teen pregnancy and the penning of her memoir, Americans began accepting a lower and lower bar for what middle-class status actually is-- while the capitalist elite, with their zeal for deregulation and union-busting, kept pressing down the limbo stick. The sense of outrage that

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⁴ Take note, however, of Romney’s outrage when someone accused his wife of “never working a day in her life” as a stay-at-home mom. Referring also to Romney’s wife’s penchant for expensive automobiles, as AlterNet columnist Adele M. Stan put it, “Drive one Cadillac, and you’re a welfare queen; drive two, and you’re Ann Romney.” “11 Ways Mitt Romney Shows His Rich Guy, Ayn Randian Cluelessness.” www.alternet.org, May 29, 2012.

⁵ Robbins, ibid (4).
Arnoldi carried with her beyond her late 70’s college experience is based on a simple, indefensible reality: that it shouldn’t be so hard for single moms to get somewhere that everyone deserves to be.

For most of her adult life, Arnoldi has viewed her activist approach to making art in terms similar to those articulated by Diane Dujon and Anne Withorn articulate in For Crying Out Loud: Women’s Poverty in the United States, a collection of experience-based theory, scholarship, alternative history, poetry, and policy recommendations compiled by two single moms in response to the consistent legal and ideological assault on unmarried welfare recipients occurring throughout the 80’s and 90’s (culminating in President Clinton’s 1996 promise to “end welfare as we know it”). The volume advocates for a “moral floor of basic support” that poor women with children and ultimately all U.S. citizens should have access to, a guaranteed income “that members of this society owe each other, regardless of whether anyone breaks cultural taboos regarding sexual, economic, or marital behavior.” Arnoldi’s primary contribution to this conversation is to give voice to the role that public education could play in helping to raise this moral floor, a fight that has as much to do with dignity as degrees.

Working in a mixed media format, Arnoldi has gained access to a variety of audiences. She’s written a manifesto for the Welfare Mother’s Voice urging single moms to “bring our children to the classroom with us if the school has made no provision for daycare”; won slam poetry contests in Lower East Side New York riffing about “my landlord taking over the world”; and published avant-garde short fiction in the literary

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7 Dijon and Withorn, ibid (6-7).
8 Arnoldi, Katherine. “The Single Parent’s Bill of Rights.” Published in The Welfare Mother’s Voice, circa 1989, p 2. The author mailed me a hand-typed copy of this text, as The Welfare Mother’s Voice, now re-named Warrior Mother’s Voice, no longer has an archived copy on record.
magazine *The Quarterly.* But with the graphic novel, Arnoldi’s goal was to develop a narrative form that could function as a means to challenge the age-old, simplistic distinction between the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor that many single moms internalize as representative of the choices available to them. As Sandra L. Dahlberg has discussed, this still-resonant dichotomy has threatened to become even more problematic as the boundary between who is and is not deemed deserving of federal financial aid (and, by extension, participation in higher education) becomes increasingly subject to this discourse. Arnolds set out to tell a story not just by and about a teenage single mother, but for an audience of other single moms, to help them feel worthy or entitled to claim education as a social right.

This chapter argues that Arnoldi’s use of the comic medium to tell her own story generates a widely accessible, deeply resonant critique of upward mobility as a meritocratic “hero’s” journey, disturbing the ideological architecture that denies teenage single mothers access to dreams of both personal and collective empowerment. Despite an arsenal of villains feeding Kathy messages of discouragement and “lack” at every turn, *Teenage Single Mom* remains unapologetically radical in its vision of the kind of society that single mothers and their children should have a right to inhabit. Arnoldi’s work delivers a counter-punch to the idea that teen and other unwed mothers have rendered themselves unworthy of both any degree of guaranteed income and the agency to plot the course of their own futures, claims nullified by the irreversible, multi-valenced “mistake” of out-of-wedlock sexuality, young parenthood, and (more often

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9 The last of which, she acknowledges, may have only be read by a “handful of intellectuals.” A collection of these stories, *All Things Are Labor*, was published for a wider audience in 2007.

than not) poverty. Telling the tale of a poor, unmarried mother who nonetheless manages to plot and achieve her college dream, *Teenage Single Mom* gives the lie to the story that single moms can take only two possible routes to redeem their “unfortunate” position—either disappearance into the low-wage labor force, or marriage, in a “post-feminist” era still the only forms of socioeconomic dependency legitimated for women. *Teenage Single Mom* also challenges educational and other institutions to rise to “our level of responsibility, our level of caring for others and good citizenry”—with this “our” serving as a rallying point around which single moms might claim and mobilize the skills, values, and ways of knowing that have long proven crucial to their survival.

Shadowing Kathy on a meandering journey of self-becoming and struggle that begins with a baby and ends with the birth of a well-incubated college dream, this chapter is organized as a series of concatenated close-readings of panels and prose, each offering a site through which to connect Kathy’s many “starts and stops” to Arnoldi’s greater quest to re-cast dignity, responsibility, and working-class interdependence as *a priori* assets from which both her hero-protagonist and readership might draw. The first of these stops situates the “disorderly” world of teen motherhood as uniquely suited to expression through the graphic novel medium, discussing how the simplified semantics of Arnoldi’s drawing style provoke reader investment in the journey to come. From here I take a more specific look at one such simplified icon, the spacialization of which drives the narrative forward: the bed that Kathy is told she must lie in as a result of her “mistake,” a cultural symbol of shame, stigma, and socioeconomic paralysis that Arnoldi reclaims as a vehicle for upward mobility.

Following this, I interrogate Arnoldi’s representation of upward mobility in a more sustained way, foregrounding Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s linkage of human dignity to independence or self-sufficiency, a hegemonic discourse that the
graphic novel argues might be transformed through an honest interrogation of the forms of dependence that allow for individual “success.” Emphasizing both the strength of the individual consciousness and the interdependent exchange of working-class capital as essential to poor single moms’ experience, I juxtapose the value of “small thoughts” in Kathy’s arsenal against personal defeat with an examination of the working-class support network that affirms Kathy’s right to feel “worthy” through its commitment to rescuing her from numerous predicaments. Finally, I hone in on the missing ingredient still standing between Kathy and her dream—the need for a mentor with middle-class capital to share—highlighting the subversive potential of mentorship when mentors refuse to promote higher education as intrinsically tethered to an end goal of comfortable middle-class assimilation.

Stop 1: Disorderly Conduct

“One thing I noticed right away: as I drew the pictures of my past, the memories came barreling back in a different way than when I had written about these experiences. It was as though the memory came through my arm and then appeared before me, like on a movie screen. [...] As I was drawing, I was seeing more deeply the truth of my memories, and, I realized, the truth of other single moms and their children. As I worked I had sympathy for the character of myself. I saw how I had struggled with such a limited knowledge of the world. How, at a time when many teenagers are thinking about what they want to be when they grow up and how they will accomplish that, I was thinking about if I had enough money to buy the number of baby food jars I needed to last until the next paycheck, and then living with the realization that I did not.”

-- Katherine Arnoldi, from “How I Became a Cartoonist”

Turning to the first page of Teenage Single Mom, a reader is immediately presented with evidence of disorderly conduct. With no context provided, the first panel contains only a baby—a diapered, smiling, squirming bundle—its legs obstructing a line of black and white hearts comprising one of the signature elaborate borders that Arnoldi

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includes around almost every panel in the story. The word “love,” surrounded by a spray of black hash marks, is written above the baby’s head. A caption to the child’s left reads, “At seventeen, I had a kid” […], continuing with “and became a teenage single mother” in the next of four horizontal, hand-drawn rectangles. Here we see a figure of a young woman holding the baby (now bundled tight) as more squiggly hearts radiate from this evidently happy family. Over the baby’s shoulder, a barely-perceptible figure of a factory, its smokestacks billowing in the distance, announces its presence (Figure 3).

Figure 3

In her study of a group of black and Latina North Carolina teen moms’ use of art as a means of self-representation, anthropologist Wendy Luttrell discusses the dominant discourse of teen pregnancy as constructed through the belief that teen moms have behaved in a way that rejects adherence to a “normative life trajectory.” This trajectory, she explains, is quite rigidly assumed to unfold as “finish school, get a job, find a male partner, marry, and have children.”12 Arnoldi’s comic memoir disrupts this normative order as a matter of both narrative necessity and political strategy. From the get-go a

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reader is not sure which came first: The baby? The factory job? The “love” shared between a teen mother and her child? In the “happy family” portrait framed within this panel, the baby gazes up at its mother fondly, the factory looming in place of an absent male figure. With their nearly identical cartoon smiles firmly in place, Arnoldi’s mother-child duo feels no sense of urgency to replace the factory with its nuclear-familial substitute.

Representing the world in formally unique ways, comics often makes use of a process artist and theorist Scott McCloud calls “amplification through simplification.” When a cartoon image is stripped down to its barest, most rudimentary signifiers of the human form—two dots for eyes, and a concave line for a mouth—this creates “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled,” a mirror in which we are likely to see ourselves reflected. “The more cartoony a face is,” McCloud explains, “the more people it could be said to describe,” the reader included. Examples abound in the comics medium of autobiographical stories that employ amplification through simplification to illustrate traumatic or “difficult to look at” events (Art Spiegelman’s Holocaust memoir Maus; Debbie Drechsler’s Daddy’s Girl, an account of the author’s childhood molestation by her father).

What enables comic memoirists to share the truth of their experiences in ways not possible through other storytelling mediums, Rocco Versace further explains, is the way a reader always already comes to comics “hyperaware of their artificiality.” Being a drawn and hand-scripted medium, no one expects a comic book or graphic novel,

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whatever its degree of artistic realism, to be an exact or even near-approximate reflection of the living world. Indeed, Arnoldi’s placement of quotation marks around “True” in her title ironically highlights comics’ inherent critique of the autobiographical imperative to “tell the truth.” The medium is able to move beyond concerns about truthful representation to presenting an always already interpreted universe in which a reader may nonetheless see herself as a kind of participant-witness. Bringing an awareness of the value of simplified semiotics to one’s cartoon style may therefore be an effective way to coax an audience toward identification with a story’s world-view and political motivations. Demonstrably drawing himself as a cartoon in his own text, McCloud addresses his reader through a pair of empty, round bifocals—no lashes, brows, or other realist features in sight. “Who I am is irrelevant,” a caption proclaims. “I’m just a little piece of you.” In the next panel he is shown reaching toward the right-hand gutter, pulling up what appears to be some kind of mask on a stick.16 “But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more,” he says. McCloud the cartoon then puts the mask in front of his face—revealing nothing other than two dots for eyes and a small oval for a mouth.17

By giving Kathy and Stacie essentially the same pared-down cartoon face, Arnoldi creates a mirroring effect between mother and baby, ensuring that a reader will “see herself” through both of their eyes. The simplified mask that Arnoldi holds up over her characters’ faces animates a world in which a reader is positioned to engage the unfolding story on its own terms, according its own narrative order. A montage

16 In comics, the gutter is the white or negative space that demarcates a discrete separation between panels. Most comics creators consider the gutter a defining feature of the medium since it stimulates a process of “closure” in which “a reader fills in the details of the empty spaces between panels, fostering “an intimacy… between creator and audience.” (Versace 14; McCloud 69)

17 McCloud, ibid (37).
sequence of three full-page panels directly follows the “happy family” portrait, capturing an enraptured bonding moment between mother and child. In the last of these panels, Kathy holds up a swaddled Stacie for the reader to admire as much as she, brimming with pride, clearly does. One might be tempted to read this montage as symptomatic of a cause-effect relationship between the arrival of the baby and the clarification of Kathy’s life priorities: a sequence demonstrating, in other words, that the baby will now be Kathy’s central concern, that any threat of youthful self-absorption has been diffused by the “unconditional love” she feels for her child. The next page, however, challenges this interpretation. Here we Kathy doubled over a desk, peering into a book in the midst of a panel bordered by an arrangement of tiny books. A “panel-within-a-panel” style captions reads, “Well, anyway, I had a kid and decided I still wanted to be…” (5).

However sincere its expression of in-the-moment mother/child love, Kathy’s “well, anyway” turns the bonding montage into an aside, emphasizing instead her personal goals. The next two panels further elaborate this sentiment. “Well, anyway, I had a kid and decided I still wanted to be… what I was becoming before I had a kid. Which was I-don’t-know-what, on account of I’m only seventeen,” and we see Kathy in ballet shoes, leaning into a side-stretch; then at an easel, painting a still life, her face intense with concentration. The important thing here is not the content of Kathy’s seventeen year-old dreams, which she acknowledges might be fleeting, however detailed each vision of self-becoming may be. As Luttrell observes, when the status-quo attitude toward teen pregnancy suggests that “regardless of a student’s capability… her pregnancy and early motherhood (foreclose) the possibility of educational and career success,” it is subversive merely to voice such dreams, much less grant them
representation through a medium typically associated with “childish” fantasies.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, far from the images of sad-eyed innocents subject to the self-interested spoils of “babies having babies” that are so prevalent in the media, Arnoldi’s positioning of Stacie as a mirror for her mother’s desires poses a further critique. Neither albatross nor unknowing victim, Stacie is a hero’s sidekick from the get-go, functioning as a visual reinforcement (the same smiles, the same desires) of Kathy’s right to embark on the journey before her.

\textit{Stop 2: Mobilizing an Unmade Bed}

When Arnoldi set out to create \textit{Teenage Single Mom} in the early 90’s, she says she “wasn’t thinking of a book at all. All I wanted to do was learn how to become a cartoonist.”\textsuperscript{19} Having admired the work of other artist-activists distributing comics and zines around New York’s East Village, she hadn’t realized that the decision to “simply tell my story, little by little,” in comic form would lead to the kind of catharsis she describes above—a new way of “learning to have sympathy for the character of myself” that also attuned her to the applicability of her personal truth to the lives of other single moms. Holding a cartoon mask in front of her own face allowed Arnoldi the kind of expansive access to her memories that made it next to impossible to \textit{not} tell her story as a representative slice of a larger story in which teenage single mothers, poor women, and ultimately all engaged readers might see their own truths reflected. Having taught the graphic novel at one point to an all-male group of former substance abusers, I was surprised at how easily these men accepted Kathy’s story as a possible version of their own. “Just like we need in recovery, (these) other teen moms need inspiration—\textit{they...}

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\textsuperscript{18} Luttrell, ibid (18).

\textsuperscript{19} “How I Became a Cartoonist,” ibid.
need to know it’s possible to have dreams, to go to college and achieve their dreams,” one man told the class.\(^{20}\) Indeed, the primary reason that Dujon and Withorn decided to focus specifically on single mothers while editing their volume of work on U.S. poverty was to cement a link between those most vulnerable to the effects of poverty and the greater *universality* of poverty as phenomenon that anyone subject to the structural insecurities of the capitalist economic system (and its ideological linchpin, the nuclear family) may eventually have to contend with.\(^{21}\) Arnoldi’s cartoon story offers a formally unique and effective site through which to make poverty personal and identifiable in the way that these authors call for.\(^{22}\)

Arnoldi’s commitment with *Teenage Single Mom* was to present an alternative narrative of success and cultural belonging that might spark a note of recognition in the education-seeking moms for whom her story is meant to provide guidance.\(^{23}\) “If my book would inspire enough moms to go to college campuses,” she remembers hoping,

\(^{20}\) From personal seminar notes (August 2008).

\(^{21}\) This point returns to frame the discussion in my fourth chapter, “’What I’m Up To’: Upward Mobility as a Radical Act in Terry McMillan’s *Mama*,” in a more focused way.

\(^{22}\) Dujon and Withorn, ibid (2-6).

\(^{23}\) Arnoldi’s white privilege does complicate somewhat her ability to serve as the ideal “masked representative” of teenage single motherhood. Indeed, one problem with McCloud’s amplification through simplification theory is his lack of attention to race when describing the “universality” of the cartoon face. In one particularly illustrative panel from *Understanding Comics*, McCloud includes a “realist” sketch of two people facing each other in side profile—a white man and a black woman. Explain how each individual abstracts an image of her or his own face as a cartoon “mind picture,” McCloud draws a thought bubble above each person’s head; only within each thought bubble, the abstract image of the face that the person sees completely lacks physiognomic contours. In other words, all that McCloud draws to indicate this abstract “sense of shape” are distinguishing features like hair, eyebrows, nose, earrings—no face frame lines (or, in more artistic terms, no *canvas*). And yet the default canvas, in what may be a limitation of the black-and-white comic medium, is still a white piece of paper; the face that the black woman sees in her mind therefore appears, despite its lack of contours, to be a white face. Consequently, this panel winds up generating a kind of racialized artistic violence: the woman’s face, which in the realist profile contains a number of black pencil strokes indicating an attempt to “shade in” race, is white paper in the abstract thought-image. Interestingly, one unique thing about Arnoldi’s text is how a number of her panels appear as hyper-saturated “negatives,” granting the art a “white on black” affect. In these instances, blackness appears to be the “default” canvas, and the author’s own whiteness the “shaded” addition.
“they would change (college culture) when they got there by demanding their rights. I sensed the potential.”

Despite her (typically working-class) feeling that she might not be successful enough to serve as a representative voice for other teen and single moms, what helped Arnoldi decide that she “must begin” work on her graphic novel was having observed the apprehension with which single moms taking GED classes approached the possibility of higher education during her volunteer work at the now-defunct Charas Community Center in Lower East Side Manhattan:

I began to notice a disturbing fact. [Even] though they told me they wanted to go to college, most [single moms] did not fill out the applications right there with me, as I hoped. Instead, they politely excused themselves, said they had to run to pick up their children, and, often forgetting their applications, ran out the door, repeatedly thanking me for coming. I realized that the problem was not just having the information. The problem was the same problem I had had: feeling worthy to use it. These single moms felt that they, too, had made their bed and had to lie in it, that they had made a “mistake” that in turn made them ineligible to participate in the world. [This problem] was even more severe in the 1990’s. These women had been bombarded with anti-welfare rhetoric, with propaganda poised to discourage teen pregnancy by attacking teen moms themselves… It was they, not Desert Storm or the Savings and Loan bailout, or global changes, that had caused the nation’s economic problems. All they wanted, after having the applications in hand, was to disappear! How well I understood that!

24 Personal interviews, ibid.

25 The story of the closing of the Charas/El Bohio Community Center stands as a vehement example of a working-class community of color’s fight to protect its resources in the face of gentrification. Around the same time that Teenage Single Mom was being published, Charas found itself embroiled in the early stages of an eviction process that would last for the next several years, culminating in a showdown between a handful of protesters refusing to vacate the premises and more than 50 police in full riot gear. Having served as a gathering space for community organizers and artists since the city abandoned the property in the late 70’s, Charas became the target of a campaign by city officials and developers to turn the former school into luxury condos. Despite the best efforts of Charas supporters— who believe the court’s decision to allow developer Greg Singer to purchase publically earmarked property was due to the center’s vocal opposition to Giuliani administration policies—cops enforced eviction of the property on Dec. 12, 2001, arresting 7 protesters who had chained themselves together inside the center. Charas had also served as a rallying point for antiwar activists following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Singer eventually revised his plans, hoping to turn the building into college dormitories; but after the New York State Dormitory Authority refused to grant him a permit to do this, the community again took action, intent on eventually re-claiming and re-naming the center in honor of brutally murdered Charas founder Armando Perez. This last effort continues to this day. (Sources: socialistworker.org; nytimes.com; tenant.net; geocites.com; apccnyc.org.)

26 “How I Became a Cartoonist,” ibid.
Arnoldi’s story emerges within a sociopolitical context in which neither republican nor democratic lawmakers questioned the assumption that poverty is caused by a lack of middle-class values attributable to an underclass “subculture” consisting primarily of urban women of color and their rural white sisters-in-crime.27 Disrupting and re-orienting readers’ perceptions about who should have access to power, and where responsibility should “lie,” in a just society, it offers teen moms a story about one of their own who insists on her right to a college education in the face of such pathologies. As solidly as the story reinforces this right, however, it is again called into question by the fourth panel following Kathy’s “well, anyway” announcement. Here Kathy is drawn from an overhead perspective lying face-up on a bed, holding Stacie next to her, a rarely-seen frown on her face. “But someone said I made my bed, so I should lie in it,” a caption recalls. The panel is surrounded by three layers of border-art. The first layer, closest to Kathy’s bed, contains a chain of miniature beds (drawn in side profile); the middle layer, the youthful expressions “bummer, man,” “bummer,” “triple bummer,” and “way bummer,” respectively; and the third, within a tab bordering the outer right edge of the panel, the words “RUDE AWAKENING” in dark, all-caps print (Figure 4).

27 See Margaret Cerullo and Marla Erlien’s “Beyond the ‘Normal’ Family: A Cultural Critique of Women’s Poverty,” for more on this crucial issue. As these authors see it, the liberal attitude toward poverty is one and the same from both parties: “Both agree on the superiority of middle-class values, as well as on the assumption that a lack of them causes poverty. They simply disagree about how best to enforce them on the poor—by threats and punishments or by ‘retraining’ and ‘clinical intervention’” (In For Crying Out Loud, p.89-90).
Nudged forward by this “RUDE AWAKENING,” a reader’s eye moves to panel 1 of the next page, where we are given a side-view of the previous panel; only this time, a half-visible crib is included at the foot of the bed, its other half residing somewhere in the gutter between this panel and the next (an absent presence that one must fill in with her imagination). A caption describes what Kathy recalls having done in this bed: “I lied in the bed they said I made, dreaming and dreaming [...]” (6). A number of these dreams are written around the outside of the panel: “New York—Europe—Dance Classes—An island—An apartment of my own—Career—A boyfriend—Friends—To live in a cool place like San Francisco.” The eye is quickly directed from this panel to the next by a horizon line that connects the top of the bed frame to the top of the crib, cutting straight through the gutter and resurfacing in the next panel as a roadside horizon that trails off the right-hand edge of the panel, straight into a setting sun. Picking up where it left off in the previous panel (“dreaming and dreaming”), the text continues: “and dreaming of somewhere else... somewhere with no discouraging words” (Figure 5).
There is a striking contrast between the bed as a mechanism for punishment through immobilization of one’s dreams—a prison cell, so to speak, in which a teen mom should lie and think about how the mistake she’s made has ruined her life—and the story that Arnoldi tells by mobilizing the bed in which she places Kathy. Linking the bed directly to the desert highway through the gutter, Arnoldi uses a particular strength of the comic medium to transform a teen mom’s contemplation of her future into an example of a hero taking flight. The bed that “someone” said Kathy made (and should lie in) becomes a vehicle of transport, transcendence, and ultimately resistance, refusing to serve as a final resting place for a teen mom’s forsaken dreams—a “dream coffin” into which she should shame-facedly disappear, along with both her baby and her untouched college applications. The crib, and the child assumed to inhabit it, is not an obstruction in Kathy’s path, but rather a bridge between a past defined in terms of personal “mistakes” and the freedom characteristic of the “somewhere else” she imagines living, this place with “no discouraging words.”

As much as it represents the acquisition of middle-class cultural capital and the possibility of individual upward mobility, Kathy’s college dream also symbolizes the
ability to promote and disseminate new stories about single mothers, poverty, and the working class more generally within an institutional setting invested with the power to shape (and re-shape) discourse. The figure of the bed persists throughout Teenage Single Mom—I counted no fewer than 13 examples of bed-related imagery or sequences. In each case, the bed illuminates a moment at which Kathy actively struggles against limits imposed on her dream by institutions with which her situation requires her to engage.

On page 10, we see a frowning Stacie “alone in a crib” at a daycare center, a consequence of her mother’s need to take a low-paying job at a surgical glove factory in order to pay the bills and begin saving money for college. A few pages later, we see an anonymous person lying on a gurney, surrounded by doctors and medical equipment; “holes kill, they told me,” Kathy narrates, alluding to the coercive nature of a job in which capital (or they) pins the responsibility for “quality control” on labor while ignoring the unhealthy, exploitative conditions in which the glove factory employees (“all women”) are made to work. A few pages later, we are shown a further consequence of our hero’s uphill battle against poverty, exhaustion, and labor conditions: Kathy again lying in her bed, this time sick with pneumonia—a direct result, as we learn from Kathy’s involvement in her factory’s union negotiations, of the steady stream of toxic chemicals to which she and other glove factory employees have been exposed (13, 31). The connection between the anonymous patient on the gurney and Kathy’s bedridden predicament cannot be overlooked. When it comes to gaps in the accountability with which capitalism regards its workers, holes certainly can kill, particularly if a lack of sick leave, affordable health insurance, or worker’s compensation are part of the bargain.

Here Kathy’s experience appears to exemplify the losing side of this (dialectical) battle. Not only does she get sick, but, as the next panel illustrates, her illness forces her to quit her 2nd job as a waitress to avoid getting a pink slip at the factory—to which she
must report, the implication goes, regardless of her poor health. But the bed itself continues to travel, placing Kathy in the narrative driver’s seat of the everyday yet deeply politicized journey on which hero and sidekick take the reader. Regardless of formidable obstructions that the intersecting structures of capitalism and patriarchy continue to throw Kathy’s way, the persistence of her dream in the face of this string of incapacitating or “bedridden” experiences only strengthens the revisionary appropriation of an icon that, in Arnoldi’s hands, animates systemic abuses of power rather than the pathology of the socially poisonous poor single mother. Far from marking a site of psychological paralysis (or socioeconomic stagnation), Kathy’s bed also becomes a zone of restful contemplation within which an individual who has been told that she’s forfeited her right to both autonomy and rest stops to re-fuel her connection to her dream in the midst of her exhausting life.

**Stop 3: Dignity, Shame, and Dependency Problems**

In *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb discuss how working-class people, regardless of the allegiance and respect they feel for the communities of which they may forever remain a part, still intimately link the concept of human dignity to the ability to demonstrate a degree of individual self-sufficiency. “(Everyone) in this society,” the authors contend, “is subject to a scheme of values that tells him he must validate the self in order to win others’ respect and his own.” Sennett and Cobb take seriously the idea that a psychology of working-class self-respect can, and should, be examined, making their work a valuable lens through which to peer more deeply into the motivations at the heart of Arnoldi’s memoir. Like Arnoldi, Sennett and Cobb understand that working-class people, regardless of how the demands of blue and

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pink-collar labor leave one with little time and energy to cultivate a “life of the mind,” still place an inherent value on the ability to acquire tools of “internal development”-- and conceive of the quality of their own lives, to some degree, in relation to the ability to acquire these tools (or to ensure, if they can’t, that their children will acquire these tools).\textsuperscript{29} As the authors point out, though most working-class people actually respect manual labor more than white-collar work, they also tend to buy into the idea that better educated people have the right to bestow respect for and judgment of others, “because they seem internally more developed human beings.”\textsuperscript{30}

In addition to having transgressed in a way deemed “out of order” according to the dominant social discourse underlying how gender and youth should shape sexual behavior (as evidenced by the “consequence” of this behavior, the baby), Arnoldi and other single moms also face stigmas related specifically to poverty that contribute to ambivalent feelings about education and what it means to be a dignified or “worthy” human being. Sennett and Cobb give the example of meat cutter-turned-loan processor Frank Rissario, who describes the poverty of his childhood as “something shameful,” a zone in which material deprivation was fused with the “chaotic, arbitrary, and unpredictable behavior” of his family members. Indeed, Arnoldi’s own story often lends support to such behaviorist explanations for poverty, focusing on the cruel and indifferent treatment she received at the hands of her mother and sister—women who, she is also quick to point out, had their own share of both children and troubles (6).

\textsuperscript{29} For a contemporary example of this phenomenon, consider the emphasis that Carmela Soprano puts on Meadow and AJ’s education throughout HBO’s The Sopranos. Her sense of self-worth not just as a mother, but as a working-class Italian-American mother, is contingent on ensuring that her children have access to the tools for “development of capacities within a human being” that she sees herself lacking—a feeling that no ladies’ book or film club, Armani wardrobe, trip to Paris, or “spec” property can ever fully compensate for (Sennett and Cobb 24).

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid (25).
Though Arnoldi’s relationship with her family members receives far more nuanced attention in her short story collection *All Things are Labor* (2008), the representational choices she makes in the graphic novel lend credence to the argument that higher education could provide a means to access the sense of “self-worth” that the conditions of poverty often render inaccessible. Whether there is any truth to the idea that poverty creates a “cultural” environment in which specific behavioral pathologies (like an inability to “delay gratification” or “plan for the future”) are likely to take hold, both Arnoldi and Sennett/ Cobb remain aware that the psychological impact of these stigmas greatly influences poor people’s sense of their own internal capacities (or perceived lack thereof). “A poor (person) has to want upward mobility in order to establish dignity, and dignity means, specifically, moving toward a position in which (she or he) deals with the world in some controlled, emotionally restrained way,” Sennett and Cobb reiterate. According to this definition, dignity requires adhering to a standard of “emotional restraint” generally believed to only be accessible to the lower classes through training received in middle-class educational contexts, away from “chaotic” home communities.

Yet unlike Horatio Alger-style upward mobility tales insisting that a protagonist separate her or himself from toxic lower-class associations, values, and ways of knowing in order to access middle-class “respectability,” Arnoldi’s story intimately links individual success with an ongoing, collective fight for social justice on behalf of those who may not have acquired the tools of power and privilege necessary to effectively join the fight. Though Arnoldi may indeed need to “escape” from an unhealthy family

32 Sennett and Cobb, ibid (22).
situation in order to achieve her college goal (or even simply to survive), she conceives of her dreams as little more than a means to the end of that “somewhere else” she’d like her daughter to inherit, a place with “no discouraging words” where single moms could access the individual dignity and freedom necessary to collectively empower one another. Like Spider-Man’s Peter Parker contemplating how to use his mutant superpower for the good of society while also appeasing his everyday teen desires, Arnoldi turns her protagonist’s upward climb into an opportunity to problematize, as superhero comics theorist Douglas Wolk puts it, “the relationship between power and the obligation to use it correctly.”

**Stop 4: Smallness, and Other Such Weapons**

Arnoldi’s dream that single moms and their children inherit a future with “no discouraging words” is a definitely larger-than-life mission befitting the efforts of a superhero. Her ultimate goal is “to bring institutions up to our level of responsibility and caring for others,” a formidable task in a society in which institutions both set and police the standard for what counts as valuable knowledge and “good” or “bad” behavior. Superheroes, however, tend to be muscular, well-armored beings bestowed with powers that make it next to impossible for readers to seriously fear for their heroes’ safety (beyond the “nick of time” excitement that most well-written comic books attempt to generate). Kathy, by contrast, is a hero whose power come not from physical might, largesse, or enhancement, but rather from the paradox of all that she “lacks” as a teen single mom with few material or psychological resources at her disposal.

Aware of her pedagogical position relative to her readers, Arnoldi devotes a full page of her memoir to a cartoon cross-section of Kathy’s brain parceled into variously-

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sized lobes, each detailing the amount of “room” her protagonist is able to give a thought or collection of thoughts. One could imagine seeing such a graphic on a blackboard in biology class, perhaps next to the diagrams of meticulously drawn insects. At the point in the story where this graphic shows up, Kathy has taken a detour through Los Angeles on her way to Denver, Colorado, where she winds up after fleeing her abusive boyfriend, Dave. Allowing herself to entertain the possibility that her estranged biological father, who lives in L.A., might be of some assistance to her and Stacie, she looks him up in the phone book. Above the illustration of Kathy’s brain—also contained, significantly, within a profile-view of her (smiling) mug, flagged by a broken nose— a caption explains, “In the back of my head, I guess I hoped that he might help me” (Figure 6).

Figure 6

The contents of Kathy’s head read as a shorthand version of the story in which the reader has been involved, with the most urgent, prominent refrains of her young life
occupying the largest, front-and center segments of her brain. Far from the superheroic mask of perpetual optimism we have come to expect from Kathy (that ever-present cartoon smile), her largest lobes generally contain anxious or cynical expressions. In the wake of the domestic crisis that she and Stacie have recently experienced, it’s not surprising to see “worry that Dave might find us” and “bitterness about the loss of savings, the van, etc.,” scrolled within her two frontal lobes. These are survival-oriented issues that require Kathy’s immediate attention. In the middle-back section of her brain, “worry about Stacie,” “thoughts for Stacie’s future,” and (written in slightly smaller letters) “guilt” also take up a good deal of her mental space. Wrapped in the crook of this last large lobe, near the center of her mind, are the things she wants for herself: “desire to go to college” and, significantly, “desire to be like the people in magazines (middle class)”—the latter of which she labels as a “secret” desire (gesturing toward the kind of working-class ambivalence toward upward mobility that Sennett and Cobb detail above). Also wedged between these worries and desires are Kathy’s “faith” and “hope,” occupying two easy-to-miss segments. Toward the top-back section of her mind, two medium-sized lobes highlight the specialized knowledge she has acquired as an employee of the glove factory: “knowledge of how to inspect surgical gloves” and “knowledge of how to strip the gloves off ceramic for ms.” Beneath these, wrapping around the back her head, are three lobes containing more-or-less useless or trivial knowledge: “How to punch a time clock,” followed by “rock lyrics” and, in a large lobe at the base of her brain, “misc. information about TV shows.” With a sense of irony that only the comics medium could convey, within the “rock lyrics” and “TV info” lobes are hidden two barely-perceptible mini-lobes (or “lobes-within-a-lobe”), squares so tiny that they have to be externally labeled at the side of the graphic: the first of these,
“everything I learned in high school”; and the second, absolute smallest brain wave in her entire head—“thought that ‘dad’ would help us.”

Looking closely at the four smallest of these lobes—Kathy’s “faith” and “hope,” as well as “everything I learned in high school” and, of course, the miniscule “thought that ‘dad’ would help us”—a reader gets a sense of the real content and force of Kathy’s superheroism: the way her unique “condition” as a poor teenage single mom allows her to take things that are supposed to be big or important, and shrink them; and conversely, to take things that appear to be small or insignificant, and “super-size” their capacity to help her. As a teenager who continues to dream of becoming “what I was becoming before I had a kid,” one might assume that the things Kathy learned in high school would take up more space in her mind; or that the opportunity to re-connect with her father, once presented, might be given more significant billing. But Kathy remains a realist in her sense of what to expect from her father—next to nothing, to put it bluntly.

The smallness of these expectations gives the lie to the conservative refrain that single mothers in need of help should always look to the benevolence of paternalistic institutions, specifically marriage and the capitalist wage-labor system, rather than succumbing to the “dependency” of welfare or other forms of government aid.

Throughout the graphic novel, Kathy experiences little other than abuse and exploitation at the hands of both men and capitalism. Accepting a ride from a man in a “car painted blue,” who rapes her, leads to Stacie’s conception; she is also raped by her sister’s husband (whose family she lives with temporarily), and told to keep quiet about it, because “he made the money.” Indeed, in Arnoldi’s artistic, it is only men with money who receive a comic-book monster “makeover.” Illustrating her sexual molestation at the hands of her stepbrother, Kathy draws the perpetrator as a horned, misty-eyed devil
cradling wads of cash who becomes increasingly hideous (fangs, drool, and a tail are added) the closer he gets to initiating the “permanent break” in Kathy’s life.

In one example of a monster “makeover” that highlights the conflation of capitalist exploitation with the patriarchal traffic in women’s bodies, Arnoldi draws one of Kathy’s male customers at Sam’s Steakhouse (where she works as a waitress early in the graphic novel) holding up some kind of coin: “This is for you to get yourself something nice to wear, honey,” he growls at Kathy through a beastly cartoon visage, his wide black mouth, bushy eyebrows, and bloodshot eyes relaxing into his own sense of entitlement as a vessel through which capital is authorized to flow to the “less fortunate” (who should repay him for this generous gift by becoming a reflection of both his sexual and economic prowess-- i.e., a little “honey” getting herself “something nice to wear”). In a subtle act of resistance captured by Arnoldi through the inclusion of a miniature panel-within-a-panel beneath the monster’s lower lip, a tiny, smiling Kathy addresses her customer through (significantly) both thought and speech bubbles. She thinks, “But I wear the same clothes all the way to the end of this book” while saying to the creature, simply, “thanks” (Figure 7).
Kathy’s “thanks” (as well as her smile) is a performance required by the system in which she participates as a laborer (in her case, a sexualized laborer). The meager tip that the customer-monster smugly gifts Kathy is unlikely to help her facilitate any real form of independence, and was not given with the spirit of her “self-sufficient” actualization in mind; if anything, it was intended to mock her status as a laborer whose livelihood depends on the whims of customers like him. But by wearing the “same clothes all the way to the end of this book”—as any comic book hero in uniform would do—Kathy rejects the conditions under which the gift was given while at the same time, with her “thanks” and smile, retaining the tip itself.  

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34 Kathy’s experience attests to the impact of a phenomenon that Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon historicize in “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Key Word of the U.S. Welfare State”, how the modern capitalist system was largely constituted through the rhetoric of wage labor as a form of independence. At first this rhetoric functioned as a means to help white male wage-laborers feel “free” and self-sufficient while paradoxically becoming increasingly dependent on whims of capitalism for their livelihood. Later, after
Yet despite a distrust of the “magic” of paternalism that serves as one of Kathy’s most valuable weapons in her struggle to clear a path toward college, Kathy is not invulnerable to that little thought in the back of her head—the “hope that he might help me”—nor is she impermeable to the shaming effect that pathologizing discourse can have on single moms. When Dave, a co-worker at the glove factory, shows interest in her, her first thought is telling: “I couldn’t believe that someone liked me. Me, who had made the bed, my bed, I had to lie in” (34). It is perhaps this notion that leads Kathy, despite an expressed desire to “(take things) slow,” to allow Dave to move into her place, “right away” (45). From Kathy’s bed, the pair stays up “all night, making plans to leave,” participating in a storybook fantasy of running away together—“going cross country! (the words are the happiest ever!”)—that implodes when Dave, angry over Kathy’s expressed desire to “see about going to college” at the University of Arizona at Tempe, mutates from unassuming dishwasher to controlling, enraged monster (61).  

35 Castes of those deemed “naturally” dependent within this system (women and people of color) began to demand their right to inclusion as free, independent members of society, the concept of independence began to function more as a means to punish, or stigmatize as dependent, anyone who would dare reject participation within the wage-labor system. Not surprisingly, those impacted most harshly by these authors refer to as the “psychological register” of this false dependence/independence dichotomy were those doubly subject to the stigma of having challenged their essentialized role: poor women of color, who as “welfare queens” reject their role as “natural” (i.e., free or cheap) labor, and as unwed mothers reject the appropriate form of “dependence” that marriage to a man, in the absence of a job, might provide. Though Kathy’s whiteness allows her the privilege to avoid the stigma of the “welfare queen” in a way that a single black woman with a child (regardless of her employment status) could not, her indifference toward and in places flat-out refusal of the “help” being offered her by men emphasizes the fragility of the “carrot” on which men still count—private-sector control of women (as husbands, brothers-in-law, customers, and CEO’s)—while accepting the “stick” of their complicity with capitalism. In For Crying Out Loud, p. 235-268.

35 In a poignant representation of seeming “domestic bliss” gone amuck, Arnoldi illustrates Dave’s “mutation” scene according to a sequence of provocative events: in the first panel, Dave is shown washing dishes with his back to the reader, with a physically much smaller Kathy off to his right, standing in profile at the edge of the panel. The next panel “zooms” to a close-up drawing of Kathy in this same basic position; she tells Dave that she’s going to drive him to work the next day so she can take their van to the University of Arizona at Tempe to “see about going to college.” Below these panels, the scene continues as a series of two uniquely “paneled” drawings; in the first, a dinner plate is shown breaking violently into pieces, the exclamation “CRASH!” printed above it within a spray of cartoon zigzags that match the contours of the broken dish. In fact, little “pieces” of this zigzag fly left, busting through a series of (vaguely rectangular) quivering lines encasing two angry eyeballs, a bulbous nose, and warbling, fang-filled mouth—something akin to a deranged Halloween jack-o-lantern without the pumpkin frame. Beneath this ghoul, a caption reads, “What? Where’d you get the idea to go flouncing around at a college?”—and any illusions that Kathy
Arnoldi illustrates Kathy’s gruesome fight with Dave by both employing and critiquing the conventions of stylized macho violence for which superhero comics are known. In the context of domestic abuse, the exclamations “POW!”, “SLAM!,” and “KICK!” emphasize the corporeal terror being inflicted rather than an erotics of dominance and submission; Kathy, feeling duped, is forced to acknowledge her vulnerability to a number of well-muscled foes (63-64). Sitting on a black-and-white tiled floor, head in her hands, Kathy is “very busy thinking” about how Dave used her Achilles’ heel—her need to function as primary caregiver for Stacie—to his advantage. “So I could be with Stacie,” Kathy narrates, “Dave had done me the favor of handling things. He’d put the van in his name, opened up the bank account, dealt with the landlord. All my money was in his name” (68). Moreover, when Kathy responds to this calamity by going to Social Services to ask questions, the law only re-enforces Dave’s control of her assets and her inability to pursue a route to safety outside the nuclear arrangement to which she found herself bound. Drawn as a black mass with his back to the reader, a male social worker holds up a document, explaining to a battered Kathy and (as always) joyfully oblivious Stacie that “if the apartment is in his name you can take your clothing but nothing else,” and that public housing would also not be available for “at least six months” (Figure 8).

may have entertained regarding the personal autonomy that this “nuclear family” arrangement could provide for her are shattered along with the dish.
Facing all the situational villains that she does here—legal bureaucracy whose rules are skewed to assure male “head of household” control over the resources of co-habitation, as well as her own youthful naïveté at not having grasped the potential consequences of Dave’s doing her “the favor of handling things” (she wanted so badly to believe in the romance of “going cross country!”)—it is no surprise that Kathy winds up assessing her life in diminutive terms. “Who I was a very small speck,” she concedes, with Arnoldi drawing a tiny black dot in the midst of a white background to pinpoint this feeling (52, 68). Significantly, Arnoldi’s stylization of where Kathy “winds up” at this point in the story underscores the author’s struggle to represent and assess the truth of her memories in graphic form. So often, the most powerful villain that Kathy finds herself battling is her own cramped, exhausted, circumstantially limited mind. As a teenager facing both poverty and pregnancy, Arnoldi “struggled with a limited knowledge of the world” that constantly threatened to usurp her college dreams,
replacing the “when I grow up” thoughts that more privileged teens are at liberty to entertain with thoughts about whether “I had enough money to buy the number of baby food jars I needed to last until the next paycheck,” underscored by the weighty “realization that I did not.” One of the many reasons that Kathy counts as a superhero is her commitment to protecting those vulnerable slivers of “faith” and “hope” that reside at the center of her crowded mind from all manner of competing, encroaching, potentially immobilizing thought-villains—many of which must be immediately confronted and dispensed with as a matter of her and her child’s survival. Indeed, it is precisely the imperative to survive that ensures that Kathy’s faith and hope won’t go the way of “everything I learned in high school” and the “thought that ‘dad’ would help us”—won’t be relegated, in other words, to a zone of triviality reserved for thoughts and feelings that have been of little help or redeeming value in Kathy’s young, hard life (all those thoughts in the back of her head). On the contrary, Kathy’s “hope lobe” occupies a pivotal, visually centralized point of intersection between her fears and desires, keeping larger lobes that compete for space in her mind both connected to and insulated from one another. Her hope may be small, but it mitigates and lubricates the course of every decision Kathy makes. The need for a few more jars of baby food is a small thing—a starving baby is a very, very big thing. The sliver of hope residing between these things is what granted Arnoldi the breathing room necessary to act in the face of such unjust, mal-proportioned predicaments—and to cement the link between the sympathy she learned to have “for the character of myself” (while watching her memories appear in comic form) and the ability of this character to speak representational truth to the experiences of poor single moms.

Acknowledging herself as both a “very small speck” and most likely “back at zero” (she’s got nothing left but the clothes she can carry), Kathy takes flight from her
bug-eyed (now ex) boyfriend, wrapping both her own battered head and Stacie’s in matching paisley headscarves that grant their stripes and polka-dots costumes a “road warrior” edge as they hitchhike along a desert highway, “looking back for something to get us ahead” (73-74). When no one picks them up, however, Kathy and Stacie find themselves wandering into the darkness of the desert, forced to camp out for the night. Here, at this most perilous of junctures (one can’t help thinking about coyotes, rattlesnakes, and plummeting night-time temperatures), the “bed-mobile” appears again in its roughest form yet, a quilted blanket laid on the desert floor. Kathy and Stacie climb on the blanket and lie down side-by-side, catalyzing what for Kathy becomes a pivotal moment of restless contemplation that propels her toward her college dream.

A white-lined silhouette frowning into a starry sky, Kathy finds herself doubting her ability to fulfill a promise just made to a peacefully sleeping Stacie: that her mother will “always take care of her,” a sense of duty no doubt punctuated by the discursive weight of her “position.” Here she is again, head in her hands, lying in that bed “they” said she made, thinking about “all the bad things that had ever happened to me” (76-77). Thinking about the incidents of violence, abandonment, and silencing that encompass much of her personal narrative, she wonders, “Is this the way my life is always going to be? The same bad things again and again. Over and over. Forever and ever” (108). Arnoldi includes Stacie’s sleeping form throughout a series of 7 panels in which Kathy is shown in basically the same face-up position, embroiled in despair. Stacie’s innocent slumber represents a kind of protected encasement of the hopeful “dream state” that Kathy has relinquished for the time being (a visually repetitive counterweight to the “over and over” of the “bad things” Kathy is thinking about). Despite this, a reader has a hard time not feeling the immensity of Kathy’s predicament relative to the paucity of weaponry she appears to carry. Will the sleeping child’s smile, in contrast with the
quivering frown that Kathy now wears, be enough to propel this duo past “ground zero”?

What happens to Kathy next illuminates Arnoldi’s representation of her hero as someone whose ability to gage her own smallness relative to a greater vision of social connection serves as her most potent source of power. Staring into the blackness of the night, Kathy feels the weight of the repeated struggles of her past pressing her into the ground, threatening to pull her future into this “over and over, forever and ever” as well. In what McCloud would describe as an expressionistic use of the comic medium to chart the “inner landscape” of a character’s mind, Arnoldi then includes a full page panel that “zooms in” to a close-up of Kathy’s face. Her cartoon facial features, however, are covered by a detailed sketch of two large, comparatively real-looking hands, a mask that has the paradoxical effect of unmasking the artist beneath the hero’s cover (Figure 9). Those are not Kathy’s hands we see, but Arnoldi’s, whose “sympathy for the character of myself” results in her attempt to literally cover the eyes through which she channels her own past—and to keep her memories, even as an artist depicting experiences more than 20 years old, from excessively influencing her present (mid-90’s) struggle to simply get through the process of graphically archiving these experiences, “panel by panel.”

“Often I would find myself at my drawing table, my body racked with sobs at seeing images of myself as a young teen mom […]. Time and again I was shocked to see the reality of my life before me, irrefutable stark.” (“How I Became a Cartoonist”)
But Arnoldi doesn’t completely let Kathy (or herself) off the hook here. Though her right hand fully covers her right eye, her left hand is drawn balled into a loose fist, creating a kind of telescopic “peep hole” through which Kathy peers up at the sky. Following this, Arnoldi includes another full-page panel that “zooms out” a bit to reveal an overhead shot of Kathy lying next to Stacie, arms crossed, a more relaxed half-frown animating her features (a look of tired bewilderment, one might say). On the next page, Arnoldi’s overhead “camera” zooms out even further, turning Kathy and Stacie’s blanket-bed into a tiny panel-within-a panel centered in a blackened landscape of sparse grasses and prickly cacti (Figure 10). Like an alien astronomer spotting this mother-child spectacle from a far-off interstellar perch, a reader notices that Kathy’s single-line half-frown has become a slightly upturned half-smile—and that her arms, now at her side, seem to encase her in a protective cocoon (which Arnoldi actually sketches around the perimeter of Kathy’s form, ever-so-lightly, for added effect). In the next panel Kathy sits up, “surrounded by stars,” and begins to narrate:
Something happened. You know, a desert star-type thing. The type of thing that would happen to a mother and child who are penniless and who are at the side of the road and who are sleeping out in the desert. It was something to do with particles of light or maybe it was because it was just so very, very dark. It was as though the particles that were me split apart and went out to the stars and the particles that were the stars split apart and came to me. Back and forth. Forth and back. My brother-in-law suddenly seemed small. My sister was small. My mother was small. I was small. But my heart felt big. Very, very big. I felt so thankful, so grateful for all I had (114-116).

Stop 5: Caught in a Working-Class Safety Net

A recent creative writing PhD (Binghamton 2008) who also founded and maintains College Mom magazine, Arnoldi remains unsure about who may be reading or otherwise engaging with her work, especially her comic memoir. Of the women taking classes at Charas to whom she distributed the zine-style cartoons that eventually

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\[37\] An online, blog-style magazine whose mission is “to feature mothers on college campuses who are fighting for their equal rights to education and who are forging the way for others to come behind them.” www.katherinearnoldi.com.
grew to fill out the entirety of *Teenage Single Mom*, Arnoldi says, “I do not know if the moms read (the pages), threw them away, were inspired by them, or not.” The memoir has won two American Library Awards since its 1998 publication, an honor that requires the book to be made available in all high-school and middle-school libraries across the country; “just where I want it to be,” Arnoldi says. It is therefore a good bet that the book is reaching members of the audiences for whom it was intended-- young women and, at least potentially, some teen mothers. But when it comes to identifying a particular community in which the memoir and her other activist and artistic work might find a “home,” this community looks less like a solidified group that might in theory meet up for book clubs or organizing drives, and more like Bruno Latour’s vision of an “actor-network” arrangement—not a “special domain of reality,” in other words, but a “principle of connections,” a *movement* that requires the kind of mixed-media that Arnoldi employs to reach and “move along” a series of engaged associates that remain connected even as they drift in and out of the orbit of a specific political project. These associates may be single moms taking college classes; attendees at a slam poetry night; women living at homeless shelters; or a PhD student who, though not (yet) a mother herself, may have grown up with exactly the kind of mother (also named Kathy) who would often find herself thinking harder than anyone should have to about how to keep that “hope-lobe” functioning in the face of daily socioeconomic crises.

Staring up at the stars, the comfort that Arnoldi’s Kathy ultimately derives from her own smallness comes from a radical awareness of her lack of solidity or control as an

38 From private interview transcript.

39 For more on the American Library Association’s award program, see [http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/](http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/).

“actor” writing and performing her own life story. Indeed, Kathy particle-izes both herself and the universe during her stargazing, gesturing toward Latour’s understanding of agency or action: where an actor is not the source of its own momentum, but rather “the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it.”41 Lying in her desert bed, Kathy is moved by the fact that regardless of the direction she turns, she sees nothing but shooting stars swarming toward and away from her. This vastness causes her to re-think her smallness as not necessarily insignificance or helplessness— or perhaps as a best-case scenario, indifference toward anyone and anything but her and her child’s needs (which would be more than understandable under the circumstances)—but as the opportunity to see herself as one minute particle among a vast “swarm” of entities working to re-map and re-order power according to a flexible grid of constellations that takes everyone and everything’s smallness (relative to the collective whole) into account.

It is possible to read Kathy’s story as a diamond-in-the-rough tale about a disadvantaged girl who used her own momentum to propel herself toward the kind of self-motivated success that would win your average reader’s respect. This reading looks thin, however, if one takes into account the greater swarm of entities that continually comes to Kathy’s aid throughout the text, emphasizing and affirming her worth not as a self-possessed agent of her own destiny, but as someone who—regardless of how she may have wound up in her particular bed—is deserving of the attention and generosity it takes for anyone to achieve any degree of individual success. Arnoldi’s representational focus on Kathy’s unique “brain waves” affirms the inner life of a working-class subject who might be easily dismissed as too busy or worn down to

41 Latour, ibid (48).
possess such interior complexity. But Kathy is no self-contained supermom.\textsuperscript{42} In a twist on a genre that Douglas Wolk calls “the public face of the [comics] medium,” Arnoldi’s story makes use of the dialectical simplicity that superhero comics are famous for—particularly the “heroes” vs. “villains” scenario—to present a radically re-interpreted universe in which a teenage single mom gets to define and stand for “truth, justice, and the American way.”\textsuperscript{43} But Kathy’s individual power is only as potent as that of the concatenated “network” of everyday working-class heroes who provide the lion’s share of the fuel that keeps her bed-mobile on the road. Arnoldi’s awareness of the political link between the collective power of the working class and the vision of “somewhere else” to which her work aims to contribute is indebted to the reality that, far from existing in a meritocratic bubble, most upwardly mobile individuals receive a great amount of continual support from such networks.

The morning after Kathy’s night of cosmic revelation, a long-haul truck serendipitously stops to pick Kathy and Stacie up, “right away” (117). The truck driver is a Latino man who speaks no English (at least not in Arnoldi’s representation of the scene, in which Kathy and the man converse entirely in basic Spanish). As Kathy opens the door to the truck, smiling, the scene cuts to a close-up panel of the driver’s face. “Qué Lástima. El mundo es muy malo,” he says, smoothing a finger under his left eye as if wiping away a tear; Kathy’s face, at this point, is still covered in untreated bruises and other evidence of abuse (Figure 11). The driver offers to take the duo with him to Los Angeles, which is “not on the way to Denver” (their hopeful destination), “but it was away from (Dave).” The series of rides that occurs over the next several pages has the

\textsuperscript{42} For a thoughtful discussion of how U.S. society puts particular pressure on single mothers to prove themselves dependency-free “supermoms,” see Jane Juffer’s Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual (New York: NYU Press, 2006). I also theorize this issue in greater detail in my 4\textsuperscript{th} chapter.

\textsuperscript{43} Wolk, ibid (89).
feeling of something underground or covert, an urgent “spiriting away” in which several of truck drivers (all men) negotiate Kathy and Stacie’s safe transport from destination to destination. In one panel, a driver is shown with his face in profile, its top half covered by a caption, arranging via radio for “another driver to take us north from L.A.” (119). In San Francisco, this new driver arranges “for another driver to take us all the way to Denver”—and this last driver, in addition to the ride, also gives the penniless duo food.

Figure 11

That these drivers, in addition to being working-class, are all men offers a compelling critique of the appropriation of power (and “traffic” in women) by the men who have abused Kathy throughout the story. As Arnoldi draws it, Kathy’s abusers demonstrate the excesses of hegemonic, unevenly distributed relations of power. These men all have too much (super) power, too much sway within in the “swarm” of entities hurtling toward Kathy. The legally and ideologically privileged nuclear family arrangement in which both Kathy’s brother-in-law and Dave were able to consolidate control and brandish it over their “dependents” was as much to blame for the transpiring abuse as any internal monsters that these men may have been harboring. On
the other hand, the “good guy” truck drivers appear to have limited individual power to help Kathy. Yet through establishing a chain-link of associative assistance, granting Kathy access to both safe transport and sustenance, this trucker tag-team provides our hero with crucial ammunition in her fight against superpowered “bad guys.” Additionally, it should not be overlooked that the only non-anonymous truck driver is a person of color with limited English skills, a man shown empathizing with Kathy’s plight. This man, at the very least, also knows something about what it means to be on the “losing” side of power and privilege in the U.S.

Other than these good-guy truckers, however, Kathy’s primary network of working-class support consists of other women: some anonymous, some personalized, all narratively indispensable to her journey. Early in the story, Kathy has to “lie about my age” to take a 2nd job as a waitress when a glove factory strike takes its toll on the money she’d been saving toward college. Despite Kathy’s solidarity with the strike, Arnoldi portrays the reality of what it means to actually be “all women, out of a job” (17). In one panel, the women stand around the factory gate with their bundled-up children, holding signs; the words “rent, groceries, utilities, gas” are scrolled around its border in a continuous loop, reminding the reader that for working women with children, strikes possess little of the romance often granted to representations of working-class site-of-employment struggle (Joe Hill likely never had to pull a “double shift”). So when she takes a job at Sam’s Steakhouse, Kathy is grateful for the practical advice that other waitresses give her—everything from how to smile in a certain way to garner bigger tips from drunk old men, to how to carry a large serving tray with one hand to keep it from dropping—that contributes to her ability to weather the everyday

struggles of being an underemployed single mom. When Kathy has a particularly bad day at work, Arnoldi shares a moment during which our hero, usually so strong, is shown crying. To perhaps generate a certain amount of reader “disidentification” meant to draw attention to her co-workers’ position of power and knowledge relative to Kathy, Arnoldi draws Kathy’s waitress friend in a more realist style than her cartoon protagonist; putting her arm around a sniffling Kathy, the waitress, her hair pulled into a tight bun (as opposed to Kathy’s loose locks), whispers, “Come on, now. It’s not worth messing up your mascara,” and offers her next table to Kathy—“You’ll do fine. Honest. Trust me” (Figure 12). As with the truck drivers, the waitresses’ willingness to share their resources with Kathy (in this case, knowledge, compassion, and even a few extra tips) is what provides her with the ability to properly gage and access her own sense of “worthiness”—the confidence that she really can do what she sets out to do (whether making it to Denver, learning to carry a serving tray, or getting into college).

Figure 12
Stop 6: Mentorship and Mobility as Subversion Strategies

Despite Kathy’s personal resilience and her “safety net” of working-class heroes buttressing her ability to achieve her goals, something about Kathy’s college dream still feels slightly out of reach, or beyond the scope of the forms of capital she has at her disposal. One of the most virulent strains of the American myth of meritocracy, as educational activist and single mother Donna Beegle has pointed out, is the idea that “if you work hard, you will move up” — a maxim that poor and working-class people often accept as true despite their own experiences providing evidence to the contrary. What so often keeps this myth from having any bearing on reality is working class people’s persistent lack of exposure to the middle-class cultural capital that it takes to actually “move up.” Unlike many first-generation college students fortunate enough (or perhaps unfortunate, considering today’s debt crisis) to have been acquainted with information about government-subsidized grant and loan programs by guidance counselors or early mentors, Kathy approached her college dream from a very green position, knowing nothing about the existence of financial aid. The waitresses and truck drivers helped Kathy by supplying her with the forms of working-class capital that they did have at hand — a ride, a few bucks for dinner, babysitting, and forms of situationally specific social capital (like how to flirt with dirty old men to get bigger tips). However, their influence on the motivation driving this narrative forward — Kathy’s dream to go to college — is limited primarily to such here and now, crisis-aversion interventions. The importance of these contributions should not be overlooked or downplayed when it


46 When Kathy applied for college in the early 1970’s, it was also much less common for students to take out loans or take advantage of grant money than it is today. The federal Pell grant program, first implemented as part of the 1965 Higher Education Act, would have been in its infancy. For more about the Pell Grant program, see http://www2.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html.
comes to both the material and affective significance of what this “network” offers Kathy. Without the truckers’ help, she and Stacie may never have made it out of the desert; without the waitresses’ knowledge and compassion, she might not have felt as capable or encouraged as she ultimately does. These workers offer Kathy resources essential to her ability to access upward mobility. She continually credits working-class allies for helping her get “back on my feet” at various moments at which her path to an education threatens to divert itself perilously away from her goal (130). The working-class network cannot, however, provide Kathy with the capital necessary to take that final step toward implementing her college plans; she needs capital that she can only gain through access to a mentor who has been exposed to, and is willing to share, middle-class knowledge, connections, and resources.

Kathy’s initial encounter with Jackie Ward is facilitated by the one thing these women clearly have in common: their children. Walking down a sidewalk, Kathy and Stacie spot a woman and two children sitting on a stoop. Arnoldi illustrates this meeting by drawing Stacie and the older of the two children face-to-face, smiling and saying “hi”; she mirrors this panel in the next, with the adult women introducing themselves in like fashion. Through the simplicity of this childlike greeting, Jackie and Kathy realize that their children are the same age (both three), and immediately offer to exchange babysitting. Thus, before any mention is made of the knowledge-capital that Jackie possesses, the women have already established themselves as part of the same working-class network within which an exchange of “care-capital” often facilitates lasting communal bonds (Figure 13).
In Arnoldi’s representation of this “life-changing” meeting, Jackie invites Kathy in for tea. Within the space of three panels, information comes pouring out as easily as cream and sugar (133-34). When Kathy tells Jackie how she hopes to go to college someday, Jackie informs Kathy that she herself goes to “Metro,” and gets financial aid from them—to which Kathy responds, “What’s financial aid?” In a further mirroring sequence in which Arnoldi draws Kathy and Jackie facing one another, each within her own half-page, vertical-rectangular panel, Jackie responds with her own question: “You don’t know what financial aid is?” The gutter between the panels in which each woman is individually encased is indeed a vast expanse. There is a potentially insurmountable gulf between the knowledge that Kathy lacks—the mere existence of the possibility of receiving financial aid to attend college—and the achievement of the college dream.
represented by Jackie, possessor of this crucial knowledge from the “other side” (Figure 14).

Figure 14

Not only does Jackie serve as a cross-cultural gatekeeper facilitating Kathy’s “crossing over” toward the actualization of her dream, but she takes seriously her position as someone with the power to bestow potentially life-altering information and resources. As a kind of super-mentor, Jackie is uniquely representative of the superhero comic’s potential to animate “the relationship between power and the obligation to use it correctly.” Directly following their tea-date, Arnoldi includes a quick montage of four panels, all on the same page, over the course of which Kathy’s college prospects are radically transformed. Jackie, who “had all the answers,” sits with Kathy and helps her fill out her Metro application and financial aid forms (“not in real English”). She takes Kathy and Stacie to her day care center, and makes sure they get a bike with a seat on
the back. Arnoldi draws Kathy’s hand peeking up from the bottom of the last of these panels, grasping a “letter from the college” encircled by a series of quivering lines that highlight the sense of anticipation surrounding the contents of this particular sealed document. Somewhere in the gutter between this and the next (full-page) panel, Kathy opens the letter, catalyzing a sudden climax to this arduous, uphill narrative—“I was accepted!” Kathy screams, spinning and tossing a gleeful (yet still oblivious) Stacie high into the air for the duration of five full-page panels: a jubilant, confetti-filled celebration befitting such a milestone.

The celebration is granted an ironic twist when Kathy runs to Jackie’s house to tell her friend the great news. “Jackie, Jackie, guess what? I’m accepted!” Kathy shouts through the front door, to which Jackie replies, “Congratulations. But please, please, calm down. Everyone is accepted. Metro has open enrollment” (143). But after what a reader has been through with Kathy—not merely observing, but practically becoming her cartoon struggle to simply render accessible the opportunity to attend college—the “back on earth” quality of Jackie’s announcement in no way diminishes the value of Kathy’s accomplishment. If anything, the distance between Metro’s populist approach to education and the more general lack of educational accessibility to single mothers underscores a bittersweet truism at the heart of Kathy’s narrative journey: that for a poor, unmarried woman with a child, to merely be accepted as worthy to participate in an educational culture to which everyone should have a right to belong is indeed a feat of superheroic proportions.

Moreover, as a working-class single mom whose identity has been indelibly shaped by the acquisition of middle-class educational capital, Jackie’s presence as a mentor for Kathy is nothing short of titanic. But there are several things that grant Jackie’s mentorship style an additionally subversive quality that challenges the cartoon...
superhero’s reputation as protector of the status quo.\textsuperscript{47} Jackie is a hero whose mere willingness to get and stay involved in Kathy’s life advocates for what I like to call a “return to Krypton,” a revision of the American Dream mythos that casts a mobile alien as permanently severed from her or his home planet, country, or culture. In Superman’s case, this home was “destroyed by old age.” Though Krypton is believed to have possessed inhabitants “(whose) physical structure was millions of years advanced of our own,” something about these creatures’ (toxic?) culture is assumed to have led to its stagnation and eventual demise.\textsuperscript{48} Earth (monolithically cast as the U.S.) therefore represents a modern, civilized alternative to a planet on which Superman simply could not stay. From a working class studies perspective, the case of Superman (and other uniquely gifted aliens or mutants) speaks poignantly to that of the upwardly mobile individual from a poverty or working-class background who struggles to “pass” in middle-class cultural environments. She feels that, in order to be accepted or taken seriously in this new world, she must suppress or hide aspects of her “secret identity” that were distinctly shaped by having come from “another planet” which, though home, was in many respects also an impossible place to stay. As with Superman, what leaving this home often boils down to is a need to survive, or to trade powerlessness and uncertainty for a relatively more empowered socioeconomic position.

\textsuperscript{47} In \textit{Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology}, Richard Reynolds discusses how the superhero “has a mission to preserve society, not reinvent it.” This preservation might involve protecting vulnerable individuals against the few “bad apples” (wife beaters, crooks, “mistaken” politicians) assumed to threaten an otherwise orderly social universe (Superman, \textit{Action Comics 1}), or a continued policing of the already “safe” space of while middle-class suburbia (\textit{The Flash}, early 1960’s). Though many superheroes claim to be champions of the oppressed, few use their heroic platform to offer any sustained structural critique of capitalism, patriarchy, or other systems of domination. It is always ultimately individual villains who are proven responsible for abuses of power, and individuals whose lives are rescued through superheroic interventions. Birmingham: University Press of Mississippi, 1992. 73-74. Print.

As Kathy’s adventure has shown, while working-class capital may be useful, the “market value” of working class skills, associations, and ways of knowing is significantly reduced if middle-class skills, associations, and ways of knowing set the standard for what counts as valuable. All the working-class capital in the world would never add up to enough to get Kathy into college; unlike Superman, there was no magic rocket that anyone could put Kathy in to blast her over the walls of the university. What Kathy needed, therefore, was a mentor figure willing to risk returning to Krypton to get her—through this return voyage revealing that Krypton, despite Superman’s lamentation if its loss, may not only still exist, but may be teeming with ideas for how to organize a more just society.

Indeed, Jackie’s return to Krypton to pick up Kathy reveals that Jackie herself never completely left. Due to a need for family housing, daycare, financial aid, additional employment, and other resources, a low-income single mother cannot choose to keep her poverty or working-class identity hidden in ways that child-free students from similar backgrounds might attempt to do (with varying degrees of success). Darning a middle-class costume is simply less of an option for her, unless she is somehow able to keep her dependent “sidekick” hidden from both sight and bureaucratic oversight (generally not a scenario that single mothers would condone).49

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49 The novel *Push* by Sapphire offers an interesting example of a single mother being pressured to do just this, by the same mentor figure given the most credit for “saving” the protagonist from her dismal life. After Precious gives birth to her second child by her father, she and Ms. Rain, her teacher at the Each One Teach One alternative school, get in an argument through letter writing (an exchange that, at the same time, serves as a writing exercise for the marginally-literate student). Precious expresses her anger at a social worker who suggests that she should give up her new baby, Abdul, and her older daughter, Little Mongo, for adoption; she writes of the worker, “Nvr hep now wnt kiz away (Never help now want to take kids away); tsak Abdul i don notin (take Abdul I don't have nothing) (...) also I want to b god muvther (also I wants to be good mother)”—to which Ms. Rain responds, “It seems the opposite to me. If you keep Abdul, you might have nothing. You are learning to read and write, that is everything (...). Being a good mother might mean letting your baby be raised by someone who is better able than you to meet the child’s needs.” Despite admitting that she in one respect “did jus’ wanna take Abdul home 'n rest so I could hurry up n’ go back to school,” Precious makes sure to clear up any of Ms. Rain’s misperceptions as to where her priorities lie: “I is bt meet cldls ed (I is best able to meet my child’s needs),” she writes back (70-72). What Ms. Rain (a lesbian-identified woman with no children and ample middle-class capital at her disposal) may not understand is
Jackie is therefore in a unique mentoring position as someone who has acquired a degree of middle-class educational capital without having the ability to keep her working-class identity “secret.” The imperative to pass as middle class functions as a form of what I would call “shame capital,” which is supposed to serve the upwardly-mobile individual by allowing her to exchange the relationships, attitudes, and values of her home culture for a more socially valuable modus operandi. I would argue, moreover, that the desire to pass as middle class (and to shun features of one’s working-class identity) is intimately linked to the perceived scarcity of middle-class capital: the idea that, once you’ve acquired a bit of knowledge or expertise, you need to hoard it for yourself, or risk being pillaged of your gains by association with former modes of life and less “productive” cronies.

Jackie does everything she possibly can to help her new friend get into college and be successful as a single-mom student, including the vital act of taking her to the library and helping her fill out the “not in real English” forms. By taking an “open source” approach to sharing information and resources with Kathy, Jackie devalues her own middle-class educational “capital gains.” Jackie’s act re-politicizes the concept of value by supplanting concerns over the scarcity of middle-class capital with the idea that higher education need not be viewed as a commodity available to and deserved by some, unavailable to and undeserved by others. This devaluation of middle-class capital opens up space for re-thinking value in terms not of what a college education might do for the few single moms deemed worthy enough to partake, but rather in terms of how their presence might affect both the use-value and exchange-value of higher education more generally. Jackie offers Kathy all the information and resources she has at hand, the potentially empowering function of the child as “sidekick” in many poor single women’s lives. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1996. 69-73. Print.
using her position of power to make a statement in favor of a public ethic of connection, generosity, and interdependence, rather than limited, case-specific access to opportunity.

Arnoldi prompts a reader to think about how her own story chronicles and articulates experiences that are all-too-common in the lives of poor single mothers. These experiences would inevitably affect the form and expression of the critical consciousness that such women would both already bring to class and continue to develop through training received in a liberal arts educational context. Arnoldi places Jackie in an almost sacred position as the missing link catalyzing the climax and resolution of her story—the “one” with that little bit of middle-class capital to offer that made all the difference. However, what Arnoldi’s memoir really gets across is the kind of scenario that might occur if more single moms are able to use the “tools” gained through access to middle-class capital to not supplant or suppress, but rather to augment and illuminate, the value of working-class skills, associations, and ways of knowing. For Arnoldi, the project of helping her single-mom readers feel “worthy” to attend and graduate from college is intimately aligned with promoting the value of a cultural perspective deemed threatening to status-quo forms of knowledge production that take place within the boundaries of educational institutions founded to cater to and continually shore up (via worship of professional standards) a white middle-class, liberal-capitalist worldview.

When Kathy finally goes to Metro to sign up for classes, she doesn’t opt to take a “para” or job-market skills only approach to filling out her schedule (as today’s educational bureaucracy would have her do).\(^5^0\) She wants to take classes that sound

\(^5^0\) In “Families First—But Not in Higher Education: Poor, Independent Students and the Impact of Financial Aid,” Sandra Dahlberg discusses how higher education has become less accommodating to single moms and other non-traditional students over the last 30 years. Interestingly, due to cuts in funding for education coming out of conservative legislatures in the 80’s and 90’s and a decline in the 18 to 24 year-old “dependent” student population relied on to fill seats in 4-year colleges, non-traditional students were
interesting or pleasurable—“urban anthropology, the worker in post-industrial society, women in literature, the history of Africa,” and even, in what may seem an especially quirky move for a single mom, “English horsebackriding…” (150). The content of Kathy’s chosen course load speaks directly to struggles she faces throughout the memoir. In her job in “quality control assurance” at the latex glove factory, Kathy receives a firsthand lesson in class consciousness that one could never get in a university setting. Overhearing scientists in the research and development laboratory discussing the harmful effects of the chemicals used to make the gloves (talc, coagulant, sterilizing gas), Kathy agrees to make copies of documents she sees for union leaders. Though she ultimately gets fired for this act, the solidarity she feels with her fellow workers—all of whom, she observes, had “thick glasses, eczema, (colds), coughs, and red noses”—causes her to contemplate going to college as a continuation of her involvement in struggles on behalf of working-class women. Driving home from her last day at the factory (after having been escorted off the premises by a policeman while shouting “latex causes cancer, talc causes lung disease, the coagulant will make you go blind!”), Kathy imagines herself “going west” to college, “sitting in a room discussing worker’s rights, the status of women, discrimination against single moms, unsafe factory conditions, union snitches” (49-51). The desire to “go west” evokes a pioneering, individualistic conception of the American Dream—and, indeed, Kathy does hope to make life better for her and her daughter. But the deeper impulse behind this dream is

briefly courted to help schools “maintain their share of the budgetary pie.” However, when the traditional student population began to rebound in the mid 90’s, emphasis was put back on providing more “merit” based aid for middle-class students, and less need-based aid for low-income and other non-traditional students. This effectively created what Dahlberg calls a “two-tier aid policy,” whereby “non-needy” students wind up with a state-subsidized education while low-income students bear the brunt of the burden for rising tuition rates. Moreover, as Vivyan Adair discusses in “Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education,” 1996’s Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act (“welfare reform”) discouraged participation of single mothers in 4-year colleges due to strict “work first” requirements that limited the amount of time welfare recipients could spend in class. In Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Problem of Higher Education in America. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003. 169-195. Print.
not personal gain, but resistance and, hopefully, reinvention. As her many, perpetually mobile beds remind us, the aliveness of Kathy’s college dream is fed and maintained by a refusal to be “kept in her place” that she cultivates not as an individual of exceptional merit, but as an active participant in a collective struggle against the idea that single moms (and their working-class allies) should have and know their “place” (52). In contrast to the time and space of the factory, the ultimate middle-class tool that Kathy seeks from her liberal arts education is simply the time and space within which to sit, think, and further contemplate how to use her critical consciousness to help “make a contribution” on behalf of this fight (163).

In a political climate in which education for poor women continues to be skewed in a “job skills only” direction—often, as Sandra Dahlberg points out, due to policies that make it nearly impossible for poor women with children to attend full-time classes for longer than a year—it is harder than ever for single moms to make college happen without the help of mentors like Arnoldi. In addition to using her artistic skills to promote representational dignity for single moms and the working class more generally, Arnoldi continues to gain and use middle-class bureaucratic and professional knowledge to uncover loopholes within which single mom students might gain access to the tools they need to make headway in the fight. Despite the bleak statistics, in our e-mail exchanges Arnoldi takes an upbeat tone when she discusses both single moms’ educational opportunities and new representational approaches to their stories and lives. Compared to the 70’s educational climate in which she went to school, Arnoldi points out that there are now “more moms on campuses,” and that “they are organizing and demanding more rights.” She cites schools like Hunter College and the University

51 Dahlberg, ibid (184-85).
of Florida, Gainesville for their innovate approaches to advocating for single moms’ educational rights and opportunities. She is even glad (despite the many problematic features of such representations) to see young moms receiving mainstream cultural attention through the popular medium like the MTV reality show *Teen Mom* and Lee Daniels’ film *Precious: Based on the Novel ‘Push’ by Sapphire* (2009). But if both Arnoldi’s own story and Sapphire’s still-resonant novel offer anything of enduring value, it is through exposing the power of what can happen when education and poor women’s stories collide—or, more specifically, when education grants the time and space for a single mom to begin to tell a story that goes much deeper than the damning rhetoric of mistakes and “personal responsibility.” Though she has every reason to despise and blame her abusive mother for the tragedies of her life, what education prompts Precious to do is to instead think about the story behind the so-called monster. Sitting in the classroom, surrounded by women much like her, Precious lets go a flurry of tears. She cries for herself, “for every day of my life,” but she also cries for her mother: “(What) kind of story mama got,” she wonders, “to do me like she do?” When single mothers gain the opportunity to apply the critical-analytical tools acquired through a liberal arts education to the telling of their own stories and those of their communities, the persistence of systemic inequalities, rather than personal or cultural failure, invariably outs itself as the villain at the heart of such narratives.
Chapter 2: Where We Left Off Yesterday: Class and the Reclamation of Small-Town Community in *Friday Night Lights*

“The simple act of catching a thrown ball becomes a marvelous achievement only in defiance of the brutal blow.”

--Michael Oriard, from *Reading Football*

All my friends were vampires
Didn’t know they were vampires
Turns out I was a vampire myself
In the Devil Town

--Daniel Johnston, “Devil Town”

Peeking out from under the covers, I stare at the TV screen, breathless with anticipation. A young man with shoulder-length, unwashed hair, accompanied only by the muffled growl of his ‘85 Chevy Silverado, peers through the windshield into the West Texas sun, his muscular forearms resting easily on the steering wheel. A pile of books and spiral-bound, single-subject notebooks are strewn on the seat next to him. Grabbing the book on top, he regards it curiously before chucking it out the driver’s side window. He grabs another—a yellow “English” textbook—and lets it fly. As the textbook lands with a “thunk!” in the middle of a lonely stretch of highway, the spiral notebooks follow it, each flapping pleasantly in the breeze. Finally, the only thing left to dispose of is an empty backpack, tossed to the wind without the slightest hesitation. As the young man smiles and sticks a free left arm out the window, I exhale, reveling in the


rightness of what’s happening: Tim Riggins, star fullback of the Dillon Panthers 2006 Texas 5A high school state champion football team, is coming home.³

Encouraging me to give the TV series Friday Night Lights (2006-2011) a chance, my best friend Emily felt the need to provide a disclaimer: “It centers on a small-town high school football team,” she apologetically explained. Indeed, the mere mention of the words “small-town,” “high school,” and “football” was nearly enough for me to laugh her suggestion right out of the room. I grew up in St. Helens, Oregon, the kind of working class, post-industrial town (not quite rural, not quite suburban) where a young person chooses between two competing “survival plans” to combat the reality of having to live there: Plan A, begin plotting your escape at the earliest possible moment, an exit strategy generally contingent on using the education system to your advantage (getting good grades, getting teachers and guidance counselors to take an interest in you to a degree that you might amass enough “book smarts” and confidence to begin worming your way out); or Plan B, dive head first into the institutional matrix holding the town together: church, family, and—perhaps most important to one’s sense of greater community belonging—sports. In toughness-valuing St. Helens, involvement in sports was thought of as a gender-neutral activity that young girls were also expected to embrace if they wanted to stand any chance of being regarded in a positive social light. The most popular girls in school tended to have the biggest calf muscles and fiercest scowls, and their parents could be heard screaming at bewildered umpires from the sidelines as early in their daughters’ athletic careers as the pitching machine softball league. But the king of all sporting events—the activity that could draw the most members of the St. Helens community to a rain-soaked field in one fell swoop—was

high school football. It didn’t seem to matter that the team, coming from a school with less than 800 students, was only in the 3A league and therefore not likely to get any of its players “noticed” regardless of its win-loss record. Between the cheerleaders, dance team, elaborate marching band formations, booster club raffles, Homecoming festivities, bitter next-town-over (Scappoose!) rivalry, and play-by-play local media coverage of every game, “Lion Pride” became synonymous with the community-endorsed worship of a pubescent pride of young men in whom the town discovered the deepest expression of its imagined sense of self: a place characterized by masculine tenacity, of course, but also a belief in the idea that, win or lose, a group or individual might still be able to wipe off the mud and move forward, ready and eager for the next contest.

Yet as I sat in the bleachers beneath my poncho, trying to keep the rain from ruining my clarinet while lamenting the size of my skinny, inadequate calves, I recall feeling a smug sense of satisfaction in the belief that my way of dealing with being stuck in St. Helens—Plan A, the higher-educational exit strategy—would take me places that most of those boys on the field—not to mention those mean-eyed, broad-shouldered girls whose self-assured strut seemed calculated to mock my very (awkward) being—would never get to go. Years later, this smugness came back to haunt me when, in my capacity as temporary clerk at the St. Helens County Jail, I found myself regarding a roster unlikely to lead to lionization for the men (and more than a few women) unfortunate enough to make the cut: the jail’s daily role call. Glancing down the list, I noticed one name in particular—Jonathan Gunn, who I remembered not only as a good-looking kid with a sweet smile and learning disability who I’d known since grade school, but as a talented member of the Lions football team. When I turned to ask one of my co-workers if she knew Jon, she said to me, simply, “The guy’s a piece of garbage.”
As angry as my co-worker’s comment made me, I wondered if I hadn’t also come to a similar, albeit desperate conclusion: that those who remained in this “devil town,” due to their assimilation to the “town pride” mentality that I’d written off as dangerously backward, were destined to become *losers*. Alcoholics; meth-heads; pregnant and married at 19. Men and women struggling to hold onto that low-paying, non-union job at the ceiling tile factory, or scrounging their way up the management ladder at Wal-Mart; people with no time, no ability, no desire, to think. People with, I feared, minds too atrophied, too *small* to think. “Small town, small minds,” I’d say to my sister, and we’d roll our eyes and laugh together. So great was this fear of the small mind—the kind of mind that would misplace its priorities, that simply wouldn’t know *how* to do better by itself, its children, its community—that I ran to the other side of the country to get away from the memories of the red-faced “good ‘ol boys” and overweight, bottle-blond women cheering in the stands on Friday nights. Yet here I am hiding under the covers, waiting for that Chevy to pull up to the pink-brick, one-story ranch house along a dusty stretch of highway in the fictional town of Dillon, Texas, so Tim Riggins can claim a dream perhaps called to life by the last lecture he’ll hear at San Antonio State University. “Odysseus’s journey,” Tim’s professor begins blandly while pacing before the class, “is like a process to help him appreciate his earlier life... the home he left.” Inspired in the midst of boredom, Tim grabs his backpack and quietly leaves class. As he walks through campus toward his truck, we hear the professor say in voice-over, ever so faintly, “So why don’t we pick up where we left off yesterday...”

Focusing on representative moments from the story *Friday Night Lights* tells throughout its 5-year run as a series, this chapter examines the give-and-take relationship between a married football coach/guidance counselor “team”—better known as Eric and Tami Taylor—and the football-loving town with whom they
negotiate their livelihood. I argue that the Taylors’ ability to function as the series’ aspirational middle-class anchor depends on the degree to which they continue to invest in the high school football “archive project” through which the largely working-class town of Dillon, a modern representation of “Anytown, U.S.A.”, expresses and preserves its identity. By looking at how Eric and Tami, as service professionals, offer access to individual upward mobility for select Dillon High students while also contributing to the collectively-authored “story” of Dillon Panther football, I explore several questions: In what ways might the professional middle class function to facilitate mutually beneficial, cross-class alliances with the working-class communities it imagines itself “serving”? In Friday Night Lights, how does the relationship between “Taylors” and “Town” represent an attempt—however imperfectly executed—to engage with this vision? How does the show portray the Taylors’ frequently changing employment status at a moment when the middle class is experiencing a noticeable backslide in its own upwardly mobile prospects? Moreover, what do we make of the series’ desire to recast the middle-American small town as something other than a socially and politically regressive stronghold from which flight is the only empowering move for those endangered or marginalized by its conservatism? Speaking to the dominant social mood of its era while assimilating unavoidable political echoes (and moments of “déjà-vu”) from the recent past, Friday Night Lights confronts such questions at a time when a weary U.S. workforce is becoming increasingly conscious of the systemic inequalities obstructing one’s ability to simply wipe off the mud and move on to the next game.

A Town, a Team, a Deferred Dream: Friday Night Lights as Cultural Franchise

In Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle, cultural historian Michael Oriard argues that each and every football game offers a built-in
“primary text” rendering football spectatorship an activity grounded more in its
contingent nature than generic or “mass-mediated” appeal. Though acknowledging that
the popularity of football relies on both its status as spectacle and a packaging for
television “that does tend to make the game less distinguishable from the weekly
detective series,” Oriard still insists that the outcomes of games “as often as not resist
such packaging,” leading to a series of “stories” rife with an authentic unpredictability.
“It is the function of football to tell stories,” he claims, “and in a way that no movie or
novel can be, the stories football tells are ‘real.’”4 Granting him his concurrent
observation that the mass appeal of football also depends on the sort of artful tableaus
that my second epigraph exemplifies (the “thrown ball” caught in defiance of the “brutal
blow”), I wonder what Oriard would have to say about a serial TV show that uses a
football game as the primary grounding force of the narrative and its development.
Friday Night Lights fans expect a high school football game to occur at the end of nearly
every episode, and more often than not rely on the “accidental” events resulting from
this game to influence their sense of where the storyline will go next. Yet despite (or
maybe because of) this packaging of Oriard’s football “contingency principle,” what’s
astonishing about the series is its undeniable degree of hyper-mediation from the
original text from which it takes its name. The TV show Friday Night Lights is based on a
film that’s based on a book that’s based on one journalist’s experience living with,
learning about, and coming to love—for better or worse—the members of a small-town
Texas football team and the community that opened its doors to him.

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Oriard, ibid (8-9).

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It would be an understatement to call H.G. Bissinger’s powerfully written *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream* an indictment.\(^5\) To this day, the citizens of Odessa, Texas tend to display some combination of indifference, avoidance, and anger when asked to comment on what’s come to be thought of as the “FN\(^5\)L era,” that moment at the tail end of the Reagan administration when Bissinger came to town to research and write about the 1988 Permian Panthers football season. A recent article in an online version of the *Odessa American*, the town’s main newspaper, reads as a quiet defense against the notion that the school and town have changed significantly since the publication of Bissinger’s book:\(^6\) a response no doubt underscored by the fact that, in the several years following the publication of *Friday Night Lights*, the Permian football program (more commonly referred to by its nickname, “Mojo” football), sunk into a period of decline that lasted throughout the 90’s and on into the new millennium.

Several of the teachers interviewed, quick to claim that “Mojo Pride” is still alive and well, insisted that Permian students are “basically the same” as they were “back then.”

Long-time band director Mike Watts is paraphrased saying that he “didn’t like the book,” and that coach Gary Gaines, a figure of central importance in Bissinger story, is “still a good man.” Coach Gaines himself, who returned in 2009 to again coach football at Permian after more than 20 years away, maintains a cool relationship with Bissinger, feeling “betrayed” by the publication of the book despite admittedly not having read it.

Basing his opinion on talk amongst Odessa citizens, he resents, according to a recent *USA Today* article, how the book “painted Odessa unfairly as a city of rednecks and


Yet ’88 team captain Brian Chavez—one of the only Latino members of the team and today a practicing attorney in Odessa—was paraphrased in this article describing the book as “dead-on accurate,” and elsewhere referred to it as “a yearbook that everyone has seen.”

During a 2004 trip back to Odessa to help with production during the filming of the Friday Night Lights movie, Bissinger claims to have been approached by a number of citizens who expressed to him (in his words), “We did hate you. It was a very difficult look in the mirror. But when we thought about it, we knew we had to change, and we did.”

What this “look in the mirror” revealed to perhaps some Odessa citizens, and surely to the numerous more remote readers of Bissinger’s bestselling, critically-acclaimed book, was a personalized sense of irresponsibility that Bissinger, despite carefully framing his “reportage” with a structural critique of the Reagan/Bush-era “boom and bust” socioeconomic landscape of small-town west Texas, could not avoid conveying. In the final analysis, Friday Night Lights reads as a damning assessment of a town with a tragic case of misplaced priorities, a community that would sell its own children’s futures down the river in order to continue living in dreams of past glory: a town addicted to the ritualistic “archiving” of Mojo football wins, titles, and gratuitously-displayed State rings. In “How Can One Be a Sports Fan?,“ Pierre Bourdieu gestures toward the sense of betrayed futurity likely to be felt by the average reader (sports fan or not) of Bissinger’s book. Bourdieu mentions American football as one

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9 Waggoner, ibid.

among an array of sports designed to meet a “social demand” within a “field of competition” that includes not just the players on the field, but the coaches, fans, and “specialized governing bodies… recruited from the old boys of the public schools”—this governmental category being represented, significantly, by the football boosters in all incarnations of *Friday Night Lights* (book, movie, and show). The betrayal is therefore contained in the particular ways that Mojo fans and fan boosters are assumed to be using high school football to meet a self-serving, solipsistic social demand rather than as a means to instill the “manly character” and “will to win” in their boys necessary to prepare them for roles as “future leaders” (a “political philosophy” that Bourdieu sees underlying the bourgeois and upper class use of the sport).

This feeling that the Odessa community is *not* encouraging or training its interchangeable football heroes to be leaders of any kind—that these boys are merely serving as fuel for the Mojo “beast”

-- is further compounded by Bissinger’s shadowing of several football careers-in-the-making that ultimately lead his chosen few no further than, at best, a short-haul trucking gig a few towns over. At *his* best, Bissinger turns *Friday Night Lights* into an opportunity to critique the institutionalized racism crippling black Permian players’ ability to claim ownership of their futures, allying himself politically and affectively with his more socially marginalized “characters.” In addition to maintaining a years-long relationship with scholar-athlete Chavez, whose graduation from Harvard he was “honored” to have attended, Bissinger spends a significant portion of the book engaging with the situation of black star running back James “Boobie” Miles,

11 Bourdieu, ibid (427-440).

12 Describing former Permian players’ reaction to how “legendary” coach John Wilkins, whom Gaines replaced, treated them once they were no longer players, Bissinger provides a clear picture of the boys’ sense of alienation the process and end product of their on-field labor: “After their careers were over they hated how barely even said hello to them anymore, as if all they had ever been were slabs of steak for the voracious beast of Permian football.” (244)
whose aspirations of playing professional football came to an end when he tore a ligament in his knee in a preseason game. “I often wonder,” Bissinger implores us to think about in the book’s afterward, “how different (Boobie’s) fate would have been if his cleat hadn’t gotten caught in the artificial turf of Jones Stadium that terrible August night.”

Challenging Oriard’s belief that what makes football both a beautiful art form and “authentic” form of storytelling is its propensity toward accident, there seemed to be few true accidents—minus perhaps the unfortunate incident described above—shaping either the athletic careers or later job opportunities available to Boobie and the other black “stars” of the Permian team.

In typical Texas small-town fashion, Odessa was not officially de-segregated until 1982. Moreover, rather than focusing on how desegregation might facilitate a truly integrated student body, white Odessa school board members and sports boosters immediately latched onto the only race-related controversy that seemed to really matter: as Bissinger describes it, “which school, Permian or (cross-town rival) Odessa High, would ultimately get the greater number of black students, and thereby the greater number of black football players.” Permian eventually won a contest seemingly rigged by what school board member Vicki Gomez described as “gerrymandering over football” in the re-zoning of Odessa’s Southside (where most black residents lived). “The curious zigs and zags of the proposed division gave Permian a clear edge… in the number of blacks assigned to go there,” Bissinger writes. Pointing out the eugenicist hoopla over how Permian would finally be getting the black running backs that could only make the Mojo franchise even better—“It was clear that the coaches expected black athletes to be better because of a belief that their bodies matured earlier than did those of

13 Bissinger, ibid (358, 361).
whites”—Bissinger nonetheless underscores the “enormous contributions” that Boobie and the team’s other black athletes made to the Mojo program despite being, as he describes it, “one after the other shipped across town to Permian for the mass enjoyment of an appreciative white audience and then shipped right back again across the railroad tracks to the Southside after each game.”

Indeed, one of the many ironies of the story Bissinger tells is that none of the black student-athletes playing on the Permian team during the “FNL era” were ultimately able to make a career of it, a fact that led them back to yet another confrontation with the racist and classist structuring of opportunity marking the Texas socioeconomic landscape: the inevitability of low-wage menial labor. In a 2008 “Where are they Now?” online spread at espn.com, a viewer is presented with a photograph of the 1988 Mojo team, beneath an enormous banner reading “Home of the Permian Panthers: State Champions Football AAAAA 1965 ’72 ’80 ’84”. Several of the coaches’ and players’ faces are circled in red, with an instruction above the photo telling a reader to “(rollover circles to expand).” Rolling over these circles, I discovered that Chris Comer, Boobie’s “replacement” running back, “fell on tough times in the mid-2000s” and now works as a security guard in Houston. Middle linebacker Ivory Christian, who played a year of ball at Texas Christian University before experiencing a “drop in the depth chart” due to a strained knee, today “works as a short-haul truck driver in Dallas.”

Boobie Miles, according to the graphic, “still resides in West Texas, though he could not be reached for comment.” Digging for more information, I discovered that

16 Some of this information about Christian also comes from Bissinger’s own account in the “Afterword” (360-61).
Boobie, who in 2010 was not working and in 2009 was given probation for aggravated assault, now lives in suburban Dallas. “I’m really not ok,” he told a reporter at USA Today. “But it will have to do, I guess.”\textsuperscript{17}

Despite the predictability of these “endings,” one of the remarkable things Bissinger accomplished by emphasizing his political and personal affinity with the young men of color he profiles in \textit{Friday Night Lights} was to provoke a recognition of injustice in his (mostly white) readers that, I would argue, singularly impacted the framing of Bissinger’s story in its later film and television incarnations: both of which, significantly, began production long after the rise of multiculturalism as representational “redress” strategy in public educational contexts and throughout U.S. culture-at-large.\textsuperscript{18}

One only has to glance at the cover of the 2004 film version of \textit{Friday Night Lights} (dir. Peter Berg)—which, unlike the TV show, claims to be based directly on Bissinger’s book—to notice the impact of these broad social changes. While Bissinger portrays the relationship between black and white Permian players as somewhere between indifferent and openly hostile, the DVD cover features a shot from behind of three suited-up Permian players—one black, one white, and one brown—holding hands while walking across the football field toward bleachers full of screaming fans.

\textsuperscript{17} One notable bright spot in Boobie’s situation: old friend and notable “brain drain” antidote Brian Chavez represented him pro-bono in his assault trial and on other occasions (Bissinger 361).

\textsuperscript{18} In 1990, when Bissinger’s FNL became a bestselling sensation, multiculturalism had not impacted public education or the American cultural vernacular to the degree that it had when the film and television versions of the story came to be. I do think this is a significant issue, especially considering how multicultural education affected even the town I came from, a place smaller and perhaps even more conservative than Odessa. My sister Maggie, who is 10 years younger than me, benefitted from the impact of the multicultural emphasis in the classroom in that the “idea” (if not reality) of difference did become far more widely tolerated and (often problematically) assimilated, even in mostly white, staunchly Christian St. Helens. There were a number of students of color, and even openly gay and lesbian students, in her graduating class (2007). When I graduated in 1997, St. Helens may have rightly still been called a “sundown town.” The social/ historical context in which these changes took place indelibly changed the kind of story that \textit{Friday Night Lights} went on to tell.
The film includes many such displays of a racial harmony not present in the story Bissinger tells.\(^{19}\) However, the film also expresses a truth not fully explored in the book in how it captures the class-based, desperate desire to break out of Odessa—felt by blacks, whites, and Latinos alike—that was certainly experienced by members of the actual ’88 Mojo team. Examples abound of former players casually mentioning how the memories of Mojo football will be the highlight of any player’s life, followed by the boys’ pained reactions to hearing that, after Mojo, “that’s it.” In one such scene, an ex-Panther hands his baby girl to player Mike Winchell for a quick photo-op in a burger joint with the “next Texas state champion quarterback.” As Mike stands there uncomfortably holding the baby, the former player gives Winchell some quick advice. “Remember every minute of this, I’m telling you right now... because before you know it”—snaps fingers—“It’s done. Nothing but babies and memories.” You can practically see the sweat break out on Winchell’s brow as the man then walks away, pretending to leave the baby. “Why don’t you hold onto her for a while?” he jokes, but no one—including the other Panthers munching away on their burgers—laughs at this cryptic snapshot from their supposed futures. The film also manages to capture, with striking rawness, the affective experience of thwarted small-town escape. Exiting the field house after his final moments as a Panther, Boobie walks out to the street and toward a waiting car, a personal monogrammed towel still tucked into his jeans. Over the course of this brief stroll, his walk transfigures from cocky strut to tired hobble, a subtle,

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\(^{19}\) For example: When a permanently sidelined Boobie is shown cleaning out his locker in the Panther field house, the other players—including “Pretty Boy” tailback Don Billingsley, who is quoted making explicitly racist comments in the book—gather around, regarding their teammate with silent sympathy. Cockily attempting to retain his dignity despite the somber tone of the moment, Boobie rips his nametag (“Miles”) off of his locker and hands it to Billingsley, telling him, “This is a gift for you. It’s gonna be worth a lot of money.” Looking Boobie in the eye, Billingsley smiles and says quietly, “I bet it will.”
expressionistic transition emphasizing the injury crippling Boobie’s athletic prospects. As he slips quietly into the passenger’s seat, his uncle, L.V., turns to face him, a look of world-weary understanding on the older man’s face. Boobie then lapses into what can only be described as a paroxysm of hysteria as L.V. hugs him close. In the breath between sobs, Boobie repeats, “I can’t do nothing else—I can’t do nothing else but play football!” “Don’t worry about that, son,” L.V. whispers unconvincingly, wrapping a gentle hand around his nephew’s head—his own labored breathing more than justifying Boobie’s feelings of despair. Though this scene did not appear in the book (and may not have occurred in “real life”), it captures one of the most powerful aspects of Bissinger’s project: the idea Boobie Miles deserved to have his story told, not as an other to pity for his particular misfortune, but as representative of a uniquely traumatic experience that visits most working-class athletic stars, race and ethnicity notwithstanding.

Considering the many social and personal forces conspiring against the sport as a pathway “out” for athletes hoping to escape small-town immobilization, one is apt to wonder: Why would the citizens of Odessa—and the citizens of St. Helens—and also the citizens of the fictional town of Dillon, Texas—place so much importance on high school football? How might a reader or viewer come to not merely dismiss “these people” as small-minded vampires sucking their children’s futures dry in order to vicariously relive days gone by—but rather to understand, and perhaps even appreciate, what it is that they see football doing for their communities? Bissinger gets it right in the preface to Friday Night Lights when he discusses his search for the lights themselves, to find “a town where they brightly blazed that lay beyond the East Coast and the grip of the big cities, a place that people had to pull out an atlas to find that had seen better times, a real America” (emphasis mine). Real or not, the America that Bissinger found was a town called Odessa in the “severely depressed belly of the Texas oil patch,” a town he also
claims “could be anyplace in this vast land where, on a Friday night, a spindly set of stadium lights rises to the heavens to so powerfully, and so briefly, ignite the darkness.” Though Odessa could perhaps be “Anytown,” I’d argue that its Texas-ness also highlights, through the sheer amount of evidence available in this locale, the post-industrial fallout from an idealized vision of “boom and bust,” unregulated free-market capitalism. In other words, Bissinger took us deep into the heart of one of the least regulated, most socially unsafe (from the perspective of the “social safety net”) states in the Union to talk about the meaning that a game like football might have for a town whose majority of citizens (working class citizens) may only ever get to experience “brief flickers” of something that feels like success, triumph, or empowerment. Football, to many Odessa residents, may be like a weekly “boom” in the midst of a “bust” of low-wage, non-unionized, unstable work in the oil industry. Football, assistant Permian coach Mike Belew points out, may be something enduring when so little can be trusted to be: “Later on in life they can take your money away from you, they can take your house, they can take your car, they can’t take this kind of stuff away from you, something that you’ll always have and you’ll always be proud of,” he tells his players on the eve of a big game.20

Moreover, Oriard’s exhaustive historicizing of how American football went from being a “gentleman’s” game enjoyed primarily among Ivy League college elites to a sport dependent for its survival on appealing to a popular, usually “massed” audience (whether in the bleachers or in TV land) demonstrates that these changes were accomplished largely as a result of a working-class refusal to be excluded. Though sidelined from inclusion in a greater Ivy League educational or “leadership training”

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20 Bissinger, ibid (xi-xiv, 271).
culture that basically required elite “Anglo-Saxon and northern European genealogies” for admission, members of the working class were able to use their growing role as spectators to claim a sense of ownership over and broad community investment in the game of football.\textsuperscript{21} American football became, at the behest of the people watching it, a people’s game—and the people, more than anyone else, influenced the development of its rules, tableaus, and greater cultural meaning.

Taking the example of Odessa and its “Mojo” fans into consideration, I nevertheless want to complicate Oriard’s assertion that a “hunger for heroes” or the spectacle of star players is the defining characteristic of fans’ investment in football. Odessa did love its stars—even Boobie, in his time, was cherished as a favorite among fans, black and white. However, it may be more productive to look at the subsequent “tragedy” of the town’s failure to continue to invest in its heroes once their football careers were over not as a reflection of indifference, solipsism, or even racism, but as in indication that the game, in a place like Odessa, is not there primarily for its \textit{players}. Rather, the small-town “use” of high school football generates an archive of fleeting moments, those thrilling flickers of stardom, that collectively add up to something \textit{owned} in which everyone invested in its making—players, coaches, and fans alike—can claim a share: a communal asset, in other words, for those accustomed to owning very little.

Moreover, in a town where there are very few “leadership roles” or even \textit{well paying}, stable jobs available for \textit{any} of its working-class citizens (one-time football stars or not), is it fair to judge these citizens through the lens of their failed responsibility as “trainers” of the future generation? Where are the true vampires lurking in this scenario?

\textsuperscript{21} Even attending the early “Thanksgiving Day” Ivy games that eventually drew nearly 40,000 spectators, many of whom were Irish and Italian working-class residents of New Haven, Princeton, and Cambridge (Oriard 121).
“We don’t need a JumboTron—but we want one”: Town, Taylors, and Cross-Class Give and Take

In a 2007 interview on NPR’s Fresh Air, Peter Berg, executive producer of the Friday Night Lights TV series and director of the film, shares a story with host Dave Davies about an experience he had watching a Permian Panthers football game during a research trip to Odessa:

I was standing at the top of the stadium, looking down, and there was a long stairway that went all the way from the top to the field…. And I was up at the very top, (and) a woman was kind of coming up the steps toward me from the bottom, very purposefully, and she had a baby in one arm… And she got right up to me, and she pointed a finger in my face, and she said, “Are you here to make a movie about Friday Night Lights?” And I said, “Well yes I am.” And she’s just glaring at me… and the baby was looking at me, and she said, “Are you gonna make us look like monsters?” And it really hit me, and I said, “No ma’am, no, I’m not gonna—no.” And she looked at me, and said, “Let me tell you something, we are not monsters.”

Feeling “stunned” by this encounter, Berg thought about what this woman said “for a long time,” thought about it “while I was making the film, and every day… and while I was writing the pilot for the television series,” the latter of which aired on NBC in October 2006. Yet when Berg talks about taking the responsibility to frame the visual products he was creating as respectfully as possible, he conveys an unmistakable sense of ambivalence as far as what exactly this “responsible” framing would involve; “We aspire to honor what Buzz Bissinger did, and the respect he had for those players, and that’s the spirit of what we’re trying to do,” he also told Davies. Taking this conversation at face value, what the film and television versions of Friday Night Lights amounted to, I would argue, was a “two-pronged” means for Berg to approach this woman’s wishes, as well as his 2nd cousin Bissinger’s best intentions, with the respect he felt both

perspectives deserved. The film became a 118-minute representational “gift” to the same Odessa constituency that tended to have the more knee-jerk, communally protective response to Bissinger’s book. Basing the film on the Odessa location and actual figures profiled in the book, Berg nonetheless decided to scrap the attempt to engage with the complex social issues at the heart of Bissinger’s project, devoting most of his energies instead to the lights and Friday nights by crafting stunning visual representations of the football games themselves: games that sports fan Bissinger also insists “were the most exquisite sporting events I have ever experienced.”²³ Considering that some of today’s Permian players have seen the film as many as 50 times, and also hold regular screenings of the movie during bus trips to away games, this gift appears to have been well-received by the Odessa community.²⁴

The television series became the gift to Bissinger, a long-form opportunity for Berg, his cast, and a slew of co-producers, writers, and directors to dive into the nitty-gritty, sociopolitical and interpersonal issues characteristic of a “football-obsessed” community: everything from racial tension to redistricting schemes to the conflict between a school principal and booster club over funding for a JumboTron scoreboard. Perhaps still haunted by the woman at the bleachers, Berg also decided not to claim Odessa as the location for the TV version of his story; Odessa became the fictional town of Dillon, Texas, and the Permian Panthers became, in honorarium, the Dillon Panthers. Berg and crew also relied heavily on documentary realist filmmaking techniques to capture the journalistic spirit of Bissinger’s project in the series’ Austin and (nearby) Pflugerville, Texas locations. Filmed entirely in grainy 16mm, the show features around-

²³ Bissinger, ibid (363).
²⁴ Brady, ibid.
town sites rather than prefabricated stage sets (including Austin area homes, streets, and, in a seamless incorporation of product placement, a local Applebee’s). Scenes are usually shot in one take, with actors being encouraged to improvise blocking and make their own changes to the official script. Moreover, the fictionalized football games are infused with touches of authenticity that help those climactic Friday night contests feel less “packaged” for television. In addition to using Pflugerville High uniforms, Berg and crew hired University of Southern California football announcers Peter Arbogast and Paul McDonald to provide off-screen, play-by-play commentary.25

But as C.L.R. James pointed out long ago, popular cultural texts are usually only accepted by mass audiences if the stories they tell attempt to account for the general “mood” of the time without appearing to push an overtly politicized agenda. Such texts, James elaborates, “must represent some of the deepest feelings of the masses, but represent them within the common agreement—no serious political or social questions which would cause explosions.”26 In kind, Berg and crew understood that the TV audience for Friday Night Lights would demand representational gifts supportive of the feeling that what happened to Boobie Miles or any of the other one-time football heroes who watched their dreams unravel toward the unemployment line must not happen today: the arrival of black presidential candidates and “change we can believe in” to the American cultural stage demanded a more active form of social intervention than what Bissinger was able to provide, with his pen and good intentions, on the gloomy morning of the Bush I administration. Yet the task of maintaining the delicate balance between capturing this overarching “mood” and avoiding overtly politicized representations of


contemporary working and middle-class life is complicated by problems that look like ʼ88 déjà vu: *Friday Night Lights* also found its (always precarious) popular foothold within a cultural climate characterized by mortgage crises, bank bailouts, chronic unemployment, and other well known features of the “Great Recession,” as well as a heartland-based, strikingly visible anti-government crusade centered on localized ideas about what community self-protection should look like (the Tea Party movement).

Taking this uneasy popular “mood” into account, what could the more direct, modernized form of “social intervention” demanded by TV audiences—audiences also fed on the liberal assumption that the U.S. should always intervene where communities appear to be failing to support their own—possibly look like? How could this intervention encapsulate Bissinger’s critique of the socioeconomic and ideological conditions typical of small-town America while also striving to understand if not *respect* the values and dreams through which towns like Odessa, Texas envision their sense of community? Enter the ultimate social safety net: Eric and Tami Taylor, “Coach” and “Mrs. Coach” of the Dillon Panthers.

In addition to a delightfully egalitarian relationship that one fan blogger described as “the most loving marriage in the history of television,”27 the Taylors bring various representational resources to the TV series that help them achieve an easy sense of belonging within the Dillon community. Both are white, and sport the authentic accents, sun-kissed skin, and taken-for-granted gender normativity necessary to help them blend in with the West Texas locals. He’s a Labrador-eyed, resolutely masculine football coach capable of stopping his players in their tracks with a frown and sidelong glance from beneath his Ray-Bans; she’s a honey-haired former homecoming queen

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capable of whipping up 100 trays of baby back ribs for a last-minute backyard barbecue.

But what legitimates the Taylors as service professionals authorized to intervene in the lives of Dillon citizens is something they conspicuously lack: a coherent back story, as both individuals and a couple. Indeed, simply determining whether either Taylor is actually from the town of Dillon proved a labyrinthine task. There is one (cough and you’ll miss it) reference in the series’ pilot to how Eric acquired his job as Panthers coach due to his coaching of star quarterback Jason Street in the pee wee leagues. Head scratching ensues, however, when the couple are shown unpacking boxes in what appears to be their new home. More than a season later, when one of Tami’s old boyfriends passes through town, we learn that Tami was voted homecoming queen of Dillon High, which might lead a viewer to suppose that Tami and Eric were both from Dillon, maybe high school sweethearts. Yet a few episodes later Tami casually mentions having met Eric in college, at the University of Texas. Adding to the mystery, throughout the entire series the Taylors only receive one visit from a member of either of their extended families (Tami’s younger sister stays with the family briefly during season 2). Grandparents are never visited, nor do they (assuming “they” exist) appear to take any interest in visiting a family that also includes teenage daughter Julie.28

The Taylors’ mysterious personal history, I would argue, provides the show with a means to detach them from any messy roots that might lead a viewer to question their representation as definitively middle class. In a recent “Room for Debate” editorial, The New York Times characterizes “middle class” as an imagined site of cultural belonging, a

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“state of mind” defined more by aspiration than income. Economist Michael Zweig defines middle class somewhat differently, arguing that class status ultimately relies on the amount of power one is at liberty to claim over the conditions governing her or his work life. Unlike the working class, which Zweig identifies as blue and white-collar workers “with relatively little power at work,” and the capitalist class, the ruling elite of which “coordinate capitalist activity across enterprises” and influence government and cultural institutions on a mass scale, the middle class are a highly specified class group—about 36 percent of the labor force—composed of “professionals, small business owners, and managerial and supervisory employees.” The middle class, Zweig elaborates, are “best understood not as the middle of an income distribution but as living in the middle of two polar classes in capitalist society.” At the highly unequal poles between this middle ground, Zweig identifies the working class as consisting of around 62 percent of the U.S. labor force; the capitalist class, a mere 2 percent.

Synthesizing both of the above senses of middle-classness, the Taylors provide the mostly working-class community of Dillon—a citizenry more-or-less composed of workers employed in “low-power” occupations like food service, health care assistance, farming, automotive repair, and sex work—with both an “aspirational” example of middle-class belonging and a source of professional power that the community can put to use to enable the upward class mobility of young people deemed “worthy” enough to begin the climb. As professionals, the Taylors are solidly middle class according to Zweig’s definition. Eric is the newly-minted head football coach of an elite 5A Texas

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31 “Six Points On Class,” ibid.
high school football team who in “real life” dollars would be making around $100,000 a year.32 Still technically a stay-at-home mom in the series’ pilot, Tami quickly tires of a role that she conflates with having to attend book club meetings with big-haired Dillon women more interested in grilling her about her husband’s playbook than reading, so she applies for and gets a (mysteriously available) position as guidance counselor at Eric and Julie’s high school. Despite some minor grumbling from Eric—“You know guidance counselors can be a nuisance, and we’re gonna have some interaction,” he says sweetly as Tami glowers at him from across their booth at Applebee’s—Eric and Tami settle into a professional life that offers them tag-team access to the students at Dillon High. As coach and counselor, they both specialize in a delicate process of identification and “molding” of talent or merit that, if realized at its fullest potential, will result in the ultimate class-aspirational compromise: Dillon will get to keep archiving its Panther football “W’s,” resulting in the continued solidification of pride in communal accomplishment despite social-structural or individual circumstances (the “booms” and “busts”); and the gifted athletes and students earmarked for upward mobility according to Eric and Tami’s benevolent judgment will get to leave Dillon in the dust and, if all goes well, never come back.

Though Zweig correlates working-class status with having a lack of power over the conditions and means of production of one’s own labor, this “compromise” also reveals that, at least in the case of the Taylors and the town they serve as professionals, Eric and Tami find their job security to be largely dependent on the will of Dillon citizens. In other words, the working-class residents of Dillon—as booster club members, sports fans, school board members, and general dispensers of small-town

32 As a recent Salon article problematized, such jobs also pay an average of $30,000 more per year than what most high school teachers make. http://www.salon.com/sports/col/kaufman/2006/08/29/tuesday.
public opinion—have a good amount of power over the middle-class Taylors. Throughout the series, the narrative momentum of Friday Night Lights rests on the always precarious, give-and-take relationship between Town and Taylors. What Eric in particular is expected to give the town of Dillon, as mentioned above, is a football team capable of bringing home State rings. If he isn’t able to do this, as he fearfully tells his wife following the tragic injury of superstar quarterback Jason Street (rendered quadriplegic in the opening game of the season), “we’re packing our bags.”³³ Yet regardless of whether the town demands or desires it as a convenient side effect of winning football games, the Taylors will also be providing Dillon with not only a route toward a college education for its athletic and academic “stars,” but with a means to foster the kind of “character” in its working-class youth population that Bourdieu considers an essential feature of the bourgeois leadership training regimen.³⁴

Indeed, one of the reasons that coach Gary Gaines of the Odessa Panthers may not have taken so kindly to his portrayal in A Town, a Team, and a Dream (despite never having read the book) is Bissinger’s tacit assessment of Gaines as having failed to provide adequate mentorship for his student-athletes. Perhaps the most striking example of such “neglect” involved Brian Chavez, the would-be Harvard graduate and arguably most individually accomplished member of the ’88 Mojo team. In his Harvard application, Chavez emphasized, in addition to his stellar academic credentials, his ability to play tight end for the Ivy school’s team. But when a Harvard coach contacted Gaines to request game film of Chavez, Gaines accidentally sent Harvard a tape of a game that Chavez hadn’t even played in; “The problem was discovered,” Bissinger

³⁴ Bourdieu, ibid (430).
elaborates, “when a Harvard coach called Brian’s father and said he was having trouble figuring out what number Brian wore.”35 Ironically, Chavez wound up quitting the Harvard team after **one day**. As Bissinger explains, Chavez couldn’t stomach playing for a team that he found to be “on par with the junior high one in Odessa,” highlighting the extent to which the populist takeover of football that Oriard historicizes may have played itself out. But the broader implications of Gaines’ slip-up are clear. If not even a **Harvard bound** student is ensured the support of the “governing bodies” of his football-obsessed community—then who is?

To curb the outrage that a viewer of the TV series would likely feel if confronted with such a question, Coach Taylor must be portrayed as at least as invested in mentoring as winning football games. Through Berg and crew’s persistent use of extreme close-up camera work and face-to-face cross-cutting between characters, the Taylors convincingly display the process of fostering intimate, highly personalized connections to their various mentees; as my friend Emily describes it, **“Friday Night Lights** captures emotional moments, and is remarkable because it insists on being present for them in a way that no other TV show does.” Eric Taylor faces an extreme amount of pressure from the Dillon community to always be thinking about “what’s next”-- the next game, State title, season, or new crop of Panther players. Such pressure, Bissinger realized, singularly impacted Gaines’ need to put archiving “W’s” before fostering here-and-now relationships with individual players: unable to adequately contribute to the archive, both coaches would quickly find themselves out of a job. However, despite this future-oriented coaching requirement, Eric’s ability to serve as the “molder of men”36

35 Bissinger, ibid (343-44).
36 This expression is used, by both Tami and Eric’s many player-mentees, to describe Eric at various points throughout the series (examples: Season 1 episode 2, “Eyes Wide Open” — Tami calls Eric a “molder of men”
that the show requires he become depends on his ability to demonstrate a present-centered brand of intimacy while provoking his players to confront and work through challenges—the favorable resolution of which also impacts Eric’s continued tenure as Panthers head coach.

Further authenticating the personal character of the intimacy the Taylors cultivate with their mentees and members of the greater community in which they exert influence, The Taylor home and accompanying class “disposition” are presented as not overwhelmingly different from that of your average working-class Dillon resident. Eric is never shown drinking any other kind of beer than the brown-bottle, red-label combination meant to signify “Bud”: the same beer enjoyed by his underage fullback Tim Riggins, who lives in a grimy bachelor pad with his older brother, Billy. The show is therefore able to capitalize on a “class leveling” effect that helps legitimate the Taylors’ right to solicit or even demand personal information from their mentees as more a matter of course than an invasion of privacy by distanced social service professionals. One significant example of this “leveling” in action involves a late-night trip that Eric takes in season 1 to the home of Matt Saracen, the inexperienced back-up quarterback faced with the mammoth task of filling Jason Street’s shoes after the superstar “QB1”’s paralysis. Not only was Matt raised by his grandmother, Lorraine, but the 16-year old now serves as sole caretaker for the woman, who is suffering the early stages of dementia. Matt also

during a conversation about new quarterback Matt Saracen; Season 5 episode 1, “Expectations”: Billy Riggins, asking Eric about a job as assistant coach, refers to Eric as a “molder of men.”).

37 My sense of what makes a “class disposition” comes from Bourdieu’s *habitus*, which he defines as “necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practice and meaning-giving perceptions.” The show seems to recognize that the Taylors will only be taken seriously as “professionals” by working-class Dillon residents if they are perceived, by the show’s other characters as well as viewers, as dispositionally similar to the working class—regardless of the true correlation between this disposition and “necessity.” From *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984. 169-170. Print.

38 “Eyes Wide Open,” ibid.
works part-time at a local fast food restaurant and dreams of attending art school. A teenager living in poverty, Matt is mortified when, glancing out the window of his tiny, run-down house, he spots Coach Taylor pulling up in his Ford Explorer: there Matt is, sitting with his grandmother in their cluttered living room. Panicking, Matt immediately tries to hide his grandma as one might a stash of drugs (a feeling enhanced by the agitated movements of the hand-held camera darting about the living room). 39 “Uhhh, grandma, you need to go in your room for a minute,” he tells her, ketchup stains visible on his white “Alamo Freeze” uniform as he scrambles to put on his shoes. However, grandma has already caught on to what’s happening. “Coach Taylor’s here?” she exclaims with surprise, making a bee-line out of her “favorite chair” and toward the kitchen, where she grabs a plate and loads it up with a piece of leftover, store-bought cake (perched precariously atop a microwave in its plastic casing). Though Matt desperately tries to bar his coach entry to the house—“Uh, how ‘bout we just go outside?” he says to Eric, opening the door little more than a crack—Eric, assuming a stance typical of a social service worker making a “house call,” firmly yet gently resists this request. “Ahh, I think I’d like to come inside,” he can be heard saying softly as the camera, still jerking about, catches Matt turning toward his grandma’s audible rustling in the kitchen.

As Eric enters the house, a viewer, from the coach’s perspective, sees everything Matt was hoping to keep hidden: a TV screen, blaring blue-white noise; a selection of photographs in a stand-up cardboard frame, including several pictures of Matt’s estranged father stationed in Iraq. An open bedroom door framing Matt’s unmade, queen-size bed (flanked by numerous sports trophies); and, perhaps most

39 Emphasizing the “criminalization” of poverty, yes indeed!
embarrassingly, an old lady in a blue floral-print nightgown, closing in on them with a plate full of cake, a radiant smile, and a hearty, “Hiiii, how are you coach?” Despite such conditions, Eric’s demeanor toward Lorraine puts Matt at ease. Eric doesn’t “sit down” to eat the cake as Lorraine invites him to do. But as he stands there, grinning and chuckling to himself in the face of grandma’s genuine, sweetly excited offering (she is thrilled to have the Coach Taylor in her home), he regards her as perfect gentleman would: “If it’s ok with you, I’d like to take Matt off your hands for about an hour, there’s something I’d like to discuss with him as far as the football game this week,” he says, nodding at Lorraine knowingly. “Ohh,” she replies, aware of the importance of this visit. “Yes you do have a big game, and yes you can take him! But I want you to come back,” she warns, wagging her finger at the coach. “I will come back soon,” he promises, turning toward the door. “I’ll come back for some more cake. Next time, I’ll have the milk, too.” As Matt follows his coach out, Lorraine pulls her grandson aside: “You listen to him,” she whispers sternly. “Move your feet. Move your feet more.”

The icing on this “dispositional unity” cake occurs, however, when Eric and Matt are seated in Eric’s Bronco, driving toward the field. The camera cuts to an extreme close-up, over-the-back shot of Eric, his left arm draped over the steering wheel; but before we see Eric’s face in profile, we see his right hand headed toward his face with a crumbly piece of cake. He has taken it “to go,” and gluttonously shoves it in his mouth while Matt, still nervous, shoots a sidelong glance at Eric as the coach wipes his still-full mouth with the back of his hand. Eric then takes Matt through a military-style training drill that serves as a re-enforcement of Matt’s status as the ideal candidate for ascetic “molding.” A devoted grandson despite the class-based feelings of shame underlying his impulse to hide grandma, Matt is someone who has already displayed the requisite degree of “present sacrifice” necessary to not only win football games, but begin the
upward climb out of his present circumstances, toward that art school dream. But what really stands out, in the midst of this action, is the fact that Eric doesn’t simply and politely accept, but actively shoves Matt’s grandma’s offering—a measly piece of leftover coffee cake—into his mouth. This gesture solidifies not only Matt’s trust in his coach as someone who will continue to show up for him as a mentor (Eric is, after all, coming “back for the milk next time”), but a viewer’s sense of Eric as a professional who is uniquely well suited to serve poor and working-class Dillon citizens. The cake he whole-heartedly enjoys, we realize, is nothing special; and Eric, by extension, is really no one special in Dillon. But this lack of specialness is what makes him special in the eyes of viewers who identify with Lorraine as she leans back in her chair, still giggling while Eric and her grandson drive away together. “Coach Taylor,” she says, shaking her head and smiling warmly.

The series’ ability to capture a sense of genuine connection between the Taylors and Dillon residents perhaps requires that Berg and crew take a “low-brow,” strategically claustrophobic approach to filming. The use of handheld cameras and natural lighting while filming within the interior of the Taylor’s own home is significant in this regard; even though their two-car garage ranch house is sprawling compared to Matt and Lorraine’s, it often appears cramped and dimply lit. But far from coming across as a form of visual “slumming” or a means to trick viewers into accepting the Taylors as of a lower class status than they actually are, what this leveling effect accomplishes, I would argue, is a politically significant emphasis on the everyday similarities rather than differences between working and middle-class lifestyles, desires, and, ultimately, class interests. Though remaining figures of middle-class aspiration for their working-class mentees throughout the series, the Taylors are portrayed as simply having more in common with even the poorest members of the Dillon community than,
crucially, the few people in town who could be said to count as members of Zweig’s “capitalist class”—especially, it seems, when it comes to thinking about how the game of football might be used to benefit both the upwardly-mobile youth of Dillon and the community at-large.

From a vocational perspective, this commonality makes sense. As Zweig explains, part of what renders the professional middle class in the “middle” is its position as “caught in the crossfire in the principal class conflict between labor and capital,” between the vast majority of Americans who perform most of the labor and the small minority who accumulate most of the wealth resulting from this work. Zweig further argues that those professionals whose “lives are closely intertwined with the working class”—football coaches, high school guidance counselors, and school principals (one of which Tami later becomes) among them—are distinctly vulnerable to “watching their economic and social status (deteriorate) along with the class they serve.”40 Such professionals are more likely to see their class interests as aligned with the working class than those professionals “whose lives are more fully involved in serving the capitalist class” (corporate lawyers, financial officers, “doctors who practice beyond the reach of HMOs and insurance company oversight”). This issue of shared middle and working-class “class interests” becomes more palpable as the series progresses. Of the many fascinating things about Friday Night Lights, perhaps most compelling is the way the Taylors undergo a noticeable degree of downward class mobility—or, more provocatively, a degree of becoming working class—that I would argue mirrors the situation experienced by the U.S. professional middle class during the last few years of the show’s 5 year run (2008ish-2011).

40 “Six Points on Class,” ibid (3).
The Taylors wind up in their “nearly working class” position due largely to the inertia generated by two middle-aged, business-savvy white male characters who personify the polarized class conflict between those dedicated to fighting for the collective interests of the Dillon community, and those wishing to take the town in a more privatized direction where power and resources—including power over Panther football—would wind up consolidated in very few hands. The first of these characters, Buddy Garrity, functions as the unofficial social and political “representative” of working-class, football loving Dillon. A former Panther with State championship ring always prominently displayed, Buddy is the brains, muscle, and money behind the Panther power-bloc; as his name suggests, he’s a football fan’s best “bud.” Both booster club president and respected owner of Garrity Motors (his local car dealership), Buddy is a thorn in the side of many of the (well-meaning) things the Taylors attempt to do for the town of Dillon in their service capacity. But he also comes to the Taylors’ rescue at times when they need his political clout in order to maintain their own standard of living (and by extension, their role as the series’ middle-class aspirational anchor). Buddy often functions as the show’s comic relief due to his impressively authentic, small-town “good ‘ol boy” demeanor: well-fed with the requisite several chins, greasy comb-over, and Hawaiian shirt, he can generally be found putting his salesman skills to use concocting questionably legal recruiting or money shuffling schemes (or, on occasion, cursing his ex-wife’s new “tree hugger” husband). However, Buddy is anything but a self-motivated capitalist. His role is to ensure the protection and preservation of Dillon’s greatest asset—the Panther football archive—and, when necessary, persuade or strong-arm one or both Taylors into showing up on the “Town” side of various value-laden debates.
Perhaps the most controversial example of the latter involves Tami’s attempt, in her new role as principal of Dillon High (which she assumes at the beginning of season 3), to divert funds earmarked by the booster club to buy a JumboTron football scoreboard toward public education. Tami often functions as a female counterpart to Eric in her mentoring of several “at risk” young women throughout the series. However, unlike Eric, Tami also tends to serve as the series’ voice of structural critique, especially in her capacity as principal. While Eric is content to confine his social service energies to fostering connections with individual players he deems worthy of investment, Tami often engages with big-picture, publically aired socioeconomic issues—like how to increase funding for an imperiled high school—likely to broadly impact the Dillon community.

So when Buddy waltzes into Tami’s office to present her with a check with “a lot of zeroes” (in Tami’s words) in order to fund the purchase of the JumboTron, Tami is stunned. “The school has lost four teachers to budget cuts this year—Do we really need a JumboTron, ya think?” she asks Buddy, staring at the check in disbelief. “Well no Tami, we don’t need one,” Buddy explains, peering into her still shocked face with a look of steely-eyed determination. “But we want one. And we’re gonna have one because of that (check)—and you’re gonna get all the credit.” This is not the kind of “credit,” however, that Tami would like to earn on behalf of the school; and indeed, when Buddy and several other Dillon citizens are shown at a post-game party “oohing” and “ahhing” around a mini-model of the football field flanked by a scaled down replica of the desired scoreboard, the venture does seem laughable. Tami therefore attempts to “re-allocate the JumboTron funds for academics” despite Buddy’s protests, a move

leading to an early-morning office ambush by both Buddy and (rumored lesbian) Mayor Lucy Rodell. Despite liberal political leanings that might in theory align Rodell with Tami’s principled stance, it’s clear which side the Mayor is on. “Those Boosters raised that money in good faith that it was gonna be used for a scoreboard,” Rodell icily informs Tami. When Tami interjects to point out that she, as principal, ultimately has the last word on how the funds are used according to the “bylaws,” the battle lines are drawn: “I hope it doesn’t turn ugly—for your sake,” Rodell warns Tami as Buddy, hunkered down on the principal’s office couch, quietly watches the Mayor lay down the real law. When Tami does eventually lose this particular conflict of interest—Buddy and the Mayor simply go over Tami’s head and get the schools superintendent to hold a public vote (with a foregone conclusion) on the issue—Eric helps ease the embarrassment his wife feels over, she admits, possibly having picked “the wrong fight.” “I think it’s obvious that you’re right and they’re wrong,” Eric tells Tami, comforting her as they sit in bed at home. Eric earnestly supports Tami’s position as his frustrated wife acknowledges defeat. Yet throughout the entire JumboTron conflict, Eric remained publically silent on an issue that might have adversely affected both Taylors’ employment prospects were the football coach to voice his opposition to the will of the same citizens who—via empowered representatives like Buddy and Mayor Rodell—keep him in his job.

A viewer may feel outraged, in the way that a reader of Bissinger’s book might have, that the citizens of Dillon would choose a JumboTron over teachers. Such feelings suggest that a community like Dillon, though democratic in its decision-making


43 “Hello, Goodbye,” ibid.
processes, might simply hold wrong ideas about what sort of things are or should be important in life: a possibility that, through Eric and Tami’s principled “we’re right, and they’re wrong” stance, echoes my fearful and dismissive sense of the “small minds” that I felt permeated my own sports-obsessed community. However, what characters like Buddy and Mayor Rodell allow the series to do in a way that Bissinger perhaps couldn’t as a singular authorial voice is to animate the complexity of not only what football might mean for the working-class citizens of a town like Dillon, but of who these various small-town people—Buddy, the Mayor, and the Taylors alike—actually are.

In his “roughing up” of a woman who’s just trying to serve Dillon High students in her professional capacity (a capacity that, as Bourdieu also suggests, is deeply aligned with a middle-class moralistic consensus about where good people’s values should lie), Buddy may appear to have a “misplaced” sense of priorities. However, in the scene directly following his office ambush of Tami, Buddy is shown, in a t-shirt and pajama shorts, serving a steak dinner to his teenage daughter, Lyla, in his small, recently acquired apartment. Lyla, in the wake of her parents’ nasty divorce and her mother’s move to California with her two younger siblings, decided to stay in Dillon with her father to finish high school. Moreover, when Buddy, in typical Texas boom-and-bust fashion, later loses the money he’s saved for Lyla’s college education to a “bad investment,” he swallows his pride and calls his estranged brother to ask for a loan so Lyla can attend Vanderbilt, her dream school. By contrast, Eric’s generally magnanimous character is not without blemishes. When Eric decides (early in season 2) that he would like his old job as Panthers coach back after having left to take a lucrative

assistant coaching job at Texas Methodist University—a gig that temporarily left Tami back in Dillon to care for Julie and new baby Gracie Bell as a “single mom”—Eric authorizes Buddy to concoct a shady scheme that, without merit, gets new Panthers coach Bill Macgregor fired. So when it turns out that Buddy actually can’t get Eric his full salary back as desired upon resuming his coaching duties—an “oversight” that Eric and Tami discover, much to their chagrin, when Eric’s greatly-reduced first check comes in the mail—it’s hard to feel very sorry for the Taylors: especially since, when Coach Macgregor shows up at Eric’s door to remind him that “I have a family too” in the wake of his firing, Eric has nothing to say to the man. As Eric walks back into his house after this confrontation, his mouth quivering with guilt, baby Gracie can be heard crying in the background. From here, the camera cuts to a familiar sign posted in Coach Taylor’s office: “Character is who you are,” it reads, “when no one is watching.”

To the show’s infinite credit, what these “character sketches” reveal is the care with which evaluating someone’s character must be approached when the everyday politics of class come into play. “Molder of men” he may be, but Eric Taylor is also a precariously employed father with a new baby facing either a pay cut or continued estrangement from his family. Football-crazed hippie-hater he may be, but Buddy is hardly indifferent to the possibility that his children might miss out on their dreams as a result of his “misplaced” priorities or investments. The representational complexity made possible by the long-form dramatic series allows Berg to emphasize the similarities between the Taylors’ struggles and those of the greater Dillon community: a feat that Bissinger was not able to accomplish in his perhaps unintentional self-characterization

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45 Texas Methodist University is a made-up, TV land amalgamation of Texas A&M and Dallas’ Southern Methodist University.


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as an outraged outsider empowered by the written word to speak for young people being lost to the small-minded solipsism of sports-obsessed, small-town communities.

Furthermore, the philosophical divide between Taylors and Town on the issue of whether and to what degree football should continue to function as the “connective tissue” holding the Dillon community together is not quite the wedge that it became between Bissinger and the Odessa citizens who, in the wake of the damning book, watched their beloved Mojo program rapidly deteriorate. Indeed, Eric is a loud, proud high school football coach. Tami does often serve as the voice of reason inevitably racing through the minds of most viewers; toward the middle of Season 1 she matter-of-factly says, seemingly more to an omniscient audience than her nodding husband, “This town makes these kids into idols, and then they get out of here and everybody’s not just giving them something all the time... and they fall flat on their faces, it’s a shame.” Yet she also frequently acknowledges the good that football can do not simply as a route toward upward mobility for the few young men who might be getting phone calls from college recruiters, but as a means to instill a sense of community pride, togetherness, and solidarity among Dillon residents from various backgrounds.

One example of the TV series’ emphasis on the collective value of football involves Tami and Eric’s attempt to persuade the parents of Jamarcus Hall, a talented fullback, to allow their son to continue playing for the Panthers. When he gets called into Tami’s office for (in a bizarre throwback to the “Dennis the Menace” era) attempting to set a classmate’s hair on fire, Jamarcus reveals that he’s been keeping his status as a Panther hidden from his parents, who “just aren’t football people.” When Jamarcus’


parents subsequently threaten to pull their son off the team, Tami and Eric, softly mirroring Buddy and Mayor Rodell’s trip to Tami’s office, decide to stop by the boy’s house to talk with his parents; their son, after all, is a valuable component of Eric’s “W” earning potential. Significantly, not only is Jamarcus’ family black, but they are the kind of newly middle-class family that, at the exact moment this episode aired (November 2008), were facing a multitude of threats to their precarious socioeconomic gains (most notoriously, the bursting of the sub-prime mortgage bubble). While several of the Halls’ six children run about their small, modestly decorated ranch house, Mr. Hall explains their situation to the Taylors: “I’m an engineer at the power plant. My company has moved us five times in the last 10 years. We’re just passing through, I’m not one of your Dillon ‘football fanatics.’” Mr. Hall presses on with an argument that your average viewer of the show, if in a similar position, might make: “I don’t want Jamarcus wasting his time and energy on something that’s not gonna get him anywhere,” he says—a point also haunted, for this particular family, by Boobie Miles and what football didn’t do for him and his cohort of other black “stars.” Eric then tries to convince Mr. Hall that football “allows a young man to be part of something bigger than what he is”—to which Mr. Hall snarkily replies, “And all this time, I thought it was just a dumb game that this whole whacked out town is obsessed with.” Hearing this, Tami tries a more empathetic approach. “I really do understand that,” she interjects. “It took me a long time to understand all this fuss about football.” Tami goes on to emphasize her husband’s ability to “inspire and empower” the kids on his team—a line of reasoning that, though still skeptical, the Halls seem to be warming up to. However, what finally convinces them to give “this football stuff” a try is more the promise of a good show than Tami’s glowing remarks about Eric’s motivational talents. “Come to a game Friday night, just one time, just to see (Jamarcus) out there in his element, shining… I feel like it might
make a difference,” Tami reasons. “We’ll think it over,” Mrs. Hall promises, smiling despite herself. Regardless of where football might “get” Jamarcus, she might still like to see her son shining like a star in front of thousands of screaming fans.

Despite its cheesiness, what happens that Friday night serves as a testament to Oriard’s sense of football as *living* text. As Jamarcus runs toward the end zone, plowing his way past linebackers “for a much needed first down” (as an announcer explains in voice-over), his parents enthusiastically regard their son from the stands. “I see him over there,” his father says, pointing toward the field as his wife smiles proudly. While the crowd erupts in cheers and clapping, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Mr. Hall rubbing his chin, his eyes fixed on the field in anxious contemplation. As his attention suggests, the collective excitement of the “story” being told around him—a story in which he and his wife, in their gestures and reactions, also serve as participant-authors—may already be enough to sell him on the value of this “dumb game.” Moving a bit further down the bleachers, we also notice our favorite “whacked out” Panther fan Buddy Garrity, characteristically on his feet and yelling. The camera then drops to knee level and we see his younger son and daughter (Buddy Junior and Tabitha)—come from California to visit their father and older sister for the week—sitting side-by-side, bored to tears. Earlier in this episode, Buddy, Lyla, and the kids embark on a disastrous camping trip during which Buddy Junior refuses to throw the football around with his dad, siding with his mother’s new husband (the “hippie”) in his criticism of American football as “stupid” because “it’s the only sport that’s played here and nowhere else” (with the force of Junior’s “here” referring as much to “stupid” small towns like Dillon as the U.S. at-large). But despite Buddy’s pain over his inability to connect with his estranged children, it becomes increasingly possible that this particular football game, a nail-biter that ends with Jamarcus scoring on a “huge 50-yard TD pass,” might help
Buddy repair his family’s damaged “connective tissue” after all. As the Panthers rally toward a comeback in the second half, Buddy Junior, drawn to his feet by the momentum of the crowd, half-heartedly applauds, smiling wanly at his beet-faced hooligan dad. After Lyla’s boyfriend Tim Riggins “rumbles up the middle” for another crucial first down, Lyla beams at Tabitha, now also standing, who grins back in acknowledgement of Tim’s notorious toughness.

Further cementing the importance of such “archivable” moments for members of the Dillon community, this episode ends with a touching scene between Tim, Lyla, and several of their friends and relatives during which a now wheelchair-bound Jason Street presents “Tim Riggins Goes to College,” a lovingly made highlight reel featuring his best friend Tim’s greatest moments as a Panther. In addition to capturing various tableaus that exemplify Tim as a football player (“1-2-3-4-5-6 guys to bring him down, typical Tim Riggins style,” Jason says, pointing at the screen as the living room crowd gasps in awe), the video also features interviews testifying as much to Tim’s character and the off-field struggles he’s faced as his recruitability. Tim’s older brother Billy acknowledges that seeing Tim win a State title, “after all we’ve been through… was probably the happiest moment of my life.” Watching himself say these things on-screen, the “real time” Billy Riggins, moved to tears, raises a beer to thank “Streeter” for a gift that, regardless of whether Tim Riggins actually goes to college, will remain an enduring record of one human being’s collectively acknowledged value—something that, as Permian Panthers assistant coach Belew reminds us, “they can’t take away.” The posterious value of this record is further emphasized by how Tim Riggins, like my friend Joe Gunn, eventually winds up incarcerated: perhaps tragically, perhaps due to social forces that, despite a “fortitude” to which Eric himself testifies, imposed significant constraints on the choices available to the Panthers’ star fullback.
They Who Take Things: A Ruling Class Threat to a Gentleman’s Game

In order to explore the connection between they who take things and what fearless and loved Tim Riggins (hardly a “piece of garbage”) is doing in jail, it is necessary to return the issue of monsters. With the TV series, Berg accomplishes what the Odessa woman in the stands asked of him. There are many kinds of Dillon citizens: relatively privileged “good ‘ol boys” like Buddy who, though loving family men, are intent on distancing themselves from both “liberal tree-huggers” and those who “come from white trash”;49 middle-class black families like the Halls, “just passing through” a series that perhaps can’t fully envision where black people who aren’t chronically “underserved” might fit in;50 “female headed” families full of women (some sharp, some flaky) who realize there’s serious cash to be made dancing for drunk guys a few nights a week at the Landing Strip; and even a spattering of marginally closeted queer folks who, despite their silence on social issues not pertaining to football, manage to find a more-or-less functional niche (whether as Mayor, assistant football coach, or cute bass player for the Christian metal band “Crucifuxtorious”). All of these people, regardless of their differences, are likeably human and therefore assimilatable to Dillon. Witnessing their triumphs and struggles, viewers are invited to feel the complex textures of their lives, to see themselves in them. Indeed, throughout the entire series, only one real villain—one truly detestable, inarguably monstrous character—rears his (or its) ugly head: “Smilin’” Joe McCoy, a beer industry tycoon who rolls into town right about the same time the Halls show up to give Jamarcus his “brief flicker” of Panther stardom. As the lone

49 When Lyla informs Buddy that she’s begun to date Tim Riggins, this initially is his response (“he comes from white trash,” Season 3 episode 4, “Hello, Goodbye”).

50 Despite Jamarcus’ glorious night on the field, he and his family do disappear from the series after the episode discussed above.
member of Zweig’s capitalist class given a significant role in the series, Joe McCoy, and the rules by which he is portrayed as operating, represents not only an attempt to pillage and pervert the spirit of Panther football, but to obstruct Dillon’s access to what Zweig defines as “values that are central to working-class politics: recognition of mutual responsibility, fairness, human dignity, and democracy, in place of self-interest run wild into greed.”

One need look no further than Jamarcus’ triumphant Friday night to witness the various effects of Joe McCoy’s capacity to pervert. The McCoys move to Dillon so that Joe’s son JD, a freshman quarterback already receiving scouting buzz for his “golden arm,” can “be mentored by a great coach”—or so Joe sycophantically informs Eric during a trip by the coach’s office early in the football season. By the time the final regular season game rolls around, not only has the “Stud of Suds” (as assistant coach Mac McGill nicknames him) tried to win Eric’s favor with expensive Scotch and Cuban cigars—bribes that Eric politely yet coolly informs Joe he “can’t accept”—but he’s made numerous attempts, using his money, to subtly subvert Eric’s coaching authority, the most amusing of which involved sending a gaudily-decorated “Juicy Brothers” smoothie truck by the football field in the middle of practice. Eric, characteristically attuned to the seductive power of McCoy’s ostentatiously displayed suds fortune, smells something rotten in the state of Dillon earlier than most residents: including Tami, who, after befriending Joe’s wife, Katie and visiting the McCoy’s grotesque McMansion-on-a-

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51 “The Working Class Majority,” ibid (5).

52 “I Knew You When,” ibid.

53 Eric, infuriated when his players start complaining after he’s sent the truck away (“Damn, I wanted a smoothie,” one linebacker mumbles), nonetheless manages to use the situation to emphasize the character-building value of deferred gratification. “I’ll tell you what, you win Friday night,” he hollers at his disappointed team, “and you can have all the damn smoothies you want!”
hill, develops a noticeable case of the green-eyed monster that leads her to begin fantasizing about upgrading to a less modest dwelling. Even Buddy, his eye for business and hunger for “W’s” getting the better of his protectivist instincts, immediately sidles up to Joe as an “investor” uniquely capable ($$$) of helping strengthen the Panther football asset.

Yet as the playoff-securing game against the Fort Hood Cougars begins, JD’s “golden arm” is looking a bit rusty. When JD throws a deep incomplete pass right out of the shoot, Joe, the ultimate irritating sports dad, screams at his son from the sidelines: “What are you doing, JD! Keep the elbow in, boy!”, he hollers, his face reddening as he mimics the “elbow in” move that JD is apparently not emulating effectively.

Significantly, once the McCoys move to town, the show engages with both the classing of football and the greater access to resources differentiating JD from other Panther players by emphasizing differences between the “passing game” and the “running game.” JD, exemplifier of the “passing game,” has been trained in a way where most of the focus is put on the value of his arm as a cannon capable of delivering aerial passes to well-placed receivers. Eric is initially skeptical that a player as small as JD, still physically underdeveloped as a freshman, could effectively serve as his QB1. In an attempted “mentoring ambush” gone awry, Eric, informing JD that he needs to “bulk up some,” tells the kid to “eat some chicken-fried steak or something”; to which JD robotically responds, “I’m not allowed to have fried foods, my dad says it’s bad for me.” Though disgusted that Joe pays quarterback coach Wade Aikman “thousands of dollars a month” to offer JD private training, Eric has to admit that all the capital

54 “Keeping Up Appearances,” ibid.
invested in creating JD’s uniquely refined appendage has yielded a formidable product. Eric eventually makes the painful decision to appoint JD as QB1 in place of Matt Saracen, his underfunded protégé.  

In contrast with JD, Matt is all “running game,” a scrappier, more accessible style of play characterized by short tosses, hand-offs, and fakes. Remarkably, this style appears to be more similar to the upper-class “gentleman’s game” style characteristic of late 19th century Harvard football than the passing-game style resulting in the crowd-pleasing tableau catches that JD McCoy is capable of delivering. Echoing Bourdieu, Oriard mentions how the early promoters of American football stressed the capacity of the game to serve as a means to train “the man of executive ability” who would manage “corporate enterprise.” Eric’s coaching emphasis on values like “the sacrifice... of (individual brilliancy) for the team’s greater effectiveness” grants an ironic touch to Oriard’s sense of Ivy football as a site where the “scientific management” procedures promoted by a different Taylor (Frederick Winslow) might be put into practice. As head of Panther “management,” Eric often employs tactics associated with the “science of organizing physical labor.” He “(distinguishes) the needs for brain and for brawn,” for instance, and “(assigns) them accordingly,” with players like Tim Riggins and Jamarcus Hall providing the brute toughness at fullback to compliment Matt Saracen’s intellect and in-the-moment artistry at quarterback (Matt, as Jason Street admiringly points out to Eric, “listens to Bob Dylan and draws pictures”). A Friday Night Lights viewer is therefore being invited to engage with “McCoy style” football as a perversion not just of

56 “Hello, Goodbye,” ibid.

57 Oriard, ibid (75-76).

58 “Eyes Wide Open,” ibid.
modern American values like equal access to opportunity, but also of earlier modes of capitalist production that, though still hierarchical and rife with exploitation, may have at least been more “gentlemally” than what a devil named Joe McCoy is bringing to town.

During the first half of the game against the Cougars, JD’s arm, and by extension the “passing game” on which his quarterbacking is based, continues to malfunction. Joe’s increasingly furious reactions to his son begin to garner uncomfortable looks from the spectators around him, including both Tami and Buddy: the latter of whom, seated next to his new “buddy” Joe, makes a point to downplay JD’s mistakes. Turning toward Joe, Buddy, making a gesture of stark contrast to Joe’s vertical “arm chop,” holds both hands out about a foot apart. “Hey Joe, calm down just a little bit,” Buddy says, State ring flashing on his right hand. “He only missed it by that much.” When Joe continues to grumble (“But we’ve been working on that all week!”), Buddy quietly adds, “Hey, it’s ok. The receiver ran the wrong play.” No Panther fan would appear to be more invested bringing home the “W’s” than Buddy: we’re talking about a guy who maintains a barren field on the outskirts of town with a mailbox address that he secretly assigns to players living beyond the vicinity of Dillon High zoning restrictions. Yet Buddy’s open horizontal gesture, sympathy toward JD, and more group-oriented, “big picture” sense of the composition of the field—“the receiver ran the wrong play”—emphasize Joe’s attempt to both privatize and hyper-mechanize the collectivist, contingency-oriented spirit of Panther football that Buddy, Tami, and other fans hold dear. Buddy doesn’t mind that JD missed the pass—it was still an *exciting* miss—and this feeling is more important than where the pass might “get” both the team and its individual stars. Moreover, with Buddy’s own State ring conspicuously displayed, it would be difficult for a viewer to question the connection between this tried-and-true brand of communal
thrill-seeking (or “memory-making,” as Tim Riggins might emphasize) and the perpetuation of the “W’s” themselves.

At halftime, Joe’s attempt to wage a privatization grab at Panther football is further emphasized by the brewing battle between Joe and Eric over the state of JD’s very soul. JD is uniquely intriguing as a character in that he evokes a feeling of simultaneous sympathy and disgust from a viewer; paradoxically, he appears as both exploited worker and untrusted, unnatural child of privilege. Walking toward the Panther field house after his less-than-stellar first half, JD, taking off his helmet, regards his waiting father through fearful eyes. “Get over here right now!” Joe orders his son who, rather than entering the field house with the rest of the team, timidly approaches his father. As Joe scolds JD with vitriol—“Where is your timing, we worked on this all week!” he spits, ramming his index finger into JD’s sternum as the humiliated boy apologizes—Eric intervenes. “Joe, I need my quarterback,” he demands, pushing JD toward the field house and taking the kid’s place in front of his father. “That is a family matter, coach,” Joe replies aggressively. Eric assures Joe that he’s “not trying to get into your family matters… But I’ll ask you to give the kid some breathing room so I can work with him, how’s that.” Back in the field house, however, Eric’s latest attempt to “work with” JD continues to generate puzzlement and frustration. In the rarest of glimpses into his personal history, Eric pulls out an “empathy” card that he only ever uses during intimate talks with his quarterback-mentees—“Listen to me, my old man used to come watch the games… he had great expectations of me, expectations that I did not live up to, and that wasn’t easy on him,” he assures JD. Eric is once again perplexed, however, by JD’s apparent un-mentorability. Staring into Eric’s eyes, JD deadpans, “My dad, he just wants me to do my best. He wants me to succeed is all.” Back on the field, Eric has better luck when he adopts Joe’s more fascistic approach: “You’re gonna call the plays out
there,” he orders JD, yanking him aside as the rest of the team dashes toward the field. “I don’t want you looking to the stands at your daddy,” he adds, emphasizing JD’s need, as team leader and brain, to look inward for his “programming.”

Though JD goes on to wage his comeback, helping to win the game by deploying a “smarter” combination of passing and running plays, it’s clear by the end of the night that the damage has already been done. Joe passive-aggressively leaves the game before it ends, a disciplinary move calculated to deny JD that very moment of triumph that each and every Panther deserves to feel. Moreover, the reward for a job well done that his mother grants him is framed as decisively sad. “Wanna go eat some junk food?” Katie sweetly asks JD who, still looking dejected following his father’s untimely departure, begins to perk up a bit. As mother and son wave goodbye to a group of tailgaters that includes Jason Street and both Riggins brothers, JD can be overheard saying, with satisfaction, “I wanna go get some chili cheese fries.” In addition to the fact that the group of current and ex-Panthers that Katie and JD pass were no doubt raised on a steady diet of chili-cheese fries and chicken fried steak, the gendered subtext of the young quarterback participating in post-game festivities with his mother rather than such appropriately masculine potential “deprogrammers” cannot be ignored. What is wrong with a 15-year old male, a viewer is made to wonder, who (as we earlier learn) considers turkey burgers to be his “favorite” meal? And how is it possible to properly mentor a kid who has been over-served to a degree that there is perhaps little “raw material” left to mold? Taking a second look at JD and his mother as they walk away, this moment generates a greater critique of the corrosive effect that capitalist privatization has not on traditionally conceived institutions like the nuclear family, but on competing ideological and political formations. We may pity JD for hanging out with mommy on a Friday night, but we pity Katie because Joe’s money makes it impossible for her to be as good a
feminist as Tami, or even the women working at the Landing Strip (who at the very least walk away with their own money at the end of the night). Mother and son aren’t hanging out together because he’s a henpecked “mama’s boy” (a representational situation usually calling for a father to step up and reclaim the patriarchal control he’s lost to his “domineering” wife). They stick together because they feel terrorized by Joe, and can more effectively protect each other when they return to that isolated McMansion on a hill. The consolidation of patriarchal control that Joe’s money makes possible is too great a force for Katie and JD to counter: grabbing some low-brow, nutritionally unsound chili cheese fries behind Joe’s back may be the strongest form of resistance they can muster up.

Near the end of season 3, this perverse degree of familial privatization is taken to its logical conclusion when Joe, once again infuriated after an inadequate Friday night performance from JD, brutally beats his “broken machine” in the Applebee’s parking lot as a terrified Katie attempts to fend him off. The Taylors witness the beating from a booth inside and, true to form, dash outside to intervene. The class politics of private versus public “social service” become crucial to the development of the story when, following the beating, Tami is informed by her vice principal that she has a mandate to report the incident to Child Protective Services. Tami is understandably reluctant to do so. Directly following the beating, she and Eric bring Katie and JD to their home, turning it into a private “halfway house” for the night, a situation requiring the Taylors to draw from their arsenal of counseling skills. “You’re just gonna drink your tea, leave it be for right now,” Tami calmly advises a distraught Katie; “What he did was wrong... doesn’t


matter if he’s your father or not,” Eric soothingly ensures JD when the boy questions whether the beating might have been his fault. When the Taylors do ultimately report the incident—a task that Tami, ever the feminist-professional, insists on taking upon herself despite Eric’s offer to make the call—the McCoys, having retreated once more to the privacy of their “family matters,” receive an unexpected afternoon visit from CPS. The inclusion of this scene emphasizes the show’s sense of itself as committed to representational redress of various forms of social inequality. Save a few scuffles between the Riggins brothers, virtually no domestic violence or child abuse is shown occurring in the numerous poor and working-class families who we come to know throughout the series. Tellingly, other than the scene between the McCoys, the show’s only incident of family violence resulting in actual physical contact between a perpetrator and clear victim featured middle-class Tami, in an exasperated moment, slapping her daughter Julie across the face.

Feeling humiliated and insulted that social services would dare darken their door—“This is outrageous… what country do you think we’re living in?” Joe shouts at a CPS officer—the McCoys wage an all-out war against the Taylors for the loyalty of the Dillon community. Complicating Zweig’s assertion that “fairness” and “democracy” are the cornerstone of working-class politics (as opposed to the “raw individualism of the capitalist marketplace”), the outcome of this battle again raises the issue of “misplaced” small-town priorities and the effect that such misplacement might have were a windfall of communal capital (or power) not properly managed by well-intentioned “service class” professionals. This windfall is depicted as coming from two disparate sources: One, in response to a request for the redistricting of Dillon schools according to a new West/East divide, from the state of Texas (a situation requiring some students from Dillon High, more properly known as “West” Dillon High, to transfer to East Dillon
High, a defunct school being re-opened to accommodate the growing Dillon population); and the other, from the “truckload of cash” that Joe McCoy claims to have “backed up” for the West Dillon Panther football program. As with the JumboTron scandal, Tami’s professional commitment to education leads her to voice public support for the redistricting plan at a school board meeting. “[It’s] the only way we can guarantee any funding from the State,” she apologetically explains to the outraged parents in attendance, who don’t want to see their children uprooted from their school and made to attend the “cesspool” across town (as one notably Latino man refers to the dilapidated East High situation). Additionally, and perhaps more crucially for Tami and Eric’s reputation, Panther fans don’t want to see their football program threatened.61

The “football issue” further increases a growing divide between Eric and Buddy that, due to Eric’s distrustful attitude toward Joe McCoy’s moneyed takeover of the booster club, doesn’t bode well for Eric’s future with the Panthers. When Eric coolly informs Buddy that he “doesn’t like” the boosters’ plan to re-draw the redistricting line to ensure that key Panther players remain on the team (a plan that, according to Buddy, also has the hush-hush support of the Dillon schools superintendent), Buddy angrily responds: “Let me tell you something, this is a whole lot bigger than you—this is about the Dillon Panthers. No one-- not me, not Joe McCoy, not any other booster-- is gonna stand by and let the Dillon Panthers get dismantled because of some dang politics.”62

The Taylors, regardless of Eric’s very role as football coach, maintain a unified though not always entirely public front in favor of education as clearly superior to football in terms of its value as a social “investment.” At the end of the day, after football practice

61 “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall,” ibid.
62 “Underdogs,” ibid.

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and school board meetings, Tami and Eric still whisper to one another, within a bedroom privacy to which only “like-minded” viewers gain privileged access, “we’re right, and they’re wrong.” Captivated they may be by the thrill of the lights on Friday night, but the Taylors do see football as a means to somewhere else that might be interchangeable with other ways to “get there.” For Buddy, the boosters, and many a Panther fan, high school football is the end, the place to be “gotten to” itself—an institution that’s “bigger” than any one individual or family’s goals, however motivated by fairness, equality, or socioeconomic redress such goals may be.

But Eric and Buddy’s parking lot confrontation is not staged to suggest that Buddy holds the wrong values and priorities. By this point in the TV series, a viewer has gained too intimate an understanding of the importance of football to the Dillon community to simply side with Eric’s fair-minded objections to the “re-re-districting” scheme, and dismiss Buddy’s protectionism as reactionary or small-minded. Rather, what one comes away from this altercation thinking about is Buddy’s inclusion of Joe McCoy as someone who cares about keeping the Panthers from being “dismantled”—or the problematic nature of the idea that he, the only real devil in this “Devil Town,” would make Buddy’s short list of trustworthy Panther investors rather than someone like Eric. As I hope I have adequately shown, the Friday Night Lights TV series improves upon Bissinger’s well-intentioned though controversially received story about small-town “priorities” (and the tragedy therein) by framing both education and high school football as inherently good things. Sometimes these goods come into conflict, but both remain concerned with what’s best for the greater community. Principal Tami Taylor displays her public allegiance to football by speaking at the JumboTron dedication ceremony (getting “all the credit,” as Buddy promised, for indulging the will of the people); but she also sweetly gets Buddy “back” by preemptively thanking him for “his
generous offer to host the PTA’s winter silent auction at Garrity Motors.” There is still a kind of symbiosis within these internal grumblings over how “the good” might best be achieved, emphasizing once more the show’s commitment to portraying the working and middle classes as more allied than dissonant in their priorities. Indeed, not long after the above spat, Eric and Buddy, still buddies, take an eyebrow-raising recruitment trip together, arguing like an old married couple as they drive down the highway toward an unknown small town somewhere deep in the heart of Texas.

To better understand Joe McCoy’s ability to threaten the working and middle-class allegiances allowing the stories of both Panther football glory and upward class mobility to co-exist, it may be necessary to return to the ’88 Odessa “FNL era” for an awkward political “Where are they now?”: to a moment where a Wall Street investment banker’s son named George Herbert Walker Bush, in his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination for U.S. president, “reminded an entire nation, an entire world,” as Bissinger writes, “of where he had been and what he believed in, his echo of the past reaffirming the present”:

> Now we moved to West Texas forty years ago, forty years ago this year. And the war was over, and we wanted to get out and make it on our own. Those were exciting days. We lived in a little shotgun house, one room for the three of us, worked in the oil business, and then started my own.

> And in time, we had six children; moved from the shotgun to a duplex apartment to a house, and lived the dream—high school football on Friday nights...63

Never mind the image of a banker’s son (and Yale graduate) crammed into a one-room “shotgun house” with six children made possible here by a clever speechwriter (“we had six children”—semicolon—“moved from the shotgun to a duplex apartment to a house...”). The still reverberating echo of the past from which Bush speaks infuses the

63 Bissinger, ibid (193).
TV incarnation of *Friday Night Lights* in that, in both instances, an individual with a great amount of political and economic capital at his disposal stands poised to gain *even more* by presenting himself as not simply an outside investor, but as a participant in the collective authoring of the story of small-town high school football. Both Bush and McCoy’s primary “in” with the working-class communities they attempt to woo is familial proximity to the textual terrain in question. Joe’s golden-armed son is QB1 of the Dillon Panthers; Bush’s family lived briefly in Midland, Texas (Odessa’s rival town-next-door), granting them participant-access to the “memory-making” taking place beneath the halo of Friday night lights. Moreover—and perhaps this is the tipping point concerning Eric and Tami’s job security as middle-class service professionals—both Bush and McCoy understand how to engage the “hearts and minds” of working-class communities that have conditioned themselves to survive according to a “boom and bust” socioeconomic logic based on risk-taking and shoulder-shrugging in the face of conditions largely outside their control (in a real-world sense, price fluctuations in overseas oil markets). In other words, Dillon citizens are not likely to put much faith in the longer term effects that a state-funded redistricting plan might have on their children’s futures. They are likely, however, to put their faith in a “truckload of cash” being (figuratively at least) dumped on the football field by a wealthy private investor.

Eric’s eventual (and sad) replacement as head coach of the West Dillon Panthers by Wade Aikman (JD’s private quarterback coach) allows the show to politicize the process through which Zweig’s ruling class gains access to the “boards” or seats of power that structure the greater conditions of socioeconomic possibility available to the “bottom 98 percent.”64 By the time it is revealed that Eric’s job might truly be

64 “Six Points on Class,” ibid (2).
threatened—a situation that Tami is privy to before her husband when the superintendent (her own boss) informs her that Eric’s contract will be “up for review” at the next school board meeting—Eric can no longer brush Joe McCoy’s influence aside. The “dump truck” of cash has spread its influence far and wide; when Buddy and Eric arrive at their small-town recruiting destination, the confused father of the hot prospect they’ve come to talk with immediately asks them, “Who’s the head coach?” Apparently, Joe and Wade Aikman have “already been by.” Eric’s conduct as a “gentleman” who still values fair play more than winning is a representational reverberation from a past no longer equipped to handle the cutthroat Joe McCoy’s of the world. He cannot win the fight against “a man with an awful lot of money and a boy with a good arm” (as he refers to the McCoy power-bloc in a heartfelt speech before school board members poised to vote him out of his job).

Like any member of the corporate elite, McCoy understood that the path of least resistance to true power over the Panther football program and, ultimately, the greater Dillon community was to make sure that he became an influential member of the “governing bodies” through which town resources—including the job of head football coach—were dispensed. McCoy’s powerful seat in the “Booster boardroom,” combined with Eric’s inability to produce a State championship-winning team (the Panthers lose to long-time rival Arnette-Meade in a heart-wrenching finale), provided the nails in the coffin for a job that Eric could not save with his professional middle-class mentoring skills and fine-tuned force of character. Coach Taylor is done in by his own “middling” position: subject to forces beyond his control as determined by the governing elite, he also fails to satisfy the terms of his “service contract” with working-class Dillon.
**Moving Forward in Dillon, Texas**

The show immediately counters the injustice of Eric’s dismissal by giving him a new job as head coach of the “resurrected” East Dillon Lions, a position that allows the series to take its 21st century commitment to redress past social ills to new heights. East Dillon High, the school on the predominantly black “side” of town, is exactly the kind of institution that black and Hispanic residents of ‘88 Odessa were forced to sit back and watch be closed down as a result of a federally-imposed desegregation mandate.

Regarding a meeting among concerned Southside residents on the fate of Odessa’s Ector High (a “99 percent minority” school, with “298 blacks, 463 Hispanics, and nine whites”), Bissinger narrates,

> (The residents) clung to Ector High with all their might in the face of threats that it might be closed… It was as uncharacteristic display of passion on the Southside as anyone could remember, all of it revolving around a school that they had come to love and treasure, the only institution, outside of black churches, that was truly theirs. They were in favor of desegregation, but not at the expense of losing their school.65

The re-opening of East Dillon High allows the series to return to and “make right” a particular injustice from a segregated past, present-day echoes notwithstanding. Initially, Eric does come across as a kind of “great white hope” riding valiantly into East Dillon to help the “underserved” black residents of that community resurrect and improve upon a besieged past that also included at least one State championship football team. However, resulting largely from a strain of resentment toward the “whiter side” of working-class Dillon that permeates the Taylors’ acclimation to their new East Dillon situation, the show winds up making a more interesting commentary on the racialization of class, as well as the classing of race, than such typically paternalistic interventions might portend.

65 Bissinger, ibid (102).
Part of the show’s representational “contract” with its viewers involves maintaining the Taylors’ status as figures of middle-class aspiration for their poor and working-class mentees. Tami and Eric must redeem Boobie Miles through their investment in mentoring and their ability to symbolize the value and desirability of upward mobility itself. Yet with the dismissal of Eric from his head coaching gig at West Dillon and transfer to East—a school with no active football program or fan culture to speak of—the series runs into logistical trouble negotiating its simultaneous commitment to realism and the Taylors’ continued middle-classness. Though Tami retains her post as principal of West Dillon High throughout season 4 despite her husband’s move to the “other side,” no mention is ever made of the economic strain put on the family from what must be a sizeable demotion on Eric’s part. East Dillon High has no booster club to help raise Eric a six-figure salary; as East principal Levi Burnwell wearily explains when Eric asks him where funding for new team uniforms might come from, “You weren’t even supposed to take this job. You’re the only one who didn’t get the joke.” Moreover, at the beginning of season 5—a moment at which Tami has left her job as West High principal and herself taken a professional step “backward” by becoming guidance counselor at East (where she believes herself to be more urgently “needed” anyway)—daughter Julie has just enrolled at Berelsen College, a fictitious private university. Despite these hardly insignificant socioeconomic changes, the Taylors’ ability to pay for their daughter’s education remains a mystery.

To representationally buffer the economic downward mobility that the Taylors have clearly experienced—a situation that could (realistically) render the Taylors too

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stressed out and exhausted to continue to properly play their middle-class aspirational role—a sleight-of-hand occurs. In order to be taken seriously by the black working-class Dillon citizens whom they encounter in their East High service capacity, the Taylors must appear to be “struggling” enough to empathize with the circumstances of these residents’ everyday lives — residents who, I would argue, the show begins to code as more deserving of the Taylors’ benevolent aid than the “small-minded” white working-class so easily duped by McCoy’s money train in West Dillon. But how can this be accomplished if the Taylors still own the same home (on the whiter side of town); continue to pay for childcare for now 2-year old Gracie Bell; pay for Julie’s college education; and exhibit enough general ease in their lives to enable their relationship to continue to function as the egalitarian “enviable storm” coveted by both their upwardly-mobile mentees and TV viewers.68

The fact that most of the working-class Dillon residents whom the Taylors come to associate with throughout seasons 4 and 5 are also black allows the Taylors to experience downward mobility without having this appear to be a classed phenomenon. Working-classness, in other words, gets coded as black in East Dillon in a way that emphasizes the Taylors as different enough to maintain their now also clearly white veneer of middle-classness. In West Dillon, prior to the loss of Eric’s job as Panthers coach, the socioeconomic distance between the Taylors and mostly white working-class West Dillon was enough to keep this middle-class status firmly in tact. Moreover, the poverty experienced by much of black Dillon is portrayed as more extreme than anything viewers’ witnessed in West Dillon. Lions quarterback Vince Howard lives in a tiny

68 From the Onion AV Club’s Marah Eakin: “The actors and writers have built the fictional relationship slowly and quietly, like a storm, and with that comes a grace and serenity that just makes the Taylors so damn enviable.” “Non-Doomed Fictional Couples,” August 13, 2012. http://www.avclub.com/articles/nondoomed-fictional-couples,44125/
apartment with his precariously employed single mother, and is often shown reaching into a refrigerator containing only condiments—something that Matt Saracen, despite the various hardships he faced caring for his ailing grandma, was never shown doing. This representational relativity further emphasizes the Taylors’ comparative middle-classness, a situation threatening to expose one of the well-guarded secrets of the “Great Recession” contextualizing the Taylors’ “move” to East Dillon: that the contemporary U.S. workforce is perhaps in the midst of accepting—or being led to believe we should accept—a renegotiated, comparatively lower standard for what counts as middle-class status. However, despite the problematically racialized nature of such “lowerings,” the series also continues to emphasize a “unity of dispositions” between the Taylors and black working-class Dillon as part and parcel to the Taylors’ ability to effectively function as service professionals. This allows the show to make some provocative representational moves that, whether problematic or promising, again wind up emphasizing possibilities for cultural and political connection between working and middle-class people who do share much in common. True to the series’ form, football, with coach Taylor’s invested guidance, becomes the rallying point through which this commonality is expressed.

The Taylors’ relationship with black Dillon, and the series’ relationship with race more generally, contains more than its share of stumbling and bumbling. In a particularly cringe-worthy moment, we are actually introduced to young Vince Howard running from the cops, shirtless, a thin gold chain dangling around his neck as pursuing officers wrestle him to the ground. When a handsome black P.O. later delivers Vince into Eric’s care as part of the Cops n’ Jocks “second chance” program for juvenile offenders, more representational offenses occur: “You like to run?” Eric asks Vince, with the P.O interjecting, “Oh, the boy can run, coach, he’s fast, real fast.” The show attempts
to render “ok” the use of such stereotypically racialized narrative devices by literally surrounding Eric with black men (and having the men, in the P.O.’s case at least, participate fully in the dialogue). Everyone involved in this scene but Eric, including the deputy who leads Vince toward Eric and the P.O. as they discuss the boy’s fate, is black.69

Yet even here, more interesting things are happening than suggested by this attempt to cover racialized clichés with a black “band-aid.” Introducing himself to Eric, the P.O. reveals that his brother, Mike Shaw, played linebacker during Eric’s temporary assistant coaching gig at TMU. “He ended up playing, didn’t he?” Eric asks, to which the P.O. responds, his voice lowering slightly: “He played for a couple years, but he got hurt, so he had to step out.” From here, the conversation turns quickly back to Vince, with no further mention of Mike’s situation. This casual exchange of words (or lack thereof) offers a subtle critique of the idea that involvement in football might actually result in the upward mobility meant to provide “at-risk” young black men like Vince with an alternative to low-wage labor or “juvie”—the latter being “a bad path,” as the P.O. soberly points out. Later in the season, when most of the football team quits in protest after Eric uncharacteristically forfeits the Lions’ first-ever game, Eric attempts to woo Vince back to the team by evoking the difference between them as far as potential “job opportunities” goes: “I don’t know where I’m going,” Eric says, throwing up his hands in desperation as he regards Vince from across his office desk. “But I’ll get another job. This job doesn’t work out for you, we both know where you’re going.”70 Haunted by the unexplained fate of the P.O.’s brother, Eric’s cryptically offered “last

69 “East of Dillon,” ibid.

chance” underscores the likelihood that the whole-hearted pursuit of such opportunities might still be like trying to race up an escalator set mockingly on “down.” Regardless of Eric and Tami’s unflinching commitment to their mentees, the show remains aware that the Taylor “social safety net” is merely a band-aid solution to the persistent problem of socioeconomic and racial inequality rendering Vince’s chances and choices few and far between.

To counter this undercurrent of bleakness, the show turns Vince into a superstar, an invincible QB1 for the Obama era. Vince truly has it all: JD’s golden arm; Matt Saracen’s brains; the mannerly, ascetic discipline that Taylor the coach demands of him; and a contemplative, “inner-directed,” thoroughly masculine temperament that Eric is often shown regarding with quiet admiration from the sidelines.71 Indeed, unlike any of the other bonds that Eric forms with his players, his relationship with Vince stands out as one between equals. The non-hierarchical nature of their relationship may be largely attributable to Eric’s early “mistake” with his new team. Though viewers sympathize with Eric’s decision to forfeit the season-opening game at halftime as a means to protect his battered players from further injury, the players regard the forfeit as evidence that Eric might quit on them, compromising his ability to earn back the team’s trust. As he pleads with Vince to re-join the team, Eric does so from the perspective of someone looking for help, for someone—as inexperienced as Vince is with football—to co-lead a group of young men who might not be readily inclined to listen to some white guy from across town who is also trying to hang onto his job. Though Eric uses his claim that he’ll

71 The inner-directed individual, as David Riesman defines him, is the character type most likely to be successful within the competitive capitalist marketplace. Such a person has a well-developed “psychological gyroscope” that, “once set by parents and other authorities,” keeps this person “‘on course’ even when tradition… no longer dictates his moves.” Eric is able to kick back and “admire” Vince in the manner described above is because he sees his protégé having the gyroscope that J.D. McCoy lacked, allowing him to maintain “a delicate balance between the demands upon him of his life goal and the buffetings of his external environment.” From The Lonely Crowd. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950. 15-17. Print.
“get another job” to emphasize the lack of such “chances” available to Vince, the specter of his own recent ousting as Panthers coach emphasizes that perhaps Eric also can’t afford to make many “mistakes.” Vince therefore becomes more partner than mentee to Eric. Though much of the narrative force of these last seasons centers on threats to the solidity of Vince’s internal “gyroscope”—will he succumb to the “bad influence” of his less mobility-inclined peers? Will the allure of college recruiters compromise his ability to lead his team?—Eric and Vince begin building a new football dynasty together, from scratch.

This sense of partnership and newness allows the series to present a vision of working-class community betterment contingent on something other than assimilation to the white middle-class standard of success and social belonging that the Taylors in many respects still represent. The show uses the authoring of this new football text to imagine into existence a small-town community that, far from being reactionary or “small-minded,” is firmly grounded in a spirit of democratic inclusivity and thoughtful, engaged civic responsibility. East Dillon becomes the kind of place where two teenage male athletes—one black, one white—are shown independently discussing the possibility of making childcare service available so single moms can attend a community meeting at which the future of the Lions football program is being discussed.72 East Dillon is a place where a Panther-loving “good ‘ol boy” from across town can take refuge after being laid off as lead “archivist” for a team in which he’d invested years of heart, soul, and labor by the same corporate elite who he trusted to keep him in that job: and when Buddy, having been labeled an “annoying nuisance” by Joe McCoy and his ilk, makes his big move toward Lion country, he’s welcomed with open arms by a

dinner table full of ’83 ex-Lions with whom the memory-making continues as if they all truly did leave off yesterday. “Buddy’s here!” is all an incredulous Tami can say when our favorite hooligan waltzes into the Taylors’ house, fully prepared to help ameliorate the awkwardness between a white middle-class couple and their invited guests (all black) with stories and laughter about those glory days. “Ain’t nobody hit harder than Buddy Garrity!” one of the men exclaims as he stands to warmly extend a hand to his old rival.73

What a place, East Dillon. As the camera shakily pans past garbage collectors on their morning route; girls running through sprinklers in front of run-down shotgun houses; repair shops, barber shops, and Methodist churches-- this looks like a place that might actually be someplace: that could be, should be, real. But, as utopias tend to go, as of now this “Anytown” remains “Notown”. Despite the familial sense of investment Friday Night Lights fans grow to feel for the town and its inhabitants, there is still a reason that the TV series wills each and every one of Eric and Tami’s young mentees, with the significant exception of Tim Riggins, to get the hell out of Dillon and never look back. The show actually builds its casting philosophy around the trope of the graduating star heading off to college. When success stories like “poor white trash” scholar Tyra Collette and tailback Brian “Smash” Williams leave for school, the actors playing these characters leave the cast, replaced by fresh-faced characters like “farm boy” fullback Luke Cafferty and Vince’s straight-laced girlfriend Jess Merriweather. Indeed, it is almost a realism liability to the show that these dearly departed characters so seldom return. When the Taylors have the Collette and Riggins families over for Thanksgiving, Tyra’s absence at the dinner table sticks out like a sore thumb—especially since Tyra is attending college

73 “A Sort of Homecoming,” ibid.
at the University of Texas at Austin, a mere few hours’ (imaginary) drive from Dillon. Moreover, when such characters do flickeringly reappear for cameos in later seasons, it is almost always with the intent of emphasizing further potential for upward mobility or movement out of Dillon for other characters. When Jason Street, for instance, returns to Dillon for a visit nearly two years (and two actual seasons) following his departure to become a sports agent in New York City, it is really only to present Eric with a lead on a college coaching gig at a school in Florida. Lyla, returning from Vanderbilt for a couple episodes, scolds Tim about having “thrown away” his scholarship to San Antonio State.

The greater message behind this continual and emphatically one-way exodus out of Dillon is clear. If you are different from the social norm in any conceivable way—if you are black, or a woman, or disabled, or queer, or even just too bright to stick around—your life will be far richer and safer if you leave a small town like Dillon: if you move somewhere, like New York City or Austin, better equipped to offer you community support for rather than resistance (or targeted violence) toward the particular ways your difference marks you. Moreover, on the issue of which young people get to stay in Dillon—only white working and middle-class, able-bodied males—the show presents a decidedly ambivalent picture of the quality of such lives. When Tim Riggins throws his books and notebooks out the window of his truck, a viewer cheers for him. Tim’s dream is to stay in Dillon and open “Riggins Rigs,” an auto repair business, with his brother Billy: and we want this for him—we want nothing more than


75 Season 5 Episode 7, “Perfect Record.” Written by Etan Frankel and Eric Santos Olson, directed by Adam Davidson. Dec. 15, 2010.

to see him, in the virile safe haven of his white masculinity, exercise his pioneer spirit by purchasing and building up the small plot of land that he begins to eyeball lovingly toward the end of season 3. Gritty reality, however, quickly invades this beautiful dream. With a new baby on the way, Billy begins operating a “hot cars” dismantling scheme after hours at the repair shop to make some extra cash. His fine moral fabric always in tact (save his gratuitous love of cheap beer), Tim initially resists becoming involved, though he does eventually acquiesce to the scheme after realizing that he might be able to pull in the cash necessary to buy his land. Predictably, the operation gets busted—and Tim, in the ultimate display of martyrdom on behalf of the nuclear family ideal, agrees to take the fall for his brother and head to jail. Intriguingly, however, the series seems to understand that it’s made a mistake here. Following the many representations of loving, functional, non-nuclear families portrayed on the show (as well as the demise of the wealthy McCoys), this recapitulation to the primacy of the nuclear family feels far more tragic than the brothers’ “mistake.” Indeed, when Tim gets out of jail, he projects months worth of pent up bitterness and rage toward Billy for not living up to his end of the “make your perfect nuclear family” bargain; Tim is enraged, for instance, that Billy would let 16-year old Becky, an orphaned family friend that the Riggins clan takes in, wait tables at a strip club. Tim’s anger effectively captures the unstated realization, felt by both Tim and the viewer, that Tim truly didn’t need to make a “sacrifice” that winds up looking more misguided than honorable.

Tim’s bigger mistake, however, was to get caught up thinking he had more choices in the matter of his future than he did—even as one of the best situated citizens of working-class Dillon in terms of meeting the privileged standard for social inclusion

77 “Thanksgiving,” ibid.
and safety (being white, male, straight, and able-bodied). Tim neglected to take the same advice that, working at Buddy Garrity’s recently-opened bar (“Buddy’s”) following his parole, he gives young Luke Cafferty, another white, working-class male on the verge of accepting a football scholarship to Warrenfield State, a not-so-great “Div 3” local college. Talented but never quite star enough to be to be courted by major college programs, Luke elaborates: “I love football more than anything in the world... but Warrenfield State’s just not giving me, like, ‘that feeling.’” Here a viewer might expect Tim, an ex-con who “threw away” his scholarship, to launch into some diatribe about seizing the opportunity to go to college—to parrot the status-quo assumption, in other words, that a college education is always preferable to a “lesser” working-class dream like Riggins Rigs, and that not seizing such opportunities may lead a guy like Luke down the “bad path” that Tim (unlike Vince) was not able to avoid. Yet despite the cynicism contextualizing the advice he should give, Tim pulls the focus back to the football archive. “You’re going to [the State championship game], correct?” he asks Luke, turning away from his bar duties to face the kid. “Nothing’s going to be bigger than that. So play it that way. Play it like it’s the last time you’re ever gonna lace up. And let it go. Then move on.” Here the show allows thoroughly working-class Tim Riggins—who will be staying working class, and staying in Dillon, for the conceivable life of the show—to both affirm and critique the story of small-town high school football. It may be true, as Tim suggests, that nothing is ever going to be bigger than State. You may never have another moment of triumph so definitive, so worthy of a tableau, a snapshot, a band of gold to solidify its happening; you may never again be as celebrated, or feel as empowered, as you will that night on the field. But the spirit through which that

78 “Small Town,” ibid.
archivable moment came into being—the *fearlessness*, the ability to just play it as it comes—can and in fact *must* be carried forward, out of the musty vault of glory days gone by, to ensure a livable future in the face of insecure access to opportunity, resources, and power.

Of course, as the archetypal significance of Tim-as-is affirms, this fearlessness is itself a product of privilege. Not even East Dillon, Taylors included, can cast a wide enough “safety net” to be the kind of place where Jason Street or Tyra Collette would return for anything more than a cameo, a momentary haunting of the past from the alien “safe house” of their futures. Moreover, when we watch Luke Cafferty head off to Iraq in the final episode of the series, the social limitations of being working-class appear to outweigh both the privilege benefits and resulting “fearlessness” that Tim and Luke implicitly claim.79 But Tim and Tyra, at least, continue to hope for the not-yet possible. Finally home from college for a long overdue visit, Tyra accompanies Tim to his newly purchased land for an afternoon picnic, red cooler full of Buds in tow. The two old friends (who have briefly re-ignited their years-old love affair) walk side-by side, discussing their hopes and dreams. Tyra tells Tim she’s thinking about going into politics, prompting Tim to sheepishly ask, “Do you mean like Sarah Palin kind of stuff?”—to which Tyra responds, “No, you ass. Out of all people, really? No, I’m thinking more along the lines of (Mrs. Taylor), but bigger”: an answer juxtaposing two charmingly feminine “service professionals,” each of whom who knows, for better or worse, which class she serves. Tim, kicking back in a lawn chair, shares his dreams as well. “I’m gonna build a house, exactly where we’re sitting. And I’ll get a job.” Continues the 19-year old, popping the top of his beer: “And I’m never gonna do

anything illegal for the rest of my life—guaranteed.” As the camera slips gently behind them, framing Tim’s Silverado truck in the distance, Tim turns toward Tyra and smiles. “Maybe one day our dreams can merge together,” he says as Tyra, grinning back, clinks her open beer bottle against his. Personally, I can think of few dreams more worth toasting to.
Chapter 3: Your Friends and (Possible) Lovers: Working-Class Masculinity Turns to Feminism in Peter Sollett’s *Five Feet High and Rising* and *Raising Victor Vargas*

“Probably out of like 10 guys that you know, probably 2 percent might not be dogs. Just remember that.”

--Victor to Amanda, in the short film *Five Feet High and Rising*\(^1\)

*Peter Sollett* (to actor Victor Rasuk): What do you think (the character Victor) will do next? Have you ever thought about that?


*Sollett*: What about him and Judy?

*Rasuk*: They stay friends.

*Sollett*: Friends but not lovers?

*Rasuk*: Never.

*Sollett*: What, never? […] Although I think there could be a flare-up once in a while… Maybe the temptation is there—but then they’re like, “No, no, this is all wrong…”

*Rasuk* (shaking his head and turning to interviewer): He watches too many movies.

--Director Peter Sollett and actor Victor Rasuk discussing the future prospects of *Raising Victor Vargas* characters Victor and Judy, in the UK’s *The Independent*, September 12, 2003\(^2\)

Teaching a course called “Bad Mothers: Women and the Culture of Poverty” to a mostly upper-middle class group of Duke University undergrads, I was thrilled to see my students beginning to develop an empathetic, humanizing eye toward the less-than-ideal situations that poor women in U.S. and transnational contexts, whether supporting dependent children or simply trying to make their own way in the world, so often face. Listening to Reba McEntyre’s song “Fancy” (1988), we came to understand how a desperate mother, accustomed to a life of deprivation and misery, might use her last pennies to buy her daughter a provocative “dancin’ dress” to impress the “uptown”

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\(^1\) Dir. Peter Sollett, 2000. Starring Victor Rasuk as Victor, and Judy Marte as Amanda.

\(^2\) Dir. Sollett, 2002. The short film *Five Feet High and Rising* and the feature film *Raising Victor Vargas* starred the same lead actor and actress (Rasuk and Marte) in similar character roles.
gentlemen who would be the girl’s only guaranteed ticket out of poverty.\(^3\) Watching Dennis O’Rourke’s documentary *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991), we thought a great deal about why a Thai prostitute might not be inclined to embrace with open arms the gift of a rice farm bestowed by a male Australian film director with a “white savior” complex to deal with. However, what I did not anticipate with much foresight was the degree to which, as these women began to look less and less “bad” from the perspective of the knee-jerk pathologies that inform discourses around poor women’s behavior and so-called choices, the *men* in the texts we examined would swoop in to claim the badness mantle: where a fully human, complex poor woman could be found, a monstrous or at the very least pathetic man would be lurking around the corner. Sandra Cisneros’ novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984) found us witnessing newly married Sally being locked in her house like Rapunzel by her jealous husband, who “doesn’t let her look out the window.”\(^4\) In Lee Daniels’ film *Precious: Based on the Novel “Push” By Sapphire* (2009), while actress Mo’Nique’s powerful performance as a mother as monstrous as they come evokes sympathy from the very daughter she had abused (“Who was gonna love me?” the mother asks an incredulous social worker, tears streaming down her face as the camera cuts to Precious giving a somber nod), Precious’ father and rapist Carl remains an unequivocally demonic, macabre presence despite his absence from the diabolic world of the film. More subtly, as Tracey Chapman’s song “Fast Car” (1988) begins, its female narrator-protagonist has high hopes for what she and her fast-car driving man might accomplish—“Maybe we make a deal/ Maybe together we can get somewhere,”

\(^3\) *Rumor Has It*. Tony Brown, 1990.

she proposes optimistically. But by the end of the song, as the fast car proves to be stuck in a cul-de-sac of lost motivation and baseless wishful thinking—“You got a fast car / And we go cruising to entertain ourselves/ You still ain’t got a job,” we hear—the singer has second thoughts about her man’s ability to keep his end of their “deal.” She has “a job that pays all our bills”; he stays out “late at the bar.” Fed up, she elaborates: “I’d always hoped for better/ Thought maybe together you and me would find it/ I ain’t got no plans I ain’t going nowhere”—so in the end, she tells him: “(Take) your fast car and keep on driving.”

For poor and working-class women to look good, or at least less bad than stereotypes would have it, must a man-at-hand always suffer the representational fallout? In popular works of art or literature claiming realist credentials, is the presence of a man who causes more problems than he helps resolve for a woman with whom he’s partnered—a “deal” that, far from a mere handshake, implies a mutually shared degree of socioeconomic, emotional, and sexual support—an accurate reflection of the everyday reality of working-class experience? Can partnered working-class men and women, facing the constant threat or chronic drudgery of poverty, ever just get along?

In their discussion of Hollywood’s treatment of working-class masculinity in film, Peter Biskin and Barbara Ehrenreich suggest that it is rare indeed to find the working class represented in a way that isn’t meant to re-enforce the superiority of middle-class values and assimilationist goals. As I discussed in my last chapter, even the most redeeming representations of working-class individual fortitude and community life tend to still require an upward opening or “way out” for characters. Tim


Riggins may be a “good man” with the protected status his whiteness and straight masculinity affords him, but he’s still not a good catch, from the perspective of what he would have to offer a woman who might enter a partnership with him. He’s not leaving Dillon, after all. His girlfriend Lyla moves on to the greener pastures of Vanderbilt; and Tyra, though hesitantly venturing back from Texas at Austin for the weekend to clink beer bottles (and maybe, briefly, initiate other forms of contact), remains a friend. Much like Tony Manero, John Travolta’s cocky specimen of manly grace and swagger in Saturday Night Fever (John Badham, 1977), Tim’s is a masculinity that celebrates defiance without prescribing truly politicized resistance to the socioeconomic systems that limit opportunity, choices, and empowerment for working-class people. Like Tim, Tony displays “scruples” often representationally conflated with the working-class. When he and his partner Stephanie Mangano win a dance contest, Tony insists on giving their trophy and prize money to the Puerto Rican couple he feels were robbed of the win due to a racist and localized conception of “merit” permeating his Italian-American Brooklyn enclave (where he’s a big fish in a small pond). Stephanie, an upwardly-mobile, assimilation-minded college girl, disingenuously whines about how the Puerto Rican couple was “just different, not better.” Yet as the film ends, Tony’s goodness cannot overcome the weight of his role as working-class masculine foil for the relative “maturity” and desirability of a middle-class life. He still tried to rape Stephanie in the backseat of a car earlier in the film; a viewer still recalls the sheer horror as his diminutive, perpetually emasculated friend Bobby—desperate and depressed after getting a girl he doesn’t want to marry pregnant—plummets to his death off the Verrazano Bridge (“There are ways of killing yourself without killing yourself,” Tony famously mutters to a cop when asked if the death was a suicide). The best Tony can do, after all this, is to accept the imperative to remain friends—but not lovers—with
Stephanie, the lucky girl on her way out of the self-cannibalizing “culture of poverty” stew in which Tony will likely remain (despite his stated desire to get away from it all). The sheer sexiness of men like Tim and Tony (remember the camera’s ogling of Tim’s biceps on the Silverado steering wheel, and my titillated response from beneath the covers?) is not enough for them to overcome the threat of violence, machismo, and paternalistic control that their working-class maleness also signifies. They may be beautifully defiant, and even moral— but, from the perspective of their labor insecurity and disempowerment within the capitalist system, they remain both infantilized and relegated to what Biskin and Ehrenreich call the “historical past.” “If Hollywood was drawn to its glamorized working-class male out of a kind of secret admiration,” these authors insist, “it draws back with a whiff of nostalgia.” Upward mobility and capitalism, after all, are all about futures; Tim and Tony’s “fast car” (or Chevy Silverado), as hot as it might be, is still going in circles.

However, despite young Dominican-American actor Victor Rasuk’s own insistence that the Victor and Judy characters from Peter Sollett’s Raising Victor Vargas (2002) would “stay friends” but not become lovers in the film’s hypothetical afterlife, the distinctive gender politics of this and Sollett’s short film Five Feet High and Rising (2000)— the latter being the film school dissertation project from which the feature-length Raising Victor Vargas was derived— lead me to side more with Sollett than his actor-protégé in the debate sited in the above epigraph. From Rasuk’s remarks, someone who has not seen either of these films might get the impression that the characters wind up in a similar situation to Tony and Stephanie; and indeed, Sollett’s films share much in common with Saturday Night Fever, in terms of both the young working-class male/ slightly older female love interest couple at the heart of their narratives and the ethnically-inflected New York City enclaves in which these stories are filmed and set
(Lower East Side Manhattan in Sollett’s case; Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood in Badham’s). Perhaps most significantly, Sollett’s films also revolve as much around the growing friendship between a working-class male and similarly-situated woman as the romantic subtext also leading to an agreed-upon “partnership”: for Tony and Stephanie, a dance partnership; and for the Victor character and his love interest—named Amanda in the short film, “Juicy” Judy in the longer—a more nuanced arrangement involving, as I will discuss in detail shortly, the swapping of social protection for the guarantee of an also public reputation. Yet as I argue here, the thing that makes Sollett’s films unique and perhaps edgier in their representational politics than Rasuk’s remarks might imply is the fact that, unlike with Saturday Night Fever or most other popular American films starring working-class characters that feature poverty or class politics as part of their narrative universe, there is no promise of or even indicated desire for upward class mobility framing these characters’ interactions or their relationship to the working-class world around them. (Be this as it may, Rasuk’s “I dunno” response to Sollett’s question about what the Victor character will do “next” is perhaps more revealing than his “College maybe” afterthought.) Moreover—and perhaps more radically—despite an apparent lack of interest in presenting upward mobility or middle-class assimilation as essential to their protagonists’ goals, these films remain both hopeful and realist: they somehow manage to represent ethnic “inner city” working class life as neither overly pastoralized nor inherently bleak (or self-cannibalizing). As I further contend, Sollett’s films are able to pull this off because of a feminist “consciousness raising” that teenage Victor, still struggling to develop a sense of masculinity that can serve as a source of empowering social capital when few other forms of capital or privilege are available to him, undergoes as his relationship with the Amada/ Judy character becomes more complex. Where Tony and Stephanie, due to
Tony’s status as a good man who nonetheless has little “stability capital” to offer a woman he might partner with romantically or sexually, must remain “just friends,” Victor and Amanda/ Judy are able to genuinely remain friends while also retaining the possibility—as at least Sollett and I see it—of becoming functional lovers. This prospective “friends and lovers” (rather than friend or lovers) brand of male-female working-class relationality is all the more significant in that it comes not as a result of the “outside” influence of middle-class egalitarian values: there are no Eric and Tami Taylors, or other middle-class mentor figures, hanging around the streets of the Lower East Side. Rather, the feminist influence provided by Amanda/ Judy, and the subsequent form of masculinity that Victor develops and displays, is organic to the film’s self-contained working-class universe.

*Bound to Keep Rising*
One could argue that neither *Five Feet High and Rising* nor *Raising Victor Vargas* actually counts as an upward mobility story. By the end of each tale, no one has left the Dominican-American Manhattan neighborhood in which these films are set. Victor, the protagonist of both films, still lives in a tiny apartment with his grandmother and younger brother and sister; everyone is still poor; it’s still one hot summer, so not even the specter of high school, one possible gateway toward thoughts of a future beyond the Lower East Side, intrudes on a landscape of sticky naps on the fire escape, plastic-covered sofas, verbal brawls with siblings, and trips to the neighborhood pool to stay cool. But from the perspective of these films’ production history, or what the making of these films meant for members of the cast, Sollett offers a classic “Bound to Rise” tale that would make Horatio Alger giddy. Victor Rasuk, the actor who plays the Victor character, claims that he literally walked up to a group of NYU students shooting in Thompson Square Park and asked if he could be in their movie; two of the students in the group, Peter Sollett and his partner Eva Vives, went on to direct and write the 26 minute, 16mm film *Five Feet High and Rising* (named after the Johnny Cash song), in which Rasuk was chosen to star. ¹ Judy Marte, who plays Amanda/Judy, was chosen for the *Five Feet High* audition by a leadership class teacher at her high school. Significantly, both Rasuk and Marte have gone on to cultivate successful acting careers, basing themselves in L.A., 3000 miles away from home. This Cinderella story was hardly a foregone conclusion for either, though. In a revealing series of personal interviews from a filmed companion piece included on the *Five Feet High* DVD, Rasuk and Marte individually discuss their shock over the critical success of the film, which won the Short Filmmaking award at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival, an accolade resulting in Sollett

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¹ This is one version of the story, at least (told by Rasuk in so many words to Matt Caputo at urbanlatino.com, 6/10/2010). Sollett tells a different story, that Rasuk found out about auditions for the film through an open casting call printed on a flyer (*Independent* interview 9/12/2003).
and Vives' ability to adapt *Five Feet High* into the feature-length film *Raising Victor Vargas*, in which Rasuk and Marte retained their starring roles. “Sundance? Hell no!” Marte exclaims incredulously, looking into the camera from her perch on a fire escape (a place where Sollett often films his subjects). “I didn’t even know what [Sundance] was!”

Moreover, the stakes of the zeal with which Rasuk and Marte seem to have caught the “acting bug” due to this fortuitous experience are higher than they might be were the young actors lives’ not also contextualized by generational poverty. One sees an identical look of quiet desperation on both actors’ faces when they discuss, prompted by an unheard off-camera question, what they would do if an acting career doesn’t work out. Marte’s response is geared toward concerns with the future—“Probably... college. Hopefully— I hope!” she laughs, anxiously averting her eyes from the camera, uncertain as to whether this fall-back plan would even be tenable. Rasuk’s comments, interestingly, are more geared toward the past: “I mean, I did it... I can never say that I never did. A lot of things don’t work out in this world... but what you gonna do?” Even more significant to this line of conversation is a brief spat that Sollett films between Rasuk and his younger sister in their family’s small, cramped apartment (a nearly identical space to the one where Sollett films the family in *Raising Victor Vargas*). While Rasuk explains his surprise at the number of awards won by the short film—“you can’t ask for [anything] more,” he says, proudly flashing a smile full of braces—his sister interjects with her own opinions. “He thinks he’s the world because he made one movie,” she says. “He thinks he’s gonna get somewhere with this movie... I doubt him.”

The camera then zooms out to a shot of Rasuk, the opinionated sister, and a younger sister sitting side-by-side on a plastic-covered couch. “I used to be a singer... I have trophies,” the sister announces—and then, remarkably, the younger sister jumps off the couch and grabs one of these trophies, holding it up to the camera. Rasuk and the older
sister continue to argue the merits of pursuing acting as a career rather than as something you “do for fun.” “If it doesn’t work, being an actor, he has nothing to lean back on,” she says. “Yes I do have something to lean back on,” Rasuk objects, eyes darting toward the floor while he plays with this hair. “A cop,” the sister deadpans. The mixture of the younger sister’s incredulous giggles and Rasuk’s averted eyes offer a telling assessment of the family’s overall opinion of Victor’s police force prospects.

Good old-fashioned sibling rivalry is clearly at play here. Rasuk’s younger brother Silvestre, who Sollett casts in a supporting role in *Victor Vargas*, also eagerly shows off his piano playing skills for the camera; familial talent, the siblings seem to be saying, is hardly in short supply here, and everyone should have the opportunity to shine, to brandish her or his “trophy”s in hopes of being discovered. And yet the whole point of the older sister’s gesture toward her trophies—symbols of what it is that she’s accomplished with her talent, “for fun”—is to offer a critique of the seductive “fast car” that rarely serves to help break the cycle of generational poverty. More subtly, Marte’s immediate linkage of the possibility of college to the sentiment “if this acting thing doesn’t work out” implies a similar critique. Both Marte and Rasuk’s sister display the mentality that it’s great to have done something flashy—to have trophies, or a movie, to show for your merits—but one must not assume that can be enough. Meanwhile, Rasuk seems to be saying, I’ve done this great thing: Isn’t that worth something? Can’t that be enough?

What the above interviews demonstrate is not so much an obvious point about the gendering of attitudes toward social and familial responsibility; that women, socialized to be thinking and planning beyond the immediacy of their own needs, are more inclined to internalize a “future-oriented” outlook toward their own and others’ decisions; whereas men, socialized to think of themselves as individuals first, have the
privilege to maintain a more quixotic attitude toward their accomplishments (to rest on
the laurels of “this great this I did,” so to speak). Rather, these conversations underscore
a dynamic that often characterizes poverty: where a man appears to possess a form of
capital (a car, a job, a house, an attitude) around which a woman devises a plan to better
their lives (hence the lyrics “You’ve got a fast car/ I’ve got a plan to get us out of here).
This common assumption—that men supply the raw materials, women the labor-power
to transform these materials into something profitable—creates a sizeable amount of
conflict between poor and working-class men and women. Instead of questioning the
gendering of this “corporate” role distribution, and working to renegotiate these roles,
men often try to cling to the rawness of their materials—Can’t this car, or this little
movie, just be enough, as it is?—while women wind up resenting men for their
perceived inability or unwillingness to relinquish these materials to the “planning”
stage. Both Rasuk and his sister understand that talent, under the constraint of poverty,
does not necessarily translate to the meritocratic success that they both may very well
deserve (“I would have given that same advice,” Rasuk allows his sister as she expresses
her doubts about acting “getting him somewhere”). Despite her jealousy-tinged, cynical
outlook, Rasuk’s sister’s greater concern is that her brother may not only abandon their
family in pursuit of his American Dream, but that his failure to devise a workable back-up
plan—beyond the apparently even more outrageous idea of becoming a cop—might
eventually lead to his own disappointed hopes and further depletion of family and
community resources (when he winds up back at home, reminiscing about that “one
movie”).

Despite these concerns, Rasuk and Marte really did seem to both get their “big
break” from their involvement in Sollett’s projects. Five Feet High and Rising and Raising
Victor Vargas additionally qualify as upward mobility stories due to their classification
as what I would call a compromised form of ghetto pastoral: not quite ethnic working-class “tales of how our half lives” told from the perspective of “one of us” who has nevertheless experienced a degree of socioeconomic mobility (as Michael Denning defines the genre), but also not naturalistic snapshots of how a deprived (or depraved) “other half” lives. Though Sollett himself would best be identified as a middle-class white Jewish-American filmmaker, his experiences growing up in the Italian-Jewish working-class neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn (“Saturday Night Fever country,” he proclaims in one interview) provided the autobiographical inspiration for *Five Feet High*, the less polished, more socially “realist” of the two films. Sollett’s unique willingness to let his “own” story change and evolve according to the contingencies of casting, dialog, and mis-en-scene—to relinquish a certain amount of directorial control to the goal of telling a story about the everyday experiences of urban youth that might be relatable or assimilable from a variety of ethnic standpoints—turned *Five Feet High* into a quintessentially “New York” community art project whose contours were shaped as much by the energy and contributions of its stars as by Sollett’s artistic vision.

Moreover, the unanticipated success of *Five Feet High*, its subsequent “class” transformation into a mainstream-friendly, commercially successful full-length feature film, mirrors the relative class mobility experienced by both its student-director and the cast that he retains from one film to the next. Both Rasuk and his Victor character undergo a notable physical “rising” in the year or so between the first film’s success and the second film’s completion—Rasuk is 14 in the first film, 16 in the second, with height and body mass changes reflecting a growth spurt typical of young men in this interim.

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3 *Independent*, ibid.
This “rising,” it seems, foregrounds the crucial issue of Victor’s “raising” that fills out the narrative universe of *Raising Victor Vargas*. The second film becomes an investigation of the how the Lower East Side streets on which we witness an earlier stage in Victor’s process of self-becoming—specifically his education in the performances of masculinity and femininity permissible within this space—inform the more internal domain (both spatially and psychically) of familial and communal responsibility through which his sense of masculinity is further shaped as he continues to “rise” toward manhood.

**A Feminist Education**

One of the first things a viewer notices about the short film *Five Feet High and Rising* is the centrality of male-female relations and gender performance within the working-class Latino-American community in which Sollett sets the story. Gender, as opposed to class, race, or ethnicity, functions as the primary (or at least most *explicit*) social force through which the characters attempt negotiate and “script” their burgeoning adult identities. More specifically, these kids and teens—who have very few forms of social or economic capital at their disposal—view gender expression as something over which they can exercise a degree of control. As Victor lies napping in the sun on a fire escape, the camera pans vertically up his exposed torso and stops, hanging invasively over his face. “Yo Victor!” a voice shrieks, and the camera cuts to a shot of a kid in baggy jeans and a crisp white wifebeater t-shirt peering up from the street below. “What’s up?” Victor responds sleepily, peeling himself off the metal grate. The kid, smaller and presumably younger than our protagonist, orders Victor to “come down,” but Victor tells him, “I can’t—I got punished,” allegedly for not letting his mom cut his hair, which he wears in a loose Afro. “You’re a baby!” the kid shouts back. But when such insults have little effect, out comes the trump card: “All the girls are asking about you, yo, they talkin’ about you!” Victor cracks a smile. “They are?” he asks cautiously.
Finally, Victor agrees to come down, enticed by an irrefutable brand of logic: “Yo, be straight up: would you rather be on a hot fire escape, or at the pool with a bunch of girls?”

Hurrying downstairs to meet Carlos, Victor, wearing an identical white t-shirt and jeans, quickly realizes that he’s been tricked. “Where are those pretty girls so I can flex for them?” Victor asks, flashing his guns. Not only are there no girls downstairs, but the girls that his friend sheepishly admits referring to, Latasha and Tina, are merely the “usual girls,” no one special. “Those are the pretty girls you told me to come down for?” Victor demands, getting angry. “You never do anything with them anyway!” Carlos fires back. To add insult to injury, the pool at which these less-than-desirable girls are rumored to be hanging out is not on 10th St.—where Carlos announces they can’t go, because “kids piss and shit in that pool”—but all the way out on Pitt, at least 10 city blocks (and three full avenue blocks) southwest of where Victor assumed they were heading. “That’s a journey, man!” Victor complains, cursing as they head on down the street. Despite these annoyances, Victor takes a moment to remind Carlos exactly what kind of guy he is. “What you talking about I never do anything with them? Those are my sons, yo, I be making out with all of ‘em.”

When they get to Pitt Street, however, the bravado takes a back seat as Victor leaps into the pool after Carlos, dunking him. The boys splash in the pool for a moment during which we are reminded, in the midst of Carlos’s giggling, that these are still just kids—the younger one being no older than 10 or 12. As the boys swim, the camera cuts to our first sighting of members of the female persuasion. These are not the “usual girls,” we realize immediately, but a feminine counterpart to Carlos and Victor: a tiny girl in a one-piece swimsuit; and a much taller girl, with a very light complexion, sporting a bikini and disinterested expression. From their perch against a wall, the tiny girl points
toward the pool, where the camera lands on a large girl playfully attempting to grab a
guy from behind. “That’s a hoochie,” the tall girl announces, presumably referring to the
female half of the offensive pair; “Grade-A Number One!” her friend concurs, laughing.
The pair suddenly spots Carlos. “Oh my god, who’s his little friend?” the small girl
wonders aloud, seemingly disgusted. “An Afro, eeeeeew!” she squeals as Victor,
emerging from the water, smooths back his wet hair. Nevertheless, the girls call Carlos
and Victor over to say hi, though they aren’t particularly friendly when the boys get
there. “Move—you’re in my light!” barks the small girl, waving them to the side. Victor
immediately asks Carlos about the taller girl, learning that she’s “Eddie’s cousin”—not
“Eddie from Campos,” but “Eddie from Baruch” (referring to two different Lower East
Side public housing complexes). As Carlos runs back to the pool, summoned by a curvy
girl in a bikini (Latasha or Tina, perhaps), the tall girl peers up at Victor. “And who are
you?” she asks, frowning suspiciously. “Carlos’s friend,” Victor mumbles, arms folded
awkwardly around his torso. When the discomfort persists, Victor hurries back toward
the water to give an unsuspecting Carlos, lingering poolside, another dunking.

The above situations paint a picture of a world in which a number of intersecting
factors—size, age, place, race, and more general access to knowledge and people—
influence both the availability of certain gender scripts and the degree of authenticity or
believability inspired by assumed roles and performances. Though Carlos is both
younger and smaller than Victor—two factors that one might assume would lead to the
boy’s inability to perform an “adult” form of masculinity relative to his older friend—
the role-reversal conflicts in which they participate underscore the instability and

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4 The Campos Plaza, an East Village high-rise housing project, is close to Tompkins Square Park on 10th St.,
where the pubic pool in which “kids piss and shit” is housed (and Victor Rasuk claims to have had his
fortuitous meet-up with Sollett and crew). The massive Baruch complex (2,194 units) is on Pitt St., near
Hamilton Fish Park and the pool at which the kids wind up. All locational info gleamed from various
Wikipedia and Google Maps sources.
malleability of the masculine identities they struggle to assume. Carlos, vibrant and alert as Victor snoozes, appears as the “man with the plan,” dispensing knowledge that the ultimate form of heteromasculine capital—pretty girls—may soon be available to them. When Victor later questions the quality of Carlos’s intelligence—“Those are the pretty girls you told me to come down for?”—Carlos responds by bringing up the issue of Victor’s motivational impotence: “You never do anything with them anyway!” Despite his diminished stature, Carlos’s easily worn confidence and future-oriented outlook grant him a position of leadership relative to Victor, who grumbles about the 10-block “journey” to the Pitt Street pool (a little over half a mile’s walk). Carlos’s status as “alpha male” is further reinforced through their interactions with the girls at the pool. When introducing himself to Amanda, the taller girl, it is not surprising that Victor refers to himself as “Carlos’s friend” before even mentioning his own name. Carlos not only knows the girls, but knows their whereabouts and even their sense of belonging relative to other men (she’s cousin to Eddie from Baruch, not Campos). The girls, picking up on this power differential, even refer to Victor as Carlos’s “little friend.” And yet Victor, older and larger than Carlos, still manages to exploit gendered forms of privilege inherent to these divisions. His claim to be “making out with all of ‘em,” regardless of its lack of truth, still exhibits a higher degree of verisimilitude than it would coming from the younger boy—who also shares a stake in the believability of such sentiments in that he, too, wishes to develop a “ladies’ man” reputation. Moreover, in a public space like the pool, Victor can always reassert his dominance physically (i.e., dunking the smaller boy in the water).

The girls, however, make it clear that the value of these displays of masculine capital is relative only to their willingness to buy the show. The girls’ responses largely dictate whether or not these performances come across as authentic displays of
manliness, and whether or not the boys might then internalize these reactions as indicative of their desirability to members of the opposite sex. One of the many things that differentiates the feminine (or female gendered) landscape of Sollett’s film from those offered by other filmmakers attempting realist representations of urban working-class teenage life—particularly Larry Clark (KIDS, 1995), a director to whom Sollett has been compared—is the shrewd sense of world-weary, almost prudish composure displayed by its leading ladies. Amanda and her friend are not the teen girls of KIDS, naively duped by the hedonistic, violent, proudly misogynistic boys who display what appears to be the only form of masculinity available within this self-cannibalizing portrayal of Lower East Side working-class culture (in a mid-90’s spin on the Verrazano bridge suicide, at least three of the film’s main characters contract HIV). Rather, Sollett’s girls are onto the game. And though they don’t completely opt out of playing, their behaviors articulate a counter-performance meant to disrupt and disorient gendered assumptions about how power should circulate during the courtship process. Girls who try to claim a position in the game as it stands, aggressively soliciting boys’ attention, get labeled “hoochie.” Though the girls themselves call the boys over, this move seems primarily geared toward exposing the boys’ fantasies of prowess and control in relation to the opposite sex—all that beefed-up talk about “making out” with not only one girl, but “all of ‘em”—as farcical and presumptuous, a mere invasion of the sunlight in which the girls would rather bask. Moreover, the girls’ derisive focus on Victor’s Afro—a moment that hearkens back to the fire escape, site of Victor’s punishment for not letting

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Interestingly, while Sollett’s teen characters fall somewhere on a multi-ethnic spectrum of brown-ness (a generally ambiguous mix of Latino, Afro-Caribbean, and Caucasian ancestry), the cast of KIDS is more typically multicultural; there are distinctly black, white, and brown characters. I have to wonder, therefore, if there is also a strain of anti-miscegenation built into KIDS’ hysterical DARE-generation messaging: that too much mixing between the races, in other words, will lead to the urban cultural “death” that the HIV subtext implies.
his mother cut his hair—calls on both race and class to neutralize the male privilege authorizing Victor’s (attempted) performances of masculinity. Carlos actually has darker skin than Victor, as does Amanda’s tiny friend—who lets loose the chorus of “eeeeew!” at the sight of Victor’s hair. Both, however, wear their hair “neatly”—cropped short, and pulled back into a tight ponytail. It seems, therefore, that the problem with Victor’s Afro is primarily its unkemptness, or the racialized low-classness that his refusal to cut his hair implies. The consolidation of go-getter Carlos’s well-trimmed hair and the light skin tone displayed by the cool and comely Amanda—who Victor immediately identifies as the ultimate prize—only further emphasizes Victor’s loss of social capital due to the “unrestrained” blackness he displays at the pool.6

However, a viewer quickly learns that Amanda’s lightness, though definitely a form of privilege from the perspective of the absolute value it assigns her relative to other markers of social desirability (thinness, cuteness, “good” hair, etc.), comes with its own set of problems that, I’d argue, are exacerbated by the intersection of poverty with the order of the public space through which these young people move. Conceived of in this regard, the girls’ attitude toward the boys comes across as a self-protective mechanism rather than a willful subversion of what Gayle Rubin has named the “sex/gender system,” that “set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity”—products that, Rubin usefully reminds us,  

6 In “Black Hair/Style Politics,” Kobena Mercer sheds further light on the relationship between race, hair, and class status. Describing what Stuart Hall calls a white-biased “ethnic scale,” she writes: “Opportunities for social mobility are… determined by one’s ranking on the ethnic scale and involve the negotiation not only of socio-economic factors such as wealth, income, education, and marriage, but also of less easily changeable elements… such as the shape of one’s nose or the shade of one’s blackness. In the complexity of this social code, hair functions as a key ‘ethnic signifier’ because, compared with bodily shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening.” Also, perhaps more to the point of Dominican-American Victor’s characterization: “In the stereotype of the Sambo… the ‘frizzy’ hair of the character is an essential aspect of the iconography of inferiority. Once) we consider those new-world societies created on the basis of the slave trade economy—the United States and the Caribbean especially—we can see that where ‘race’ is a constitutive element of social structure and social division, hair remains charged with symbolic currency.” New Formations 3 (1987): 35-36. Electronic.
have historically been sculpted by the patriarchal management of women’s physical and socioeconomic mobility. Compared to Amanda, Victor is smaller, younger, blacker, and “lazier” (hence the unkempt hair). In the article “Blanca from the Block: Whiteness and the Transnational Latina Body,” Stephen Nadler identifies Amanda’s derivative “Juicy Judy” character (from Sollett’s second film) as an example of a privileged figure of normative “Latina whiteness.” Knadler argues that the black and African cultural history of the mestiza—a figure he calls a visual symbol of “liberating transnational and transracial identity that brings together various hemispheric peoples” from South America and the Caribbean—has been erased or displaced through the overwhelmingly “white women of color” representations of her in circulation in the mainstream U.S. media. In addition to mentioning Judy, Knadler’s article focuses specifically on Jennifer Lopez as an icon through which such representations circulate, arguing that the characters she plays in various films serve as “Republican-friendly and de-Africanized emblem(s) of the new Latina.” Her goal being to assimilate to middle and middle-class America, this new Latina re-inscribes white mainstream hierarchies in a desire to perform “borderland difference” without displaying “any complicated allegiances to multiple homes.” That difference, Knadler continues, “will be a memory of the ethnic neighborhood”—the “block” from which J-Lo legendarily comes—“defined by a cultural expressive style of blackness emptied of any historical weight.”

Amanda does appear to channel some features of this “Blanca from the Block” mestiza figure—particularly, as both Knadler and Priscilla Ovalle have problematized, her tendency to displace her “unruly” blackness onto the men of color with whom she

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becomes involved personally or on-screen (P-Diddy and Wesley snipes in J-Lo’s case; Victor in Amanda’s). However, the most crucial difference between Amanda/Judy and J-Lo’s characters is that Amanda/Judy is still on the block, and remains there throughout the duration of both films. The ethnic neighborhood in which she lives is not only not a memory, it contextualizes the everyday contours of her sense of how a young woman moves through life, the possibilities inherent to or limited by this range of movement. Moreover, what happens next at the Pitt Street pool—an event that challenges Victor in ways he may not have expected when he headed out with Carlos to take a dip—is less astonishing than it is, I would guess, representative of the typical environment in which “pretty” working-class girls find themselves attempting to negotiate the conditions of their agency and safety.

Following their initial encounter at the pool, the camera cuts to a shot of Amanda, Victor, and an unknown older teen guy standing in line to use the poolside bathroom—the older guy up front, Victor in the middle, Amanda in back. As the guys discuss how long the person in the bathroom is taking—“I’m about to knock down the fucking door, yo!” Victor complains—an agitated Amanda paces in place behind them, glancing around. “Hey Amanda,” the older guy says, turning to face her and mumbling something inaudible. Reacting to whatever it was that he said (which I really, really wish I could hear!), Amanda replies, “Chill, yo, I just wanna use the bathroom, alright? Fuck off.” Ignoring the guy’s invitation to let her use the bathroom first, Amanda

9 Discussing how J-Lo is often cast to “mediate the sexual and racial tension” between black and white men in her film roles (like 1997’s Money Train, with Woody Harrelson and Wesley Snipes) and opposite black men in hip-hop videos, Ovalle elaborates: “As a Latina, Lopez’s specific combination of nonwhiteness and femaleness is imperative to her ability to mediate black male sexuality for mass-market consumption…” Perhaps of greater relevance to Five Feet High, Ovalle also mentions the importance of New York to J-Lo’s particular brand of transnational Latina sexuality: “By popularizing an ethnic/Latina-ness defined and contained by the decidedly U.S. urban center of New York, Lopez maximized her representational potential while maintaining an ‘Americanness’ in the media eye.” “Urban Sensualidad: Jennifer Lopez, Flashdance, and the MTV Hip-Hop Re-Generation.” Women and Performance Issue 18, Volume 3 (2008): 260-61.
nudges Victor. “Hey shorty, where’s Carlos?” she asks, a question that the older guy finds unwarranted—“What are you talking to him for?” he demands, stepping forward. Amanda again nudges Victor, who by this time is growing uncomfortable with his triangulation between the older, taller, antagonistic pair. “Hey shorty,” she tries again, “I know of a bathroom over there if you wanna go,” gesturing toward the other side of the pool. “He don’t need to walk you!” the older boy informs her angrily, his back to the camera as he steps forward, forcing Victor to his left as he stares down Amanda. “Excuse us!” Amanda fires back, grabbing a confused Victor’s hand and yanking him along with her as she leaves.

The camera then cuts to Amanda pulling a silent, scared-looking Victor behind her down a short flight of stairs, toward their alternate bathroom destination. When they get there, however, the door is locked. “Come over here,” Amanda orders Victor, and the two disappear behind a dumpster, at which point we see Amanda, glancing around furtively, beginning to unbutton her jeans. Victor looks away, embarrassed. As Amanda squats down behind the dumpster, the camera cuts to a close-up of Amanda’s hand, clinging tight to Victor’s as she pees. We hear the steady refrain of Victor’s frightened, laborious breathing. Panning up Victor’s arm and torso, the camera finally lands on his face, stoic and passively attentive as Amanda finishes her business.

Through a detailed focus on his behavior relative to Amanda’s desperate act, this scene interrogates Victor’s confrontation with his own unearned gender privilege: privilege Victor can access, whether he likes it or not, simply by being male. The range of uneasy affective responses that Victor exhibits—the confusion, labored breathing, stoicism, and general sense of discomfort—comes from his recognition of something Amanda already knows: that on some level, this older, assertive girl—a girl who calls him “shorty,” who grabs his hand to drag him behind a dumpster—must defer to him as
having “rights in her,” as Gayle Rubin puts it, “that she does not have in herself.”\(^\text{10}\) Amanda feels unsafe in this situation, Victor is realizing, simply because she is a woman. Victor thus recognizes himself here as the decoy that he is: a protective foil in Amanda’s struggle to claim a sense of agency, to mark her own “territory,” within a situation in which she has inadvertently been demarcated as part of the terrain over which the older boy, Hector, presides. She is, in a sense, borrowing Victor’s male privilege, his male “right” to preside over a woman’s body and how it circulates. Moreover, as his behavior indicates, Victor gets this. He may not initially understand why he is being dragged behind a dumpster by a girl who, mere minutes before, seemed suspicious of his desire to even be talking to her. But while witnessing the lengths Amanda must go to in her struggle to claim her body, and the space in which she moves, as her own—going so far as to recruit him, a 14-year-old kid, to serve as bodyguard while she performs the de-eroticized yet highly intimate act of relieving herself—Victor experiences what it is that makes “men’s rights” activists like Robert Bly and Roy U. Schenk feel violated by feminism: shame, in the realization that, simply by being male, he is implicated within a social system rendering it necessary for Amanda to cling to him while she pees.\(^\text{11}\) Victor’s shame is nothing more than the affective

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\(^{10}\) Rubin, ibid (191).

\(^{11}\) The problem with Bly and Schenk’s attitude toward men feeling shame about their maleness is not their shared conclusion that shame is a potentially destructive emotion that need not be part of “healthy” socialization. “If we start from birth to teach children that we are fallible human beings [and] that making mistakes does not in any way make us defective or unlovable, then it seems to me that shame should not develop,” Schenk writes; whether or not “mistakes” should be identified as such in the first place (a topic I discussed somewhat in my first chapter on Arnoldi), this claim at least seems well-intentioned. Rather, the defensiveness with which these authors respond to the idea of being made to feel any level of discomfort at all in the process of confronting their male privilege makes their work truly disturbing. They see their assumed burden of psychic responsibility for patriarchy, or what Schenk calls the “Shaming of Men,” as proof that not only are men the real victims of this system, but that women, conversely, are the oppressors, destroying men’s emotional lives with their “moral superiority.” For Schenk in particular, these accusations of “reverse-sexism” serve as little more than an excuse to re-inscribe a need for patriarchal authority and men’s natural right to dominate women through whatever means necessary. If “the most intense form of violence one person can do to another” is not torture, enslavement, or sexual abuse, but rather to assume “an attitude of moral superiority” (I kid you not, this is his claim!), then “self-defense” involves protecting
recognition of the injustice of this arrangement, followed by the sinking feeling that his own ability to move freely and confidently through the world might be buttressed by Amanda’s inability to do so.

Zipping up her pants, and without looking back, Amanda turns to head back to the pool, leaving a silent, stone-faced Victor to contemplate such revelations. The camera then cuts to Victor sitting on a stoop by himself, still deep in thought. A question arises in the heaviness with which the boy squints into the sunlight: What exactly is it that I’m supposed to have learned—or to have been provoked to think about, at least— from this encounter with Amanda? For the rest of the film, Victor becomes a man on a mission: to locate Amanda, perhaps in the hope of gaining answers to such questions. As he takes to the streets, Victor’s search is additionally contextualized as part of his process of self-becoming as a socially-conscious member of the Lower East Side community through which he moves.

While Victor is busy tracking down Amanda to no avail, the camera cuts to a shot of a tiny boy in a red basketball jersey. Dragging a baseball bat behind him, the boy runs up to a teenage guy, who’s seated on a stoop. “Hello Aaron,” the little fellow says cheerfully. “You wanna play with me?” Following a nasty look from Aaron, the kid kicks hard at Aaron’s crotch. The two tussle for a moment—“get the fuck on out of here!” Aaron repeats several times, annoyed—before the little boy, giving up, drags his bat on down the street. The camera then cross-cuts between a shot of Victor, his back turned to check an apartment complex call box for clues to Amanda’s whereabouts, and

oneself against this feminine/feminist onslaught of moral superiority. To back up his point, Schenk shares the following story (told to facilitate his and other men’s “healing”): “I recall an occasion when an associate and I visited a woman whose ‘abusive’ husband had recently left her. She put down her husband… and depicted herself as so superior and above him that she would not even condescend to discuss issues with him. I soon realized that if I lived with her a couple of weeks, I would end up being physically violent in response to her intense verbal and psychological violence.” From Breaking the Shackles: Bringing Joy into Our Lives. Ed. Schenk and John Everingham. Madison, WI: MPC-BEP Press, 2002. 46-47. Electronic.
the boy with his bat, smiling as he approaches the unsuspecting sleuth. The boy kicks Victor in the knee; Victor, moaning in pain, follows the boy around a corner and into an alley. The boy then picks up a discarded football that Victor, presumably over the pain, provokes the kid to throw his way. Holding the ball playfully over the kid’s head, Victor grabs him by the shirt in a gesture of restraint. “I’ll give you the ball if you tell me why you kicked me,” Victor says, staring seriously at the boy. Crossing his arms and glaring at the ground, the boy replies, “Because no one want to play with me!” Smiling, Victor gives in. “Alright, go back,” he orders, and they play a laid-back game of toss-the-pigskin before Victor continues on his way.

Victor encounters other such street-side distractions during his journey to find Amanda—including, in a fortuitous turn of events, Amanda’s smaller friend from the pool. The girl is initially reticent to give Victor any information about Amanda. Similarly to the situation at the pool, a premium seems to be put on protecting friends and kin from potentially bothersome outsiders, or, in the case of the men who remain cagey toward Victor’s questions about Amanda, those who might serve as competition for the women around whom they attempt to demarcate territorial boundaries. What seems to warm Amanda’s friend to Victor, however, is his willingness to suspend the prerogatives of his search for long enough to stop and engage with her. After trotting around town for sometime, Victor’s plops down on a stoop next to the girl, who’s busy drawing with chalk on the sidewalk (also reminding us, as with Carlos’s splashing and giggling at the pool, that this shit-talking girl is still a just a kid). “Amanda’s not back

\[ In an earlier scene, when Victor interrogates Carlos about Amanda’s possible whereabouts, Carlos claims to not “remember” anything about Amanda from their encounter with her at the pool, even though he knew she was Eddie from Baruch’s cousin. This motivation for informational reticence seems different than Amanda’s friend’s desire to keep potential problems out of her and Amanda’s sunlight. Carlos’s behavior, I would argue, is more about re-asserting his sense of rank: he has information that Victor wants, and he can choose to withhold this.\]
yet, if you were wondering” the girl tells Victor, turning to offer him a piece of chalk. “You wanna do something with me?” Victor grabs the chalk and starts making scratches on one of the steps. “Hector’s an asshole,” the girl opines, having witnessed the earlier altercation between Victor and the older boy. “I know how we can get him back if you want,” she adds slyly. Though Victor, sensing trouble, tells her there’s no need for retaliation, the girl bursts into feigned tears right as her older cousin Aaron emerges from across the street. In response to her seeming hysteria—brought on, she claims, by Hector having hit her—Aaron hunts down the alleged bully and gives him a sound public thrashing while Victor, astonished, looks on.

The message the girl sends to Victor is clear. If you treat people in the community well—especially younger, more vulnerable people—you deserve to be rewarded with information, protection, and a more advantageous position within the neighborhood social network. Perhaps due to the age and developmental stage he is at (14, no longer quite a little kid, but also not quite ready to vie for a place in the masculine chain of command in which Aaron and Hector assume roles), Victor is in a prime position to benefit from a reminder of the value of this ethic to the community. Victor’s behavior indicates that as much as he would like to locate Amanda, he isn’t going to forget about the “little people” in this single-mindedness of purpose. He can still take the time to throw a football around with a lonely kid or, in a different scene, stop to beat some drums with a budding musician. Through a detailed shadowing of Victor’s meandering behavior as he proceeds on his quest, this film makes an argument about the kind of community leader a young man should aspire to be: someone who is motivated enough to set a “goal” and work to achieve it; yet not so self-possessed in his sense of purpose that he shoves aside the same people who might, when push comes to shove, aid him in his mission. As with Katherine Arnoldi’s journey to college, this film
displays the degree to which working-class people rely on one another to achieve their goals. Its classing of the quest narrative adds an additional layer to Judith Kegan Gardiner’s critique of Robert Bly’s belief that boys cannot become men without a ritualistic “clean break” from female and other “nonlinear” forms of community influence. In Bly’s paternalistic, individualized conception of how “healthy” masculinities take shape, “only under hierarchical forms of male authority can boys develop into proper men.” Victor, however, turns to the working-class world around him—largely including children looking for ways to keep themselves busy when economics prohibit the availability of summer camp programs and other middle-class forms of diversion (and corralling)—to guide him in the development of a masculinity that will at once enrich the neighborhood and help him get where he wants to go. Considering that Aaron and Hector’s solipsistic, “hierarchical” masculine styling gets them nowhere but at each other’s throats—they are, in fact, merely the dupes of a clever little girl—the film additionally critiques the “cul-de-sac” masculinity of KIDS and Saturday Night Fever while offering Victor’s narrative as a viable yet still organic working-class alternative to this bleakness.

Victor’s ultimate reward for his upstanding behavior is, of course, the opportunity to engage with Amanda. Spotting her from across the street in the midst of his drumming diversion, he weaves his way through a series of parked cars, looking determined. “Remember me?” he asks when he reaches her, shuffling nervously. From off camera, we hear Amanda’s response: “Ohhhh, shorty! Yeah, sit down,” and the

13 This point was additionally essential to my discussion in chapter 2 concerning the symbiotic working-class/middle-class relationships developing throughout the Friday Night Lights TV series.

camera follows Victor as he takes a seat on a concrete step to her right. Excited to have found her at last, Victor politely asks Amanda what she’s done with her day. “Oh you know, the usual,” she replies. “Clean, cook, babysit my little sister, all that crap.” The conversation then takes a more intimate turn:

_Amanda:_ So what you doing around here?
_Victor:_ You know, I came to see you.
_Amanda (rolling her eyes):_ Me? Oh come on, you know you came to see somebody else...
_Victor:_ No really, I came to see you. (Sighs.) So, um, got a boyfriend?
_Amanda:_ No, and I don’t want one neither.
_Victor:_ Why’s that?
_Amanda:_ They’re bastards, they’re dogs!
_Victor:_ Not all of ’em.
_Amanda:_ How you figure?
_Victor:_ Probably like out of 10 guys that you know, probably 2 percent might not be dogs. Just remember that.
_Amanda_ laughs, patting Victor’s head.
_Victor (earnestly):_ How do girls actually know if a guy’s a dog? For real?
_Amanda:_ They play you!
_Victor:_ Not all of them.
_Amanda_ looks away and shakes her head, smiling.
_Amanda:_ So you got a girl?
_Victor:_ I got a few.
_Amanda:_ A few? So now you’re a play-a?
_Victor:_ I mean… let me rephrase… I got… _I had_ some… a few.
_Amanda_ (looks at Victor with disgust): See what I’m taking about!
_Victor:_ I said _I had_ a few. I… I made a mistake.
_Amanda:_ So… what you do with these “girls”?
_Victor:_ You know, we make out.
_Amanda:_ Ohhhhh…
_Victor_ looks straight ahead and spits, embarrassed.
_Amanda:_ So what you think of me?
_Victor:_ You know, you’re cute. You look good.
_Amanda:_ I’m cute? I look good, that’s it?
_Amanda_ smacks her gum, astonished.
_Amanda:_ So what else you do with these girls?
_Victor:_ I mean, I buy them whatever they want.
_Amanda (laughing):_ With what money? $5 allowance you get every week?
_Victor (embarrassed):_ No. But I’m faithful. I don’t play them.
_Amanda:_ You’re faithful. But you had a few. You can’t even get your head straight!
_Victor_ looks at Amanda helplessly.
_Amanda (patting Victor’s leg):_ You’re faithful. That’s nice.
Bruce Robbins, through readings of “sentimental” early-modern European upward mobility stories like Rousseau’s autobiographical *Confessions* (1782-1789) and Constant’s novel *Adolphe* (1816), notes that a key feature of the eroticized older woman/younger male dynamic characteristic of such stories is the way the woman’s desire for the younger man often comes across as a “chilly” sort of love. She is often, he claims, “more concerned with instructing (than) seducing” her male lover, despite their erotic dynamic. Critical of representations of idealized mother-substitute figures in male-authored fiction—such figures, he agrees with feminist critics, “serve a system of values that does not go out of its way to do justice to women”—Robbins praises the older woman figure for her ability to appear simultaneously self-interested and “sustaining” of both the younger male protagonist’s individual happiness and his ability to contribute to greater society. Amanda is a young woman who, while clearly “using” Victor to further her own ends (self-protection and access to the gender capital Victor possesses), also provokes Victor to think about how his “rising” might serve as an opportunity to envision and perform a non-violent, non-paternalistic form of working-class masculinity that could prove healthy both for Victor (as a man) and the community of which he is likely to remain a part.  

In line with our growing sense of Victor as an open and “worthy” young man in whom to entrust such a cause (during his journey to find Amanda, he *proves* this to us), Amanda prods Victor toward the awkward, at times embarrassing task of exposing and re-thinking the rules of the masculine “game” he has been socialized to eventually

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15 In a future book chapter draft I would like to more clearly problematize the assumption that working-class masculinity is inferior to a more “enlightened,” presumably middle-class form of masculinity. This issue is under-theorized in Robbins’ work, which tends to idealize the state, and upward mobility more generally, as offering a vision of “the good life” unavailable within working-class and poverty contexts without some form of deliverance from a more privileged “outside.” As my discussion of *Friday Night Lights* and Joe McCoy’s visit from Child Protective Services perhaps demonstrates, it is not difficult to find violent and paternalistic masculinities represented as a cross-class problem; it is more difficult, however, to find positive representations of working-class masculinity that do not owe their “softening” to middle-class influences.
master. When Victor tells Amanda that he came to see her, she immediately tests him. "You know you came to see somebody else," she muses, exposing the contempt she feels for Rule #1 of the game: don’t ever seem too interested in or available to a specific woman, for this could compromise your ability to circulate freely, potentially leading to a lost sense of self-ownership and responsibility for the welfare of another (or others).

Unfazed by Amanda’s critique—he gets it, he’s over it—Victor persists. “No really, I came to see you.” Eager to prove himself a quick study, Victor then attempts to impress his teacher with statistical knowledge of the conditions of the social norm to which she refers (where guys are “dogs” and “bastards” who “play you”) and his implied exceptional status relative to this norm: “Probably out of like 10 guys that you know, probably two percent might not be dogs.” Perhaps aware of the unintentional irony of Victor’s computation—a mathematical situation rendering only a small part (20%) of one in ten guys likely to be composed of something other than canine DNA—Amanda challenges Victor’s exceptionalist claim by putting the emphasis back on his conflicting desire to perform a version of masculinity contingent on assuming a position of power relative to the circulation of women. “So now you’re a play-a?” she asks in response to Victor’s claim to have “a few” girls. Knowing she’s trapped him, Victor backpedals—“I said I had a few-- though he then persists in pressing his claim to have “made out” with these girls that he “had,” past-tense. When Victor continues to vacillate between performing a normative version of masculinity and a version he feels might be more palatable to Amanda —claiming to have bought those “few” girls from the past

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16 As further evidence for this being “Rule #1” of the masculine socialization process to which Victor is exposed, when Victor is interrogating a tight-lipped Carlos about Amanda’s whereabouts the day after their Pitt pool encounter, Carlos snarkily asks Victor, “What you want with her? You want to go like this to her? [Wags his tongue.] You in love with her?” Victor, embarrassed, grabs the chain link fence they’re standing against, averting his eyes and turning away from Carlos. “No, man, I’m not in love with her!,” he snaps. “I got a lot of other girls.”
“anything they want” while also professing faithfulness as among his redeeming qualities—Amanda reacts with an ambivalent mix of condescension and understanding. “You can’t even get your head straight!” she snaps, but immediately feels bad, witnessing the helplessness with which Victor responds to “failing” her cross-examination. “You’re faithful. That’s nice,” she allows him.

It could be argued that the “nice guy” portion of the performance Victor puts on for Amanda is scripted merely to offer Amanda what he thinks she wants to hear—a move that, judging from her reaction, Amanda has seen and seen through countless times. However, the developmental journey Victor has undergone does not support such conclusions. Victor is seated on the stoop next to the older girl precisely because he does not—least not in the same way—the “usual” that Amanda takes for granted as constitutive of her range of experiences: cooking, cleaning, and caring for her sister, as well as the need to devise creative solutions to mitigate the threat of masculine violence to which her womanhood renders her vulnerable. Holding her hand at the pool awakened him to both the reality of her vulnerability and his privileged place within a patriarchal system that denies her freedoms he takes for granted. So Victor does something that, in the annals of various taboos structuring how men perform masculinity, is unique and more subversive than it might seem: he seeks out a woman to help him think through and attempt to perform, however awkwardly, a version of masculinity predicated on something other than dominance and submission as the “natural” mettle separating the sexes. Considering that Victor is a working-class man of color, I would argue that it is NOT to his or any other similarly-situated man’s advantage to attempt to “refuse” his male privilege, something with which activist Amit
Tanjea also struggles. I’m not even sure that privilege can, or should, be refused (because what happens to refused privilege? Might it wind up in more insidious coffers?). Taneja points out the unique task faced by those, like himself, Victor, and Amanda, who find themselves simultaneously in the position of oppressor and oppressed. While I suggest that this focus on oppression is too limiting, Taneja draws critical attention to the complex and particular struggles of those who possess certain forms of social capital (whiteness, in Amanda’s case) while lacking others (gender, class). A sense of responsibility to this positionality “must fuel our passion for resisting oppression,” Taneja says, “by abdicating norms that give us privilege over others.” The passion with which Victor proceeds in his search for Amanda is fueled by a desire to learn how to begin resisting the norms that have structured his sense of how masculinity is envisioned, performed, and internalized as a central part of a man’s identity. Though Amanda has few tools in her pedagogical arsenal other than a (finely tuned) sense of outrage with which to administer the lesson that Victor craves, she does the best she can with what she has, and they learn from one another. With an eager pupil like Victor, outrage is often enough to get the ball rolling.

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18 Organizing with the Occupy movement over the last several months, I have developed a more nuanced sense of this “refused” privilege issue. Though I still don’t think privilege is ever something you can simply choose to reject or get rid of—the class privilege of my education, for instance, will always be with me and influence my privileged relationship to knowledge in most circles—I now understand that what it means to refuse privilege is to refuse to be interpellated by institutional systems that provoke you to take normative advantage of your privilege. For instance, when I asked a longtime activist from OWS (whose name I can’t remember, she was conducting a teach-in) about how one goes about refusing privilege, she gave me the example of how a gender-normative white man at a political rally might defer being interviewed by a TV news outlet to a woman, person of color, or someone with an alternative gender presentation. Though doing this does not “cancel” the man’s privilege, it does challenge institutional assumptions concerning who might be a proper authority to speak or innocuous face for the nightly news.

19 Taneja, ibid (155).
A Private Person

In a turn of events both intriguing and potentially problematic, Sollett ends his short film by allowing things to turn sexual (as they so often do for the characters of Robbins’ study). Mirroring the earlier “pee” scene, Amanda gets up (after patting Victor’s leg) and walks across the street toward a run-down, secluded alcove—perhaps an abandoned coop meant to house chickens in an alley behind a bodega. This time, instead of being dragged in a mess of confusion, Victor follows Amanda, undeterred by the “you poor sweet kid” condescension that the leg-pat also signified. Tucked away in this forgotten shack—the sense of this being an abandoned space heightened by the remnants of old bicycle parts, gym equipment, and crusty garden hoses scattered about—Amanda administers one final “test question” to a pupil who, by this time, is beginning to exhaust her capacity or willingness to teach. “So what happened?” she asks Victor, crossing her arms and turning toward him. “Aren’t you going to do anything?” she continues, referring to the “making out with all of ‘em” that, despite their “alternative” lesson plan, Victor insists on claiming as central to his sense of masculine self-definition. While Victor stares at the dirt and shuffles anxiously, mumbling about “how I got it like that, I don’t gotta prove shit to no girl,” Amanda—studying Victor from the foreground, a visual affect that dwarfs the boy physically to an even more exaggerated degree than their several-inches height differential accounts for—puts a stop to all this directionless bravado. “Come over here,” she orders, and Victor moves toward her, reaching one hand out of his pocket for long enough to, with much hesitation, lightly stroke Amanda’s arm. “I’m sorry,” he says, pulling away from her

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20 A bit of context for this reference: In an earlier scene, Carlos stops to poke fun at a female group of aspiring R&B singers, cackling, “You guys sound like chickens in the back of a bodega!” (Bodegas with attached chickens coops are an everyday feature of Dominican culture within the city.)
with a knee-jerk sense of defeat. This hesitation, however, seems to be exactly what Amanda was looking for; “It’s ok,” she replies, taking his hand and gently placing it on her collarbone as she looks down at him with a kind smile. While Victor glances away, Amanda pulls him to her and, grabbing his jaw and rotating his head to meet hers, kisses him.

Much could be made of the “reward” of the kiss that Amanda bestows on her pupil, apparently for displaying a reticent form of masculinity that doesn’t take for granted the submission of the woman to the man’s assumedly active instigation of the “make out” scenario. The kiss signifies an “A” grade end to their lesson, a marker of Victor’s willingness to abandon the prerogatives of his scripted masculine stylings to a gender “role-reversal” truer to the power dynamics at play; and yet, the kiss also gets Victor’s “foot in the door” to becoming exactly the kind of playboy he was bragging to Carlos about being (if he continues to wish to present himself this way). However, a perhaps more interesting way of reading this scene, or using this final scene of Five Feet High as a segue toward a discussion of Victor’s second incarnation (in Sollett’s second film), is to think about how the spatialization of this intimate encounter as private rather than public affects the performances of masculinity (and femininity) on display. Here, as with the dumpster scene, Victor and Amanda are filmed on their own, visually partitioned from the streets and community that otherwise frame their interactions. The shaping force of poverty in these young people’s lives cannot be disarticulated from the ways they use gender to empower themselves in a situation where other forms of social capital are in short supply: including the ability to claim personal privacy relative to the spaces they inhabit.

In a stylistic turn differentiating Raising Victor Vargas from other recent films centering on poverty that have proven appealing to popular, largely white middle-class
audiences, Sollett’s feature film utilizes a comedic voice to tell a story that nonetheless takes its teen characters and their everyday problems very seriously. Films like Frozen River (Courtney Hunt, 2008) and Winter’s Bone (Debra Granick, 2010) present the “everydayness” of poverty as a compelling narrative problem through reliance on the conventions of film noir and the nick-of-time thriller. Both of these films revolve around an almost identical crisis involving a protagonist’s struggle to procure enough money, in as little time as possible, to keep from losing a home.\textsuperscript{21} Victor Vargas, however, takes its cues from the Marx brothers, granting itself narrative momentum through what I’m calling the comedy of “cramped quarters.”\textsuperscript{22} The lack of personal space characteristic of the universe of this film (as opposed to a lack of time, in the aforementioned poverty “thrillers”) functions as an important catalyst for the events that both sustain a viewer’s interest in the story and move the narrative forward. Moreover, that Sollett’s short film almost entirely lacks an indoor or spatially-enclosed social context only re-enforces the maturation of Victor as a character when we are introduced to him not basking lazily on a fire escape, but in a place similar to where we left him at the end of Five Feet High and Rising: in a private alcove of sorts, preparing to display his “make out” potential.

Despite the two-year age difference between his Victor characters, Sollett did not conceive of Raising Victor Vargas as a sequel to Five Feet High. Uniquely, watching both of these films in sequence causes a viewer to experience a kind of staggering or “bumping up” effect: similar events are depicted, only the main characters have aged slightly in the second film. As in the first film, in Raising Victor Vargas Victor doesn’t meet his female

\textsuperscript{21} Mortgage bubble influence, anyone?

\textsuperscript{22} For perhaps the best known filmic example of this type of comedy, see the infamous “Stateroom” or “Crowded Cabin” scene from the Marx brothers’ A Night at the Opera (1932)—where around 20 people, offering a group of stowaways various services (manicures, plumbing, etc.), cram themselves into a tiny ship cabin. For a less slapstick example, recall would-be quarterback Matt Saracen’s attempts to hide his grandma before Coach Taylor enters his small rental house (from chapter 2).
counterpart-- known in this film as “Juicy Judy”-- until their encounter at the Pitt Street pool, this time accompanied by an older, lighter-complexioned, less ambitious Carlos substitute named Harold. This casting change drastically alters the power dynamic between Victor and the “buddy” character. Harold’s comparative whiteness perhaps grants him the privilege to act “silly” in a way that Carlos never does; if anything, Victor is the more serious of the two. Additionally, one wonders if Victor will come across as a substantially different character in this film as a result of the lack of feminist “consciousness-raising” he received from Amanda (at a critical moment in his youth) in the first film. Here he’s already 16, and hasn’t met Judy yet. Moreover, how might Sollett’s presentation of Victor to a more mainstream audience rather than the art-house intellectual crowd who would have viewed his short NYU Master’s project influence the contours of the masculinity displayed by the “Lothario” with whom many a film critic (and Sollett himself) became enamored?23

*Raising Victor Vargas* begins with the camera, in medium close-up, honing in on Victor as he stands against a bare, stucco wall. Here, we begin to get a sense of Sollett’s at-times fetishistic interest in Victor as an “everyboy” representative of the behavioral universe in which the film’s teenage male characters script and sculpt their masculine identities. Gazing languidly into the camera, head cocked to the side, Victor slowly licks

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23 I found at least 8 reviews and synopses of *Raising Victor Vargas* in which the writer refers to Victor as a Lothario: a “lip-lickin’ would-be Lothario,” from [http://www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk); the “self-appointed Lothario of Manhattan’s Lower East Side,” from [www.smh.com](http://www.smh.com); a “Latino kid who fancies himself as a bit of a lothario around the ghetto,” from film description at [www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com); the “titular Lothario,” from [www.slantmagazine.com](http://www.slantmagazine.com); and a “teen Latino lothario-in-training,” from [www.boxofficemagazine.com](http://www.boxofficemagazine.com), among others. The Lothario descriptor has long been synonymous with a low-brow “Latin lover” masculine stereotype; an “unscrupulous seducer” character named Lothario first appeared in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, and showed up again to play a similar role in Nicholas Rowe’s play *The Fair Penitent* (1703). Sollett, as the reviews perhaps confirm, was also under Lothario’s thrall when imagining the contours of Victor’s youthful working-class Latino self-presentation. In the Sept. 2003 *Independent* interview between Sollett and Rasuk, Sollett envisions redeeming his own perceived teenage masculine failings through his sense of the kind of macho “stud” he takes both Victor and the Rasuk character to be (this interview seems to have disappeared from the web; my apologies for the missing citation).
his lips, smacking and slurping. Enchanted, the camera then dashes to an extreme close-up of Victor fondling the edges of his white “wifebeater” t-shirt, which he proceeds to roll up and discard slowly, revealing brown, toned abs, sculpted pectorals, and a coy, eager smile. As Victor flexes, a gold nameplate necklace (reading “Doctor”) playfully jangles against his skin.

The camera then cuts to a reverse-shot of a mysterious person leaning against an assortment of pillows on an unmade twin bed, putting a human face on the pornographic gaze with which viewers have been invited to feast our eyes on Victor. We see not a “pretty girl” like Amanda; not Sollett himself, which might have been expected amidst all the titillation; but rather a smiling, overweight girl with curly hair and a caramel complexion much like Victor’s: a girl known around Victor’s neighborhood as “Fat Donna” Santiago. Biting her lip, Donna beams at Victor who, mouthing the words “here, sweet,” joins her in a steamy lip-lock on the bed. In the midst of their make-out session, however, Victor’s eyes dart to Donna’s nightstand, on which he spots a Polaroid picture of the two of them; in the picture, Victor is shown nibbling sweetly at Donna’s neck. Furrowing his brow, Victor pulls away from Donna. “You been keeping your mouth shut, right? Didn’t I tell you to throw that shit out?” he scolds, and they go back to kissing before Victor, still agitated, pulls himself up. “Listen,” he sighs, looking down at her. “I’m a private person. What we do is between me and you. You still want this lovin’, right?”

But all is not right in Victor and Donna’s love nest. While they continue to make out, a male voice appears in the ether: “Yo Victor, I know you’re in there!” As Victor grows increasingly annoyed—“Motherfucker!” he curses several times under his breath—the camera cuts to a teenage guy in a New York Knicks jersey and white do-rag staring up from the pavement outside. Suddenly, a younger, chubby girl with long curly
hair sticks her head out a window, shouting, “Harold, shut the fuck up!” at the boisterous guest below. In tandem, Victor’s head emerges from a nearby window, greeting Harold in like fashion: “Harold, shut the fuck up man!” he whisper-yells, darting his eyes about in extreme agitation. Confused, Harold peers up at his friend. “Yo, you’re in the wrong floor!” he bellows as the camera cuts to the girl who, looking up and over her shoulder with her mouth wide open, trumpets the foregone conclusion: “Oh my god Victor, are you up there with Donna? Are you fucking her?”

What happens next is basically an all-out battle of the sexes between Victor and the younger girl, his sister Vicki, for which the prize will be not only a claim to the truth of “what went down” one apartment over and above from their own, but the ability to either protect or exploit the “play-a” reputation that Victor regards as his most prized form of social capital. On Victor’s end, the damage control begins immediately. “Oh my god,” he mutters, yanking on his jeans in a panic as a lively, non-diagetic “getaway” jingle (full of flutes and Latin drum beats) accompanies the growing chaos. While Donna stares at him from the bed, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of someone’s hand—presumably Vicki’s—dialing a number on an olive green, old-fashioned rotary telephone. Panning up the phone cord, the camera settles on Vicki’s gleeful face. “Hello, is Sabrina there?” she inquires as the camera cross-cuts back to the scene in Donna’s room, where the slapstick antics continue. “Come here,” Donna says sweetly, reaching out to Victor who, hesitating while his wifebeater hangs perilously around his neck like a loosely-tied noose, moves closer to her, apparently to meet her embrace. However, Donna looks on in astonishment as Victor, bypassing her open arms, leans across her to grab the Polaroid picture. As Vicki attempts to fill Sabrina in on the goings on—“Oh my god, you know what I found out? My brother, he was…”—Victor bursts through the front door of their apartment, grabbing at the phone. A screaming match ensues, during
which Vicki ensures Victor, “I’m gonna tell everybody that you were with Fat Donna, that ugly bitch!” Infuriated, Victor bites his sister’s arm to wrestle the phone away from her and runs to an open window, threatening to drop the phone to the ground below. When Vicki refuses to back down in her threat, Victor glares at his sister with contempt. “Kiss this shit goodbye,” he says as the camera follows the imperiled communication device out the window and to the pavement, where it cracks into several pieces with a thud.

This charming opening sequence—which, from Victor’s initial flirtations with the camera to the smashed phone, takes only 3 minutes of screen time – reveals an ironic, easily overlooked “secret” that continues to influence Victor’s decision-making process to a compulsive degree. However their situation came about, our “play-a” hero actually likes Fat Donna. Were circumstances more conducive to his ability to be the “private person” he identifies himself as to his lady-friend, he’d probably still be with her in bed, whispering sweet words and nibbling her neck affectionately. But Donna lives less than a stone’s throw away from both the surveilling eye of Victor’s own family and the bustling street where, at any time on this hot summer day, someone could accost them merely with a shout from below. This is a Lower East Side project neighborhood; no one has or can afford the air conditioning that would at least allow the window to stay closed. On the other hand, the close proximity of Donna’s apartment to Victor’s does offer Victor certain opportunities to arrest his sister’s telephone operation before things go too far. In “real time,” it takes him a matter of seconds (no more than 20) to move from Donna’s apartment down a short flight of steps and through the “foyer” of his own cramped apartment to Vicki, phone in hand. From door-to-window, their apartment is no more than 10 or 15 yards in length. Moreover, as Victor quickly realizes, the “breaking the phone” strategy to guard his precarious sense of private ownership of
how information concerning his desires and behavior circulates is largely a symbolic
gesture. Within minutes, Victor is downstairs talking with Harold, who teasingly
interrogates him about the situation he “witnessed” from below: “Yo, I see your head
out that window!” he insists when Victor denies involvement with Donna. “What kind
of bitches I bag, son? Dons. You know that,” Victor reminds his friend, attempting to re-
enforce his “reputation.” Harold answers skeptically, laughing as he and a grumbling Victor take off down the street. Perhaps overly
dependent on the physical and verbal signifiers of his masculine self-styling—his toned,
dancing pecs, playboy smile, insistence that he “bags” only “dons” (a class of woman to
which Fat Donna assumedly does not belong)—Victor underestimates the degree to
which the contours of his reputation will be shaped in the court of public opinion. Based
on the spatial constraints of the situation in which Victor and his family and friends find
themselves, there is little possibility of keeping “private” matters out of this court.

Furthermore, the status of Fat Donna (the non-don) within Victor’s private realm
of erotic (or romantic) attachment as well as the greater narrative universe of this film
warrants a moment of discussion. As mentioned above, Fat Donna is introduced as a
stand-in for both the filmmaker and the viewer. Her perspective is, at least initially, our
own. But within moments, she becomes the violently rejected (abject) figure that
catalyzes the central crises of the narrative: how Victor will go about salvaging and
further promoting the “play-a” reputation that he considers central to his burgeoning
identity. Public opinion leads both Victor and the viewer to develop a sense of what
kind of people it is ok to desire, identify with, and ultimately be. Vicki’s threatening

24 In addition to meaning “sir” in Spanish, the best approximation I can come up with for Victor’s use of the
word don is “the crème de la crème, best of the best.” From www.urbandictionary.com.
phone call, and Harold’s chiding laughter, represent a shoring up of a social norm from which Victor displays a desire or willingness to deviate, calling into question his ability to acquire the social capital—dons—necessary to prove his manhood according to the community standard. Vicki’s attitude, moreover, offers intriguing commentary on how Fat Donna, as symbolic capital (or lack thereof), relates to her own situation and that of other young women. Vicki relishes the idea of getting on the phone to tell everyone she knows that her brother is “fucking that fat ugly bitch.” However, taking into account that Vicki is herself an overweight brown girl, one can’t help but wonder if her desire to expose Victor isn’t motivated by a deeper desire to expose a truth undercutting the rules through which gender norms are organized and performed: that some guys actually do like the fat girl, and might be more willing to reveal such feelings in the absence of codes linking masculine social capital to the possession (or alleged possession) of the “right” kind of women (thin, light-skinned, traditionally beautiful). Though she certainly wishes to embarrass her brother, Vicki also functions as a whistleblower on behalf of the social-constructedness of desire.

Victor faces a number of other “poverty of space” constraints that play a key role in moving the narrative forward and defining the contours of the elusive private personhood he seeks. In a twist that Victor might not have predicted in his haste to “kiss it goodbye,” the broken phone becomes a further limitation on his ability to claim privacy. When the kids’ grandmother—a first-generation immigrant, androgynous mother/father figure tasked with raising the family on her own—finds out about the broken phone, she tapes it up and puts a padlock on it, insisting that they’re only allowed to use it “in emergency—and emergency only going to be when I’m home!” Realizing that the phone, the only link to the “outside” world from within their 2-bedroom apartment, is a means to help them claim a somewhat individuated sense of
self, a disgruntled Victor and Vicki sit side-by-side on the family’s plastic covered couch. It’s “not fair,” Vicki protests, that they will no longer have the opportunity to communicate freely with those they might choose to call, especially when grandma is away at work. The grandmother, filmed in extreme close-up to augment the claustrophobia that Victor and Vicki are feeling, claps and smiles as the kids’ younger brother Nino plays piano. Provoked by grandma to respond to Nino’s playing, the unhappy brother-sister pair, with a number of small throw-pillows strategically placed between them (despite the heat), nonetheless continues to each stare straight ahead and down, unmoved by grandma’s declaration that they should all make more eye contact. Indeed, the refrain “let me see your eyes” becomes, throughout the film, a way for grandma to police her grandchildren’s attempts to guard internally-held knowledge, sentiments, and desires; when trying to provoke Victor to think more about his responsibility to “set an example” for the family, for instance, she tells him, “I want to see your eyes.” Within the confines of a tiny apartment in which everyone is more-or-less forced to share common space, the attempt to guard the amount and duration of eye contact made with others is meant to mitigate a lack of privacy that subtly yet dramatically affects the classed and gendered dimensions of one’s identity. Victor’s refusal to look at his grandma exemplifies how this space issue affects a performance of masculinity that also functions as a means to protest the socioeconomic constraints under which he is asked to be the “responsible” big brother. Until I get the space of my own that I desire as an oldest son saddled with so much responsibility, Victor seems to be saying, you’re not going to see my eyes.

Moreover, the grandma’s fear that Victor is threatening to become the kind of working-class man who can’t be depended on to honor his family responsibilities is continually stoked by “comedy of cramped quarters” moments that directly impact the
narrative progression of the film. At one point, Victor stands inside the apartment near the front door schooling Nino about girls. Nino stands across from him, staring curiously at a lipstick-stained glass that Victor brags was the result of a visit from one “Juicy Judy” Gonzalez. Grandma, hearing their conversation from the hallway through the thin door and uninsulated walls, bursts into the apartment and chastises Victor for trying to initiate the younger boy into the “third generation” of gigolos—the first of which included, she insists, her own husband (the children’s grandfather). Later in the film, grandma walks in on Nino masturbating in the bathroom, an encounter resulting entirely from her need to wash an oversized cooking pot in the bathtub because it won’t fit in the tiny kitchen sink (where she struggles, as more non-diagetic flute music plays, to jam the pot under the faucet). The grandma, in her old-school Catholic zeal, immediately concludes that Victor is to blame for corrupting his younger brother, resulting in her attempt (in one of the film’s stranger, more awkwardly-conceived moments) to actually take Victor back to social services. He’s nothing but a “very bad influence,” she tells an incredulous social worker at family court, who gently reminds her that “people (go to) jail for just throwing kids in the street.” Later, when Judy accepts Victor’s invitation to join his family for burgers at their apartment, the lipstick-stained glass comes back to haunt him. Having earlier noticed the mysterious marking (which Nino failed to wash off properly), grandma makes a “match” between the glass and the one Judy is using at dinner—provoking yet another “corruption of innocence” accusation hurled at Victor, this time resulting in the grandmother’s public “outing” of Nino’s earlier bathroom incident. “I catch my baby in the bathroom doing something terrible!” she proclaims, pantomiming the alleged act by grabbing at the air.

In “I Am Somebody: Victory Outreach, Masculinity, and Upward Mobility in Low-Income Latino Neighborhoods,” sociologist Edward Flores makes a distinction
between “machismo” and traditional “macho” brands of Latino masculinity of particular relevance to the multigenerational cramped quarters in which Victor and his family live. As Flores defines it, “(Machismo) is egoistic behavior, while being macho requires abiding by codes of honor, as well as being openly affectionate toward women and children.”

Older generations view macho as conducive to family and community prosperity in that it “re-oriens capital back toward the home,” away from spaces of “non-domestic involvement” where the “machista” male ego is thought to reign supreme (streets, bedrooms, public pools, bars, etc). This last scene, uncomfortable to watch as a mortified Nino attempts to restrain his grandmother’s gesticulations, is demonstrative of intergenerational conflicts that, as Flores sees it, often occur in poor Latino communities over the shoring up of macho masculinity. In Victor Vargas, the grandmother serves as the 1st generation guardian of macho—the benchmark of “a re-defined private world where family is the central focus”-- whose diffusion to the 3rd generation is threatened by several correlated factors: her own “gigolo” husband’s unwillingness or inability to adhere to its prerogatives; the “missing link” of the 2nd generation (the kids’ absent parents); and the youngest generation’s desire to embrace “non-domestic” forms of personal expression under what the older generation construes as the “negative influence of native-born black and Latino cultures.”

Combined with both the desire for self-definition that adolescence generally implies and poverty, the domestic space of home and family feels suffocating to Victor and his siblings, male and female.

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25 Paper presented at the “Spotlight on Immigration Conference.” Berkeley, California, March 2008. 9-10. Though Flores’ points about 1st generation immigrants’ attempts to protect subsequent generations from the (perceived) disintegration of traditional ethnic values hold true in the narrative universe of Raising Victor Vargas, I strongly disagree with his uncritical equation of upward mobility with middle-class assimilation. He doesn’t consider that the “oppositional” stance he identifies among the gang-member participants in his study might be a method of coping with oppression and structural inequality rather than a willful rejection of upward mobility (the embrace of which he equates with living a “reformed” life).

26 Flores, ibid (10).
female. Viewed from their perspective, the meaning of privacy shifts somewhat to not necessarily be about (or exclusively about) the enclosure of a space of one’s own, but about the degree to which the activities that take place within particular spaces, whether the bathroom or the pool, are being surveilled by the family-as-central imperative (where both masturbation and bravado are assumed to be a waste of energy better directed toward family-oriented goals). Significantly, the meandering street quest that young Victor of *Five Feet High* embarks on could be read as demonstrative of traditional macho masculine values; Victor, after all, stops to play with children while machistas like Aaron and Hector waste their energy on fighting. However, the non-domestic nature of Victor’s journey, as well as his end goal of learning something from an older woman he finds not in the home but on the street, offers a compelling challenge to both the macho/ machismo dichotomy and gendered demarcations of how masculinity (and femininity) should be expressed in private and public spaces. Victor, it seems, displays the best of both macho and machismo. He can show affection toward women and children outside the controlled private sphere of the family, where macho men can only get away with such softness because of their paternalistic role in “re-orienting capital back toward the home.” He can additionally approach a woman on the street without this implying either an exchange of capital for her “man-making” services (prostitution) or potential infidelity.

Moreover, in *Raising Victor Vargas*, Victor’s entire motivation for inviting “Juicy” Judy over for burgers is that he *wanted* her to witness the generational and gendered conflicts that, for better or worse, define his existence as a young “family man” who is nonetheless being provoked—by his sister, by Donna, by Judy, even by the private pangs of his own conscience—to find a way to be a man that disrupts this macho/ machismo bind. Victor’s intensifying relationship with Judy is neither the conquest he
initially took it to be nor the traditional courtship ritual that his grandma wishes to see (a performance rendered impossible by the lipstick match-game anyway, since grandma reveals Judy to have already “been to my home” before). Rather, this relationship becomes an opportunity to bare the messy conditions of his life, as-is, to a new friend. Amidst grandma’s inappropriate dinnertime gesticulations, a humiliated Judy dashes from the apartment. Later, when an angry Judy asks Victor why he invited her over in the first place, Victor, surveying his outfit, replies: “Man, I wanted you to see me down to my beat-down chacletas, these fucking… beat down shorts and shit.” When Judy again asks why, he says, sincerely, “Because that’s me.”

**Becoming Friends**

As mentioned above, Victor and Judy share much in common with *Saturday Night Fever*’s Tony Manero and Stephanie Mangano. However, upward mobility is hardly a part of the narrative universe in which Sollett situates his duo, rendering them unique in the annals of working-class filmic couples whose relationship is as much “business” partnership as romance. The opening sequence of *Saturday Night Fever* (Tony’s famous walk down 86th Street in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn) provokes viewers to recognize Tony as a future-oriented character before he even appears on screen. Positioned as if peering through the glass (or window shopping) outside a corner department store, the camera settles on a display case containing two pairs of black men’s shoes, buffed to a high-gloss shine ($47.99, reads the price tag on one pair). Appearing through the glass on the opposite side of the corner, an approaching man’s polyester-clad hips enter the frame. As the man holds up one of his shoes to compare his own shiny kicks to those on display, we also see, dangling from his right hand, a bucket of semi-gloss paint. Tony’s relationship with middle-class aspirational Stephanie serves as the catalyst for his growing realization that there may be an outside, even for him, to
the working-class Italian-American community responsible for both limiting his sense of opportunity and insulating him from disappointment. Yet the seeds of his desire to stand out as a uniquely capable individual—to be someone of “high gloss” rather than merely “semi-gloss” status—are there from the get-go, augmenting the self-consciousness with which he struts down the street swinging a paint bucket that, for better or worse, grounds (or weighs down) the buoyant masculinity he strives to perform.

Despite Sollett’s admiration for both his main character and the upwardly mobile actor who plays him, Victor displays no apparent desire to be anything other than “semi-gloss.” On the contrary, Fat Donna’s threat to Victor’s ability to properly assimilate within his community of young people—that he might “stand out,” marked forever as Fat Donna’s Man—leads him to identify and pursue “Juicy Judy” as the social capital that will allow him to “cover for that Donna girl,” as Judy herself accuses him of doing. Moreover, the only (alleged) talent that Victor displays throughout both films is his ability to bag “dons” like Amanda/Judy: a skill rewarded only with local reputation through the telephone game of public opinion, not trophies, money, or—as in Adrian Lyne’s Flashdance (1983)—access to a prestigious dance academy or some other form of educational capital. Viewers admire Tony, as a character, because of a commitment to his craft (dancing) that marks him as a candidate for upward class mobility. While his neighborhood pals lounge around a table at the disco club discussing the whereabouts of “Paulie” and whether or not to go see the Knicks on Tuesday, Tony, leaning against a guardrail, has eyes only for the dance floor. We admire Victor for different reasons. Heavily enmeshed within the everyday teenage word of poolside banter, cute chicks, and fights with family members, Victor is a character who, for better or worse, never questions the inward turn toward his own working-class community.
that demarcates and limits his interactions. His community is what it is. Sitting in a car with his friends, Tony complains about the same old “bargain basement” cassette tapes they have been playing for the last 4 years, his eyes cast out the passenger’s side window in disgust. Victor, however, focuses on figuring out how to come into his own within his world without getting caught in the machismo cul-de-sac rendering Tony’s neighborhood an unappealing place to stay. We like Victor because of, not despite, both his maleness and his working-classness. Victor answers Judy’s question—“Why did you invite me over, anyway?”—with directness, honesty, and vulnerability: “I wanted you to see me down to my beat-down chacletas.” This response generates a powerful opening toward building the “new alliances” and “unforeseen lines of force” that Michel Foucault ascribes to friendship: a relationship form that, unlike the “two readymade formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lover’s fusion of identities,” Foucault associates with liberation from repressive social norms and binary conceptions of identity.27 Victor and Judy’s friendship becomes a means for them to negotiate a “way out” of (or through) the constraints that poverty imposes upon them without having to lean on a conventional desire for upward mobility, which insists on putting distance between individual dreams and the less-than “semi-gloss” sheen ascribed to working-class communities of origin. Neither Tony nor Stephanie, it is worth noting, would ever be caught dead in beat-down chacletas.

Sollett’s Lower East Side is a world of unavoidable chaos, conflict, and “cramped quarters,” but also of recognizable, relatable personalities: the preening big brother who thinks he’s hot shit; the loud-mouthed, jealous sister determined to do you in; the well-meaning yet overprotective grandma; the hot, smart girl who just wants all the “dogs”

to leave her alone; and the chubby, average-looking girl who longs for those same dogs to show her a little attention for a change. This is in many respects a generic, teen-centered world that, as Sollett has said, isn’t defined by “drugs and guns and poverty”:

If you pulled Victor aside—the character or the guy-- and asked him, “What are you about,” I don’t think he would say, “I’m about being poor. I’m about my socioeconomic affiliations.” He’d say, “Well I wanna be an actor, I’d really like to find a girl I’m happy with.” Like everybody else, you know?28

Yet despite the “universalizing” of teen experience that such remarks imply, the beat-down chacletas remain, as does the too-small kitchen sink; the bed sheet curtain separating Victor’s half of a twin bed from Nino’s; and the everyday, gender-specific forms of violence that Judy experiences as she walks home from the bodega with her groceries. Early in the film, two large teenage guys stop Judy in the street to inform her of her place in their “double penetration” fantasy, reinforcing her rationale for finding a form of “bug spray” (i.e. Victor) to keep such vermin at bay. Moreover, even comparatively harmless male characters like Victor and Tony feel entitled to invade or encroach upon the limited space within which working-class women, who generally have to walk down the street to get anywhere, struggle to claim a sense of privacy and autonomous personhood. Directly following Tony’s aspirational toe-nod toward the display case, a viewer witnesses our cocky yet inherently likeable hero (a guy who, like Victor, you want to root for from the second you see him on screen) turn, rubberneck, and follow for a few feet an attractive woman as he continues to strut down 86th Street. Within a few more blocks, he spots another woman coming the opposite direction and abruptly turns to follow her as she speeds up and waves him away; incredulous over her lack of interest, Tony grabs his crotch, turning to get a look at her derriere.

Foreshadowing the rape subtext that asserts itself later in the film when Stephanie and “average” neighborhood girl Annette both experience sexual assaults, Tony’s behavior also problematizes the “ready-made formulas of the pure sexual encounter and the lovers’ fusion of identities” that Foucault finds limiting for those searching for alternative ways to access power. When Annette asks Tony why he doesn’t want to be anything “more” than dance partners, Tony reluctantly recalls an earlier date between the two during which Annette did nothing but talk about her married sisters—leading Tony to infer, quite reasonably, that “all you was interested in was being a married sister yourself.” Later, when Annette again propositions him about “making it,” a confused Tony asks her a question that is also an ultimatum: “What are you anyway, are you a nice girl or a cunt?” Annette responds, “Both?” Tony’s insistence that “you can’t be both” fails to account for the connection between his earlier rubbernecking incidents and how this stratified option—nice girl, or cunt—denies women the humanity that the option to be *both at once* (or neither) would imply or at least make possible. When Victor dashes out of Fat Donna’s apartment with her Polaroid picture in hand, he similarly (though a bit more humorously) acquiesces to “public opinion” as to which of these categories Donna belongs. In the world through which Victor moves, only “dons” can be “nice girls” in a way that might still allow him to claim the play-a status that he views as his only accessible form of social capital.

So Victor and Judy make a deal. Following the “double penetration” incident, a visibly shaken Judy rounds the corner to her apartment complex. Victor, sitting curbside with Judy’s younger brother, stops her to “apologize” for bothering her the previous day at the local pool.²⁹ At first, Judy is every bit as annoyed with Victor’s insistence on

²⁹ This pool scene is similar to the one from *Five Feet High and Rising*; though this time, a more confident Victor approaches Judy and her friend Melonie himself, rather than being summoned over by the girls. This hubris leads Judy to accuse Victor, in her sunlight uninvited this time, of behaving like an “a***hole.”
being there, all up in her face, as she was with the sleazebags she just passed; she’s had it with guys thinking they can accost her merely for walking while female (and young, and attractive). However, as a somewhat pathetic Victor follows Judy to the door of her apartment, still provoking her to accept his apology, one of the aforementioned sleazebags walks by, headed to a different unit in the complex. He and Victor make eye contact; “What’s up, son,” the guy mumbles, giving Judy a few quick glances before passing by, without further incident. Noticing this exchange, Judy agrees to go hang out with Victor at his apartment. When Victor at one point tries to kiss her from behind his “privacy” curtain (the bed sheet separating his side of the bed from his brother’s), Judy pulls away, but says, with finitude, “Ok you’re my new man. But I’m warning you—don’t fuck with me.” She also insinuates what Victor might get from their arrangement: “Go ahead, tell your little friends,” she mocks, turning to leave. From this moment forward, Judy gets her bug spray without having to “put out” (as chubby, average-looking, or darker-complexioned girls may have to do); Victor gets to call himself Juicy Judy’s Man as opposed to being cast to the social graveyard associated with being Fat Donna’s Man (a similar graveyard to the one Tony imagines himself in were he to fulfill Annette’s desire to be a married sister). To Victor, privacy means the ability to control how information concerning one’s reputation—the cornerstone of manhood—circulates. For Judy, privacy means, simply, access to the space within which to move freely and safely. Here the full force of male privilege rears its ugly head: for women, reputation must remain a lower-order concern.

Still taking his assumed right to encroach for granted, Victor initially doesn’t understand the terms of the contract he and Judy have agreed upon. When Judy’s friend Melonie asks Judy why she stood her up the previous afternoon, Judy refers to her “date” with Victor only as “taking care of some business.” While Melonie and Judy sit
on a bench in relatively secluded apartment complex courtyard discussing Judy and Victor’s “business transaction,” Victor, much to Judy’s dismay, bursts through the (unlocked) chain-link fence separating the courtyard from the busy street out front. Misreading Judy’s disgruntled interpellative gesture (she sort of half-waves him over) as excitement to see him, Victor slouches toward the girls, shirt off and smiling, his arms outstretched. “What’s up, baby?” he inquires, leaning in close to Judy—whose perspective, her back turned toward the camera from her seat on the bench, is now also the viewer’s. Immediately leaping up from the bench, Judy grabs a confused Victor’s arm (as Amanda does at the pool in *Five Feet High*) and leads the still-smiling “Lothario” back through the fence and out to the street. As the fence crashes shut, Judy turns to face Victor on the sidewalk, the camera hovering over her left shoulder. “Ok, let me tell you something about me,” she says to Victor who, staring earnestly into her eyes, appears to stand at almost exactly the same height. “I like my space.” The camera then cuts to a medium close-up of the pair in profile (the fence framing their interactions from behind) as Judy testily informs Victor, “You can’t be showing up like that.”

In the blocking of this scene, Judy’s perspective, being that from which the viewer apprehends Victor as he approaches her space, is granted privilege in terms of teasing out whether or not Victor’s behavior feels appropriate. As she sees it (and we see it as well), Victor’s “hey baby”-style barging through the fence assumes a right to invade her personal space that he takes for granted due to his recently-minted position as Juicy Judy’s Man. Judy, however, reserves more power to “call the shots” in setting the terms of the relationship. Victor’s desire to preserve his reputation, it seems, has been weighed greater than his need to make real the *play-a* performance on which they both suspect his courtship of Judy is grounded. Still, despite and within such conditions, the at-times awkward openness with which Victor approaches their relationship “negotiations”
serves as an asset with which to propel him to a more even playing field in the bargaining process. Standing directly across from Judy and looking her in the eye, Victor, responding to Judy’s insistence that he “can’t be showing up like that,” replies, “I’m sorry… if I would’ve had your number, this could have been avoided.” When Judy suggests that Victor give her his number instead, he says (truthfully), “My phone broke.” With the telephone option nullified as a means to communicate, Judy and Victor debate the conditions of the “planning ahead” that will therefore have to take place. Victor thinks they should just meet at “my house”; while Judy, clearly not keen on that idea, insists, “No, let’s meet in public,” looking warily at her still smiling yet clearly disappointed “business partner.” Acquiescing to Judy’s demands, Victor nonetheless seems satisfied with the decision to “take things slow,” as he terms it. “Ok, very cool,” Judy concurs as they both soberly turn to face the street, their backs against the fence.

Even discounting the irony of Victor’s phone situation—for, as we know, “my phone broke” is not in fact the play-a line that Judy (rolling her eyes) takes it to be—Victor and Judy do the best they can to devise a way to be together that will meet their “privacy” needs while also subverting the sexual or romantic subtexts through which working-class men and women tend to approach considering one another’s needs. Though they don’t actually shake on it as Tony and Stephanie do when solidifying their dance floor partnership, Victor and Judy’s relationship is contingent on an understanding that each is there to offer the other a partner with whom to script a convincing performance of conformity to normatively-conceived, gender and age-specific behaviors: in Victor’s case, the norm of possessing “pretty girl” social capital; and in Judy’s, the norm of wanting to be with, and belonging to, a man. The ability to convincingly sell this performance to an evaluative public audience will allow Victor and Judy the ability to move with relative safety and freedom within their community,
as individuals. Furthermore, what opens their contract relationship to the possibility of becoming a friendship is precisely their willingness to recognize both the mutuality of their need—the fact that each is, on some level, using the other—and the underlying truth that, were the world they live in structured according to different conditions of possibility, they would likely not choose to cast themselves in the gender-specific dog and pony show in which they participate.

As with Saturday Night Fever, Sollett’s films do suggest that there are limits to how relationships between men and women can express themselves within working-class urban social environments. However, Five Feet High and Rising and Raising Victor Vargas fail to offer a “way out” of such communities for their protagonists while also presenting these same communities as robustly humanized spaces full of likeable, relatable characters (as well as a few slimebags). Films set within a working-class universe, Sollett’s work suggests, need not necessarily frame themselves as narratives of upward mobility and middle-class assimilation in order to avoid the sense of foreclosed futurity that a film like KIDS—thoroughly unimaginative in its insistence that all young working-class men are, as Amanda put it, “dogs—cannot help but convey. As Raising Victor Vargas ends, Victor and Judy, like Victor and Amanda, find themselves facing one another in a liminal streetside alcove— a space neither inside nor fully outside, neither private nor public—“without terms or convenient words, with nothing to assure them about the meaning of the movement that carries them toward one another,” as Foucault puts it. Poverty, as both well know, is a condition of unavoidable vulnerability. Victor can offer Judy only beat-down chacletas and a crazy family; and Judy, reticent and awkward as always, can offer Victor only the assurance that, whether or not he ever leaves the Lower East Side, he is worthy of her trust: “You’re the closest I’ve ever been to a boy,” she admits, finding his eyes. And yet even as trustworthy Victor prepares to
again receive the “reward” of a kiss from his crush that his upstanding behavior has earned him, the “formlessness” of their youthful, undefined connection prevails. Lying down on a makeshift bed in the semi-darkness of the alcove, Judy calls Victor over to lie next to her; only she continues to face the wall as Victor, ever the reticent gentleman, lies behind her, following her lead as she eventually places his arm around her in a loose “spoon.” The pair do spend the night in this “love nest,” but as Victor walks Judy back to her apartment the next morning, they keep a respectful, friendly distance. As their precariously held smiles and the almost somber gravitas of their walk indicates, something “special” did happen in that alcove. Only, as Sollett and Victor Rasuk’s argument perhaps implies, we are left with an open-ended, debatable sense of what that special thing might be.

Adding a further layer of complication to Foucault’s discussion, I would additionally like to suggest that Peter Sollett’s films serve as convincing proof that only within working-class or otherwise socioeconomically-deprived communities can the kind of open or “formlessly” queer relationalities that Foucault associates with freedom actually come to pass (at least at the representational level). I say this not because I think *Five Feet High and Rising* and *Raising Victor Vargas* are great films that overwhelmingly prove this hypothesis, but rather because I was so disappointed to witness the train wreck that occurred when Sollett tried to jump on the Judd Apatow “angsty teen nerd” bandwagon with 2008’s *Nick and Norah’s Infinite Playlist*. Significantly, this film was set not in New York City proper, as the various films discussed above all are, but in an unnamed suburb somewhere outside the city. Moreover, the film’s titular characters, as well as the friends they encounter during their inner city quest to discover the whereabouts of a favorite local band, are all middle to upper-middle class. Norah, shown early in the film in a prep school uniform, turns out to be the daughter of a
famous record producer. Mentioning at one point how she got into Brown, but “might not go,” higher education also appears to be of little consequence in her world. Clearly, this is not due to a lack of privilege or access. Norah is in no need of the capital, cultural or otherwise, that a Brown education might supply; she has more than enough to last her.

The forms of gender expression available to characters in this film couldn’t be any more formulaic and limiting. As the film opens, young Nick, a white kid played by ultimate genteel geek boy actor Michael Cera (of Juno and Arrested Development fame), is, like the Victor of Sollett’s 2nd film, in a bedroom. Only instead of rushing out of the room with a less-than-ideal girl’s incriminating photo in his hand, his bedroom walls are papered with photographs of him and Triss, the cutesy, emasculating, unrealistically out-of-his-league shrew who just dumped him. As pathetic as Nick’s behavior toward Triss seems—he leaves her countless unanswered voicemail messages and mixtapes that she tosses in the trash—the hierarchically “backward” nature of their power dynamic is quickly remedied with the arrival of Norah: a girl who, unlike Amanda or Judy (or Triss, for that matter) appears to have been waiting in the wings her whole life for a nerd like Nick to give her a sense of purpose and identity. Though Norah is presented as the hip alternative to mainstream beauty Triss, the former’s complete lack of self-confidence appears to be her defining feature and, as the film sees it, greatest asset as both an ideal feminine love interest and vehicle to move the narrative forward.

In one groan-inducing scene, after Nick and Norah enjoy a passionate hook-up in one of her father’s Manhattan studios—where Nick “gives” Norah, rumored to have never had an orgasm, an experience a viewer confirms via her moans of pleasure as they register in red on the studio’s recording equipment—the new couple runs into Norah’s ex-boyfriend, Tal, on the street. “You show up here with this gaylord, and you’re trying to
make a fool of me in front of my boys?” Tal demands of Norah, gesturing to his pack of cronies. Though Nick and Norah are shown holding hands and blissfully gallivanting through the subway mere seconds before this encounter, Norah lets Tal drag her away to a bar without a fight, staring meekly back at Nick. Norah does run back to Nick a few minutes later, leaving Tal in the dust. However, this sudden burst of decisiveness seems wildly out of character for a girl who, when Tal remarks how she is “going to make a great mother someday” after caring for a sick friend, only smiles up at him, earnestly thanking him for this highest of compliments.

In its silver-screen, typically one-dimensional incarnation, the suburban white middle class is hardly fruitful grounds for nuanced or complex depictions of male-female connection. This, I would argue, is due largely to its classless presentation. Contrary to what might seem common sensical, the range of gender identities available for characters to explore becomes rigidified when money is no object in a narrative universe—or, if money does make an appearance, it is only to emphasize the “otherness” of characters with whom viewers are provoked to disidentify (as when Norah leaves presumably broke Tal with a high bar tab before racing away to Nick). We can still like Nick even if he gets called a “gaylord”; but this is only because there are actual gay male characters in the film that it handles in stereotypical, offensive ways, re-emphasizing Nick’s softness as refreshingly still straight. Norah’s meekness likewise gets coded as a breath of fresh air compared to Triss’ ball-crushing tendencies; at one point, in a desperate attempt to win back Nick’s attention, Triss jumps on top of him, purring, “You wouldn’t have to get over me if you were still under me.” Films like Nick and Norah, insulated by the banality of their “secure” middle-class self-presentation, require no deviation from formula. These kids are all going to college—and even if they choose not to (what a choice!), this is only because privilege renders it unnecessary.
Perhaps also due to the impact of 911—an event that occurred between *Five Feet High and Rising* and *Raising Victor Vargas*—it was refreshing to see more imaginative, radicalized relationship possibilities come into focus through the uncertainty and openness characteristic of working-class life in the big, busy city. It is therefore unfortunate that Sollett chose to take his work in a more cynical, safe direction as the rest of the nation also let fearmongering stunt its progressive impulses.
Chapter 4: “What I’m Up To”: Upward Mobility as a Radical Act in Terry McMillan’s *Mama*

“We try not to threaten, but it seems to us only a short time before those who think they will be secure when ‘welfare cheats are forced to work,’ will find themselves needing the very assistance that has been taken away.”
-- Welfare rights activists Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn, 1996.¹

“We need to show (the GOP) how rich poor folks really are.”
-- Author Terry McMillan (on Twitter), April 13, 2012.²

It’s hard to believe that Terry McMillan’s 1987 short story “Ma’Dear” wasn’t written just yesterday. In the casually intimate, let’s-cut-to-the-chase voice typical of McMillan’s black women protagonists, a 72-year old widow named Hazel invites the reader into the home she’s struggling to hang onto. “Last year the cost of living crushed me,” Hazel announces outright, “so I took in three roomers”: the same bit of information she spends the rest of the story preparing to conceal from a social worker slated to arrive at her door in a matter of hours. Tipped off by a nosy neighbor who “couldn’t stand to see an old lady’s house looking better than hers,” the “case worker,” as Hazel describes it, “claim she want to visit to see how I’m doing, when really what she want to know is what I’m up to”.³

Without knowing, or caring to know, how Hazel is doing, what she’s up to might look like no good. Hazel hides her boarders’ conspicuous personal belongings and extra food in her washing machine, away from suspicious eyes. On a previous visit, “When


² https://twitter.com/#!/MsTerryMcMillan

(the case worker) saw I had a stove and sink and refrigerator, she didn’t like the idea that my house was almost paid for, and just knew I was lying about having roomers,” Hazel explains. On top of such state-sanctioned snooping, Hazel’s bank refuses to grant her a loan to replace a broken boiler-- yet they send her weekly letters “on they best stationary,” prompting her to re-finance her nearly paid for home at a higher interest rate. Too smart for the bank’s attempt to seduce her with typical “bucket list” fantasies, but affected nonetheless, Hazel narrates:

They say I’m up in age and wouldn’t I like to take that trip I’ve been putting off because of no extra money. What trip?... They say dream about clear blue water, palm trees, and orange suns... They made me think about it. And they asked me what would I do if I was to die today? They’re what got me thinking about all this dying mess in the first place.4

Featuring a “vampire bank” that literally raises the specter of an old lady’s death in order to suck her remaining life-blood, “Ma’Dear” strikes an eerily familiar chord when read at a cultural moment characterized by racist “reverse redlining” and other predatory mortgage lending practices. The additional consequences of Hazel’s vulnerability as an elderly black widow5—surveillance of her economic “behavior” by both social services and a working and middle-class public (those nosy neighbors) accustomed to battling it out for the crumbs falling from the mouths of the financial elite— are no mere remnant of the Reagan-era “welfare queen” hysteria that McMillan’s

4 McMillan, ibid (426).

5 Hazel’s status as a black widow (including the “dangerous” connotation that creaturely expression implies) receiving state aid resonates in historically significant ways. In American Dreams, Jason DeParle discusses how Aid for Families with Dependent Children, conceived of in the 1910’s as a means “to tide over widowed mothers until Socially Security matured,” was originally an “elite” program from which minorities, divorced mothers, and those with “children born outside marriage” were excluded. Citing one Arkansas congressman’s elated response to the imagined benefits of the program—“I can see the careworn and dejected widow... kissing the tears of joy from (her child’s) pale cheek as she explains they can now obtain clothes and books”—DeParle writes, “The pale cheek is telling: the last thing congress (intended) was to move black women out of the fields and onto the welfare rolls... Southern members of congress controlled the presiding committees and made sure the law did nothing to interfere with the South’s supply of cheap field labor.” New York: Penguin Books, 2005. 85-86. Print.
frank little story somehow managed to survive. To engage with a no-less fictionalized contemporary text that might as well have been birthed in 1987, one need look no further than “Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: What is Poverty in the United States Today?”—a July 2011 policy report from the Heritage Foundation, the lavishly funded, deeply influential conservative think tank whose recommendations led to the industrial deregulation and slashing of social services granting the Reagan administration its “One Percent” driven influence on decades of socioeconomic policy.6

Penned primarily to demonstrate that the U.S. poor, by virtue of the laundry list of “luxury” goods in their possession, are not actually that poor, the Heritage report makes its case by relying on exactly the same method of seeing what the poor are “up to” that Hazel faces in her struggle to keep her home. The case worker glances around Hazel’s kitchen at her “stove and sink and refrigerator,” questioning her status as deserving of aid: how could a woman living off Social Security afford appliances and keep up on her mortgage payment? In lock step, the Heritage report lists refrigerators, stoves, microwaves, and even the obsolete VCR as “amenities” signifying a lack of “real” poverty among the U.S. poor.7

All resulting Stephen Colbert heckling aside,8 a cruel social logic—a logic I’ll call the “Xbox Paradox”—lies at the heart of the Heritage report. The Xbox Paradox casts poverty as a condition that one can only claim if no (so-called) evidence of an attempt to


7 Rector and Sheffield, ibid (5).

8 From Colbert’s July 26, 2011 show, during which he takes Fox News’ Stu Varney to task for his “run through” of the luxury items the poor enjoy (“99 percent have a refrigerator; 81% have a microwave,” Varney announces): “A refrigerator AND a microwave? They can preserve AND heat food? Ooh la la! I guess the poor are too good for mold and trichinosis.” http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/393168/july-26-2011/-poor--in-america.
leave this state behind is shown to exist. A truly poor home, in other words, must contain nothing to indicate anything other than utterly austere, preferably squalorous living conditions. Indeed, according the Heritage report’s internal definition of poverty as “homelessness, hunger or not being able to eat properly, and not being able to meet basic needs,” the mere existence of adequate shelter—especially an owned home—would render one suspect of not really being poor. Only the destitute poor would be deemed worthy (or at least pathetic) enough to reap the benefits of what the report calls “effective public policy”—policy ideally resulting in a social safety net to which a miniscule fraction of individuals and families would require access. The appearance of a ceiling fan, new couch “bought on sale” (in Hazel’s case) or—God forbid—Xbox would serve as proof of self-sufficiency, canceling one’s claimed need for social services. If you are not homeless, helpless, or hopeless, in other words, you have no right to ask for a share of the “limited resources” granted by “a government that is facing massive future deficits.” Were theory put to practice, the immediate effect of the Xbox Paradox would be complete paralysis of poor Americans’ ability to leave poverty behind— or the foreclosure of access to an American Dream whose impossibility serves as punishment for the ultimate crime being identified in the Heritage report: poverty itself.

“Ma’Dear” is a powerful refusal of this logic. Hazel must break a few rules (be “up to” something) in order to ensure herself a dignified, moderately comfortable existence; she cannot keep her home without doing a little makeshift mending of a social safety net containing too many holes to catch her. McMillan refuses to let a reader walk away from the story without an intimate understanding of Hazel’s place within a socioeconomic system designed to ensure her failure to thrive: a system dependent, for

9 Rector and Sheffield, ibid (3).
its very survival, on the exploitation of a permanent underclass insidiously characterized as responsible for its own immobilization and the punishing consequences of this state (taking low-wage jobs without complaint, employer refusal of health care or retirement benefits, etc). Though an elderly woman might be uniquely sympathetic as far as safety net “chiseler” go (since without her hustle, the only trip Hazel will be taking is to “the old folks home”)¹⁰, “Ma’Dear” additionally functioned as a rough draft of McMillan’s debut novel Mama (1987)¹¹—a story whose protagonist, a black single mother of five named Mildred Peacock, could more easily be reduced to what Wahneema Lubiano has called the welfare queen “synecdoche,” or the “shortest possible shorthand (for) the pathology of poor, urban, black culture” through which mid-80’s conservatives honed their caricature of a class of society undeserving of government-funded protection.¹² Yet the mama of Mama, despite her many “behavioral” imperfections, is someone McMillan provokes a reader to care about and identify with. As welfare rights activists Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn put it, the story fulfills “an absolute need to personalize poverty and welfare when we talk about (these things).”¹³ While offering little direct commentary on black civil rights struggles, the indivisible relationship between racism and poverty, or structural barriers to socioeconomic mobility, Mama nonetheless presents the personal world of Mildred Peacock as a deeply political place. Through personalizing this world, McMillan normalizes the experiences of a woman who might otherwise, and with particular zeal at the moment of this novel’s

¹⁰ McMillan, ibid (431).


¹³ Dujon and Withorn, ibid (6).
publication, be cast as the embodiment of social degeneracy. Serving as the catalyst for single mom McMillan’s bursting onto the U.S. popular literary scene in a frenzy of self-promotional ingenuity, this novel is also a powerful example of an upward mobility story that challenges deeply ingrained cultural assumptions regarding who does and does not deserve to leave poverty behind.

In this chapter, I argue that Mama radically challenges U.S. cultural and literary parameters concerning what upward class mobility looks like, and who such “rising” is supposed to be for. It is particularly important to engage with this challenge at a moment when the lived experience of upward mobility, far from resembling a Horatio Alger “rags to riches” fantasy whereby profit-minded opportunists claim their place of rightful superiority in the class hierarchy, has little to do with riches or rags. In Mama, a woman Dujon and Withorn might call a “veteran of poverty” strives to create a better life for herself and her children that in no way posits material wealth as its endgame—or even the nebulous, increasingly untenable goal of comfortable middle-class assimilation. Moreover, this striving begins at a less singularly destitute starting line than the “ragged” fantasy of perpetual disempowerment through which the Heritage report structures its discourse of true poverty. Displaying the working-class novel’s tendency to concern itself more with the challenges of everyday life than an individual’s climb toward success (or descent to failure), Mama casts upward mobility as nothing more than the forward momentum necessary to keep poverty from consuming one’s dignity.

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14 In Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion, Paulette Richards describes the process McMillan went through to promote Mama, at a time when “conventional wisdom” in publishing held that African Americans did not buy books (and thus McMillan’s publisher, Houghton Mifflin, refused to allocate Mama an advertising budget). “(She) sent out over three thousand letters to colleges, bookstores, and professional organizations... As the responses came in, she scheduled her own book tour (...). McMillan made a very personal connection with the (predominantly African American) women who bought copies of her book. They became her devoted core audience who spread the word... to friends, family members, and book discussion groups. Mama went into its third printing just six months after its initial release in 1987 (...). Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999. 4-5. Print.
As Heritage analysts well realize, the assumption that everyone deserves to lead a
dignified life underscores the belief that all human beings are additionally entitled to “a
floor (of social support) that society doesn’t let you fall below—whether luck, or
personal mistakes, or structural problems bring you down.” Responding to President
Bill Clinton’s enshrinement of Reagan’s caricature of poor black mothers in official
“welfare reform” policy, Dujon and Withorn rightly predicted a “you’re next” moment
to come: a moment where (to reiterate my epigraph), “those who think they will be
secure when ‘welfare cheats are forced to work,’ will find themselves needing the very
assistance that has been taken away.” Read today, Mama emphatically resonates through
the arrival of this “you’re next” moment, at which the political will toward austerity for
most, luxury for the few has expanded the undeserving poor shorthand to include
virtually all American workers as potential perpetrators of the crime of inauthentic
poverty.

**Your House is My House: McMillan, Men, and Author-Protagonist Solidarity**

The primary assumption on which the Heritage Report bases its measurement of
who is and isn’t truly poor is the commonly accepted notion that the stuff on display in
or around your living space—the refrigerators, color TVs, gaming consoles, cars,
gardens, etc.—is indicative of prosperity. And indeed, a reader of Terry McMillan’s
Mama will find many such things in and around the home of Mildred Peacock. Set over
a 25-year time span from the 60’s to mid-80’s—a time when, perhaps resulting from
African Americans’ increased access to social programs (and other civil rights gains),
talk of “welfare chiselers,” “matriarchal households,” and “entitlement” began to color

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15 Dujon and Withorn, ibid (6).
the cultural vernacular—*Mama* features a black single mother of five embroiled in a twofold struggle: to help her children understand, as she explains to eldest daughter Freda, that “you just as good as the next person”; and, every bit as importantly, to not lose *herself*—and all the attendant desires and dreams that go along with being a self—to that potentially encompassing Mama role.

The narrative situates poverty as the primary threat that Mildred faces as she strives to realize these goals. Counter to the Heritage report’s understanding of poverty as “dire need” and destitution, as *Mama* begins Mildred is married and owns a home in South Park, the black section of a small Midwestern city called Point Haven (a loosely-fictionalized version of McMillan’s own hometown of Port Huron, Michigan). However, following a dramatic opening scene in which Mildred’s philandering husband Crook brutally beats her as the children listen from their beds, the novel makes it clear that marriage—long espoused by the Heritage Foundation and democratic policy wonks alike as the cure-all for “illegitimacy” and other purported social ills—has granted the Peacock family few of its promised rewards. Much has been made by McMillan critics of

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17 *Mama*, ibid (34).


19 In addition to democratic (then) Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s infamous mid-60’s characterization of “disintegrating negro marriages” and out-of-wedlock births as a social disaster of epic proportions, Kate O’Brian of the Heritage Foundation provides a similar explanation for socioeconomic problems of the early 90’s: “Why launch new school reforms...when the real key to educational performance is whether a child comes from a two-parent family? Why experiment with anti-poverty programs...when the most important indicator of poverty is whether there are two parents in the home? It sounds too simple to be true...but (marriage) is the ticket out of poverty” (Moynihan, ibid; Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families in the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. 256.). Also see a 2010 Heritage Foundation report, “Marriage: America’s #1 Weapon Against Child Poverty.” http://www.heritage.org/research/projects/marriage-poverty/marriage-and-poverty-in-the-us
what many view to be the author’s derisive portrayal of black men; and truly, most of the men who come into Mildred’s orbit throughout the novel are either inadequate providers prone to bouts of abusive rage or adequately moneyed yet singularly unsexy pushovers. A closer look at *Mama*, however, reveals that McMillan (if not especially prone to exhibit much sympathy for her male characters) intimately understands the socioeconomic context in which these men display such unseemly characteristics. Taking a reader on a descriptive “tour” of Point Haven, McMillan solidifies the link between institutionalized racism, small-town solipsism, and the everyday drudgery of chronic un- and under-employment situating the behaviors she ascribes to her novel’s men:

Most of the black men couldn’t find jobs, and as a result, they had so much spare time on their hands that when they were stone cold broke, bored with themselves, or pissed off about everything because life turned out to be such a disappointment, their dissatisfaction would burst open and their rage would explode. This is what usually passed for masculinity, and it was often their wives or girlfriends or whores who felt the fallout.

In plain-spoken prose, McMillan generates an intersectional “flow chart” that structurally situates the various forms of oppression her characters face. The black men of Point Haven, subject to racist hiring practices, cannot find jobs, a situation forcing them to occupy a class position where they have both too much time and not enough money on their hands— not surprisingly resulting in feelings of boredom, disappointment, and inadequacy that they then vent by activating one form of privilege.

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20 Discussing the history of white mockery of black men in particular in American culture, author Nathan McCall responds to McMillan’s critics (including Myles Johnson, who called McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* “just another facet of the assassination of the black male character”): “(This) constant ridicule by whites has made black people hypersensitive to criticism of any kind from anybody—especially from their own people.” McMillan herself, in *Publisher’s Weekly*, responded to critics as such: “Unfortunately, the black people who are the most militant are the ones who seem to be more hung up than anybody on what white people think… They make the assumption that we’re anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, when all we are is storytellers.” Johnson wonders, however: “If you’re showing one side of black men… Where is my portrayal? I don’t behave like the men in her book.” (McCall, *What’s Going On*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. 19-20).

21 *Mama*, ibid (24).
they have left: their status as men, which expresses itself as gendered violence (the “fallout” that their “wives or girlfriends or whores” then feel). McMillan’s status as a narrative insider, however, keeps this description of masculine rage (and promiscuity) from resembling something akin to a Carol Stack-style ethnographic account of the situational limitations inherent to the development of the presumably healthier masculinities stunted in their growth by poverty. The lack of distance between author, narrator, and protagonist characteristic of McMillan’s writing reflects what Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson call a distinctly “working-class literary aesthetic.”

McMillan may be describing the men of Point Haven, but her observations also come courtesy of someone who has herself felt the effects (as a daughter, neighbor, and eventual wife and mother) of the “fallout” she describes.

Unlike “Ma’Dear” and most of McMillan’s other novels (including Disappearing Acts, based on the struggles the author and her first husband faced trying to maintain their love in the face of socioeconomic hardship), Mama uniquely employs a third-person omniscient rather than first-person perspective. The narrator’s all-knowing voice, however, is curiously indistinguishable from a voice best identified as that of Mildred’s


24 From a 1993 interview in Ebony magazine, in which McMillan reflects on the domestic abuse she endured at the hands of her first husband and the father of her son, Solomon (whom she would later raise alone): “I grew up watching this and I always said I would never let a man put his hands on me.’ That was a promise McMillan made to herself when, as a little girl growing up in Port Huron, Mich., she watched... her alcoholic father abuse her mother. ‘When I was younger, all I thought about was the fact that he had no right to put his hands on my mother,” says McMillan, whose mother raised her and her four younger siblings after she and McMillan’s father divorced when the author was 13...” But my mother was also the type who fought back. She didn’t just sit there and get her butt kicked. She tried to kill him. And I hated him when he did that. I also used to hate my mother sometimes for running her mouth so much because she knew how to provoke him... I hated the fear of worrying if one day they were going to kill each other. And I knew that when I grew up, if a man couldn’t deal with his anger any other way, he wasn’t going to take it out on me.” Randolph, Laura B. “Terry McMillan Exhales and Inhales in a Revealing Interview.” http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_n7_v48/ai_13698104/

perpetually occupied mind. Following the blowout with Crook, an exasperated Mildred (one foot throbbing where her husband ran over it with the family car) scrapes together enough change to send her kids to the movies, telling them to “sit through the feature twice.” Thoroughly spent from the drama, Mildred plops down on a couch as McMillan narrates:

Good, she thought. No Crook, no kids, and no dog. Mildred looked around the room, scanning its beige walls and the shiny floors she had waxed on her knees yesterday. The windows sparkled because she had cleaned the insides with vinegar and water… The house looked and smelled just the way she liked it. Clean. […] Her eyes claimed everything she saw. This is my house, she thought. I’ve worked too damn hard for you to be hurting me all these years… I pay all the bills around here, even this house note. I’m the one who scrubbed white folks’ homes in St. Clemens and Huronville and way up there on Strawberry Lane to buy it.26

Though McMillan uses the pronoun “she” while sharing Mildred’s inner dialogue with the reader, the lack of quotation marks to situate transitions between third and first-person perspectives creates a situation where the narrative distance between “she” and “I” is hardly distinguishable or, I’d argue, important. As Mildred scans the walls and windows of a home in which she takes a great amount of pride, McMillan’s narrator, like a friendly houseguest pointing out details for a reader, explains Mildred’s actions and desires: the windows sparkled “because she had cleaned the insides with vinegar and water”; the house smelled clean, “just the way she liked it.” This doubling of narrator-character voice-- where pronouns matter far less than a deeply shared understanding of Mildred’s circumstances-- showcases McMillan’s investment in authorial solidarity with her protagonist, re-enforcing Mildred’s territorial right to claim her home space in the face of her impending divorce.

26 Mama, ibid (13-14).
Abuse and infidelity notwithstanding, McMillan’s primary frustration with Crook (and men “like” him) comes down to his inability to offer little more than an empty performance of the masculine provider role he struggles to inhabit. Though “she” and “I” appear interchangeable in the above passage, the “you” being addressed is highly specific. Voicing her thoughts to the Crook in her (and the reader’s) mind’s eye, Mildred explains how, after the electricity got cut off, “You give me two dollars. Say, ‘Here, buy some pork-n-beans and vanilla wafers for the kids, and if it’s some change left, get yourself a beer. A beer. Just what I need, sitting in a cold-ass house in the dark.’” Crook’s performance of something that might “pass as masculinity”—to shore up his imagined status as a “family man” by tossing a couple bucks down and delusionally behaving as if this counts as a contribution (even going to far as to suggest that Mildred indulge in a beer)—comes across as especially insulting in that he also takes advantage of his head-of-household privilege by withholding the true extent of his (already meager) earnings from the family. “Never even made up a decent excuse about what you did with her money,” Mildred grumbles, lighting a cigarette.27

Furthermore, by contrasting the cleaning that Mildred does in “white folks’ homes” and the waxing she does “on her knees” in her own home, McMillan offers a critique of the distance between Crook’s pantomimed household contribution and Mildred’s authentic one. Whether her “women’s work” involves the humiliation of scrubbing wealthy white families’ floors or the more personally satisfying toil required to make her own house sparkle, all the fruits of McMillan’s labor go toward maintenance of home and family. Despite the very real feelings of inadequacy behind Crook’s “good provider” gestures (as well as the daily humiliation he may face as an underpaid

27 Ibid (14-15).
garbage collector in a segregated city), Mildred owns a greater amount of stock in her home and family, measured in both labor expended and “investment” capital. Though both Mildred and Crook are disadvantaged by Point Haven’s racist structuring of economic opportunity, McMillan reminds readers that the patriarchal nuclear family is not a satisfactory solution to such problems. Traditional family structures, as historian Stephanie Coontz has pointed out, cannot be strengthened as a substitution for addressing economic and social inequality—including the gendered imbalance of power within those family structures that allows Crook’s disingenuous provider performance and income hoarding to go unchecked by anyone other than his tired, pissed off wife.

*Truly Audacious Hope: Place and Movement in the World of Mildred Peacock*

Of course, the mere fact that Mildred takes as much pleasure as she does in a clean home—that she actually spends time that she could be spending scrubbing white folks’ homes (for peanuts) on her knees in her own home, rendering it anything but squalorous—would raise Heritage suspicions that a family like Mildred’s isn’t struggling enough to be considered poor. Indeed, despite being forced to return to domestic work after being laid off from her line job at Diamond Crystal Salt (a local factory) in the wake of her divorce from Crook, Mildred remains committed to not only ensuring her family’s survival, but to doing whatever it takes to instill in her children—as well as remind herself—that they deserve more than destitute poverty. As Dujon and Withorn see it, one of the reasons that poor single women with children (especially women of color) generate so much hysteria in promoters and protectors of normative “family values” is the audacity of such families’ claim to a future assumed to have not been adequately earned. The children serve as the primary signifier of such daring. Basing their logic on the all-too obvious yet provocative point that “if the descendents of
slaves had all waited to have children until they could reasonably expect economic security, then there would be few black people in the U.S. today,” Dujon and Withorn characterize many poor women’s decision to have children as “a statement of hope undefeated by circumstances—not the unwise decision it may appear to be from the perspective of middle-class ‘rationality.’”

Indeed, as both Coontz and literary scholar Vivyan Adair have discussed, such “rationality” is grounded in Emersonian and Enlightenment ideals that cast individuals as more-or-less deserving of certain rights—like the right to have children, buy a home, or get an education—based on their performance in the capitalist free market. This performance is taken to define one’s “circumstances,” or the range and quality of life choices available. Explaining the pride and pointed lack of regret Mildred feels about having had five children, McMillan narrates, “These kids were her future. They made her feel important, and gave her a feeling of place, of movement, of having come from somewhere.” By casting her children as representatives of a hopeful claim on her own future, Mildred refuses to participate in what I would call passive eugenics: a campaign, in other words, that uses shame rather than sterilization to make single black and other poor women feel they have forfeited the right to have children. Rendering null-and-void rationalist attempts to foreclose on her future, Mildred’s “movement” to have and raise children despite poverty is a radical act that explicitly challenges the hegemony of the patriarchal-capitalist social order. Unlike middle-class white children authorized into

28 Dujon and Withorn, ibid (4).
30 Mama, ibid (16).
existence by their parents’ commitment to following the “rules,” Mildred’s children were never supposed to have existed.

Mildred’s alternative value system, and its threat to the rationalist hegemony’s attempt to designate a class of irrational, non “rights bearing citizens” assumed to be deserving of little more than a permanent state of immobilized labor (or labor that gets workers nowhere), might best be examined through a detailed look at the function of place and movement in her life. For Mildred, like many other poor women with children who live with precarious access to resources, developing a sense of place often involves more the feeling (as Mildred mentions above) of being grounded than either the fantasy or tangible reality of space claimed as one’s own. The home Mildred owns as the novel opens is a place she loves, infused with a sense of pride, memory, accomplishment, and hope. Whether watering the weeping willow trees she planted “in anticipation of Freda’s sixteenth birthday” or tending her garden, “her hands caked with the rich black dirt from where she’d been hoeing and weeding,” Mildred remains committed to fostering the growth of her assets. Though none of the crops Mildred planted “ever did too well,” she still “liked to smell the mixture of grass and spring air, and (liked) the solitude of working in her own soil,” a descriptive moment emphasizing the primacy McMillan places throughout the novel on Mildred’s right to claim her own generative “products”—be they tomatoes, okra, or children— as much on behalf of her own pleasure as their investment potential. Moreover, the way McMillan weaves in description of the beauty of Mildred’s yard with the actual work being performed to make it so—the hoeing, weeding, and watering, where Mildred “pulled the hose from around the house and put its nose at the base of the (willow trees’) thin trunks”-- marks this novel as a

31 Adair, ibid (16).
distinctly working-class artistic product. Beauty, here, is actively made, never merely described.\textsuperscript{32}

Toil and love aside, however, Mildred cannot guarantee maintaining her home as an asset in the future. Indeed, the basis of Mildred’s strength as a single mother lies in the almost Buddhist level of non-attachment she has internalized toward the material things that move in and out of her family’s orbit—whether Chatty Cathy dolls, sofas (likely bought on sale, like Hazel’s), or mortgages. Yet despite the Heritage report’s assumption that poor people possess “luxury” good like DVD players, microwaves, and Xboxes because they either spend money frivolously or (relatedly) are granted too much disposable income (those government “handouts”) to begin with, Mildred’s lack of attachment to material things in no way assumes that these things aren’t important or even necessary to one of her primary goals: making sure her kids know themselves to be “just as good as the next person.” With Crook out of the picture and after a frustrating spate of layoffs, unanswered applications, “waiting in line for the flour and cheese and margarine and spam they give you at the welfare office,” and even the heart-wrenching experience of having to deny Freda Christmas gifts so her younger siblings can enjoy the holiday, Mildred sits alone at her kitchen table, shuffling through a stack of envelopes:


This, of course, is the list of expenditures, including both the tangible bills in front of her and other goods and services bought or anticipated, reeling through Mildred’s mind as she sits there, unable to fathom the cost of it all. This listing technique

\textsuperscript{32} Mama, ibid (48).

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid (59).
again emphasizes McMillan’s distinctly working-class writerly aesthetic. As Christopher and Whitson have pointed out, authors writing about out-of-work protagonists often develop “narratives of waiting for change—because you’re paralyzed or without options—(that dilate time and mimic) the state of consciousness that an inoperative machines produces.” In Mildred’s case, however, the “machine” is perhaps too smoothly operational, churning out a never-ending pile of responsibilities that continually exhaust her capacities as a laborer charged with their handling. Significantly, there are things on Mildred’s list that Heritage analysts would be likely to count as necessary to a subsistence existence—lighting, perhaps, or at least water—and things they would no doubt classify as “amenities”: popsicles, Sunday shoes, and “special” field trip money for sure. But as the impersonal, disordered monotony of Mildred’s list additionally emphasizes, none of the items she names are, or should be, expendable. That field trip money might be special, but the cost of Mildred not including it in her expenditures—her child’s shame-inducing experience of being denied the right to participate in a field trip that “everyone else” will be going on—is far greater. To deny her children the pleasure of a popsicle on a hot day—where pleasure itself, in Heritage analysts’ estimation, should be a privilege afforded to only those who can pay—would do additional damage.

Mildred’s audacious position as a single black mother who likes “to smell the mixture of grass and spring air” in her garden (someone for whom, as former welfare recipient and activist Janet Diamond has put it, “laughter is an act of rebellion”) puts her and her children in a position where the normativity that they do display—those popsicles bought, and field trips taken—codes not as normal, but threatening. In her

34 Christopher and Whitson, ibid (74).
discussion of how Judith Butler’s thoughts on the “distinction between legitimate and illegitimate queer lives” apply as much to single moms as to members of LGBT communities, Jane Juffer links the potential for “future legitimacy” that some single moms and queer people display (and other apparently don’t) directly to such citizens’ “ability to demonstrate lack of need.” Again refusing the logic of the Xbox Paradox, the threat that Mildred displays through her behavior and “choices” is part and parcel to her sense of what it means to lead a dignified life despite poverty: Mildred believes that her and her children’s right to enjoy pleasure in life should not become collateral damage to her inability to prove herself a properly self-sufficient capitalist subject.

This is the primary “family value” that Mildred wishes to instill in her children—what will help them internalize that “you just as good as the next person.” The ability to access so-called amenities—even something as seemingly trivial as an Xbox—is what gives many poor people, especially children developing a sense of self-worth that inevitably involves making comparisons with peers, the feeling that they are “deserving” or normal enough to envision a future beyond bare-bones subsistence. The strain of Puritan moralism renouncing a desire for material goods as frivolous (at least for those who have not “earned” them) or indicative of character weakness is hardly the lone province of conservative policymakers—as Max Weber has pointed out, the idea that “relaxation in the security of possession” or enjoyment of owned things would beget “wasted time” and other such “deadly sins” is pivotal to the greater ethos of a “modern economic order” wishing to characterize wage labor as a duty to which good citizens willingly submit. Thus, the idea that a poor person might aspire to live beyond her


means is seriously alarming from the perspective of capitalism’s need to maintain an underclass of cheap, subservient labor. By making sure her youngest kids have at least some of the Christmas gifts they’ve asked for—and agonizing over the damage done to an oldest daughter who, though brave in her willingness to “wait until after New Years” for her Christmas, still can’t suppress the tears that well up when Mildred asks her to make a “big girl” sacrifice—Mildred is attempting to forestall the fatalistic feelings of immobilization (one of the key ingredients of proletarianization) that begin to set in when a poor child is simply told “no” too many times.

**Sisyphus, Reconsidered**

Despite McMillan’s clear emphasis on the value of relatively disposable amenities in poor people’s lives, Mildred is curiously able to contemplate giving up the one “legitimate” asset she has—her home—with little internal resistance. This, I would argue, is due to the primacy this novel places, regardless of Mildred’s desire to see her children move out of the poverty constricting their young lives, on the value of relationships over achievement: with the modest goal of an owned home (or, more ambitiously, the fantasy of a “dream home”) being perhaps the clearest American “shorthand” (to again borrow Lubiano’s expression) for something achieved. Crammed in the midst of the bills listed above, Mildred’s “house note” is still, at the end of the day, merely one of numerous expenses she envisions perpetually piling up, forever mocking her Sisyphean attempts to make headway:

(It) was as if Mildred was caught in a snowstorm and was constantly shoveling the sidewalk. It kept snowing over where she had just shoveled. In spite of the welfare checks and the occasional day work she managed to get on the side, Mildred was getting deeper and deeper into debt [...]. It cost so much to keep up a three-bedroom house like this, and trying to raise five kids, she thought. Hell, twenty years is a long ass time to be paying for anything. What will I do with all
this room when the kids is grown?... Sit in here by myself and run from room to room?¹

So when Mildred makes the “crazy” decision (at least from the perspective of asset acquisition, and also as her disgruntled kids see it) to sell her house and leave Point Haven for a new life in Arizona, she has already participated in the kind of lengthy cost-benefit analysis that poor single mothers—whose aptitude for economics may be rivaled only by Alan Greenspan—find themselves performing nearly every second of their waking lives. The resources that Mildred has coming in—capital acquired from welfare checks, “occasional day work,” or a gift “on the side” here and there from a hopeful male companion looking to make some headway—are simply not enough to keep debt from swallowing her, whether of the bad or “good” variety. From a “culture of poverty” perspective, and as the Heritage report assumes, one of the main problems with poor people’s attitude toward their finances (an attitude we are to take as responsible for keeping them poor) is their inability to defer momentary gratification (those Xboxes) for wiser investments in “future oriented” assets like a home or higher education. Yet for those living with extremely limited income, where the idea of saving to pay for anything beyond the continually amassing snowstorm of bills and debt is laughable, the future is always simply the now: 20 years paying for a home is still 20 years worth of days, weeks, and months struggling to pay down a mortgage. Equity gains aside, Mildred’s “house note” is still just one of many items on a running, never-ending list of expenditures.

It should come as little surprise, then, that Mildred’s value system would be less wrapped up in the everyday drudgery of shoveling through the snowstorm—or committing one’s life fully to the kind of labor the poor are expected to embrace as “a

¹ Mama, ibid (59).
calling” appropriate to their more-or-less permanent underclass position if they want to be considered worthy of “grace” as capitalist subjects—and more concerned with the people filling the rooms of the house she leaves behind. Defying narrative expectations inherent to upward mobility stories that position struggle in relation to a just “reward” to come (including Katherine Arnoldi’s *The Amazing ‘True’ Story of a Teenage Single Mom* and much of the *Friday Night Lights* TV series, two texts I discuss in other dissertation chapters), McMillan devotes an entire chapter of *Mama* to Mildred and her kids’ preparations for the Arizona move—to then have Mildred not only do a complete 180 on the decision to move but to additionally lose her home in the process: Mildred cannot save enough money to make the move happen, but has unfortunately already sold the house to a neighbor who refuses to sell it back to her. This chapter is particularly marked by representations of domestic chaos and the persistence of what Judith Halberstam has called a certain “queer temporality,” where the urgent need to attend to the moment creates a form of time/space compression that “those who live without social safety nets, without homes, (and) without steady jobs” often endure. Outraged, Mildred’s children hold a bunk-bed “conference over popcorn and Kool-aid” at which they decide to collectively boycott the move by dividing themselves amongst various friends and relatives. Boycott thwarted, Mildred makes everyone stay at her sister’s crowded, “nasty” house for two months in the wake of the house sale, only to then learn that “she wasn’t getting as much money as she thought from the house”—prompting her to “change her mind… just like that” about moving to Arizona.

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2 Weber, ibid (162).

The seeming flippancy with which Mildred “changes her mind” not only highlights the uncertainty (and subsequent lack of attachment to future plans) that poor women like Mildred generally take in stride, but re-emphasizes the constant grounding the chaos: Mildred’s determination to keep the relationships she values—and the “hope undefeated by circumstance” these connections represent—in tact. Dejected over the impending move, Mildred’s young son, Money, at one point runs away from home and threatens to drown himself in an icy lake. In one of the few moments in the novel where she lets Mildred show a degree of vulnerability to her children, McMillan describes Mildred’s reaction to her wet, miserable son, his “teeth chattering” from having been dragged out of the lake by his cousins:

Mildred couldn’t stop looking into his cat eyes. Then it suddenly occurred to her that he might see in her own eyes her grief and confusion and just how responsible she felt, so she averted her glance. She didn’t want Money to know that she was feeling like a collapsing bridge.

The novel returns, time and again, to the question of whether Mildred can remain a sturdy enough “bridge” to safely spirit her children to the other side of a poverty already subjecting them to its painful, disruptive effects. Though it may be disappointing to watch the family move into a rental house after losing their owned home amidst the chaos—Freda’s trees, of course, must remain behind-- within a narrative emphasizing the maintenance of human connection rather than markers of achievement or “earned” equity, the loss of this home is more an inconvenience than a sign of failure.

*Mama’s* most complex exposition of Mildred’s relationship-focused value system—and how, contrary to a fatalistic framing of those who “get stuck” in generational poverty, her children have internalized these values in a way that grants them a sophisticated sense of their own class position— occurs at a moment early in the story when Mildred takes her oldest daughter with her to “see the rich folks’ houses,”
provided that “Freda would help her clean, do something besides get in the way.” When Freda initially sees one such home, walking “proudly through (its) oak doors,” she is “awestruck”; “Ooooooo, Mama, can you believe this?” she asks, “(gliding) through one room after another.” Abruptly, and with the kind of killjoy dismissal that only a poor mother can deliver, Mildred tries to nip Freda’s fantasy in the bud: “Just don’t touch nothing girl, this shit ain’t fake,” she says. “We barely had enough gas to get out here so you know we can’t pay for nothing if you break it.”

Undeterred by Mildred’s socioeconomic reality check, Freda continues to take in all that she sees. Her desire is heightened by her projection of a relatively class-neutral fantasy—a slumber party, including “six of her best girlfriends”—into the trappings of this dream home, featuring a fireplace “big enough to walk in” where her friends would roast marshmallows and hot dogs, “dreaming out loud about their prospective boyfriends.” What truly differentiates this imagined slumber party from all others Freda has thrown, however, is the envy she envisions her friends feeling toward her. “They loved her slumber parties because there was always plenty of everything to eat and her house was always spotless,” McMillan’s narrator—in solidarity with the mind of the young girl on whose behalf she speaks—muses. The emotional impact of Freda’s fantasy depends on her internalized sense of what wealth is really about: excess, including the very presence of her mother as a worker perversely hired to clean a space where (in Mildred’s words) “don’t nothing look dirty.” But what Freda calls “envy”—a simplistic notion of class-based resentment recently granted notoriety by republican presidential

\[\text{\footnotesize 4 Mama, ibid (29).}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 5 Ibid (30).}\]
candidate Mitt Romney (among other such One Percenters)\textsuperscript{6}—is rather the felt effect of capitalism’s tendency to assert its power as a distinction between lack and abundance. Freda’s girlfriends, who it’s also safe to assume are poor or working-class like her, must leave her imagined slumber party feeling the extent of their need more intensely than when they came. The ability to remind others that you have not merely enough, but \textit{more than enough} of what they lack is the power of wealth; Freda gets this.

However, much like Jack London’s Martin Eden as he contemplates the “enormous distance” between himself and his moneyed crush—whose hands, he recognizes with a start, remain soft and callous-free due to “the highness of (her) caste”\textsuperscript{7}—Freda then demonstrates that she has a more sophisticated understanding of the meaning of wealth than her fantasy belies. Her hunger perhaps peaked by the “plenty to eat” on hand at her imagined slumber party, she moves toward the kitchen and takes stock of the contents of its refrigerator: “pickles and olives, a big leafy head of lettuce, stacks and stacks of lunchmeat,” fresh fruit, and various other delectables, with everything “neatly housed in plastic containers.” But Freda senses that something is a little “off” about this kitchen:

(It) lacked a wholesome smell. She’d noticed it was missing in the rest of the house, too. That smell that meant somebody really lived here, tracked up the floors, burnt something on the stove every now and then. There was no smell of heat coming from the radiators, or any signs that rubber boots and wet mittens ever dried over them. Her own house smelled rich from fried chicken and collard greens and corn bread, from Pine-Sol and washing powder and Windex and Aero Wax and the little coned incense Mildred burned when she finished giving the house a good cleaning.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} In a January 2012 interview with NBC’s Matt Lauer, when asked what motivates those who “(question) the distribution of wealth and power in this country,” Romney responded: “You know, I think it’s about envy. I think it’s about class warfare.” See Jonathan Weiler, “Mitt Romney and the Politics of Envy,” for a great discussion of this issue (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-weiler/mitt-romney-tax-returns_b_1232261.html).


\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Mama}, ibid (30).
In the space of a very brief walk through the kind of home that Freda and her mother can only inhabit as domestic “help” (whose presence as arbiters of excess re-enforces the same racialized class hierarchy responsible for Mildred finding herself perpetually “back out in Huronville on her knees” in the wake of layoffs and unanswered applications), Freda demonstrates the complexity and potential threat (from a Heritage report standpoint) of her 12-year old class consciousness. The refrigerator that Freda regards suspiciously doesn’t simply smell bad, or even unfamiliar; it distinctly lacks—with this lack ironically emphasizing something missing within this home of plenty— the “wholesome” and even “rich” qualities she associates with her own home. Moreover, when Freda talks about “that smell that meant somebody lived here,” it is always, as with Mildred’s work in her garden, contextualized through the actual labor it took to grant it its richness: the smell of “fried chicken and collard greens and corn bread” implies that someone is actively cooking these things; the “Pine Sol and washing powder and Windex and Aero Wax” smell the way they do because Mildred is “giving the house a good cleaning,” followed by the incense she burns to top off her effort.

Her appetite now curbed, Freda moves “up the winding staircase toward the blue tiled bathroom in the hallway” and beholds only more sensual evidence (seen this time) of the hyper-sanitized, distinctly human-free quality she aromatically observed in the kitchen: “The towels were folded neatly across the silver racks and looked like they had never been used. The blue bathtub was shining like a satin bedspread. Nothing in here needed cleaning,” she concludes. Interestingly, it is only through direct participation in this absurd economy—when her mother asks her to “get that duster and swish it across the furniture in the front room even if don’t nothing look dusty”—that the true indignity of the situation Freda and her mother find themselves in dawns on
her. As Freda’s contrasting vision of the cleaning Mildred does in their “wholesome” home highlights, this indignity has nothing to do with the labor being performed. Rather, Freda’s understanding that the work her mother does out in Huronville generates nothing of evidential use-value—that this labor is literally a waste of Mildred’s own limited and vital life-force—leads to not only her recognition of the work as a form of exploitation, but to her own will to remedy that injustice: “Freda didn’t like seeing her mama like this. Didn’t care how much money she was getting for it. And on the way home, Freda tried to figure out the best way to tell her Mama that one day if she had anything to do with it, she would see to it that Mildred wouldn’t have to work so hard to get so little.”

Freda’s promise to her mother, as yet only internally voiced, also becomes a promise to herself to avoid the pangs of humiliation generated through the simultaneously mimetic and actual experience of dusting an already spotless dining room.

Mildred therefore has to be especially careful in the approach she takes to her daughter when, on the drive home, Freda announces, “I’ma be rich when I grow up and I’ma buy us a better and bigger house than the Hales’ and you ain’t gon’ have to scrub no floors for no white folks.” In an example of what Patricia Hill Collins calls “socialization for survival”—where black mothers teach their daughters “how to survive the sexual politics of intersecting oppressions while rejecting and transcending these same power relations”—Mildred at first gently humors, then critiques, Freda’s ambitious plans:

That’s what I need to hear, chile. I sure wish you was grown now. But you got plenty of time to be worrying about millions of thangs... And you don’t have to

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9 Ibid (31).

worry about me. I know I ain’t gon be on my knees for the rest of my life… This is what I gotta do right now so I don’t have to ask nobody for nothing….This ain’t killing me. Women’ve done worse thangs to earn a living, and this may not be the bottom for me.\textsuperscript{11}

Rather than ending her lecture with this honest yet foreboding reminder of how gender designates a “bottom” for poor women that even the most desperate men will likely not visit,\textsuperscript{12} Mildred quickly shifts gears to stressing the “ethics of caring and personal accountability” framing the work she’s taken while simultaneously emphasizing, in Hill Collins’ sense, the undesirability of the work itself\textsuperscript{13}—or in Mildred’s words, “What I gotta do right now.” In a head-on challenge to Heritage report logic, Mildred frames the importance of this “desperation” work as not just about survival, but about creating the conditions necessary to ensure her children’s upward mobility: “(I) don’t care if I have to beg, borrow, or steal, every last one of y’all is going to college,” she tells Freda (who “loved when her mama went off on a tangent like this”) as they drive. Moreover, Mildred’s “tangent” is additionally meant to provoke Freda (and the reader) to disconnect the desire for upward mobility from its assumed link to material “striving”:

And baby, let me tell you something so you can get this straight. That big fancy house ain’t the only thing worth striving for. Decency. A good husband. Some healthy babies. Peace of Mind. Them is the thangs you try to get out of life. Everything else’ll fall into place. It always do.\textsuperscript{14}

Significantly, anytime Mildred ventures into “good husband and healthy babies” territory, a reader begins to notice a subtle change in the way McMillan relates to her protagonist. In such situations, there is generally someone else, usually Freda or one of

\textsuperscript{11} Mama, ibid (43).

\textsuperscript{12} Though it is arguable whether sex work, the “bottom” most likely to spring to mind and a “low” that Mildred in fact does find herself hitting later in the novel, is in fact the lowliest occupation on the totem pole of exploitative labor.

\textsuperscript{13} Hill Collins, ibid (200).

\textsuperscript{14} Mama, ibid (43).
Mildred’s other children, on hand to offer critical narrative counterbalance to Mildred’s tendency to remain a nuclear family purist despite her experiences pointing to the need for an alternative to the marriage and babies pathway. In an ironic instantiation of what Janet Mason Ellerby describes as McMillan’s desire to reveal (through her characters) “just how tenaciously women will hold onto the promise of rescue by the ‘right’ man,” Mildred tries to convince an older Freda—grown at this point in the novel, and in college— not to fear divorce as a consequence of marrying rather than simply moving in with a man (the latter being the fashionable and assumedly more liberatory arrangement characteristic of Freda’s early 70’s college experience).15 “Marrying a man is a way of letting him know you want to be with him forever,” Mildred tells her daughter. “It don’t make no difference if it don’t last but two weeks.”16 The humor with which McMillan treats this moment clues the reader into the fact that Mildred, despite her insistence on marriage, is in on the joke that is “the disturbing power of the hegemonic” responsible for framing her attitude toward traditional family politics.17 Returning also to economic considerations (and how poverty affects one’s relationship to time), two weeks with the “security” of a male head-of-household provider—even though, as discussed above, McMillan also critiques the saliency of contributions generally more performative than actual—is still two weeks worth of resources that may not have been available otherwise. Thus, though not always in agreement with her protagonist’s views or behavior, McMillan’s presentation of moments like this as an opportunity for critical dialogue between protagonist, narrator, author and, presumably, the reader highlights


16 Mama, ibid (270).

17 Ellerby, ibid (110, 116).
the baseline respect that McMillan always grants a single mother whose life has played out as a series of limited, not particularly ideal choices. Mildred’s investment in traditionalism, as McMillan understands, may be little more than a poor mother’s shrewd and practical “math mind” at work. Mildred simply wants to see her daughter achieve a modicum of security that, for better or worse, she cannot completely disarticulate from a romantic vision of “forever” that—to again emphasize Halberstam’s point about the temporal queerness of underclass experience—is ultimately at the mercy of now (which may only last “but two weeks”).

Mildred’s perhaps absurd-under-the-circumstances “faith in the mythical family paradigm that includes a steadfast, loving husband who will support his wife and children” is crucial to the unsentimental realism allowing McMillan to share a particular truth about poor black women’s experience: namely, as Ellerby puts it, that Mildred is not “the stereotype of the resilient African American single mother who can cope with whatever troubles and sorrows life serves her.” This stereotype, I would argue, is just as crucial to the Heritage report’s sense of what a “deserving” (uncomplaining) poor American might look like as the welfare queen is to their image of the Xbox owning, inauthentically poor wastrel. Perhaps the most fascinating (and challenging) thing about Mildred Peacock as a character is her refusal, regardless of perpetual socioeconomic struggle, to sacrifice her own pleasure—or her right to claim herself as an autonomous individual for whom pleasure still matters—to the prerogatives of her dual mother/breadwinner role. When Mildred begins seeing a notorious (and notoriously married) “ladies’ man,” she silences her children’s very reasonable protests—“that’s Miss Francis’ husband!,” Freda barks—with an assertion of what she views to be her rights:

18 Ibid (115).
“Shut up, would you?” Mildred snapped… “I like the man and he likes me, and I don’t care whose husband he used to be, he makes me feel damn good… And if you knew how long it’s been since your mama felt like this, y’all would be happy for me.”

Throughout the novel, McMillan often portrays Mildred behaving in a way some might regard as childish. Here, as Freda assumes her eldest child role as “spokesperson” for her siblings, she also takes a disciplinary stance toward her mother that disrupts the assumed parent-child, top-down hierarchy of authority. Mildred snaps “shut up!” at her daughter as a petulant child might at a disapproving parent (or annoying sibling, for that matter). She applies logic deluded by her desire to get what she wants—“I don’t care whose husband he used to be”—as the young are apt to do. But rather than using such episodes to critique Mildred’s behavior as backward for a mother truly committed to the needs of children and family, McMillan allows Mildred to behave this way at times while steadfastly remaining a “good” mother: in other words, Mildred’s status as a good mother is never seriously questioned by the author or, consequently, the reader. Throughout McMillan’s novels, good mothers are complex, full members of the human race. Daughters are also granted such complexity, and are not portrayed merely as young women being disciplined to occupy age and gender-appropriate roles: as Freda demonstrates, daughters can provide discipline when necessary, too. Exchanges like the above are what make Mama so threatening to conservative attacks on the poor, precisely because they de-validate the taken-for-granted assumption that so-called deviant behaviors—whether mothers acting like children, or female children acting like authoritative (paternalistic) adults—can be blamed on a “values” crisis responsible for keeping poor people from accessing upward mobility. Later in the novel, when Freda starts in (much like Hazel’s bank) on how she’s going to send Mildred on a cruise to

19 *Mama*, ibid (79).
“one of those islands with palm trees” in her post-college life of wealth and fame, the delicacy with which Mildred simultaneously humors and ignores her daughter speaks to a wise, loving, and undeniably mature life outlook that perhaps only a mother with both plenty of hope and a knowledge of hardship can claim. Once again, McMillan relays Mildred’s message to Freda not through beautiful prose, but through the intimate cadence of the productive movement definitive of working-class lived and literary experience:

Mildred got up to bend the hose back to block the flow of water and pulled the sprinkler over to dry grass.
“Mama, did you hear me?”
“Yeah, I heard you,” Mildred said, heading for the house. “Sounds good to me.”

Get Me to the Ebony Fashion Fair

So far in this discussion, we’ve observed Mildred Peacock breaking a number of “rules”: rules that must be followed, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb once noted, or the “sacrifices involved in behaving well” meant to beget a comfortable middle-class existence will be “(rendered) meaningless.” 20 We’ve seen her reject the patriarchal nuclear family as an institution more effective at shoring up male dominance in the private sphere than providing tangible resources for struggling families (while also, at the same time, still admitting its seductive pull); continue to delight in having five children despite poverty; lose her one and only traditional asset, her home, without calling this a tragedy; betray the materialistic/assimilationist logic of upward mobility for a value system based on enduring personal connection; pass a sophisticated sense of class consciousness on to her children despite their subjection to the effects of “generational” poverty; and even assert the right to claim her own pleasure despite also

20 Sennett and Cobb, ibid (58-59).
being—gasp!—a single mother. Everything Mildred has been “up to” in this novel, I would argue, resonates at a contemporary political moment at which the U.S. masses are confronting the truth of their chronic socioeconomic uncertainty: an uncertainty whose resolution is going to require, as the Occupy and 99 Percent movements recently brought to light, both a willingness to confront the assumptions on which “the rules” have been based, and the creation of innovate alternative systems—economic systems, and values systems as well—through which social life might be organized more equitably.

As callous and mind-numbingly ignorant as the Heritage report’s solution to the poverty problem (as they identify and define it) may be—to lower rather than raise what Dujon and Withorn call the “basic moral floor” of social support (those welfare “entitlements”)—I did find myself agreeing with the report’s primary contention: that it is disingenuous and even dangerous to define U.S. poverty in terms of its “starkest and most sympathetic” examples. Citing a 2004 speech given by then-Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards in which he refers to a “metaphorical” 10-year-old girl who “will go to bed hungry (tonight), hoping and praying that tomorrow will not be as cold (because) she doesn’t have the coat to keep her warm,” as well as evangelical author Ronald J. Snider’s description of a rotting house with no running water as representative of conditions faced by the U.S. poor, the Heritage report claims such depictions to be ideologically necessary to public support for the expansion of “the welfare state”; “(A) realistic portrayal of the living conditions of the typical poor family in America,” the report continues, “would not make compelling (TV) viewing. In fact, the audience would be unlikely to regard such a family as seriously deprived” (18). However, what this 2011 report fails to grasp—or fears having to admit—is that for the first time since the Great Depression, middle-class Americans are “discovering” poverty
not as a result of journalists, anthropologists, or politicians eager to share their bleak findings with the “already comfortable” (as Barbara Ehrenreich recently put it),
but through their own growing discomfort. The kind of everyday discomforts, inconveniences, and perhaps most crucially, forms judgment that are par for the course in Mildred Peacock’s life are now being felt by those formerly doing the judging. Those who may have scoffed at the idea of a poor family owning an Xbox may now have to confront what it feels like to say “no” to a child’s Christmas request. As Ehrenreich points out, despite common knowledge that the recent economic collapse was the result of high-risk predatory lending practices on the part of corporate “1 Percenters,” lawmakers in more and more states are recommending drug testing as a condition for accessing any number of social programs, including unemployment benefits. Despite the ongoing consolidation of wealth and political influence in the hands of those who received not drug testing, but rather trillions in Federal Reserve bailout funds to correct their “mistakes” (a hefty entitlement if I’ve ever heard of one), poverty continues to be treated as a “cultural aberration or character flaw” rather than a pedestrian, utterly predictable symptom of socioeconomic inequality: the most normal condition one could imagine under such circumstances.

Stories like Mama and “Ma’Dear” need to be shared far and wide precisely because they not only normalize poverty as a conditional effect of unequal access to wealth and opportunity—the very experience, either lived or looming, bonding the “99 Percent” in its sense of unity against those who feel no such anxiety—but that they additionally offer an alternative paradigm of happiness and even success that does not posit the absence of pain, hardship, or suffering as the mythical “reward” for submission

to the prerogatives of free market capitalism. As sympathetic as Mildred remains toward her daughter’s desire to see her mother out from under the thumb of a wage-labor system that by its very design functions to keep her in a position of subservience to those for whom her sweat and toil begets only excess, she also understands something more profound: that the luxury cruise is in fact not a place of rest and respite from this system—not the escape it is advertised to be—but rather another manifestation of its violence. “I told you a million times I don’t need to see no tropical islands,” Mildred tells her daughter. “All I want to do is get to the Ebony fashion fair if it ain’t already sold out.”22 Indeed, the truth behind the Heritage report’s obsessive focus on the disposable minutiae of everyday life that even the poor are presumptuous enough to assume they deserve—those Xboxes looming as evidence of misplaced, degenerative cultural priorities that the black and brown children enjoying such toys will assumedly inherit—is the fear that the dream of luxury will be abandoned for one closer to home; that the masses might stop striving for that end, and begin to re-evaluate the necessity of participation in a socioeconomic system in which promised “rewards” are, for most, a false carrot at the end of a long, increasingly heavy stick. The Ebony fashion fair is a carrot that Mildred grants to herself. The ability to give oneself such carrots at will, and know them to be deserved, is what dignity looks like in McMillan’s work. The force of Mama lies in its portrayal of poverty as a condition that, though never ideal, also need not be reduced to powerlessness or pathology. And if there is agency and pleasure available in this “lowest” of states, imagine what else—what other visions of happiness, justice, beauty, or good living-- might be dreamed up to replace the predation of palm trees and orange suns.

22 Mama, ibid (305).
Epilogue

Coming to the end of this project (as it currently stands), I am realizing that as thorough a job as I may have done delineating what it looks like to break the “rules” by which upward class mobility has been traditionally achieved (thank you, Mildred Peacock et al), I perhaps need to say a bit more about the rules themselves. It is especially important to lay these rules bare, I would argue, when “playing by the rules” is being re-enforced with a particular vigor, at a moment when Americans are truly beginning to question the correlation between being a “team player” and the comfortable middle-class existence that team membership was supposed to ensure. In his January 2012 State of the Union address, President Barack Obama emphasized that the “story of success” that “every American (once) had a chance to share” can only be “reclaimed” if everyone “plays by the same set of rules.” This “set” of rules do seem to be based on a rather simple “do this, get that” equation: If you “worked hard,” Obama’s reclaimed “basic American promise” asserts, “you could do well enough to raise a family, own a home, send your kids to college, and put a little away for retirement.” Obama identifies the biggest threat to the saliency of this equation as not coming from ordinary Americans—whom he continually describes as hard-working, rule-abiding, and even, at one point, “innocent”—but from the capitalist elite hell-bent on breaking the rules: domestic banks and “regulators who look the other way,” as well as overseas business competitors like China.

However, as my dissertation has problematized, Obama appears to have it backward. The last 30 or so years of socioeconomic policy have steadily and surely re-written these rules to a degree where his equation, if it ever added up to begin with, 23

offers little more than empty political rhetoric. The financial elite aren’t breaking the rules; they make them: as the old adage goes, “He who has the gold, makes the rules.”

The president does understand that most Americans work hard; always have, likely always will. But one thing he and few other mainstream political leaders are willing to consider is a need to re-think our cultural tendency to ideologically over-invest in the goals themselves: the family; the owned home; the education; the pension, with all that “hard work” ending at age 65. It is not that these things are not worth pursuing. I see every one of these four things as something I would like to have; currently, at age 33, I’m batting a lowly .25 (not exactly team material). But in order to think more about what it might mean to truly break the rules that Obama insists are the means to inserting ourselves into a timeless “story” assumed to be universally shared, I would like to look at two very similar stories about men whose desperate clinging to both the rules and the visionary “endgame” becomes their downfall, financially and as human beings. The first of these stories, Death of a Salesman, I mention in my introduction and return to primarily for the sake of comparison here. This play follows the life of Willy Loman, a middle-aged salesman who not only never makes it very far up the business chain-of-command, but who cannot detach his sense of self worth from his perceived failure as his family’s “provider” to the point where his life becomes a play-within-a-play: a delusional pantomime of the success that eludes him, in other words, that no one else—especially his wife and oldest son, Biff-- is buying. The second of these stories, the AMC TV series

24 See Chris Hayes’ “Why Elites Fail” for a powerful discussion of the current U.S. crisis of wildly unequal access to financial resources and political power. Defining what he calls the “Iron Law of Meritocracy,” through which “the inequality produced by a meritocratic system will grow large enough to subvert the mechanisms of mobility” that are theoretically supposed to funnel talent and ability to the “top” (and mediocrity or failure downward), Hayes elaborates: “Over time, a society will become more unequal and less mobile as those who ascend its heights create means of preserving and defending their privilege and find ways to pass it on across generations. And this... is a pretty spot-on description of the American economy since the 1970’s.” www.thenation.com, June 6, 2012. Article adapted from Hayes' new book, Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012. Print.
_Breaking Bad_ (2008-present), is remarkably similar in narrative structure and characterization to Miller’s 1949 play.

Having just handed in my dissertation, I approached _Breaking Bad_ as TV candy after a long and (more-or-less) nourishing meal; but, as often happens with cultural studies work, the candy quickly entered main course territory when I realized what the show was doing. _Breaking Bad_ is the story of Walter White, a middle-aged high school chemistry teacher turned New Mexico methamphetamine kingpin. Following an initial diagnosis of stage 3A lung cancer, Walt ostensibly turns to “cooking” meth as a means to provide his family with a nest egg after he dies; accustomed to living paycheck-to-paycheck, Walt has a pregnant wife and teenage son with cerebral palsy to support. Walt, like Willy Loman, feels like a miserable failure, and is unsatisfied with the choices he’s made in life. Unable to pay for the cancer treatment that his wife, against his own wishes, insists he participate in at all cost, Walt faces what he perceives to be the humiliating gift of having the treatment paid for by wealthy family friends Gretchen and Elliott: his one-time colleagues at MIT, who went on to make a fortune as chemists while the less ambitious Walt tried to convince himself that a “happy family” of modest means was in fact what he always wanted. In his play, Miller torments Willy with next-door-neighbor Charley, who repeatedly offers Willy a job at his successful business while Willy is forced by his company into the exhausting, commission-based life of a road salesman. Mirroring Walt’s rejection of Gretchen and Elliott’s gift, however, Willy not only refuses Charley’s offer even after he gets fired from his job, but continues to lie to himself and those around him despite his friends’ and family’s growing disbelief; “I-I just can’t work for you, Charley… don’t ask me why,” Willy tells his astonished friend.
as he simultaneously asks to “borrow” $110 to pay an insurance bill. Though Walt lies to his wife, Skyler, telling her that he did in fact accept his wealthy friends’ offer, he uses his earnings from the sale of “Blue Sky”—the high-grade crystal meth for which he and Jesse Pinkman, his former student and manufacturing partner, become famous—to covertly finance his cancer treatment.

For Willy and Walt, death is preferable to having to face that the rules each has committed to living his life by have yielded little but more struggle and disappointment. The Sisyphean snowstorm of bills that Mildred Peacock manages to take in stride, and scraps some of her own gains to better combat (including her home), is for these (barely) middle-class white “family men” the bearer of lost hope. Willy’s way “out” of his predicament, as he fantasizes it, is suicide. In imagined dialogue with his dead (and also wealthy in his lifetime) brother Ben, Willy manically explains the beauty of his plan to off himself so his family can claim the $20,000 life insurance policy he’ll leave behind:

Ben: It’s called a cowardly thing, William.
Willy: Why? Does it take more guts to stand here the rest of my life ringing up to zero?
Ben, yielding: That’s the point, William. *He moves, thinking, turns.* And twenty thousand—that *is* something one can feel with the hand, it is there.
Willy, now assured, with rising power: Oh, Ben! That’s the whole beauty of it! I see it like a diamond, shining in the dark, hard and rough, that I can pick up and touch in my hand.26

Walt’s “diamond,” hard and rough, is crystal. And indeed, the first time a mesmerized Jesse peers into a Pyrex dish featuring the “glass grade” fruit of Walt’s chemical labor, the show solidifies a trope that transfixes Walt, as it did Willy, every time he contemplates leaving his new line of business to re-join straight society: the tangibility of the quart-sized Ziploc baggies of Blue Sky he holds in his hands; the sheer power of “something one can feel” that ironically becomes, for those who “feel” it to

25 Miller, ibid (96-97).
26 Ibid (126).
excess, a destructive element disabling their ability to properly follow Obama’s rules (the ghoulish, scab-covered “tweakers” at the show’s underbelly are unable to “work hard” at anything other than supporting their habit). The key link between Willy and Walt’s decisions, however, is the issue of cowardice that Ben, at the center of Willy’s ambivalent conscience, raises. Per the show’s title and American Southwest slang, to “Break Bad” is to “go wild, get crazy, let loose, to forget all your cares and just not plain give a shit; to challenge conventions, to defy authority and skirt the edges of the law” (from urbandictionary.com). In many respects, Walt’s decision to “break” with his hard-working family man prerogatives for the fast-cash track of illegal drug manufacture seems like a wise, gratifying new career direction. We see his unsatisfying life as a chemistry teacher reflected in the faces of the dead-eyed, uninterested students he struggles to engage; we feel the “worlds apart” distance between him and his former MIT colleagues when Gretchen and Elliott throw a lavish poolside party at their mansion. Moreover, Walt seems to have been gifted with a convenient means to absolve his decision of the cowardice with which Willy reckons: the terminal cancer diagnosis. Indeed, as he cooks up his first batch of crystal, yellow chemtrails spewing into the desert from the top of an RV to the tune of “Dead Fingers Talking” by the rock band Working for a Nuclear Free City, a viewer can’t help but marvel at Walt’s status as the kind of badass martyr that Tim Riggins wished he could have been while headed off to do his stint in jail on his brother’s behalf. If this lower middle-class white guy is facing Dujon and Withorn’s “you’re next” moment, he appears to be adapting with creative ingenuity; his soon-to-be dead fingers, nimble in their craft, are certainly talking (where money talks).

What becomes clearer as the series progresses, however, is the degree to which Walt’s decision was not only not motivated by a genuine desire to see his family left without financial burdens (for once!) after his death, but also how utterly antithetical this decision was to the idea of truly “breaking” with Obama’s equation for middle-class prosperity. Despite its illegality, there is no doubt that Walt and Jesse’s meth operation counts as “hard work.” Jesse constantly takes to the streets in a huff of exhaustion, in pursuit of the pseudoephedrine Walt needs to keep cooking. At one point, looking to greatly increase the quantity of their highly in-demand product in order to do big-money business with a powerful distributor, Walt and Jesse break into a chemical supply store to steal two 100-gallon barrels of methylamine (the “pseudo” replacement chemical granting their drug its distinctive blue hue), barely escaping arrest. However, as with Willy, Mildred’s ex-husband Crook, and so many other men beholden to the limitations of the privatized nuclear family for their sense of self-worth, Walt’s primary motivation for what he does is to feel, where the feeling so often eludes him, like a man of achievement. The sole purpose of his growing operation is to acquire and sustain a feeling that, far from signifying a “break” from authority or convention, is the very linchpin of U.S. social convention. The gendered nature of the “carrot” Drucilla Cornell has identified as keeping men invested in the nuclear family is at the heart of Walt’s desire. Walt wishes to feel like a “king in his own castle” in a way that, especially in the midst of the increasing cultural denigration of overworked, underpaid high school teachers, his “legitimate” occupation can’t help him achieve (there’s an argument to be made that the “bad teacher” is becoming a welfare-queenlike depository of blame for social ills). As his wife continues to push for the cancer treatment despite the mountain

of bills piling up, Walt’s provider ego is revealed to be as fragile, and in need of treatment, as his increasingly sick body.

It might be easier to empathize with the plight of Walt’s threatened manhood, however, if the show wasn’t so invested in critiquing the need for this traditionalist, achievement-oriented sense of what makes a good family man. *Breaking Bad* is very much a product of the post-Great Recession class-consciousness raising that led to the populist 99 Percent “coming out” moment. Walt’s downfall—and what makes him, as the series progresses, both a fascinating and deplorable example of a human being on the verge of losing his humanity—is that he refuses to come out along with everyone else. Indeed, the devil’s deal that Walt makes when he embarks on his meth manufacturing venture reveals itself in the status of the *lie* that he must maintain in order to keep the operation going. Unable to tell his family about his druglord life, Walt stares at a pile of cash (to the tune of several million dollars) lining the basement insulation. Thwarting what we can only assume to be Walt’s Willy-like plan of somehow revealing the fortune to his family *after* his death from cancer, Walt learns, contrary to his desire to succumb to the hopelessness that his “break” to meth cook signified, that the cancer treatment is working; he now has *time*, to actually remain a member of the family he was beginning to disengage from. Remaining alive, however, Walt cannot get the satisfaction of martyrdom that he felt as an “already dead” cancer victim. An illegitimate provider, he nonetheless craves the legitimation of his wife and family’s respect for the sacrifices he feels he’s making on their behalf.

This is where the issue of cowardice rears its ugly head. Walt worries, as Willy does, that if he comes clean about his money making scheme, his family will see him as a coward. However, if he continues to uphold his lie, his family can never reflect back to him, through their grateful acknowledgement of his sacrifice, the respect he so
desperately desires. Walt’s obsessive drive to feel this respect at all costs, and his simultaneous realization that this satisfaction will forever elude him, is what turns him bad. The series casts this obsession as a higher form of cowardice than either Willy’s suicidal mission or Walt’s hopeful (hopeless) burning out through cancer—the reason for this being, I would argue, Walt’s refusal to acknowledge himself as a member of a community in which interdependence, rather than deferral to the hyper-privatized nuclear family, is becoming the new rule.

One telling example of the harm that Walt’s refusal to leave the independent family man “closet” causes him and his family occurs when Walt’s son, Walter Jr., surprises his father with savewalterwhite.com, a lovingly designed website dedicated to his father on which donors can anonymously contribute to a Paypal account. “Walter White: Husband, Father, Teacher,” the site reads, with Walt’s smiling, kindly face staring back at the viewer from a photograph. Unlike his wife—who holds back tears as she tells her husband to come check out the “incredible” thing their son has done—Walt immediately tells Walter Jr., “But, we can’t ask for money,” patting his son on the back and leaving the room. In the hallway outside, Skyler confronts her husband. “You can’t ask him to take it down. It’ll crush him,” she whispers angrily. “Skyler, it’s charity,” Walt says, to which Skyler, looking Walt in the eye in disbelief, replies, “Why do you say that like it’s some sort of… dirty word?” The show then cuts to a scene of Walt in his shady lawyer Saul’s office, pacing back and forth in agitation. ‘This is insane!” he exclaims. “I have so much cash on hand, that I actually count it by weighing it on my bathroom scale. And yet… I can’t tell my family about it, all of whom think I’m right on the edge of bankruptcy. It’s insane!” he shouts again, exasperated. When Saul then tries to help Walt come up with a way to share his “windfall” with the family without letting them in on his secret—including the old “I found a bag of money down by the railroad track”
excuse and a mythical “Uncle Murray”—Walt spits, “No. No! It cannot be blind luck or some imaginary relative who saves us. I earned that money—me!”

Had Walt truly been invested in the “family first” rationale he tries to convince both himself and those-in-the-know is his sole motivation for the meth operation, he would have taken Gretchen and Elliott’s gift. Despite the pangs of pride than anyone accepting “charity” is inclined to feel, he also would have thanked his son for a website dedicated to his “amazing” dad. After all, his family needed financial help; and as Skyler points out, there is nothing dirty about admitting such need at a time when no one save the “1 Percent” could likely afford the hospital bills attached to stage 3A cancer treatment. Even Walt’s lawyer finds his client’s incorrigible clinging to the meritocratic ideal disturbing; when Walt complains about Walt Jr.’s website, calling it “a little tin cup to the entire world,” Saul just shakes his head and says, sarcastically, “No deep-seeded issues there.” What the show provokes Walt to consider, to no avail, is the possibility that being an amazing “husband, father, teacher” renders him, despite his ability to “save” anyone else, deserving of whatever help might come his way. Gretchen and Elliott, moreover, sincerely see Walt as deserving of their help, both for his contribution to their professional development and his friendship. But when Gretchen gets wind of being made an unwitting party to Walt’s lie (Skyler calls one day to thank her for a gift she hasn’t been giving), Walt refuses to humor her desire for an explanation. As with Willy’s violent, delusional rejection of Charley’s job offers, Walt tells her, through hateful eyes, that he “already apologized (for involving you in the lie); I don’t believe I owe you an explanation.” When a shocked Gretchen then tells Walt that she feels “so sorry for you,” he mouths “fuck you” with a wrath so cruel and final that she dashes away from him in genuine fear. At a moment when so many in his position are turning outward and recognizing a need for greater access to shared, common resources, Walt’s
ultra-traditionalist turn toward paternalistic “savior” fantasies and an inner sanctum of privately guarded secrets looks especially perverse. Walt’s values, the show argues, are out-dated and inadequate for the world he lives in; he goes bad, is a coward, because of his refusal to break with this system. The world is telling him that being a good person—a good husband, father, teacher, and friend— is in fact enough. He keeps telling himself, however, that a life without recognized achievement is a failed one and, as with many a tragic upward mobility story, loses his goodness to that belief.29

Of course, the real issue at the heart of Walt’s ruinous “you’re next” confrontation with middle-class poverty is that the commons is not yet common enough. The good teacher should have been getting paid a living wage reflective of the value that his friends and family see in him; the choice between unaffordable treatment, death, and crystal meth never should have been his only viable health care options. When it comes down to it, Walt’s misery is a product of the unsustainability of both sides of Obama’s “story of success” equation. His hard work hasn’t added up to the things it should; his family can barely pay their bills, and, as Skyler explains to the divorce lawyer she turns to after (inevitably) uncovering Walt’s scheme, they still owe at least 17 years on their mortgage (after paying it off for as much time). Moreover, Walt’s questioning of the value of the things he thought he wanted—especially the family for which he is sacrificing “everything”—underlies the rush he gets when, waltzing through the state-of-the-art meth lab a wealthy druglord commissions so Walt can work his magic in style, he feels the dignified weight of his importance in a way that eludes him as overworked, underpaid “husband, father, and teacher.” Indeed, walking through this “superlab” is what causes Walt to finally and truly break. Following Skyler’s divorce threat, Walt tries to convince himself that the druglord life was never for him—“I’m no criminal,” he says.

29 Dreiser is perhaps the master of the “good person gone bad through a desire to ‘be somebody’” narrative.
in a half-assed way to his lawyer and the TV audience (a claim that, by this time, no one is buying; all of Walt’s “innocence” has flown the coop). However, Walt quietly moves out of his family home a few scenes following the above tour, leaving only signed divorce papers in his wake. Walt loses his family, but gets to keep the elusive feeling of self-importance that his former life could not provide for him. The stories I discuss in my dissertation follow characters who, unlike white, middle-class Walt, did not have the same choice to break or not break. They were already broken, regardless of their say in the matter. Through the many cracks in their lives, they are able to see hope in the possibility of truly changing a system of rules that never offered them, or even Walt, adequate support.
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*Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire.* Dir. Lee Daniels, 2009. Film.


*The Good Woman of Bangkok.* Dir. Dennis O’Rourke, 1991. Film.


Biography

Sara Appel was born in Forest Grove, Oregon. She received a Bachelor’s of Arts in Philosphy and English from the University of Oregon (2002). A member of the steering committee of the Working Class Studies Association, Sara recently published an article, “Learning the Unwritten Rules: Working-Class Students in Graduate School,” with sociologist Deborah Warnock of Skidmore College (Innovative Higher Education, Nov. 2011). The oldest of four sisters, Sara is her family’s first college graduate.