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Telling Tales of Oppression and Dysfunction: Narratives of Class Identity Reformation

Abstract

I compare experiences and class identity formation of working-class college students in college. I find that all working-class students experience college as culturally different from their home cultures and have different understandings and interpretations of this difference based on race, class, and gender positions. I find that students develop fundamentally different strategies for navigating these cultural differences based on the strength or weakness of their structural understandings of class and inequality in US society. Students with strong structural understandings develop Loyalist strategies by which they retain close ties to their home culture. Students with more individual understandings of poverty and inequality develop Renegade strategies by which they actively seek immersion in the middle-class culture of the college. These strategic orientations are logical responses to the classed nature of our educational system and have very significant implications for the value and experience of social mobility in an allegedly meritocratic society.

Keywords

Working Class; Identity; Narrative; Social Mobility; Higher Education

This is a story about class identities and their reconstruction. It draws from accounts of working-class college students who variously resist assimilation into the middle class and embrace it. The experience of being working-class in the academic world has been ably described by several who have made the journey themselves, from bell hooks (1993; 1994) to Victor Villanueva (1993), Richard Rodriguez (1988), Richard Hoggart (1957), and the many academics who contributed to the collections edited by Ryan & Sackrey (1984); Tokarczyk and Fay (1993), Dews and Law (1995), Mahony & Zmrocek (1997), Welsch (2005), Adair and Dahlberg (2003), and Muzzatti and Samarco (2006). Feelings of alienation, “being an impostor,” and having to choose sides abounds in this literature. Common emotional reactions variously include anger, shame, sorrow, and intimidation (Jensen 2004: 171). Munoz (1986) reports high levels of psychological stress. “To say I felt like a fish out of water hardly describes my overwhelming feelings of confusion, depression, inadequacy, and shame,” says one academic (Kadi 1996: 41-42) “Students from poor backgrounds who attend predominantly middle-class or elite schools can easily doubt their right to be there. Peers with similar experiences are rare. Intellectual and social codes are foreign. Fellow students talk differently, wear different clothes, cite different cultural

references, take distant vacations. Day-to-day discussions remind these students, by their simple unfamiliarity, that their right to belong is tenuous” (Loeb 1994: 64). Annas (1993: 171) has described this experience as feeling like “an immigrant.”

Working-class students must also deal with the “schizophrenia” of moving between home and school. As the director of Exeter once explained, “When black kids come to a school like this, it’s very difficult for them. They don’t feel fully a part of this place, and yet they are different from the kids back home. They have one foot in each camp and both feet in neither” (Anson 1997: 113). Alfred Lubrano (2004: 194), who calls himself a “straddler,” claims that he and others like him hold within ourselves worlds that can never be brought together. I often feel inhabited by two people who can’t speak to one another.”

This schizophrenia is at the heart of the accounts I have included here. I argue that those moving between the working class and the middle class through participation in higher education are faced with making a *choice* between loyalty to the working class or socially recognized success through bourgeois assimilation. Although this choice is exercised along a continuum, I focus on two central and opposing responses to this situation, what I have named Loyalist and Renegade responses.ⁱ Loyalists confront the choice by redefining and committing themselves to the working class. In many ways, their working-class identities become strengthened through their academic experience. Their notions of class are deeply materialist and rooted in past experiences of oppression and collectivity. Renegades, on the other hand, embrace assimilation as the only possible path out of poverty. They transform their class identities in the process – understanding class to be more about cultural orientations (adopting middle-class norms and behaviors) than about structural barriers. Whereas Loyalists tell stories of oppression to explain class, Renegades tell stories of dysfunction.

Janet Zandy (1995:1) has noted that, “according to the book of success, a working-class identity is intended for disposal.” By many accounts of class, having a college education defines one as middle class. But not all of the working-class students have felt that way. Thus, this is also a work addressing how and why working-class identities persist, even through and against the experience of social mobility.

Previous Studies

Many other theorists, researchers, and those “educated out of their own class” have reported on responses towards social mobility through education. To some extent, this issue goes to the core of Social Reproduction Theory, a body of research and theory that can be said to deal with the question of why working-class kids fail academically.ⁱⁱ Those working in this area have pointed out the “costs” of academic success to working-class children. Sometimes this is understood and explained through the lens of race – as in the “burden of acting White” that students of color are said to operate under. I would argue that there is a more general “burden of acting bourgeois” that is experienced by all working-class children. How they respond to this burden, and what it means for purposes of class identity reformation, is the subject of this article.

Hoggart’s (1957) description of the “scholarship boy” remains eerily relevant today, even though it originally described the psychic unmooring of academically successful working-class youth in mid-20th century England. In order to succeed, the scholarship boy “will have to have opposed the ethos of the hearth...the intense gregariousness of the working-class family group;” he will have learned how to

separate himself from his working-class peer groups in childhood; he will become aware, if not fully comfortable, with the different literacies between home and school; he will see life as a ladder, moving up sometimes in the spirit of “the blinkered pony;” and he will live in fear of “the shame of slipping back “ (Hoggart. 1957: 240-45). This is certainly one reaction that is amply described in the literature, but it is only one. Some students react quite differently – with anger rather than shame, and with a renewed commitment to the “ethos of the hearth” rather than its rejection. Hoggart (ibidem: 239) himself later amended his description to include a tripartite typology consisting of

- (1) those who “go into their own spheres after the long scholarship climb” and who “find themselves thoroughly at home”
- (2) those “who are at ease in their new group without any ostentatious adoption of the protective coloring of that group, and who have an easy relationship with their working-class relatives”; and
- (3) those “for whom the uprooting is particularly troublesome” (who are “self-conscious and yet not self-aware in any full sense, who are as a result uncertain, dissatisfied, and gnawed by self-doubt”).

The choice between assimilation and resistance (and sometimes, simple accommodation) has been amply described in studies of working-class academics and other “class-straddlers,” and “border-crossers.” Lubrano (1997: 193) asks, “Do you cross the border and try to pass for white collar, until you totally assimilate? Do you stay true blue and risk alienation and career stagnation among the middle class? Or do you blend town and gown, creating a hybrid who is, at the end of the day, at home in neither world?” An earlier study found that about half of those “educated out of their class” whom they interviewed spontaneously expressed strong identification with their school and middle-class culture whereas about a quarter declared themselves as long-time rebels who actively resisted the schools’ attempts to disentangle them from their families and working-class peer groups (Jackson & Marsden 1962: 167). Skip forward many years and across the pond and we have Hairston’s (2004: 158) finding that a quarter of the working-class college students he interviewed severed all relations with their families as a precondition to academic success while an equal number became more active advocates and mentors to their families.

Being a rebel and still managing to be academically successful is not an easy task, and may explain why there appear to be many more assimilators than resisters (again, this goes to the heart of social reproduction theory). Fine (1991: 134) found that low-income students dropped out of high school not so much because they were less intelligent or capable as that they identified more strongly with the working poor and recognized the barriers confronting them. “The graduates, in contrast, were basically unquestioning and unchallenging of current labor market arrangements. They believed deeply in a meritocracy and in the linear relationship of advanced education to advanced economic status” (Fine ibidem). Indeed, students who succeed seem particularly vulnerable to internalizing the dominant society’s views of the poor as dysfunctional individuals. In Brantlinger’s (1993: 41) study, low-income students had more negative views of the poor than high-income students. The majority of low-income students wanted to be different from their parents and negatively evaluated their family relationships, attributing poverty to individual choices and behaviors (Brantlinger ibidem: 149, 35-37).

Success read as betrayal has been ably documented in the case of racial minorities. As Patrick Finn (1999) has explained:

For involuntary minorities, the dominant group is not only different, it is the enemy. Because cultural differences between them and the mainstream are oppositional rather than simply different, accommodation is difficult if not impossible. Cultural differences become cultural boundaries. Once a cultural identification is established *in opposition* to another, a border is established that people cross at their peril. 'Border crossers' are likely to be censured by their own as traitors and they are not likely to be fully accepted by the dominant group. (pp. 46-47)

This has been characterized as "the burden of acting white" (Ogbu 2003; Fordham 1996). I argue that class is a border as well, and that those crossing the class border are as likely to be censured by their own as traitors as involuntary minorities crossing the same divide. At least, this is the *understanding* and the *perception* of many working-class students. For, just as "the paradox of racial identity is that it is simultaneously an utter illusion and an obvious truth, (Winant 1994: 37), so is this true of the paradox of class identity. That is why this is a *story* of class identity and transformation. And just as "the psychological costs of academic success for African-American adolescents constitute the jugular vein" of Fordham (1996: 11-12)'s analysis, so, too, do I see the potential psychological cost of academic success for all working-class students. How they deal with this, what stories they tell to make sense of the potential shift in class identities and positions, is the subject of this article.

School alters and negates the values and beliefs of subordinate cultural groups. The working class can be understood (as it understands itself to be) as a subordinate cultural group. The working class is multi-racial, but it shares as a *class* a position of oppression through low wages, economic insecurity, and cultural stigma (largely through the devaluation of manual labor and its supposed lack of intelligence) (Kadi. 1996). Interestingly, Fordham (1996) documented the same responses of high-achieving African-American students as Hoggart did in his description of the scholarship boy – isolation, having to juggle multiple personalities between home and school; loneliness "at the top," a tendency to blame the poor (including their own parents) for their poverty. Low achievers, on the other hand, were similar to the drop-outs of Fine's (1991) study in that they were more likely to imagine themselves as part of an "imagined community," perceived the demands of the core curriculum as threatening to their core identities, actively refused to learn what was taught (rather than being incapable), and were *more likely to recognize that their parents had tried but still failed to achieve the American Dream* (emphasis added).

What happens when students who resist assimilation and who reject the dominant explanation for their parents' poverty, do actually "make it"? We have less solid information here, although there are many who have personally testified to this possibility. Bell hooks, Victor Villanueva, Janet Zandy are but three examples. All three were academic successes who refused to assimilate into a middle-class belief system. Janet Zandy (2001) has written movingly of the importance of not committing "class amnesia." Villanueva (1993) has passionately called for more "organic intellectuals" from the working class who stay true to their roots and core values even as they move and operate in a field dominated by the middle class. bell hooks (1993; 1994) has encouraged those of us from the working class to add our own voices to the academy in order to destroy the false dichotomy between "lack of intelligence" and working class (or academy and middle class) and to subvert the tendency of the academy to see all of us as bourgeois. For class is not just a position – although it is always that. It is also a choice – a choice of stories, of allegiances, of identity.

Theoretical Approach and Understandings

The theoretical approach I have adopted here is one that first, recognizes the reality and importance of class identities and that, second, acknowledges the power of narratives in framing and reframing identities. Class identities, like all identities, are fluid rather than fixed, forever in the process of becoming, even as they are linked, however vicariously, to real positions of power, inequality, and oppression. "How one comes to some kind of personal and political consciousness, some sense of identity as a member of a group, is an odd underground kind of process" (Annas 1993: 169). Class identities are theoretically distinct from class consciousness. Whereas class consciousness can be best understood as the understanding by people within a class of their class interests (Wright 1997: 4), a class identity does not necessarily carry a political or oppositional content. Identities in general can be defined as "an individual's understanding, interpretation, and presentation of self as shaped within a complex web of continually changing social relations" (Weiler 2000: 4-5). Sometimes class identities are constructed in ways that severely limit the development of a class consciousness, as is the case with Renegades.

Class identities are fashioned through the stories we tell about the lives we lead. Two people may share a similar class location and experience, but understand that location and experience in very different ways. This understanding comes through in the stories they tell about who they are and who they are in relationship to others of different classes. The stories we tell about our lives form the bedrock of identity construction and reconstruction (Linde 1993; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). "Our stories are partly determined by the real circumstances of our lives – by family, class, gender, culture, and the historical moment into which we are thrown. But we also make choices, narrative choices. The challenge of narrative identity calls upon our deepest sources of imagination and creativity" (MacAdams 2006: 99).

Narratives are especially important in explaining *changes* in people's lives. "All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives" (Anderson 1991: 204). Narratives are particularly useful for an examination of people engaged in crossing (cultural, racial, class) borders because narratives serve a key function in helping to define identities,

The story is a net in which we try to capture experience. This gives narratives an almost sacred role; our sense of self and wider existence is made by these stories. Stories about ourselves and the world exist within the stories and are the building blocks of consciousness...The narrative is above all an interpretation. Interpretation is an effort to find meaning. Understanding always comes before interpretation, and without it there is no interpretation...The stories of others provide us with a means to develop meaning as we assimilate experiences into our own narrative of self. This makes narrative a ubiquitous and powerful tool in the construction of identity. (Belton 2005: 114-115)

Moving between class cultures, ostensibly gaining access to the middle class through tertiary education, creates a profound change in consciousness. People use stories to explain this change. What becomes part of this story and what is left out of this story become important questions for analysis. "Identity, personal and social, depends on memory – which is to say, identity depends on what we forget as well as

what we remember” (Taylor 2005: 7). Or, as a memorable character from an Irvine Welsh novel puts it, “You have tae try tae work out who is and isnae you. That’s our quest in life. There’s what you leave behind when you come away, and what you always take with ye” (Welsh 2002: 133).

Narrative is thus a perfect tool for understanding identities in the process of becoming. “Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Stuart Hall 1990: 222; Belton 2005: 130). This approach “allows room for explaining not only how identities come into being, but also how identities change over time. At the same time, the approach is helpful in explaining how identities and the interests that flow from them become gendered, raced, and classed” (Price 2000: 19). Although the primary focus is on class identity (and working-class identities in particular), class identity is only separable from identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the abstract sense, and never as lived by individuals. For this reason I pay particular attention to how other identities intersect with class identities in the narratives of these students. I focus on class primarily “not because it is the predominant identity but because in recent scholarship it is, in practical terms and use, the missing identifying principle. Like a ghost, it is there but not there, mentioned but not really welcomed into the multicultural conversation” (Zandy 1995: 10).

There are real material conditions of relative privilege and oppression in which people are located. But that is only the beginning of the story, as anyone who has struggled with issues of class consciousness (and false consciousness) can attest. The meanings people give to their class (and race and gender) locations are various, and an examination of these meanings, as relayed through stories and incorporated into identities, is crucial to an understanding of how the class system actually operates and perpetuates itself. If “identity formation and struggles are about the personal choices people make, the doubts they express, the strategies they devise, and the efforts towards self-transformation that they take” (Luttrell 1997: 118), these personal choices have greater repercussions on the class system, its persistence and/or eventual demise. We must recognize that the stories we tell matter, they have both personal and political implications. Some stories are “bad” and some stories are “good” relative to particular goals and outcomes (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992: 6).

Methodological Orientation

The following accounts are derived from a two-year ethnographic study of twenty-one working-class college students at a large, moderately-selective public university. Because educational credentials play such a large part in defining class boundaries, I thought it would be instructive to ask working-class college students about their experiences at college and their perceptions and understandings of class. In particular, I was interested in how their class identities were being constructed or reconstructed in the process of becoming college-educated. All of the students interviewed for this study were academically successful studentsⁱⁱⁱ with expectations of graduation and high hopes based upon what that might mean to their economic futures.

Because I was primarily interested in the meanings that these students ascribed to both their educations and their class identities (and how these two intertwined) it was appropriate to construct a qualitative study. Qualitative methods can “illuminate

the meanings people attach to their words and actions in a way not possible with other methodologies” (Lareau 2003: 219). I am here not interested in the frequency of behavior but in the *meaning* of behavior (Lareau and Schultz 1996: 4). This approach can also be described as phenomenological, in that it “is concerned to provide insight into how, through the human situation, phenomena come to have personal meaning, a lived-through significance that may not always be transparent to consciousness. The focus is upon involvement in a natural-cultural-historical milieu within which individuals discover themselves as subject to meaning. This tradition stresses that we can only understand human phenomena, such as language, in practice, or use” (Charlesworth 2000: 3).

Each student was interviewed extensively about his or her experiences both in and outside of college. All were asked about their earliest experiences with schools and how schooling affected their relationships with family and friends. They were also asked questions about identity and class in general, the particular values of their families, and whether they saw conflicts between these values and those endorsed by educational authorities. Most interviews took place over more than one setting, and ranged from 90 minutes to four hours. In addition, I interacted with most of these students outside of the interview process, as I was a member of the same campus community (all six of the students included here were at one time or another students of mine).^{iv}

The research took place at a University with which I was very familiar. I supplemented my primary interview research by taking extensive field notes during this research period, from classes I sat in on to campus conferences on issues of diversity. In short, I lived the same campus experiences as many of the students I interviewed. I sometimes interviewed students at their place of work on and off campus. Being from the working class myself helped me see and experience much of the campus culture in ways similar to my respondents. Additionally, I engaged a few institutional interviews with administrators and coordinators who dealt with the working-class college population. These institutional interviews gave me insights into the social context of the experiences and realities described by the students. Finally, I collected all documentary forms of data pertaining to policies and practices affecting working-class college students at this particular campus.

I began transcribing, coding, and analyzing data before all of the interviews were collected. At first, my only goal was to record the experiences of a unique subject group too often ignored or silenced in official literature on college students. I expected this group to have interesting things to say about class, mobility, and the relationship of both to education, but I had no clearly defined focus. It was not until the sixth interview that a pattern of differing and opposing navigational strategies clearly emerged. This became the core of my analysis. To ensure the reliability of my analysis, particularly the tripartite typology that I was theorizing, I took several steps. First, I made detailed plots and graphs comparing and contrasting navigational strategies on various indices. One of these, for example, plotted affectivity. I made a list of emotional buzzwords – “love,” “hate,” “envy,” “shame,” “guilt,” and “intimidated,” to name just a few. I further subdivided some according to object - “loved middle-class parents of my best friend” vs. “hated the way my parents lived their lives.” What I found was a clear correlation between navigational strategy and a particular configuration of affectivity. Whereas Loyalists expressed pride and love toward the working class and a lot of anger toward the middle class, Renegades expressed admiration toward the middle class, dislike/hatred toward the working class, and much intimidation and embarrassment at school. I also compared my findings with as many other studies of marginalized groups in college as I could

reasonable find, ranging from novels and journalistic accounts to theoretical approaches. Finally, I solicited feedback from working-class academics, the small but growing number of academics who have publicly admitted they were raised in working-class and poverty-class situations. All of them recognized the dilemmas of divided loyalty I was seeing emerge in my interviews, as well as the responses I here theorize. In the next section of the paper I present a few of the stories that emerged in the interviews that highlight the very real differences of the Loyalist and Renegade approaches. Keep in mind that these approaches are tendencies, and reflect choices working-class students at some point must make when experiencing potential social mobility.

The Stories

For purposes of highlighting the contrasting stories told by “Loyalists” and “Renegades,” I have chosen three “pairs” of stories, each with a slightly different racial and gender configuration. Thus, the first pairing includes one White woman, Talia, who narrates a Renegade account and one Latina, Amy, who narrates a Loyalist account. In the second pairing, I have kept the same racial and gender configuration but the strategic orientations are switched – here I compare Bethany, a White woman adopting a Loyalist account to Isabel, a Latina adopting a Renegade account. Finally, I include a pairing of two men - John, a Latino Renegade, and Calder, a Native American Loyalist. What I hope becomes apparent is how the Loyalist and Renegade stories, although distinct in nature and content, are variously filtered through a gendered and raced lens. The Loyalist and Renegade stories are stories of identity reconstruction and reformation in light of potential social mobility. Each of the three pairs was chosen because it captured the contrasts between the Loyalist and Renegade accounts in response to key recurrent themes – (1) explaining subordinate class location and inequality; (2) responding to families in need; and (3) resisting racial oppression.

“It’s not that people are lazy. It’s that they’re oppressed!”

The quote that opens this section was Amy’s explanation for subordinate class location and inequality. In contrast, Talia’s explanation mirrored that of the dominant society and policymakers – people are poor because they are dysfunctional. More specifically, working-class people lack the cultural capital to succeed. In this explanation, working-class people must assimilate to the norms and behaviors of the middle class. In Amy’s explanation, in contrast, there is, first, no call for assimilation and second, no recognition that assimilation would do much to “cure” the problem anyway. These are radically different stories.

Talia and Amy are both the first in their families to attend college. They both experienced sharp poverty while growing up. Talia’s father worked at a gas station for several years, and then at an auto parts store. Her mother, as most of the mothers in this study, cleaned houses and provided childcare in addition to being the “homemaker” of the family. Talia began cleaning houses with her mother as a young teenager. When Talia was 15, she left home and “adopted” a middle-class family, whose father was her high school track coach. Her understanding of “cultural capital” and the differences between working-class culture and the middle-class culture were, I think, heightened during this period, although she seemed very aware of these

differences even before that household change. For example, she spoke of the embarrassment she experienced when she was caught wearing someone else's boots that she had raided from the Lost and Found box in elementary school. Her desire to "fit in" and wear clothes that her family could not afford had motivated this raid.

Throughout the interview, Talia expressed a great deal of hostility towards her biological family. She was bitter that her parents had not been able to afford Christmas presents for her and her siblings and resentful that they had, in fact, given presents to the even less fortunate instead. She was frustrated at what she perceived as her family's religiosity, and could not understand why they couldn't have "succeeded" in the more conventional sense. She thought it was wrong of her parents to allow others down on their luck to "crash" at their house without paying rent, as this kept them poor. Throughout the interview, Talia made frequent references to the fact that her family, and the working class in general, did not plan for the future. For example, when describing her adoptive family, she says, "It was just interesting to join that family when I did and it was definitely different conversations – the conversations were more intelligent, they talked about what the future held, they talked about the possibilities that life as to offer, and that was never something that we talked about in the other household."

The middle class, according to Talia had earned their privileged position because they made plans and followed through. They did not allow themselves to be diverted by poor neighbors or friends. Talia believes she can become part of this middle class through imitation. Jettisoning her family, not allowing them to pull her down with them, is both a priority and a moral imperative. This is key to the Renegade strategy. In addition, Talia must adopt the behaviors and speech patterns of the middle class if she wants to be successful. She avidly read books about improving one's diction and self-presentation. Her life story becomes a quest to "access the middle class" and to drop old habits and the working-class "mindset" that would keep her from achieving this. In response to a question about what is *valuable* about the working class and her family in particular, she grew very confused, "That's really hard. I pride myself on divorcing a lot of the ideologies of that family...I am just so proud to be away from them!"

The story Talia tells is one of shame at her roots and a constant movement away from the source of that shame. Angry and frustrated at fundamental inequalities she saw at school, she directed this anger towards her family rather than any sense of a social structure. In elementary school, she reports wanting to be like the middle-class kids because, "they could focus on things like school. They didn't have to go home and take care of their brothers and sisters because the babysitter was there. I always wanted to access that and I always wanted to be part of that...for a long time I felt ashamed of myself like there was something wrong with me...so I just have to work it through and to make myself take on a different mindset." Talia's understanding of what it takes to "access the middle class," "having to do exclusively with issues of cultural capital, does not allow her to feel any sympathy towards working-class people. On the contrary, the Renegade story of success is predicated on moving away from working-class people and their ways of life.

The life story Amy tells is quite different. Amy is the youngest of three, daughter of immigrants from Mexico, and, like Talia, the first in her family to go to college. Also like Talia, Amy experienced sharp poverty in her childhood. She began working at age ten, picking strawberries along with other family members. At age fifteen, she worked a full-time job at a grocery store in addition to going to high school. She has

continued to work full-time jobs ever since. At one point she has had to drop out of college so that she could help her mother make the rent payments. She never really planned on going to college, but both her mother and her older sister encouraged her to think about it. One of Amy's biggest issues, she explains, is dealing with the fact that she has chosen a life path that is different from others in her community – "I try to stay real to where I came from. We've all come from the same struggle, and I try to say that their life path is not worse, and no *better* than my life path."

Whereas Talia struggled to distinguish herself from her family and home community, Amy struggles to "keep it real." She directs her frustrations not at her family, but at her middle-class peers. She says "not a day goes by" that she doesn't think about the ways in which she is different from other college students, "Classwise I'm different, racewise I'm different...priorities I'm different. I have to balance getting my work done and going to work." After a bad experience with a more privileged roommate, Amy is very cautious about getting too close to her peers. She does not want to waste time on people who do not share her political and cultural understandings – "if you're uncomfortable with racial issues, if you're not even open to hear about them, we're not going to work out!" When asked why this was so important to her, Amy explained, "Because it makes me more comfortable with myself. I'm able to be myself, you know...I don't want to have to explain everything, like why I can't afford to go to the movies." Notice that Amy's real "self" is rooted in her home community, and is not reflected by her college participation.

Amy's purpose in going to college is not to "get away" or "access the middle class." Rather, "the purpose for me to get through school is, I think, by bettering myself I'm able to bring back something to my family." This is a common theme of the Loyalist story. Going to school is another way of continuing the struggle against oppression; it is not a way to reinvent the self. Amy also has a fairly sophisticated understanding of the intersectionality of her class and race identities, and how they operate in a nexus of inequality. First and foremost, she argues, she identifies as *Chicana*, but she concedes that she cannot separate race and class in practice, only in theory because "on a day to day basis, my class has so much to do with what I identify with. They kind of go hand in hand, you know." Rather than feeling shame, Amy is "deeply appreciative" of her working-class *Chicana* identity – "I appreciate the struggle, you know. Some people I know get disempowered by how *hard* it is, but I gain strength from that...You just keep fighting. And that has so much to do with class! Not just race, or anything else."

Like Talia, Amy suffered bias and ostracism in elementary school because of her subaltern position, "If you don't have the nice shoes, if you don't have the nice clothes, and the cute hair, then you're gonna be made fun of and ostracized." In her case, she got the brunt of the double stigma of being "a poor Mexican." She refuses to let this affect her identity, however. Rather than internalize these classist and racist biases, Amy ignores them. She knows that these are biases and she knows where they come from – they are attacks in an on-going war between the haves and the have-nots ("it's not that people are lazy, it's that they are oppressed"). She also knows where she stands, where she wants to stand, in this war – "It's always a fine line to walk. I'm always remembering where I stand and, you know? I'm just constantly questioned. But that's the best thing about school; it keeps me humble." Thus, rather than using school as a way to climb out of the working class, Amy uses school to remind her of the fault lines of US society, and to keep her cognizant of where she needs to be. As for her future, Amy does not want to become part of the middle class and she does not want a middle class job. She would like to teach in her home community or be a coordinator at a non-profit organization.

Responding to families in trouble

Renegades may want to climb out of the working class, and they may hold unflattering pictures of their families and their home communities, but this does not mean that they sever all ties with their families. Talia, for example, kept in close contact with her younger brother and sister. In fact, the issue of younger siblings sheds further light on these accounts. Whereas Loyalists like Amy, and Miriam below, were careful to use college as a way to bring back specific knowledge and material resources to their home communities and families, Renegades like Talia, and Isabel below, were more likely to engage in a form of cultural patronage (to which their families were often greatly resistant). Both Miriam and Isabel had younger siblings in need. How they dealt with these brothers and sisters is instructive.

Like Talia and Amy, Miriam and Isabel faced both relative and absolute poverty in their childhoods, although the particular form of the experience operated in a racial field. I have chosen to compare Miriam and Isabel to tease out the racial component in what are otherwise remarkably similar stories. Miriam, who is White, grew up in the country in a very patriarchal family, with eight younger siblings. Isabel, who is Latina, grew up in the city in a family with strong traditional gender norms, the oldest of four children. Both families went through incredibly difficult times. Both families were very religious. Miriam's father, a boilermaker by trade and sometime salvage man, held very strict rules about the proper place of women in society. Miriam and her sisters were expected to do all of the domestic work alongside their long-suffering mother. Since they often lived off the grid, without electricity or running water, these domestic chores were onerous and time-consuming. Miriam left home when she was sixteen when a neighbor notified Child Protective Services of the ways in which the children were being raised. The youngest siblings were all in foster care at the time of the interview, Miriam's oldest sister, now an adult, chose to return to her parents.

Isabel's father was not a strong presence in her family, although she too grew up among traditional gendered expectations (which she understands as reflecting Mexican culture). Her parents both came to the United States as seasonal laborers. Isabel herself began working at a very young age, under the table when necessary. Isabel at first rebelled against the strict morality of her family, joining a Latina gang while in junior high. But she turned her life when she began a new school and made a decision to become a success. She had always known she was poor, and felt like a second-class citizen (because of her race), and wanted to erase the feelings of shame and embarrassment that had haunted her throughout her childhood. In this, she is strikingly similar to Talia. Isabel's Renegade story is different than Talia's, however, in that she must deal with the contradiction of wanting to leave behind people whom she finds dysfunctional (for the same reasons as Talia) but without "acting White" or leaving behind her cultural heritage. She often blames the *machismo* of Mexican culture for her mother's subordinate status, deftly linking dysfunctionality to race without seeming to embrace Whiteness. Sometimes, she ascribes her family's continuing struggles with their adoption of a hedonistic present-orientated American value system.

Both Miriam and Isabel have younger siblings. How do Loyalist and Renegade narratives explain the proper relationship between the upwardly mobile and those that are still living the life that has now become the past? Loyalists tend to reject the way I framed this issue in the first place. Although Miriam has "left" her family for the

moment, she has surely not “left them behind,” although she struggles on a daily basis with the guilt of her good fortune. Renegades, on the other hand, have a peculiar narrative of patronage. Having discovered the key to success, they are eager to pass this knowledge on to younger siblings, who often resist being cast as the returning native’s charity case.

The most frustrating aspect of Isabel’s life, as narrated, was this resistance. At an early age, Isabel defied gender expectations (her rejection of *machismo* culture) and took on a leading role in the household, shepherding her mother through relief agencies and confrontations with English-speaking authorities. Despite her brief adolescent rebellion, Isabel sees herself as the backbone, counsellor, and moral exemplar to her family. Isabel is sad that her younger siblings do not share her ambitions – “they don’t have that in them, they have nothing in them, that little seed I always had.” She understands that her going away to college may appear as betrayal, but she insists that that type of “selfishness” is admirable. Sometimes she wonders if she should even continue trying to help “if every time I try to help they end up stepping on me – they don’t care about my happiness at all.” Extremely self-disciplined (Isabel juggles not only a full-time education and full-time job, but plans for law school and a new husband), Isabel sometimes fears she may have to move away from all those who have a bad influence on her, including her mother and siblings. “I guess college has made me a better person – not one that my family necessarily likes, but I like it, I love it.”

Miriam does not see herself as a role model. She has struggled with the decision to stay in college or work enough so that she can “adopt” her four youngest siblings who are in foster care together. She understands that, by going to college now, she may be in a better position to take care of them in the long run. This has not been an easy decision to make, however, and she continues to struggle with it. The fact that the foster mother is kind and allows Miriam frequent visits has allayed some of her fears.

Although Miriam suffered many of the same embarrassments as a child as Isabel (remembering the shame of using food stamps, for example), and she harbors resentment towards her father for his bullying ways, she does not read dysfunction into the script. She is proud of the fact that she knows how to survive with few resources – “I really like the fact that I can do the dirty jobs. Does that make sense? I’m really proud of that. I cut firewood, and we made a living from it! That fact that I’ve washed clothes in a creek...the fact that I can do that, even though I know a lot of other people would look down on that.” Because Miriam has not adopted the dominant society’s value system, she can retain pride in aspects of her culture in ways that Isabel cannot. There was no discussion in Miriam’s story of encouraging her siblings to go to college. That decision is not tied up with one’s moral worth, and so is not something that Miriam finds essential in the same way as Isabel does. Besides, she acknowledges, she was lucky to have gone. Very bright, and a great autodidact (Miriam read all the greats of English Literature as a teenager when she found a stack of discarded books), Miriam knows that not everyone (younger siblings included) will have the same chances as she did. The fact that there are still people out there who must live without indoor plumbing bothers Miriam on a societal level, not a personal one. Like all Loyalists, Miriam understands this as an issue of social stratification, inequality, and oppression, not individual choice or dysfunction.

Responding to Racial Oppression and the Politics of Skin

John and Calder are both charming, courteous young men. Both come from very large families – John was the middle of seven children, Calder had three siblings and several very close cousins. John’s parents emigrated from Mexico in the 1970s while Calder is both Native American and Mexican, and he strongly identifies as Indian. Both young men were acutely aware of racial oppression in the US, but they handled it quite differently. John, a Renegade, and “the darkest-skinned” of his “mother’s children”, believed that moving up in class would erase the impact of racism. He believed that becoming middle class would act as a whitener, giving examples of popular and powerful men of color whom he believed have literally escaped their skin by becoming successful. Calder, a Loyalist, was fiercely proud of his ethnic heritage and had the greatest resistance to the hidden curriculum of assimilation operating in the educational system. Their contrasting stories give us the final insight into the dilemmas of education for the working class, as played out in the politics of skin.

A constant theme for John was overcoming racial stigma through social and financial success. This appears to be a long-standing story in his personal development. For example, he stressed that he was to be called by the Anglo name of John, not the Spanish *Juan*. His grandfather gave him the name John, specifically to distinguish him from the many *Juans* of his community. As the darkest-skinned of his many siblings, John felt the internalized racism of his mother, believing that she held the lowest expectations for him. John’s dark skin marked him from an early age, “and so my whole thing was to prove to my Mom that I was smarter than her children.” Note that John did not say “her other children,” but rather “her children.” John often stressed how isolated and overlooked he felt in his family. Perhaps some of this has to do with being a middle child, but the account given by John used skin color as an explanation. At another point, he goes further:

I wanted to prove to my mom that, and it's stupid, but to prove to her that I was better than her other kids, that I was smarter than them, that I could do more things than they could, you know, because, I don't know, they were always like, like my older brother he always got everything, he's lighter than me, he's very light skinned, he's almost white, you know? He always got everything -- so for me it was always to prove myself to people. Of my worth, you know? And now, now my brother tries to give me words of wisdom and it's just like, it goes in one ear and out the other, because a lot of stuff he tells me -- it's almost sad. Now a lot of people are proud of me and I think that's cool but I really don't, it's almost like, I don't know, it's kinda frustrating to hear them, they're always like, well, if you ever need anything just tell us, you know, we are so proud of you and I was so rejected when I was younger so it's like where were you when I needed you? And I don't really need you now.

John was angry and bitter towards his family when I interviewed him. He was angry that his mother claimed pride in him once he began college, “My mom used to tell her friends, ‘my kid is in college’. Like she was putting them through school. Like she had helped me get here and all that! I used to tell her not to tell anyone I was her son. Tell them about your other kids, huh? Tell them he is over their smoking weed with his friends.” It is impossible to tell, without much more extensive interviewing with parents and siblings, whether Renegades reject their families in reaction, or whether family rejection to Renegades results from prior attitudes of Renegades. Many Renegades I encountered have felt rejected by their families, but it is likely that

rejection, if this is not too strong a word, is mutually reinforcing, as well as the result of many misunderstandings. Having this feeling, however, makes it much easier to “get educated out” of one’s class and community.

Throughout the interview John expressed disdain and contempt for the working class, adopting as his motto, “*tell me who you hang out with and I’ll tell you who you are.*” In college, John was quick to pledge a fraternity. The particular fraternity that he joined was predominantly White and well-heeled. John preferred hanging out with his brothers, even though they engaged in a great deal of racist stereotyping and offensive behavior, because these were scions of the elite. Although comments about “dumb Mexicans” and illegal immigrants bothered him, he was happy to play the token minority if it would help him climb up the social ladder.

How John dealt with the racism he experienced at college and among his fraternity brothers is enlightening. For John, any amount of discomfort he experienced now was offset by his expectations of future gain. John believed in the American Dream. He believed very strongly that he would eventually surpass (measured financially and socially) his fraternity brothers in the same way he had already surpassed his brothers by blood. In the process of social mobility, his dark skin would lose its meaning. This was, in many ways, the entire point of social mobility for John. Note the consonance of color and class in the following narration: “See, the way I talk to my friends... yeah, White boy, you are wealthier than I am, you have more money than I do, but I guarantee you that I will make more money than you, you know like what I am saying? I will have made more than they will and that is just a matter of fact and they know it.”

John did not expect this success to come easy – he was willing to work at it, as he had been doing ever since he could remember. John blamed his parents and other working-class people, especially working-class Latino/as for not getting ahead. Like Talia, he understood poverty to be a result of indecision, fatalism, and simply “not wanting it enough.” Like Isabel, he saw himself as a role model for younger siblings, even as he simultaneously viewed them in a condescending and patronizing manner. For John, the politics of class and social mobility were inextricably tied up with the politics of skin. The only way to overcome racial stereotypes, to make his dark skin *not matter*, was to become part of the establishment. How different really is this story from that found in the myriad “pulled himself up by his bootstraps” accounts of American culture? The idea that if you dream it, you can achieve it? That success goes to the willing? John’s story illustrates, I believe, the unspoken costs of the American Dream.

If John does succeed, he will be cut off from his roots. Whether White society will ever fully recognize him as one of its own remains an open question. Calder’s story illustrates the opposite pitfall for working-class college students – the possible dangers inherent in choosing *not to succeed*. Calder, a Loyalist, is most concerned with resisting assimilation. The very path that John eagerly embraces is the path Calder fears the most.

When I first encountered Calder I was struck by the fact that, although exceptionally friendly and courteous, he chose to remove himself from the rest of the class, preferring to sit in the back rows with a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes. Often I would catch him staring out the window. But I quickly learned that this was not because of disinterest, as he would raise insightful (and quite critical) points seemingly out of nowhere. As I got to know Calder better I came to see this as a metaphor for his entire relationship with academia – his extreme caution towards being drawn into what he perceived as a White bourgeois community.

From the very beginning of our interview, Calder identified as poor and Indian, and expressed a great deal of pride in both. Within the first five minutes, Calder had managed to raise issues of race, class, government policies of genocide, and the criminal justice system (Calder's father died of a heroin overdose). He was also quick to give a reason why he was in college – because he was good in sports, happened to be smart, and figured he could keep playing sports if he stayed in school. Besides, he had firsthand experience of the types of bad jobs available to him otherwise. The determined linearity of John's story had no parallel in Calder's account. Nor was there any parallel with John's story of moving out and away from family and community. On the contrary, Calder had managed to pull in several relatives with him – although only one, a younger brother, was also attending college, five brothers and cousins were living on the same street (or in the same house) in the town in which his college was located. Unlike John who eschewed Latino/a clubs and joined a White fraternity instead, Calder remained aloof from everyone except members of the Native American Students' Alliance.

Calder tries to present college as “no big deal.” It is, in some ways, just another job, another way to pass the time until something better comes along. When he first went away his mother drove him to campus, dropped him off and his mattress, and quickly left. There were no emotional farewells because, in many ways, Calder never really left. Even though he acknowledges that several of his friends from before college are in jail, working bad jobs, “in the ghetto or on crack,” he seems to pass no judgments on them, nor does he see himself as doing anything special or more admirable than they. In this, he is very similar to Amy and Miriam who made the same point. Where people end up is as much a matter of luck (especially in evading the disciplinary side of the class/race system) than it is to hard work or desire.

In no way did Calder try to deny any of his identities. His biggest criticism of college was the lack of diversity and the silence around issues of race and class – “I was just thinking it would be better if everybody could at least just put it out there because if higher education isn't going to confront racism then what is?” he asks. Calder would prefer to hear people's racist comments and stereotypes rather than pretend they don't exist. He continues,

If you're going to lead, then lead! If people don't want to talk about race, make them talk about it! Grab one of them and ask them what do you think of this? Don't just ask a Black guy or me about slavery or me about, you know, reservations, or the barrio because they think I'm Mexican or something like that - everyone thinks that only these three people can answer those questions, but you need to hear everything from everyone. If illusions are going to be broken then they need to be addressed. We need people to talk about them. Ain't no other way around it.

Notice that Calder, like Amy and Miriam before him, has a systemic understanding of race and class and the connections between the two. I wondered where this came from. For Calder, it may have been his grandfather who sat him down when he was a young child and explained to him the facts about White expansionism and genocide. He realized that the stories he learned at home were not the stories he was told in school and this has made him deeply suspicious ever since of official knowledge. Calder's school career, as he presented it, was one long struggle balancing the need for education with the need to remain skeptical and aloof. At one point he had considered dropping out because he felt to continue would be a betrayal:

I was getting all this history about westward expansion and it was eating at me and eating at me, and I was just thinking, “why am I even part of this institution? Why do I even want to be a part of it?” Part of it is just like me joining in and being a traitor and I just wanted to go back and be among my people, and drink some beer.

The question about the function and necessity of college continued to plague Calder throughout this educational career. He adamantly rejected training for any type of managerial position, as did all of the Loyalists I encountered. He did not want to become better than anyone else, he rejected the idea of “being educated out” of his class, and he certainly did not want to erase his racial identity. Thus, although he participated in college, Calder, like other Loyalists, may end up not benefiting materially from his college degree. In point of fact, Calder chose to work with Native Americans as a teacher’s aide on a reservation – a job with little prestige or recompense, but inwardly gratifying to a person like Calder.

You only get to the head of an institution as much as the institution gets into your head. (Newman 2004: 219)

A few points can be drawn from the preceding accounts. First, the stories confirm the “divided loyalties” and “dilemmas of class” that pervade the accounts of working-class academics and findings of educational researchers. Second, the stories reflect fundamentally different strategies for dealing with the dilemmas of class. The rest of this discussion will focus on the implications of these different strategies for the students and for society.

I have entitled this article “telling stories of oppression and dysfunction” to stress the dichotomous response to potential social mobility of working-class college students. Renegades, as typified by Talia, Isabel, and John, tell stories that mirror society’s prejudices and beliefs about the poor. “We live, in America, with so many platitudes about motivation and self-reliance and individualism – and myths spun from them, like those of Horatio Alger – that we find it hard to accept the fact that they are serious nonsense” (Rose 1989: 47). Like the students in Brantlinger’s (1993) study, Renegades blame their own families and communities for being “dysfunctional” – i.e., for not clearly embracing middle-class values, norms and behaviors. This does not make them “traitors” to their class, however. As Isabel’s story illustrates, Renegades very much want their families to succeed, they just believe the best way to do this is to become something else. In one sense, Renegades are idealists - “Often their earnestness for improvement shows itself as an urge to act like some people in the middle-classes; but this is not a political betrayal: it is much nearer to a mistaken idealism” (Hoggart 1957: 246).

Why do Renegades tell a story of dysfunction? Unlike many of the Loyalists I encountered, Renegades have not developed systemic understandings. “Unable to relate analytically the macropolitical to the micropolitical, I, like many young people, blamed my family for everything, believing that they were deliberately holding me back in life” (Morley 1997: 110). Renegades are more likely to believe in the reality of the American Dream. They are, as Hoggart (1957: 240) eloquently notes, “self-conscious and yet not self-aware.” The invisibility of a class discourse, particularly in the United States, makes personal problems, like family “dysfunction”, much more salient (Jensen 2004: 172). This salience means that dysfunction is *relatable* – it can be told as a convincing story, that most people, including middle-class people, will understand. Furthermore, the studied linearity of these narratives mirror the types of

stories middle-class people tell about their own occupational choices and careers (Linde 1993:129).

Interestingly, even though Renegades lack a discourse of class (in a political sense), they may be more likely to recognize (even over-recognize?) the existence of other structural barriers like racism. Indeed, John's story hints that Renegade strategies may be an immediately effective means of responding to racism ("the only way I can succeed is to become like them"). In Price's (2000: 186) study, a young Black man named Jeff seems engaged in a very similar response, "If it takes me to change my culture, to change my speech, to get ahead in life, to get that big house with that white picket fence, I'm going to do it."

Implications

How do we evaluate these stories of desired assimilation? We might call them "bad stories" if we measure them against a standard of political viability – if, that is, we are looking for organic intellectuals from the working class (Villanueva, 1993). But they may also be "bad stories" from a non-political, individual standpoint. Renegade stories fail to provide a convincing explanation for inequality; lead the narrator to uproot him or herself (psychologically, emotionally, and physically); and provide no basis for understanding future "failures." In other words, Renegades who succeed often lose their families in the process and Renegades who fail (believe they) have only themselves to blame. This is exactly what comes through in accounts of other working-class academics. Irvin Peckham (in Jensen 2004: 179) has called the price of success "erasure" –

A few of us manage to break with our origins, denying our 'incorrectness' or the 'incorrect' class into which we were born. I do not know how others manage the break but I erased my incorrectness by infrequently going home. In time, I more or less forgot who my parents and siblings were. Although I hesitate to admit it, I have to tell you that the only time my parents and I and my brother and my sister have all been together since I left home was for my parents' silver wedding anniversary. I suspect the next occasion will be a funeral. That's called erasure.

In the earlier British study discussed above, Jackson and Marsden (1962) found that most of the educated children of the working class never went home again and switched their political allegiances from the Labor Party to the Tory Party. Compared to their parents (with whom they were not in much contact), they were also more likely to blame the poor themselves for their poverty (Jackson and Marsden *ibidem*: 184).

This would not be true for Loyalists, however. Loyalists tell a fundamentally different story that is rooted in a systemic understanding of class oppression and its connections with race. Loyalists embrace a working-class identity as a matter of pride and political defiance. Theirs is a "good" story if measured for political viability, working-class solidarity, and individual cohesion, although it is arguably a tough story to maintain in the light of the dominant ideology of social mobility and American classlessness. It is also a story unlikely to yield worldly success.

The Loyalist story requires a delicate balancing act – how do you stay true to your roots at the same time you are going to college, a recognized path of upward social mobility? How to reconcile the two? "Together, my father and mother amalgamated seven years of education in Mexico and worked at minimum-wage jobs here in the United States. They experienced degradation on a daily basis. I with my

books and my cap and gown, represented the same people who oppressed them” (Almanza 2003: 160). One way is to disentangle cultural values from occupation and class position. “My family, my friends who are poor, and my children and I are families of love and support. It is hunger and exhaustion and pain that I want to leave behind, not the people I treasure so much” (Mitchell 2003: 118). But how is this possible over time, and over generations? At some point, the educated working-class person either will have to face the fact that he or she has entered the middle class or will have had to willfully choose working-class jobs, in spite of educational credentials. A great deal of concern of working-class academics today is the disconnect their children feel from the working class. In some ways, then, the Loyalist story may only be a postponement of a larger political question. Namely, what side are you on in the class struggle? And where does the middle class fit in? Historically, the middle class has been supportive agents of capital. But this need not be true. There is no reason that the more privileged cadre of workers we call the middle class cannot align with the working class. So here is the second option for working-class college students. Loyalist stories may be the beginning of this realignment.

What needs to be recognized by educators, theorists, and policymakers, is the dilemma success poses for some working-class students. Not only are they in danger of becoming alienated from their roots, but they must also deal with the possibility of being perceived as “tokenistic proof of meritocracy” and the American Dream, the fact that their academic success “serves to underscore the unworthiness of those who fail” (Reay 1998). On the other hand, there is potential for radical realignments. If Loyalists can succeed academically and socially, and at the same time continue to tell stories that enact working-class identities and politics, academia itself has the potential to be transformed from a training ground for capital’s agents to a true “practice of freedom” (Hooks 1994).

Listening to the different accounts working-class people tell of their experiences in and reactions to college and the promise of upward social mobility tells us a great deal about how the trope of meritocracy functions in our society as well as how class continues to matter. The different accounts mark out the importance of stories and meaning-making to the project of class formation and reconstruction. They show us that working-class people are under great pressure to assimilate in order to succeed, that this assimilation in practice means conforming to certain bourgeois cultural norms, behaviors and expectations, as well as “leaving behind” those who do not share these norms, behaviors, and expectations. Assimilation also requires a particular kind of story, one in which the working class is vilified as a dysfunctional other and education is understood as a path *out* of one’s original class location. Poverty and class inequality generally are then justified as the results of a properly functioning meritocratic system, whereby all those with the “right stuff” (right values, right commitment to hard work and planning for the future, right level of intelligence) get ahead and those without do not. Those who do not get ahead have only themselves to blame and should be properly ashamed. This is the dominant story told of those who “pulled themselves up by their bootstraps.” If it sounds uncharitable, it is. Retelling this story to explain their own lives and those of their families, as Renegades do, is an act of internalized classism. But we should not fault those who tell this story – it is hard to resist, it is everywhere, it is in every aspirational poster proclaiming “anyone can be president!”, and every exhortation to “not be a dummy; stay in school!” It is in every show depicting the “ignorant redneck,” every story of the “welfare queen”, every “rags to riches” film about the kid who made it out of the ghetto. It is our American story. Generally, we do not pause to look at what

effect this story has on those who get left behind. Listening to Renegade accounts gives us a good glimpse of the psychic costs of this story.

Against the weight of this cultural juggernaut we call the story of the American Dream, there is an alternative story being told. Loyalist accounts also acknowledge the call to assimilation but they strenuously reject it. Their stories describe the obstacles placed in the way of poor people and people of color. Their stories celebrate working-class values of solidarity and acknowledge that the bourgeoisie does not have a monopoly on intelligence. Although educationally successful themselves, they resist the siren call of believing themselves somehow “special” and gifted, more intelligent and thus more deserving of success than their families and communities. Instead, they describe themselves as lucky, the few that the system overlooked and who were let through. Along with this luck comes a special responsibility to those who were not so fortunate. I want to leave this section with some words spoken by Tillie Olsen (Edwards 1995: 357) to a first-generation Chicana professor who regretted no longer being working class:

You are the working class that your working-class parents fought into being, believed could be. To call education a privilege, to call development of self, of capacity – to call those the province of the middle class is a distortion of history. You are the first generation of your family to be able to claim this birthright. You have not left your family behind, you carry them with you. You are committed to the true potentiality of your students. You are doing your work serving and honoring the working class.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented the experiences and class identity formation of working-class college students in college. Although all working-class students experience college as culturally different from their home cultures, I have demonstrated that students develop fundamentally different strategies for navigating these cultural differences based on the strength or weakness of their structural understandings of class and inequality in US society. I have presented three sets of paired stories showing the opposing strategic orientations of what I call *Loyalists* and *Renegades*. These orientations exist across race and gender, although their articulations are often inflected by race and gender positions. Students with strong structural understandings develop Loyalist strategies by which they retain close ties to their home culture. Students with more individual understandings of poverty and inequality develop Renegade strategies by which they actively seek immersion in the middle-class culture of the college. In the first paired story I show how Loyalists understand poverty in structural terms (here, Amy describes through the lens of race and racism) whereas Renegades tend to blame the poor themselves. The lesson of the second set of paired stories is that Renegades respond to families in trouble in ways that reinforce the distance and alienation between them, whereas Loyalists are heavily invested in “keeping it real” and remaining tied in to the family, despite individual success. The final story focuses on the discourse of race and how Loyalists and Renegades engage in fundamentally different stories about the relationship between skin color, racial identity, and inequality. Whereas Renegades may see upward social mobility as a way of escaping racism, Loyalists shift the focus to inequality and cultural identity. Finally, I have argued that Renegade strategies for navigating class cultures come at a high a risk for the individuals engaged in them, their families, and our dreams for a more just and equitable society.

Endnotes

- i I am not suggesting the existence of “pure” Loyalists or Renegades. In fact, I have also uncovered a third “Double Agent” response, which manifests itself in a chameleon-like ability to freely move between cultures, and a general resistance to making any choices that will impinge upon this freedom. As I believe that all the Double Agents I encountered were (a) unusually charismatic; and (b) tending towards the Loyalist or Renegade pole when pushed, I do not include their fairly unique stories here. Furthermore, I believe that one’s orientation can and often does shift over time, depending on one’s access to particular stories, role models, and explanations, and in response to particular experiences.
- ii For general discussions of Social Reproduction Theory, see Foley (1990) and MacLeod (1995).
- iii Not necessarily the top of their class (although some were), but at least average and without fears of being placed on academic probation.
- iv These particular examples are fairly typical of the accounts I collected although, in many ways, they were also the most personal and sometimes emotional. I believe this was a function of these students’ greater familiarity with me. Other students interviewed were found through snowball sampling and flyers posted around campus.

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