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Introduction: Reclaiming Class

Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America

Until the missing story of ourselves is told, nothing besides told can suffice /
We shall go on quietly craving it / In the missing story of ourselves can be
found all other missing stories.

—Laura Riding Jackson

IN THE FALL of 1999, on a crisp, beautiful afternoon in upstate New York, a group of educators, legislators, social-service providers, and welfare activists met for a conference at Hamilton College.¹ Our goal was to discuss and enrich our understanding of the plight of welfare-recipient students in a post-welfare-reform era. One of the keynote speakers for the event was the economist Teresa Amott, whose years of research and publication had guided many of our own professional careers.² Before she shared her thoughts on poverty and welfare reform in the United States, Amott told the rapt audience a story that emanated from the core of her experience. Recalling her activist roots in the 1960s, she spoke of attending a welfare-rights demonstration as a college student after spending months organizing for legislative change. At the rally a *Boston Globe* reporter approached Amott, the only academic in the group, and earnestly asked: “How much do they *really* need to live on?” In her sincerity and enthusiasm, Amott began to answer but was abruptly silenced as one of her new welfare-recipient colleagues cautioned, “You answer that question when you have to live on the answer!” Amott assured us that she had never forgotten that moment, and it was clear to all in attendance that her colleague’s message had shaped the entire body of Amott’s finely nuanced, respectful, and powerful work.

Many of us attended the conference as intergenerationally poor women who were engaged in academic scholarship, as poverty-class

academics attempting to negotiate dual, and often conflicting, class identities on a daily basis. In Amott's simple anecdote we recognized a complex and powerful truth: that for far too long we had been asked to live with shame and silence; that far too often our lives and the lives of those we loved had been reduced to little more than the object of scholarly investigation; and that, like Amott's colleagues, we had in that process allowed ourselves to be spoken for and about while denied a voice in venues of power and authority. We vowed at that moment to try to use our burgeoning, yet still often tenuous, authority to reclaim our voices and our stories in the classroom and in a world that both denies us and marks us with misinterpretations of our class and value.

This collection of essays represents the fulfillment of that vow. It was written by poor mothers and daughters who, ironically, found and then often learned to erase their voices in the post-secondary academy. It represents, in many cases, the first stirrings of stories that have been heretofore repressed, denied, erased, and dismissed in society and in the academy. We articulate and theorize what the poet Laura Riding Jackson calls "the missing stories of ourselves" to rename and reclaim our complex relationship to the academic classroom and to prolific misrepresentations of our own class identities. These are powerful and poignant stories that press for a hearing.

We are women who have known profound poverty—as children and as adults—and we, like the vast majority of our sisters in poverty, bear the material, social, psychic, and physical marks of our poverty-class origins. Our perceptions of the world and our actions have also been positively influenced by our cultures of origin. Having roots in poverty has both hurt us and provided us with strength, community, resiliency, and vision. Some of us are no longer experiencing the hardships of economic poverty, but we identify our culture of origin as the poverty class and remain grounded in that identity as surely as members of the middle class maintain their own class identities despite economic fluctuations.

The women who have contributed to this collection are also associated with higher education and view its structure, culture, and policies from the vantage point of poverty. Although we recognize that education is not a unilateral solution to poverty, we also know that we have survived and positively changed our lives and those of our families through the process and products of post-secondary education. Most of us survived in an environment that sought to exclude, punish, and vil-

ify us because we were poor. We are living proof of both the pejorative power of public policy based on stereotypes of poor women and the liberating and revolutionary potential of higher education.

We are deeply indebted to those working-class scholars who have so brilliantly, and so bravely, come before us to articulate the anomie and sense of dislocation they experienced in concert with the power and privilege associated with higher education. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb in *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1973) and Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey in *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working-Class* (1996, 4) recognized that, for working-class men, “the conflict inherent in the hierarchy of the class system becomes internalized within the individual, upwardly mobile person.” Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth Fay further explore this sense of dislocation and shame in *Working Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory* (1993). Focusing on the experiences of women marked as working class—often by virtue of their parents’ economic and social positions and not their own—contributors to this collection reflected their experiences of being hired to do more work for less reward (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, 16); of lacking material, emotional, and financial support that would otherwise enhance their careers (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, 18); of taking on greater work loads than their middle-class peers so they could “prove to themselves and to others that they are worthy” (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, 17); and of being silenced by the “singular [middle-class] voice of the institution” (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, 7). The essays in Tokarczyk and Fay’s ground-breaking collection also reflect that working-class female academics suffer the price of class “transformation,” that they often believe themselves to be imposters (a move that can undermine their own success), and that they engage in self-hatred that makes them complicit in their own oppression (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993, 51, 55).³

In addition, poor women in the academy are often disenfranchised materially. Working at minimum wage, lacking health care, caring for children on our own, securing necessary social-service benefits, and attending school full time renders poor female academics silent and exhausted. Wearing the “wrong” clothes, having bad teeth, not being able to afford expensive research materials or to attend important academic conferences, coping with public censure and vilification, and stumbling with new language and methods evoke feelings of shame and guilt, again generating a sense of fear and alienation.

In C. L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Law's *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Classes* (1995), contributors also evocatively described the psychic pain of embodying "the oxymoronic phrase: working-class academic." In this collection, working-class academics speak of feeling forced to "shift [their] allegiance[s]" (Law 1995, 3) and of interacting with the academy and their families of origin in ways that produce pain and dislocation. Law laments that through the process of education she "suffered a loss my present context doesn't even recognize as a loss," concluding, "my education has destroyed something even while it has been recreating me in its own image . . . my success is always tempered by the guilt I feel in having chosen a life path that has made me virtually unrecognizable to my kin" (Law 1995, 2). She adds, "While one can appear to be a native in an adopted land, one is always haunted by voices from the other side of the border. These are narratives of profound conflict, of persons feeling out of place in both worlds" (Law 1995, 7). It is the unrealized dream of these scholars "not to embarrass family but to reclaim our past lives with dignity" (Law 1995, 4).

Our contributors expressed similarly profound, complex, and raw feelings about the prices they paid, and continue to pay, for accessing the fruits of education. Added to the general malaise expressed by working-class scholars is the very real poverty-bashing that poor women experience in the media, from public officials, and, crucially, at the hands of "well-meaning" professors, administrators, and peers. All too often, and increasingly in the past decade, the term "poor woman" in the United States has been yoked to images of "broodsows,"⁴ "Welfare Queens,"⁵ "unfit parents who view their children as nothing more than increases in welfare checks,"⁶ "alligators," and "wolves who eat their young."⁷ Poor women are feared, blamed, mocked, ridiculed, and punished in U.S. media and society, and hence in public policy.⁸ Indeed, several contributors noted their experiences of being judged and feared for being "less than working-class," as their marital status and maternal bodies collided with racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in the rhetoric of poverty-bashing both in and out of the academy.⁹

In response, poor female academics have often remained silent. Indeed, poor women learn at a very early age that their stories are dangerous and obscene. As children, we are daily reminded not to share the details of our lives for fear of public sanction, and as we grow we are

well tutored in shame, guilt, resentment, envy, and self-hatred—all of silence's handmaidens. These lessons are reinforced as our families are marked with debilitating tropes and punished with policy meant to control and contain our "dangerous" and "pathological" bodies.

One avenue by which some poor women transform their lives is through higher education, but even that pathway often is not benign. Our lives continue to be discounted and devalued in the post-secondary academy. In sometimes elaborate acts of confession, poor women are forced to publicly reject their cultures of origin to gain entry into academic institutions and to be viewed as worthy, "deserving" students and "legitimate" scholars. When we began our educational journeys, many of us believed (perhaps naively) that the academy was a place where we could be freed of class stigmas, a place where we would be judged on our own scholarship and hard work. Yet the process we continue to experience of moving from poverty to a professional class has been and remains full of twists and turns, carrying with it examples of rejection and loss, oppression and denial. Rather than being cleanly transformed by educational advancement and achievement, we were simultaneously erased and made painfully visible with poverty-class markers. Education does, however, provide the means for many women to secure economic solvency and intellectual fulfillment. It offers hope, even as that hope is complicated by pedagogies and policies that are ultimately detrimental to poor women.

In the United States, the standard academic lens through which poverty is examined is that of middle-class culture, which posits an adversarial stance toward the poor. When poverty is being examined, for instance, poor people are seldom called on as expert witnesses; academicians and the media rely instead on interpretations of poverty made by middle- and upper-income observers. Often in academic inquiry, more validity or status is accorded to the "disinterested" observer than to the active participant. In the case of poverty and the evaluation of higher education, this practice has too often resulted in a false inference that there is only one truth, one lens, by which the efficacy of higher education can be analyzed: the lens of the middle-class perspective. As a result, the stories of poor women are controlled or revised to conform to the middle-class lens. Too often, when poor women critique our class system and its barriers to mobility, we are further marginalized by being labeled "ungrateful," which very clearly

displays that privilege is the basis for respect and access to public discourse. These moves erase the complexities of poverty and prohibit firsthand poverty-class analyses of the American condition.

When poor women do find the energy and courage to speak, they are often silenced by the fear of reprisal. This collection is a case in point. Poor women writing these essays struggled to include pivotal examples of abuse and domestic violence, unfair treatment at the hands of educational administrators, and damaging practices experienced in courtrooms, welfare offices, and social-service agencies. Ultimately, much in those sections was removed—literally excised—to avert the possibility of litigation, even though irrefutable documentation exists to validate the claims.

So, many of us learn to live a lie and to pretend that we are not poverty class. Those who are both “fortunate” enough to pass successfully and willing to bear the psychic cost of such deception throughout our undergraduate and graduate educations must continue to do so to perform our authority as professionals throughout our careers. Rita Felski points to Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1987) as evidence of the long-term cost that passing as middle-class can entail:

In spite of Steedman’s movement out of the working-class she remains haunted by the psychic markings from her childhood, conscious of the gulf between her background and that of her upper-middle class friends. Yet she cannot simply celebrate her origins: indeed they stand for a material and psychic impoverishment she is glad to have escaped. (Felski 2000, 12)

Forced to pass in order to survive and denied the opportunity to celebrate and take solace in our communities of origin, poor female scholars and professionals become homeless.

In this collection we begin to break this cycle, and to rupture the ubiquitous middle-class lens, by allowing poor female academics to reclaim their truths. We tell and theorize our stories, delineating the class barriers we encountered in an effort to demonstrate the effects that public policy and sentiment have on our lives. We offer analyses of the academic systems that marginalize poor women and provide counter-narratives and policy recommendations that can ameliorate the class bias of academe and allow academic institutions to fulfill the promise of providing affordable access for all classes of Americans.

As this collection illustrates, despite the enormous risk inherent in resistance, poverty-class academicians make sense of their lives, marginality, and liminality by using their experiences of class in ways that are both startling and productive. In being allowed to reclaim both our class and our experiences in the classroom, poor women reveal new insights around the ontology of class marking, resistance, and transcendence. Here, to borrow from the feminist credo, the personal becomes political, as in the process of coming to voice class is re-envisioned as psychic, economic, social, cultural, corporeal, and semiotic.

Our stories are heartfelt and impassioned, but they are not unique. We offer them as representative examples of the experiences of poor women in higher education who have been, and continue to be, denied the opportunity to speak, even while resisting and pushing against that prohibition. It is our hope that these stories will affect legislation, and educational and public policy, that for so long have operated and been justified without our perspectives; create a new politics of recognition that is immediate and resonant; and clear a space for the articulation and valuation of the stories of other poor women in and out of the academy. In this way, we hope to support them in their efforts to resist their positioning as voiceless objects of investigation, a resistance that will allow poor female scholars and educators to emerge as literate and powerful speaking subjects.

In Part I: *Educators Remember*, women who exited poverty via the pathway of higher education and joined the professorial ranks recall their experiences within theoretical frames, allowing readers to understand and critique the process of education as a democratic project. Vivyan C. Adair begins this section with “Disciplined and Punished: Poor Women, Bodily Inscription and Resistance through Education.” Using Michel Foucault’s argument about the inscription of bodies, Adair examines the closed circuit that fuses together systems of power, the material conditions of poverty, and the bodily experiences that allow for the perpetuation—and, indeed, for the justification—of discipline and punishment. She also exposes the “revolutionary” and liberatory potential of higher education to disrupt this process.

Working from a central thesis of the bodily inscription of poor women, Adair explores the processes and epistemology of resistance through which many poor women have entered into post-secondary-degree programs to “rewrite their meaning and value in the world.” She

warns that this process is not as simple or as positive as the myth of education and meritocracy suggests; rather, she illustrates that ultimately education can and does allow poor women “to resist and to reconsider—deconstruct and rearrange—the bodily signs of [their] own very public punishment.” Adair claims that, in the end, education does not erase the indelible marks of poverty, but that it does transform the ways in which poor women are able to address class stratification, punishment, and erasure, ultimately enabling them to interrogate and critique the indelible scripts of poor women’s—of our own—bodies.

Nell Sullivan’s “How to Insult the Poor without Really Trying” further explores the theme of class inscription and poor women’s forced silence. In this compelling essay, Sullivan uses Lacan’s theory of aphanisis to describe her own fading and disappearance, her nascent erasure and silence as a white child growing up poor in the South. In rethinking her class origins, she argues that no matter how hard one works “it is not individual identity, but class identity that determines one’s fitness for even a basic education and respect.”

Sullivan connects childhood lessons of class to brandings and misreadings that she experienced at various junctures in academe. She remembers that experiences of “shame were also abundant in college and graduate school, but in those settings everyone always assumed that I was at least middle-class, and if not, that I would pretend to be,” adding ironically that “in such settings, economic need supposedly becomes a moot (or perhaps only a mute) point.” For Sullivan, poverty-class shame and invisibility force us to become complicit in our own silence and invisibility. This complicity is fueled by literary and social stereotypes that are “academically endorsed” and “in turn serve [again] to silence those who hail from the lower economic classes by inducing shame and creating the desirability of passing for middle-class.” Sullivan reveals that, even in writing this essay, she “struggled with the alternating urges to remain silent . . . or to hide [herself] within an authoritative middle-class voice that passes in academe for the voice of consensus.” She concludes with a plea: “We educators [of the lower economic classes] need to proclaim our heritage and refuse further complicity in our own silence and the silencing of others.”

In “Survival in a Not So Brave New World,” Sandra L. Dahlberg expertly continues to explore the institutionalized disfranchisement of poor women in the “academic broom closet” of higher education. As an

opening metaphor, Dahlberg compares herself to the characters of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, especially to those characters for whom "no resolution is provided." Like the play's Miranda, Dahlberg found herself longing to live in the "brave new world" of academe that promised learning, advancement, and financial security. But like Caliban, she realized that in reality, her presence in the academy was often co-opted, as she was positioned as a foil by which other "normative" and "deserving" students could "measure their own worth, their own privilege." As a result, Dahlberg tells us, she was remanded to the "periphery of higher education" unless she abandoned her "culture of origin and refashion[ed herself] in middle-class customs." For Dahlberg, access to higher education involved "a duality that required self-erasure in order to succeed . . . in a sometimes hostile environment."

Dahlberg goes on to explore the ways in which the concept of class transcendence diminishes the lives (strengths and power) of poor, single mothers in the academy; the ways in which categories of deservedness and undeservedness mirroring those of welfare reform are established and used to maintain academic class distinctions; and the pressure to pass as privileged or as middle class (or, at the very least, as working class) in institutions of higher education. In all of these ways, poor women learn to "closet themselves" to survive. The price of passing is both erasure and "a loss of family and community of origin," as Dahlberg puts it, but the price of not passing is greater still: It is failure and banishment from the brave new world of the academy.

Through the work of Adair, Sullivan, and Dahlberg, we begin to understand that misrecognition and misplaced authority are central to the co-optation and misrepresentation of poor women in the post-secondary academy. Joycelyn Moody illustrates that this misrepresentation is intensified for poor black women experiencing the "multiple jeopardies of race, class, and gender." In "To Be Young, Pregnant, and Black: My Life as a Welfare Coed," she explains that racist, classist, and sexist misrepresentation rendered her welfare experience "particularly snarled and thus deeply painful," leading ultimately to self-hatred and erasure. She convincingly argues that "the injurious censure" she received at the hands of health-care workers "compounded my sense of shame about my 'illegitimacy,' my pregnancy, and my dependency."

Moody uses these experiences of shame and humiliation to consider both inter- and intra-racial conflicts "based on (the mere appearance of)

class differences,” expertly exploring the confusion of class with race by both blacks and non-blacks. Further, she posits that this confusion “amplifies the pain of African American women’s experiences on welfare during pregnancy and exposes the interlocking systems of oppression that stereotype and misconstrue them.” In her essay she untangles the “knotted threads of the story of [her] participation in the welfare system” and confronts the injuries of racism (affected by classism, sexism, and heterosexism) that “make us all crazy.” Moody ends by exposing the “exceptions” model as one that absolves the larger society of its role in her past suffering. She concludes by choosing to claim the stance of activist, proclaiming, “We are nobody’s exceptions: not causalities of the latest ‘war on poverty,’ but sufferers of it—and proudly valiant soldiers against it.”

Reflecting on public policy that responds to a rhetoric of blame and finger-pointing, Lisa Waldner’s chapter, “If You Want Me to Pull Myself Up, Give Me Bootstraps,” continues with an analysis of our culturally “myopic vision regarding welfare and single-parent families.” Waldner begins by arguing that “for some the American Dream is not even a dream. It is a hallucination.” She continues by critiquing short-sighted policy concerning poor women and education that leads to their devaluation in institutions of post-secondary education.

Waldner urges us to understand the complex intersection of public and private issues that lead to poverty and structural inequity. Some of the most salient of those issues for Waldner are “a system that refuses to promote equal pay for women and that discourages poor women from earning educational degrees or training for higher-paying skilled positions . . . and a system that does not hold men accountable for their contribution to out-of-wedlock childbearing or failure to pay adequate child support.” In drawing on sociological theory and her own lived experiences, Waldner’s resonant points are that we must “look beyond individuals and alleged character flaws to address systemic forces that create and re-create the welfare-class,” and that we should “invest in college students, especially single-parent students, as we would any other infrastructure project.”

Part II: *On the Front Lines* presents the stories of five poor women pursuing their educational goals. These essays present counter-narratives that offer opportunities to reframe public discourse about poor women and education. In the process of telling their stories, these

women also allow us to understand better the formal and informal structures that enact and enforce their silence and erasure—and increasingly, their absence—in the post-secondary academy.

Our initial impulse was to include in this part of the collection essays that told the stories of those who had survived and overcome profoundly debilitating obstacles, but not every academic effort results in success. Too often, the system overwhelms, permanently silences, and kills hope. This is the case, as it now stands, with Tonya Mitchell. Once a thriving college student, Mitchell exemplifies the draconian policy changes brought about by welfare reform. These “reforms” disallowed higher education as a viable option for poor women and thereby eliminated hope of changing lives for the better. Mitchell’s essay, “If I Survive, It Will Be Despite Welfare Reform: Reflections of a Former Welfare Student,” traces her entry into college and her subsequent removal from the university less than a year short of graduation because welfare reform “forced [her] to be ‘responsible’ and to ‘work first.’” Her displacement from the university before she had earned the degree that would allow her to earn a livable wage meant that she has less to live on than she did under welfare.

Mitchell’s essay begins with a description of the humiliation she endured as a welfare mother, then describes the rage she felt when she discovered that poverty disallowed her right to autonomy and privacy. She reminds us that if you are black and poor and receive welfare benefits, then “the state pays for you and the state owns you, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it.” Her intellectual aptitude, her proven academic ability, and her hard work did nothing to ameliorate her circumstances. Of all the stories in this book, Mitchell’s is perhaps the most tragically compelling, and the most important. She represents the tens of thousands of poor women whose hopes and ambitions have been destroyed by welfare reform. Furthermore, the effects of welfare reform experienced by Mitchell and others are usually excised from the public discussion on welfare policy.

The remaining essays in Part II reflect the stories of poor students who are succeeding in academe but are doing so at great cost. In “Not By Myself Alone: Upward Bound with Family and Friends,” Deborah Megivern describes the alienation and dissonance she felt as an undergraduate from a very poor family entering a private college. Megivern goes on to examine more fully the tensions between familial

responsibility and personal actualization, between the need for honest friendships and the imposter phenomenon she used to avoid social rejection at college. Faced with the threat of social rejection, Megivern tried to pass and, as a result, experienced episodes of depression as her successes intensified the distance between home and her academic world.

The tensions between these competing values and desires culminated in graduate school, when Megivern became a single parent to her younger siblings. At the same time, she began experiencing extreme dissonance because the ways in which poverty and the poor were being addressed in her social-work and social-science graduate courses erased or defamed the core of her being. Megivern describes how her home community—supportive through her undergraduate work—became increasingly distant when she entered graduate school and she found herself “caught in the margins between upper-class academe and my poor and working-class roots,” with no clear sense of belonging in either world.

Andrea Harris examines the ways in which the stereotype of the Welfare Queen demeans, condemns, and alienates poor, black single mothers who seek fair and equal treatment under the law. In “Choosing the Lesser Evil: The Violence of the Welfare Stereotype,” Harris begins with the ties between abuse and poverty, then demonstrates how poverty in turn labels poor women as “deviant,” resulting in civil alienation—even when the women are acting in the best interest of their children and themselves. The Welfare Queen designation, Harris learned, evokes a visceral power that supersedes any actual individual ability or action. When she petitioned the courts for protection from her abuser, she found the judge more concerned with her status as a welfare recipient than with her determination to raise and protect her child. Legitimate complaints—for safety, legal rights, and access to higher education that allow a life without poverty (and abuse)—Harris contends, are not accorded to welfare mothers, simply because their poverty is proof that they “rejected” marriage and middle-class values.

In her essay, Harris further reveals the costs of resistance and the price she paid to secure the education that would ensure autonomy and safety for herself and her child. Yet resisting this erasure and censure and insisting on visibility and full citizenship is exhausting and dangerous. Still, Harris is determined to reinvent the image of welfare recipients, warning that, “as long as the Welfare Queen reigns in the imagery and pre-

sumptions of social narratives, my experiences are not only pushed to the periphery, but, like that of many others, they are made invisible.”

Addressing the issue of invisibility and resistance, Sandy Smith Madsen declares that “educating welfare women is the stuff of revolutions.” In “From Welfare to Academe: Welfare Reform as College-Educated Welfare Mothers Know It,” she analyzes the circumstances and obstacles faced by welfare mothers trying to gain access to higher education, findings she obtained as a result of extensive interviews with twelve women who, like Madsen, relied on welfare while enrolled in college and university programs. Madsen notes that, “while political elites and poverty experts have gone about the business of spreading stories of immoral and idle Welfare Queens, . . . [with] the aid of a welfare check, poor mothers have transformed themselves into taxpayers with double and quadruple their former incomes.” Her interviews demonstrate the resilience and determination of these women as they encounter barriers and face public humiliation.

A major concern of Madsen’s work is the punitive nature of welfare policy that seeks to punish and sanction not only the welfare mother who tries to obtain higher education but her children, as well. Her interviews revealed the concerns women had about the effects of public humiliation on their children and openly address the ways in which the women avoided compliance to protect the children and themselves.

It is not always societal or programmatic constructs that thwart access to higher education. Some of the most stubborn barriers are imposed by the families of poor women who believe that, as students, they are rejecting their cultures of origin. In “Seven Years in Exile,” Leticia Almanza recounts her efforts to obtain an education and the obstacles she faced both within the university structure and within the culture of her family. Almanza describes herself as a woman “born poor to migrating parents” who arrived in the United States from Mexico at age ten, unable to speak English. She was so alienated by language, class, race, and gender that teachers branded her “retarded.” When she graduated from high school at the top of her class and was admitted to a selective university, it was not, however, the public school system that Almanza had to fight—it was her own family. In her quest for a university education, Almanza coped with dual senses of alienation: She would alienate her family by attending college and betray herself by not obtaining an education.

As she attempted to straddle these borders, Almanza faced other hurdles, including the unjustified loss of financial aid, the racist interrogation of her citizenship status, and a debilitating lack of allies and economic support. Eventually, these losses drove her away from college for seven years. Her success in obtaining a degree was a result of her resilience and ability to see herself as the hero of her own epic. Almanza notes, "Odysseus was not so different from us poor Mexicans: fate had dealt him a hard hand." As Almanza insinuates through her analogy to Odysseus, much of her success and failure was capricious as she battled the institutionalized "gods."

The essays in Parts I and II examine the barriers poor women encounter in higher education; those in Part III: Policy, Research, and Poor Women consider policies that affect access to higher education and advocate remedies for improved access. One function of this part is to illustrate and critique the ways in which public policies, enacted by diverse bodies and for distinct purposes, interact to produce competing mandates that harm poor female students. Only by bringing the many practices together, as they are in poor women's lives, can we begin to understand the complicated set of hidden barriers poor women encounter when they attempt to change their lives through higher education. The theoretical frame for this part is one that allows poor female academics to present analyses based on research and firsthand experience. That takes, as its first premise, the conviction that theory is at its most powerful when it allows us to understand and challenges us to work together to fight for social justice and equity.

In "Families First—but Not in Higher Education: Poor, Independent Students and the Impact of Financial Aid," Sandra L. Dahlberg examines an increasingly bifurcated financial-aid system and the impact of recent financial-aid policy on the 30 percent of college students identified as "independent." Poor, independent students are forced to cope with an aid system designed for dependent students and, increasingly, with a system that focuses on the needs of middle-class rather than poor students. Dahlberg details how aid policies are being used to create disincentives for poor students, if not implicit disbarment from higher education, when poor students are denied, through institutional and federal policy, the full benefit of the external scholarships, veterans' benefits, and child support awarded to them.

In concert with the fiscal impact of financial-aid policy on poor, independent students, Dahlberg explores the ways in which the political rhetoric of financial aid is quickly becoming aligned with welfare rhetoric when aid is allocated for poor students. At the same time, funding for merit-based aid, which supports mainly middle- and upper-class students, is increasing. As Dahlberg states, "Most certainly, notions of American higher education as a meritocracy are disrupted when 'deserving' and 'undeserving' are measured in terms of personal and familial income and not on the basis of the student's ability to succeed in college." Dahlberg's timely analysis of financial-aid policy proposes alternative practices that would revitalize the promise of equal access to higher education for all Americans.

Judith Owens-Manley's research focuses on the interplay between welfare caseworkers and welfare recipients and the effect that welfare reform has had on this already tenuous relationship. In "The Leper Keepers: Front-Line Workers and the Key to Education for Poor Women," Owens-Manley relates the results of her study of the attitudes of welfare workers and how these attitudes inform the provision of services that are crucial to poor women, particularly access to educational programs and support. One factor that underlies these attitudes is the very condition in which these social workers find themselves negatively labeled "leper keepers." It is notable that many welfare workers show some resentment toward their clients; because the social workers are so poorly paid, they find themselves "generally close to their clients in socioeconomic status" and therefore experience a sense of competition.

Owens-Manley illustrates the degree to which the administrative discretion that determines which clients will receive access to education has increased as a result of these systemic environmental problems, in conjunction with the requirements of welfare reform, and exposes the potential threat this discretion presents to poor women. Her research suggests that "until education is again regarded as a viable route out of poverty, and until welfare policy recognizes the work value of attending higher education or training, the prospects remain dismal for the long-term solvency of poor women and their families." In addition, Owens-Manley argues that as long as welfare workers are disparaged as "leper-keepers," are underpaid, and are wedged between societal

mandates that posit excessive caseloads against client needs, poor women and their children will suffer needlessly and be even further restricted in their options for educational pursuits that would enable them to live life beyond welfare and poverty.

The discretion of welfare workers is of particular concern to Lisa D. Brush. In her essay “‘That’s Why I’m on Prozac’: Battered Women, Traumatic Stress, and Education in the Context of Welfare Reform,” Brush presents findings from two studies she conducted that exposed the gaps between staff workers’ perceptions of rates of battery and abuse experienced by welfare recipients and the rates of incidence actually reported by those same welfare clients. She then examines how caseworkers’ misperceptions about abuse rates affect battered welfare women’s attempts to obtain autonomy and solvency through education.

Brush describes and analyzes the psychic damage of battery and compares medical and social perceptions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veterans to the PTSD experienced by abused welfare women. Without widespread recognition of the impact of battery on welfare recipients and their children, Brush contends, abused women “face a dual trap of poverty and abuse,” and she proposes education as an effective means by which battered welfare women can remove themselves permanently from this trap. Even when battery is recognized by caseworkers, she argues, the time limits for services imposed by welfare reform “undermine battered welfare recipients’ [access] to education,” because these women use much of their designated support time overcoming trauma, with little time remaining for educational pursuits. Thus, Brush analyzes the process through which caseworkers’ discretion and misinformation collides with welfare policies to reduce poor women’s already limited access to higher education.

Vivyan C. Adair concludes this part by examining the trajectory of welfare reform that has forced hundreds of thousands of poor women away from earning economic security through higher education. In “Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education,” she argues that educators committed to fostering social and economic equity through education must challenge themselves to understand how crucial post-secondary education is to low-income, single mothers; to recognize that this student population is increasingly “at risk”; and to work against legislation that at best discourages, and at worst prohibits, these students from entering into and successfully completing post-secondary-degree

programs. Integrated into her discussion of recent welfare-reform legislation are findings from three studies she conducted with welfare-recipient students after welfare reform. She presents data illustrating the degree to which many poor women have been discouraged from earning college degrees, describes students' desires to further their education, and delineates the frustrating obstacles that make this endeavor difficult, and often impossible.

While acknowledging that education is not a panacea for all of society's ills, Adair's research demonstrates that access to education can aid many poor, single mothers in their efforts to embrace the lifetime challenge of becoming fully engaged and responsible thinkers, citizens, workers, parents, and community members, as it concomitantly improves their economic stability for generations to come. She concludes that we must take steps toward ensuring that education remains a truly democratic project that has the potential for enacting social change and fostering economic equity, and warns that by failing to act "we acquiesce to the production of a two-tiered educational and economic system that increasingly widens the gulf between educated and thus economically viable, and undereducated and thus economically underprivileged, citizens."

Together, these essays present a compelling and unique vision of the ideology and operations of class and of the power of education in the United States today. By engaging in remarkable acts of autobiographical theorization, contributors to this collection tell a story that has rarely been heard and is seldom given credit. The authors' frank reflections and stunning critical insights challenge us to consider a paradox that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak analyzes in the now famous essay "Explanation and Culture: Marginalia" (1996). In the essay, Spivak reflects on the inability of the disfranchised ever to come to political voice without experiencing co-optation and transformation. Indeed, for Spivak, it is through the very practice of political articulation, crucial to authority, that the poor simultaneously gain and lose an authentic and a powerful voice. What Spivak is getting at is that poor female academics are wedged between a political rock and a hard place: We can speak through a frame of subalternity, but we are accorded no authority, validity, or power in this voice. Conversely, we can garner authority as academics but in doing so lose our authenticity—and to some degree, as Amott acknowledged, our right to speak.

A clear response to Spivak's concerns echoes throughout *Reclaiming Class: Women, Poverty, and the Promise of Higher Education in America*. With this collection, we illustrate that, as the subaltern in America, we have not forgotten (and will never forget) our voices. In reclaiming the "stories of ourselves," we produce new insights and perspectives; suggest new strategies; celebrate and critique education as a pathway out of intergenerational poverty; and resist erasure and silence. It is through education that we have begun to speak at last in clear, unified, and powerful voices.

NOTES

Epigraph: Jackson (1996, 3).

1. "From Welfare to Meaningful Work through Education" Conference, Hamilton College, Clinton, N.Y., 15–16 October 1999.

2. Amott 1999.

3. Peter Hitchcock refers to this dual marking as the "age-old but continuing predicament of the 'working-class subject' as intellectual." He adds that, when trying to make sense of working-class scholars, "the economic and social determinants that produce the former are seen to exclude the latter" (Hitchcock 2000, 21). For Hitchcock, as for the contributors to this collection, this paradox is complicated by assumptions that poor women cannot speak cogently on the subject of poverty—that they are illogical or chaotic when they attempt to speak, or that when they have learned to speak they can no longer represent their class of origin. This sentiment is coupled with the erroneous notion that poor "communities only exist as those from which one must escape" (Hitchcock 2000, 21). Rita Felski suggests that this erasure may be exacerbated by a general and "noticeable silence about class in much contemporary theory," along with poverty-class identification that is "fundamentally connected to shame and guilt" (Felski 2000, 34). On both an internal and an external level, these assumptions produce a seemingly inexorable silence in the graduate and undergraduate academy.

4. Landers 1991. Robert Rector of the American Heritage Foundation evoked the term "broodmares" to describe welfare recipients who have children out of wedlock while speaking about "rising illegitimacy" as "the number one catastrophe in American today" (Rector 1996b).

5. See "Welfare Queens" 1992; Crass 1999; and Williams 1998.

6. In 1994, Governor William F. Weld of Massachusetts began using a story about child abuse in Boston to illustrate that mothers on welfare have children simply to increase their welfare allocations: See Aucoin and Lehigh 1994; see also Gillian 1995 and Rector 1996a.

7. During a congressional welfare-rights debate in 1995, Representative L. Mica (R-Fla.) held up a sign that read, DO NOT FEED THE ALLIGATORS. WE POST THIS

WARNING BECAUSE UNNATURAL FEEDING AND ARTIFICIAL CARE CREATES DEPENDENCY (*Congressional Record* 1995, H3766 16). That same year, Representative Barbara Cutin (R-Wyo.) compared welfare recipients to wolves who eat their own children (*Congressional Record* 1995, H3772 4). See Douglas 1995.

8. For a more detailed analysis of the ways in which poor women are blamed and punished for their “condition,” see Adair 2000.

9. As we have argued, working-class students, like the privileged, can be read as being mobile. Indeed, our national narrative is based on the promise of upward mobility through work and sacrifice. To the degree that their presence can reinforce the myth and absolve the privileged members of the academy of guilt, working-class students are read as deserving, albeit “rough,” idealized students. This is not true for the poverty class. Poor students—particularly poor, single mothers—are de-historicized and de-contextualized, and they are made to represent static “Others” who can rarely be transformed. See Adair and Dahlberg 2001.

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LAURA SULLIVAN-HACKLEY

Speech Pathology

The Deflowering of an Accent

EACH SCHOOLDAY was a raveling Pavlovian chain. First a flicker of naked bulb shocking us out of bed. Then Bus 64's engine grinding uphill, belching sour diesel exhaust in our path like a taunt, daring us in this chase. Once aboard, we watched the neighborhood's grey Etch-a-Sketch landscape scroll past our windows until it disappeared into fog behind us. We dreaded the air brake sighing that sigh of a tired old man, our cue to wade through Marlboro clouds toward the clatter and nag of homeroom bell.

When Bus 64 screeched and coughed to a stop in front of school one Tuesday, the driver refused to let us off. We sat, watching all other buses unload, spilling classmates into a new schoolday. At 8:01, a long sedan parked over our shadowed silhouettes in the bus lane. The county school superintendent thrust himself out of that black Lincoln, then boarded our bus two steps at a time. Grim like somebody had just died or egged his house, he appeared to be masturbating with his necktie, gripping and tugging and rearranging with one fist.

"Hogtrash." He flung the word out over us all like a Frisbee rimmed with mud for extra spin, then waited for it to settle.

"Every last one of you. Hogtrash. Never amount to nothing."

We would have searched each other's faces for clues, but our gazes drove forward, hard swizzlestick skewers this man might impale himself on. Bus 64 seemed to shrink, its brown vinyl closing around us like cupped hands of beggars until we were no longer passengers parked outside our destination; we were stepchildren bumming a ride.

The superintendent gave his tie one more fierce yank before spinning on his heels, knocking the door open with his fist. He tripped on the last step down, but his gaffe came too late to elicit even the slightest snag of an upper lip.

The slow stream of us snaked from Bus 64 to the linoleum school foyer. Stepping down to asphalt, my jaw clamped shut. By the ring of first-period bell, I had slated my own lesson plan: to master a new language, no matter how bitter or foreign its flavor on my tongue.

My words became bullets, severe and staccato. Rappelling the cliffs where *gs* and hard *os* had always dropped off the ends of things, I fought past the *ins* and *uhs* my lips liked to rest upon. I stiffened against the easy lean of *ain't*, the lively rhythm of twang. I bit down on all the lacy fringe of my mother's words, the slurred segues between my father's syllables, that peppery patois of the neighborhood.

The prize I knew when I heard it pronounced, years and miles from Bus 64's shuttling: "You don't sound like you come from anywhere."

NOTE

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