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“DROPOUTS” DROP IN:
RE-VISUALIZING THE “DROPOUT” STEREOTYPE

by

RONDI SILVA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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Rondi Silva

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

“Dropouts” Drop In:
Re-Visualizing the “Dropout” Stereotype

by

Rondi Silva

Advisor: Wendy Luttrell

“Dropouts” Drop In aims to challenge conventional views of both “dropping out” and “dropouts.” When young people “drop out” of high school, they open themselves up to a world of negative assumptions and blame, which are directed at them from the outside and are also deeply internalized. Young people are constantly messaged that “dropping out,” or being a “dropout” is at best a bad choice and at worst something akin to being a criminal. Lost in this messaging is that in reality “dropping out” of high school is often a positive move out of untenable social and educational situations and a first step toward a more meaningful and fruitful social and educational path—a path that often leads back to formal education. This project is the culmination of several years of thinking about, exploring, and experimenting with multiple modes of visual communication and research. It is also an attempt to marry those explorations with lessons learned from the young people I have had the honor to teach and get to know for over a decade. From 2003 to 2013 I worked in a college preparation program for 16 to 18 year-old out-of-school youth in the Bronx. The students’ journeys from out-of-school to and through college in some ways mirror my own. Having left high school on my 16th birthday, I slowly and circuitously made my way back to formal education. Watching my former students navigate similar waters I am reminded that this voyage is complex and little understood, whether attempting an associate’s degree or striving for graduate school. The lack of

understanding is demonstrated by the linear structures and finite timelines dictated by many programs theoretically created to support young people through the process. These young peoples' lives, however, are anything but linear and instead require room for improvisation unconstrained by predetermined time restrictions. It is my hope that this project, which is my dissertation and is manifested as a website, will provide safe harbor for young people setting sail on similar journeys and create a forum for dialog with fellow travelers. It is also intended to expand the walls of the academy and serve as a portal for teachers, counselors, parents/guardians, and other supporters, as well as researchers and policy-makers, leading them to a deeper understanding of what it actually takes— physically, emotionally, and materially—to embark on such an adventure.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my three angels, all lost in the time of its writing. My beloved father Pedro Pablo Silva passed too soon to see me emerge as the “doctora” he always knew I would become. My mentor and friend Dr. Derrick E. Griffith started me down this path so many years ago. And my sweet and wonderful student/participant Richmond Agbesi—his generous and loving spirit permeates every page and frame of this project. All three were lit from within and the world is a darker place without them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If there is one thing I have learned in this process it is that nobody does this alone. I have been particularly blessed with an abundant support system consisting of my family, friends, colleagues, and my amazing dream team, a.k.a. my dissertation committee. Beginning there, Terrie Epstein always made sure my work was grounded in the practical and would serve some actual purpose beyond the defense. David Chapin first opened my eyes to possibilities of visual research and on my darkest days would never let me give up. I am eternally grateful for the turning point day when David spent eight hours on Skype with me, genuinely excited about the work and our collaborations, relighting my fire with his focus and enthusiasm. Wendy Luttrell respected me enough to challenge and stretch me intellectually in ways that were often uncomfortable, and also stood by me while I worked my way through the discomfort and into clarity—a long journey. Wendy’s feminist stance of insisting that relationships (and love) be at the center of our work has powerfully and forever colored my approach. We are all blessed to be part of the CUNY Graduate Center, a public institution that is on the cutting edge of advancing and supporting digital and multimodal scholarship. Receiving the Provost’s Digital Innovation Grant in its inaugural year made it possible for me to complete this project, and I thank Matt Gold for being such an encouraging and vocal champion of those of us attempting to blaze this trail. My Collaborative Seeing Studio comrades for their multiple (loving) eyes, inspiring visions, and boundless curiosity. None of this work would have been possible without all of the lessons learned from my colleagues and former students at CUNY Prep. The ten years I spent there were the richest learning experience of my life. I still love and miss you all. My three participants, Travis Padilla, Ally Escolastico, and Richmond Agbesi, were obviously the heart and soul of this project, and three of the most important teachers in my life. I greatly appreciate your love and generosity over the years, and I am so grateful for your time and focus. My two collaborators, Shannon Taggart, my partner in crime and video, and Margot Spindelman, my fabulous friend and website designer together made my visions a reality, always with love, patience, and humor.

I could not be more grateful. Ivana Espinet, my master note-taker for the 2nd doc, proposal, and defense made it possible for me to really hear my feedback in the moment without the worry of losing details. Thank you for being my academic reality check. All of my beloved friends who have stuck with me through so many missed events. Not sure how many times I said, “Sorry, I have a deadline,” over the past several years, and yet you all were the first to send me congratulations when the deed was done! I am so blessed to have you in my life, and I look forward to making up for lost time. My fabulous extended family—Julie Rich kept me moving and laughing through my darkest days, David Perry was always ready with tea, flowers, and funny puppy videos, and Holmes Newman’s opulent “meals on wheels” got me through that last impossible week with style and grace. Your constant faith is a source of enormous strength and perseverance. My immediate family—anyone who knows me knows the “Silva’s” travel as a pack (even though we have many different last names!). My big brother Tony Silva and his Dragon Circle clan, Michelle and David Marroquin, were my biggest cheerleaders, never letting me lose faith in my own abilities. My niece Gwendolyn Stegall, who makes me proud every day for being so completely herself, was the most stellar wingman for my defense. I could not have done it without you! My sister and Editor in Chief, Marie-Louise Silva Stegall, who first taught me how to write with gems like, “Just because there are a bunch of words in front of a period, that doesn’t make it a sentence!” There are no words sufficient to express my love and gratitude for your unwavering support and so many lost hours of sleep! You helped me find my writing voice while always managing to make it sound a little sweeter. You are also the calm in my storm, keeping me from wreaking too much havoc, and always helping me rebuild in the aftermath. Finally, my mother, Valerie Falk, who was as proud of me the day I dropped out of high school as she was the day I defended my dissertation. You are the center of our family, and your unconditional love is the glue that keeps us together. Your quiet care over these past three years is so appreciated and made all of this possible. I love you more than words can say and look forward to many celebratory years ahead!

NOTE TO READERS

This manuscript is the textual component of a multimodal dissertation, which is manifested as a website. As such, it has been modified to fit this format. Throughout the pages you will find 'link' indicators, which on the website are live hyperlinks. I left them in this version to give the reader a sense of how the live version works. To read it in its intended format, please visit dropoutsdropin.org. There you will find the text (which is actually two separate articles), and the videos, upon which the project is based. You will also have the opportunity to comment, ask questions, and/or share your own stories or those of your loved ones. Thank you in advance for your engagement.

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PART I

Introduction:

This project is the culmination of several years of thinking about, exploring, and experimenting with multiple modes of visual communication and research. It is also an attempt to marry those explorations with lessons learned from the young people I have had the honor to teach and get to know for over a decade. From 2003 to 2013 I worked in a college preparation program for 16 to 18 year-old out-of-school youth in the Bronx. The students' journeys from out-of-school to and through college in some ways mirror my own. Having left high school on my 16th birthday, I slowly and circuitously made my way back to formal education, earning a GED, bachelor's degree, master's degree, and now I am approaching completion of a PhD. This passage has taken me over 30 years. Watching my former students navigate similar waters, I am reminded that this voyage is complex and little understood, whether attempting an associate's degree or striving for graduate school. The lack of understanding is demonstrated by the linear structures and finite timelines dictated by many programs theoretically created to support young people through the process. These young peoples' lives, however, are anything but linear and instead require room for improvisation unconstrained by predetermined time restrictions. Many of my former students express crippling self-blame when their charted courses are disrupted by prevailing winds or sudden gusts and the often harsh judgment directed at them from people in authority. It is my hope that this project, which is my dissertation and is manifested as a website, will provide safe harbor for young people setting sail on similar journeys and create a forum for dialog with fellow travelers. It is also intended to expand the walls of the academy and serve as a portal for teachers, counselors, parents/guardians, and other supporters, as well as researchers and policy-makers, leading them to a deeper understanding of what it actually takes— physically, emotionally, and materially—to embark on such an adventure. Within the cyber moorings of this interactive website, we have an opportunity to share stories, ask

questions, and offer ideas and resources. My expectation is that learning from each other can help us all stay safely afloat, and that we can continue to challenge some all too common assumptions about “dropouts” along the way.

PROJECT OVERVIEW:

“Dropouts” *Drop In* aims to challenge conventional views of both “dropping out” and “dropouts.” When young people “drop out” of high school, they open themselves up to a world of negative assumptions and blame, which are directed at them from the outside and are also deeply internalized. Young people are constantly messaged that “dropping out,” or being a “dropout” is at best a bad choice and at worst something akin to being a criminal. While these messages come in some obvious forms, such as popular media imagery, they also come in more insidious forms, such as GED prep manuals, the very materials that are supposed to be educational supports for “dropouts.” For example, the Steck-Vaughn GED Language Arts, Writing practice book (2002) contains the following practice assignment:

Write a letter to a friend or relative who is in school. Explain why you think staying in school is important. Try to give several reasons for staying in school. Use examples from your own life and the lives of other people you know. As you write about each new reason, begin a new paragraph (p 119, emphasis theirs).

An innocent enough writing prompt at the face of it, one can see how it assumes and implies a lot when put into context. It sends a clear message to the reader (someone preparing for a high school equivalency exam) that being out of school is a bad thing, no matter the reason and whether or not it was their own decision. Further, it asks for a kind of penance by insisting the reader write several reasons why their situation is a bad one. Lost in this messaging is that in reality “dropping out” of high school is often a positive move out of untenable social and educational situations and a first step toward a more meaningful and fruitful social and educational path—a path that often leads back to formal education.

In this project, we hear from three young people all of whom I met while teaching in the Bronx at a second chance school called CUNY Prep [link]. I was part of the founding faculty of this school which was built on the premise that many young people who had “dropped out” or been “pushed out” of high school not only needed, but *wanted* an opportunity to earn a diploma or equivalency and go on to college. Under the leadership of our founding principal, Derrick Griffith [link], we created a program that offered the necessary academics, but more importantly focused on helping our students create new academic identities and begin to imagine themselves as viable candidates for college. This was particularly important since most of our students were coming from poverty and many were the first in their families to go to college. They were also majority black and Latino/a and as such, burdened with the individual and institutional racism that messages school, especially college, was not for them even before having the “dropout” label appended. Much of our work involved humanizing the experience of school by building a strong positive culture where students felt safe to express their true interests, feed their natural curiosities, and stretch their academic wings. At their best, our classrooms were animated spaces where students were active agents of their own, and often their teachers’, learning.

In that spirit, our principal matched me (a humanities teacher) in 2008 with Shannon Taggart [link] (a documentary filmmaker) to teach a digital storytelling class. My curiosity had been piqued by my students’ seemingly ubiquitous obsessions with video games and the burgeoning world of social media. Seeing young people who had been marginalized and deeply discouraged by their previous school experiences so absorbed in their online multimedia interactions was hard to ignore.¹ Here were compelling ways of communicating that involved layers of the visual, the auidial, and the ever-increasing possibility of interactivity. Witnessing my students’ focus coupled with their ease and intuitive mastery of the tools involved (e.g., computers, digital cameras, cell phones, etc.) inspired me to ponder the educational possibilities of new media and

multimodality. This class was the perfect opportunity to experiment with their promise and pedagogical potential. The only problem was I had absolutely no knowledge of or experience with *any* of the media that had the students so engrossed!

We decided to address that shortfall head-on by asking our students to teach me how to make a MySpace page (the social networking site of choice at the time) as our initial project [link], which Shannon documented on video. It was my very first foray into the world of social media, and as with any novice, I was by turns slow and awkward and not a little clumsy. My teachers/students were amazingly kind, patient, humorous, and above all persistent! Ultimately, I ended up with a decent MySpace page, and the class ended up with a wonderfully democratized dynamic, one in which we all felt safe and empowered to participate, create, collaborate, and learn from each other. At the end of the semester, the students were assigned to create short autobiographical videos about a topic of their choice. We provided small video cameras and the students then drew on multiple techniques for their films, such as interviews of themselves and others, voice-over narrations, capturing bits of action and conversations in various settings from their lives, and use of their own archival images (e.g. family photos). Three of those films serve as the inspiration for and foundation of this project [link]. My former students (and current participants) Travis, Ally, and Richmond made those three foundational films in which they each shared snapshots of their high school experiences and allowed us a glimpse of the forces that compelled them to leave school. Each had very different reasons for leaving—reasons that are emblematic of other young people in similar circumstances. Each also represents a different element of the broad spectrum that constitutes “dropouts” (more on this below).

Simultaneous to the MySpace project, I was beginning to explore the idea of multimodal visual research in my doctoral studies. David Chapin [link] introduced me to the practice in his class

The Visual in Field Research [link], which completely changed the way I thought about what research could look like and be. Later, Wendy Luttrell's *Visual Research with Children and Youth* [link] further pushed my explorations, experimentations, and understandings. Luttrell's class also made tangible ways of working visually with young people while keeping an eye toward social justice. When Luttrell invited me to join her research team for *Looking Back*, the follow up study of her on-going longitudinal visual ethnography *Children Framing Childhood* [link], I had the opportunity to experience firsthand and help facilitate a multimodal project in collaboration with youth participants. Soon after, Luttrell and Chapin went on to establish the *Collaborative Seeing Studio* [link], a group of doctoral students and faculty whose research explores and employs various modes of visual methodologies. I was again invited to participate, further solidifying my commitment to this type of work.

I offer this brief summary to explain the evolution of my dissertation and to begin to contextualize why it is a website rather than a traditional manuscript (more on this in the methodology section below). The bulk of my career has been dedicated to the mission of creating *real* access to formal higher education for young people who have left or been pushed out of high school before completion. More recently I have come to understand that "access" needs to work in both directions. The academy has much to learn from the marginalized young people it rarely gets to meet. Currently the onus of "preparedness" rests on the shoulders of the young people attempting to enter the academy. In general, institutions of higher learning are rarely asked to attempt to meet students where they are or to connect in ways that would help get them where they need and/or want to be. Even at the community college level, which potentially frames the entire experience of higher education for these students, there are serious issues that block access. Students face concrete blocks, such as inscrutable bureaucracy or conflicting employment and/or family demands, as well as less tangible emotional blocks, such as avoiding asking questions out of pride or embarrassment, or not knowing how to connect with

unsympathetic or inexperienced professors. There is a tremendous need for a safe academic space where these young people can recognize themselves, tell their stories, ask questions without fear of judgment, find allies and resources, and not only imagine, but *know* that there is a place for them within the walls of the academy at all its levels if they so choose. There is an equal need for a space where educators can get a more three-dimensional and humanized understanding of *who* they are educating, and what challenges these students face in pursuit of their degrees. My students' embrace of the MySpace project all those years ago made me think seriously about the possibilities of access, equity, agency, and communication potentially afforded by the Internet. Many of those possibilities still go unrealized for myriad reasons, but this website represents my contribution toward that end.

One challenge of a dissertation that takes the form of a website is that the site potentially has an ever evolving life after the defense. So, it was important to come to an agreement with my committee about what stage of website development had to be achieved, and what content had to be included, for the dissertation to be considered "complete." With that in mind, the "current project" [link] constitutes our agreement, and picks up where the MySpace project left off. In 2012 I reunited with my three former students, Travis, Ally, and Richmond (who are all now at various stages of their college careers) and together we revisited their 2008 films. We had several video taped conversations (semi-structured interviews), and I once again supplied them with video cameras and asked them to capture a bit of what was happening in their lives at that time. From the video taped conversations and the participants' new footage, plus clips from their 2008 films, I distilled three new films [link]. My intention was to have the new films serve as updates, and more importantly to offer an opportunity to see how my participants' relationships to formal education had developed over time, and to hear first-hand what it had been like for them to navigate their journeys from out of school through college. Lastly, there are two articles. The first article explores my process and research practice, with a particular focus

on the video aspect, making the camera visible, and questioning what “new knowledge” can be gained by this visual approach (MacDougall 2006, Rose 2007, Pink 2007, Mitchell 2011, van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001, etc.). The other, which discusses my theoretical approach and insights [link], examines the larger context of the participants’ experiences, reports on lessons learned from the project, and looks at the landscape of the challenges involved with their endeavors. The articles serve to extend our thinking, offer another mode into the work, and anchor my dissertation more formally in the scholarly tradition.

The questions my participants and I explore in this work are:

- What kinds of “messaging” do young people receive about “dropping out” or being “dropouts?”
- How do they navigate and reflect on this messaging over time and at different points in their educational trajectories?
- How do these messages impact their quest for further formal education?

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK:

If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed.
– Paulo Freire

In their concise chapter *The Thesis: Texts and Machines*, Borg and Davis (2012) assert, “the dissertation is contingent, changing and changeable... [and] changes both in the available technologies and in the kinds of knowledge the dissertation is expected to represent are having a significant effect on its form as well as its content” (p 13). They remind us that although the first doctorates (dating back 1000 years) were based on one’s knowledge of “great texts,” the products themselves were largely oral and performative, with little writing at all. Although the form text took changed over time with developing technologies (i.e., a written page to a printed pamphlet), its role as frame or anchor for the still largely oral dissertation remained the same. A major shift came with Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), who “reoriented the university away from the analysis and debate of authoritative texts” (p 16), and towards original research and

scientific discovery. The foci of universities, and in turn dissertations, went from knowledge *mastery* and dissemination to knowledge *production* and dissemination. It was the invention of the typewriter, however, that altered the dissertation to a primarily linear written document (p 14). Borg and Davis go on to say, “This written text, with its rhetoric of neutral description, became the model for the dissertation. Knowledge would be created by empirical investigation and reported in a form and manner that was honed to obscure its constructed nature” (p 17). Although qualitative researchers have done much to challenge the obscuring of construction and the rhetoric of neutrality,² and multimodal communications have become the social norm, dissertations have remained primarily linear written documents. Gourlay (2012) puts it this way,

In the early twenty-first century social and academic context, ubiquitous digital networks increasingly permeate our day-to-day lives, work practices and ways of learning and expressing ourselves. Communication practices are increasingly multimodal, interconnected, performed on the move and dispersed across a range of communities. However, the mainstream academic dissertation – at least as a finished product – has remained largely an artefact of the press-digital, pre-networked era dominated by print literacies (p 85).

This primacy of text and linearity is beginning to change, and for reasons that transcend simply the affordances of new technologies (although that is certainly a factor). Contributing scholars to the *SAGE handbook of digital dissertations and theses* (Andrews, et al., 2012) contend that in this age of re-mix, appropriation, and hack, we must navigate “the demands of the university and the evolving nature of [our] work as straddling traditional dissertation formats and *nonlinear forms of knowledge production*” (p 82 emphasis mine).

Writing about her process, Lisa Stansbie (2012), whose dissertation took the form of a website [link], cites Elkins’ (2009) lament that he has yet to see a multimedia submission where the “...scholarship melts into the creative work, or asks to be read as creative work” (p 392). She

counters that “The website format offers such a possibility and allows for a fusion of practice and ‘scholarship’. She asserts, “When presented as a website the relationship between the ‘practice’ and the surrounding theory can be illuminated for a reader who might have to transverse back and forth between these elements, with the act of doing so revealing their inextricable connection (p 393).” She achieved much of this “possibility” in her own work through a liberal use of hyperlinking, of which she says,

Due to the internal and external linking and layering of the online submission it can reference a wide variety of current sources and embed different methods of writing typically incorporating ‘... varieties of webbed structure, in which support for an initial thesis may be conceived of as radiating out from a common centre ... rather than a tree structure that is intended to be traversed by a single path, the structure of an innovative hypermedia document will incorporate repetition, circles, return loops, tangents, dead-ends, and even entire documents authored by others’ (Katz, 2004).

This multilayered approach to scholarship strikes me as particularly salient to education researchers and practitioners interested in constructivist, social, and situational theories (find definitions here: [link](#)). The real time interactivity made possible by a website format inevitably invites collaboration on multiple levels, an exciting notion for those of us coming from and/or working with people for whom access and agency is an issue. For my own work, the nonlinear format of a website dissertation remarkably reflects the nonlinear schooling of my participants, which in turn echoes the nonlinear *lives* of my participants, which encourages and makes room for nonlinear forms of knowledge production, which finally (re)complements the nonlinear format of my dissertation. In this light, dissertation as website makes perfect sense.

Coming to that conclusion was a process, however, that began with questioning the relationship between text and image, and an interest in the academic possibilities of video. Between 2008 and 2012, I worked on several small video projects with a mentor and collaborator, David Chapin, who had been developing a method of video editing as analysis. Within this editing

method, which involves deep immersion in the material, one does a visual version of sorting, coding, and transcribing (for lack of better terms) that is the heart of this mode of visual analysis. He and his collaborator Zeynep Turan liken the process to making good soup, which requires getting “...really close to the ingredients by selecting, chopping, tasting, and by using more of this or less of that” (Turan & Chapin 2008, p 102). They remind us that, “Making good soup comes from letting both the quality and quantity of what is at hand influence the texture and taste” (p 102). Similarly, this mode of analysis is inductive, drawing on the “ingredients” at hand, in this case video data, including interviews, conversations, slices of life captured by my participants, and their archival footage and images. In this way, it shares a kinship with Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory, from which this project borrows. She posits, “The grounded theory method itself is open-ended and relies on emergent processes, and the researcher’s emerging constructions of concepts shape both process and product” (p 320).

Importantly, this is also a visual approach to analysis. Challenging the primacy of traditional textual transcription is an ongoing preoccupation of Chapin’s, which I adopted and explored as we worked together. I found inspiration in MacDougall’s (2006) claim that “In considering our use of images, it is no good simply insisting that we must do a better job of adapting them to the rules of scholarly writing. This will lead only to bad compromises. If we are to gain new knowledge from using images, it will come in other forms and by different means (p 2).” I have yet to see this charge fully realized, however, (at least through a research lens) even in my own attempts. Writing on visual analysis, Riessman (2008) conversely argues, while she supports visual inquiry, “Unlike filmmakers, social science investigators must write about images... [we must] interpret them in light of theoretical questions in our respective fields” (p 143). She asserts the only way to do this is through the written word and that it is a “naïve realist position” to think otherwise. This assertion feels vaguely punitive, and perhaps underestimates the

direction of communication technologies and their impact on up and coming young minds. I do not have the answer to MacDougall's charge, but perhaps my participants (or my participants' children) someday might. Worldwide, our communications are becoming more visually based as technology grows (from "Instagram" to "Snapchat" to the new security images that are popping up on bank log-in pages, among other examples). The implication is that our future scholars will also be more visually oriented and attuned to the rapid evolution of new communication technologies. One can imagine they will inevitably and organically begin to *think* in the multimodal ways afforded by these tools, and in turn use those "ways" to ask questions, solve problems, and represent their processes and discoveries.

There is no denying, however, words clarify. As acceptable scholarly methods expand in range and variety, and push at the edges of other forms of communication (e.g. art), it is important to distinguish for ourselves what constitutes research, as opposed to, say, filmmaking. From my perspective, a research product has the responsibility to communicate something specific. An art piece has no such responsibility. I differ from Riessman, however, in that I do not think the answer lies in writing *about* images, but rather, integrating our writing *with* images. Strength comes from true integration. Not just employing images as illustrations of what we are writing about, but allowing each method of communication to speak its own language fully, while remaining in dialog with each other.³ This is possible using multiple different mediums (in my case text and video) and more mediums are being developed every day that exploit the strengths of both text and images, i.e. Prezi, VoiceThread, etc. As a close colleague always reminds me, a third element, audio, also needs to be acknowledged in the mix. Music, for example, can so clearly communicate everything from intangibles, like emotion, to specifics, like time period. Also, part of my excitement of working with video absolutely springs from how it captures the human voice in tandem with the body language of the speaker. Listening to and watching conversation with all its cadence and nuance, which can be difficult to capture in text alone, is

part of what is so compelling about the possibilities of multimodal research in all of its stages (data collection, analysis, and construction).

While I have come to believe that the visual and the textual want to live in kinship, and that they both become stronger when their forces are joined, the academy still strongly privileges text over image, which is problematic. Somehow text is still more trusted, in a similar way that quantitative methods tend to be trusted over qualitative. Textual transcription, however, is not simply a matter of listening to and copying down words verbatim from an interview. Rather it is an art that relies on the transcriber having a keen ear and an ability to notate emphasis, nuance, and implication in speech. The quality and reliability of the transcript depends entirely on the accuracy and/or interpretation of the transcriber.⁴ Chapin and I, in fact, worked with a transcript that made no sense until we went back to the source material (video) and discovered that much of what was transcribed was completely inaccurate, and further, gave a questionable impression of the participant involved [link]. It is not simply a distrust of the traditional method, however, that drives us toward a visual and audial mode of analysis. When working with video in this immersive way, the “transcriber” is charged with the same challenge as above, but also draws from facial expression, body language, and the visual cues offered in the silent spaces in between speech. Although it is still the (fallible) researcher who is doing the editing, sorting, and categorizing, (we are not making “truth” claims here) the clips from which we are working remain intact, preserving the words, intonation, facial expression, etc., of the participants involved. We feel this preservation of the visual and audial material in a participant/researcher exchange offers an opportunity for a more three-dimensional analysis of what our participants are expressing.

ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING:

We know the truth not only by reason, but by the heart.

- Blaise Pascal

The Collaborative Seeing Studio (CSS) [link], of which I am a member, is housed at the CUNY Graduate Center and is a mix of faculty and doctoral students interested in visual research. We originally came together around Wendy Luttrell's longitudinal visual ethnographic project, *Children Framing Childhood*, and its follow up study, *Looking Back* [link], both to which this project owes a great debt.⁵ Key to our approach in CSS is creating multiple voicing and audiencing opportunities for our youth participants. We are fully aware of the issues Pini (2001) and others raise about young people "creating selves" for the camera intended to please us or meet our expectations, but we have found by building in several ways for them to tell their stories (i.e., voicing, e.g., photographs, video, VoiceThread), and more importantly, several opportunities to view and discuss their own and each other's work in different settings and contexts (i.e., audiencing), they are remarkably aware of, and transparent about, how and why they choose to create those specific and varying "selves" (Luttrell, et al, 2012). The exercise becomes a fascinating window into identity exploration and expression, and ultimately provides a much more complex and interesting read of the youth involved. The six tenets of the CSS [link] serve as a foundation for my methodological ethics (appendix 1).

As stated above, the project of this dissertation was collaborative, with the main participants being three of my former students. Although I have long standing relationships with my student participants (established in 2008 when they actually were my students) my imperative in this project, as it was in our classroom, was to listen. The fact that they are no longer my students, and have not been for many years, but that we have maintained relationships speaks to the trust that has built between us. Traditionally, these relationships might raise eyebrows in research circles with questions of "validity." This is the beauty, however, of the *Collaborative Seeing*

approach. Embedded in my research design were multiple means of data collection, and more important, multiple audiencing opportunities. These opportunities included sessions between my participants, but also between myself and my colleagues and mentors. So many eyes on the data and employing a *need to know more stance* (see appendix 1), necessarily challenges and complicates ones' initial take, leading to extended questioning and a much richer read. While much of our work was collaborative, with most of the material coming straight from my participants, ultimately I was the final editor. So, audiencing became an even more crucial tool to help balance my (inevitably) emotional and personally informed response to the data, with some alternative perspectives. In this way, I consider my colleagues and mentors as vital collaborators as well.

To be clear, however, I make no apologies for my personal relationships with my participants. In fact, I understand those relationships as imperative to this project. In her *Reflexive Model of Research Design*, Luttrell (2010) places “research relationships” at the very center of an origami North Star, a guiding image she offers “as emblematic of research in search of social justice.” She explains, “...the model makes visible the central role *research relationships* play. Negotiating and representing research relationships—what and how we learn with and about others and ourselves—is at the heart of the research journey” (Luttrell, p 160). Also, importantly, she asserts, “As a feminist researcher, I think of validity in terms of *authenticity* and *reciprocity* established through my research relationships” (p 162), a perspective I have wholeheartedly adopted. Further, Haney and Lykes (2010), in discussing ethical guidelines in relation to research with “human subjects” assert, “Collaborative forms of inquiry often blur the boundaries between research and practice. As importantly, these are not static relationships in research beyond university walls but processes wherein multiple selves and relationships are enacted” (p 121). These perspectives allow for research to be a living breathing ongoing process that feels much more appropriate (and authentic) to work with young people, than do more “objective,” if

perhaps less messy, approaches. One further perspective I like on “validity” comes from Joyce Yee (2012). She writes from the perspective of a design scholar, but I think her suggestion is salient nonetheless,

...what might perhaps be a constructive guiding principle to follow is the evaluation of how useful a research outcome is to its intended audience. We should be focused on ‘does it work?’ rather than ‘is it true?’ Usefulness of design knowledge relates to how it benefits the understanding of the field, moving from factual knowledge to tacit knowledge, and the application of knowledge. Although ensuring ‘valid’ research design and research outcomes are essential, it is also important to focus on the usefulness of knowledge in relation to the research audience (p 487)

A major part of what I consider my ethical imperative for this project is to make it accessible and useful to multiple audiences (i.e., reciprocity), most importantly my participants and other young people who are, or were at one time, in similar circumstances. By “accessible,” I do not mean the often-assumed euphemism for “dumbed down.” I mean it the way Merriam Webster defines it, access as “permission or the right to enter, get near, or make use of something or to have contact with someone.”⁶ My hope is that this dissertation can become more than a collection of stories of young people with complicated relationships to formal education (although clearly these are crucial, compelling, and the heart of the project), but also a living, breathing tool for those young people and the actors in their lives. That is the main reason the project is not only a manuscript, but also a website. The seed for this idea was planted by that first project with my students in 2008, when they taught me how to use MySpace and demonstrated the role it played in their lives. Since then, of course, social media has exploded and diversified, moving far past MySpace and Facebook, into the Twittersphere and beyond. It has even made inroads into the academy in a host of interesting (and some not so interesting) ways. Never really settling into MySpace, my cyber home continues to be Facebook. Through that medium, I have managed to stay connected to over 400 former students, with more finding

me every day (one of my personal ethical guidelines for connecting with students online is that I am never the initiator).

As part of their digital media and learning initiative, the MacArthur Foundation funded a three-year ethnographic study called the Digital Youth Project. They published their findings in a white paper (and a more extensive book) called *Living and Learning with New Media* (2008). Much of what New Literacy educators speak to, for example the possible power-flip in the classroom, comes through in this study. “Youth using new media often learn from their peers, not teachers or adults, and notions of expertise and authority have been turned on their heads” (p. 2). These revelations are framed as positives not negatives. The study goes a long way in refuting the assumption of time wasted and the moral panic many adults harbor about youth online activity. That panic is born from a combo-plate of genuine concern and a general lack of understanding.

Both the generational divide and the divide between in-school and out-of-school learning are part of a resilient set of questions about adult authority in the education and socialization of youth... new media empower youth to challenge the social norms and educational agendas of their elders in unique ways (p. 4).

The study does not, however, try to minimize the role of the adult/educator, but instead seeks to expand their participation in the online lives of their students. This, of course, requires a willingness to learn and an openness to not always being the expert—a stance that is uncomfortable for many educators.

“Although youth are often considered early adopters and expert users of new technology, their views on the significance of new media practice are not always taken seriously. Adults who stand on the other side of a generation gap can see these new practices as mystifying and, at times, threatening to existing social norms and educational standards.” p. 39

Our experience of creating the MySpace video made it clear that if one decides to take that leap, the potential pedagogical possibilities are limitless.

Finally, my life's work has focused on creating real access to formal education, especially higher education for marginalized youth who left or were pushed out of high school before completion. This is a multilayered process. While there are organizations that might provide funding, or tutoring, or "pathways," none of those services or supports matter if the young people they serve cannot really imagine themselves as part of the world of the academy. They must be able to *see* themselves, and equally be *seen* as belonging in that world. It is not about compromising "rigor" but instead expanding our reach in current, relevant, and exciting ways. This website serves not only as a resource, but also an example of what graduate work and research can look like—something that is not inscrutable and mysterious, but instead something that is very much a part of our daily lives. By opening up my research process I hope to dispel some of the mystery, and provide a concrete roadmap to help the young people I have worked with over the years and others like them to truly visualize themselves going as far up the academic ladder as they choose.

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS:

Identity is an assemblage of constellations.

-- Anna Deavere Smith

As stated earlier, my three participants and I first met in 2008 when they each signed up for a digital story telling class that I co-taught with Shannon Taggart, a documentary filmmaker. Our first project together (which we documented in video) we titled, *2008: A MySpace Odyssey* [link]. As a class, we explored the (at the time) budding social networking phenomenon that had taken hold of most of my students' attentions and imaginations. We had a couple of roundtable discussions where they explained the various attractions and merits of MySpace (then the most popular SNS), warned me about the possible perils, and ended by teaching me how to make my own MySpace page (my first ever personal encounter with a SNS). It was a humbling experience

in which the students stepped into the role of teacher, forever altering the power structure of our classroom in a wonderfully positive way. It became a creative space in which we were all excited to belong and participate.

For the final project of the class, we asked the students to make short films on some aspect of their lives that they wanted to share. Three of them (Travis, Ally, and Richmond) chose to make films about why they left school [link]. Their resulting films were tremendously powerful, largely because of how eloquently and richly they captured their three very different reasons for leaving—reasons that were emblematic of many other young people’s in similar circumstances. By representing a diversity of identity experiences related to physical and cultural border crossing, the films resonated well beyond the students themselves and really spoke to the familial, social, and institutional forces in their lives. Considered together, the films represent three common reasons why young people leave school⁷: immigration, and the challenges of assimilation and language acquisition; gender and sexuality and the constant bullying that inevitably accompanies folks who find themselves outside the “mainstream;” and the challenges of attempting to step toward a new life direction without betraying or losing strong social and familial allegiances. They are also three “dropouts” who sought a way to acquire a formal education without sacrificing self-respect, personal safety, or important social and familial supports. Lastly, the diversity of stories and backgrounds of the student participants shine a light on the absurdity of the monolithic “dropout” stereotype that can be blithely applied to all three. For these reasons, they were perfectly suited for the kind of research I wanted to conduct about messaging received around “dropping out” of high school, and the impact of that messaging on their individual pursuits of higher education. The archival (2008) films they created in our class formed a solid foundation upon which to build our current project.

Situating myself

I grew up in what I have come to think of as a “privileged poverty.” My Chilean father and my (white) American mother were both artists. Our family, my parents, brother, sister, and I, scraped by on my mother’s income as a sometime teacher and my father’s intermittent graphic design jobs. It was the 1970’s in New York City, so it was still possible to survive, and in some ways thrive, on very little. What we lacked in economic capital, we made up for in cultural capital. Our parents took advantage of every free cultural event the city had to offer, and exposed us early on to the riches and delights of various arts institutions and activities. When my siblings and I were 6, 7, and 8 respectively, my parents had a stroke of luck and managed to win a spot in a new artists’ housing complex in Greenwich Village called Westbeth [link]. Rent in Westbeth was based on one’s income, so in our first year ours was \$153 a month! This miracle allowed us to move out of a tiny roach-infested basement apartment in Brooklyn and into a beautiful light-flooded duplex apartment in Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson River. Almost more important than the space itself, however, was the instant feeling of community and recognition. Westbeth was a huge building full of artists of all kinds and their families. No need to explain our unusual way of cobbling a living, here it was the norm. We had found our tribe. There was a darker side to this paradise, however. A far cry from the sanitized affluent neighborhood the Village has since become, and the now unbelievably wealthy “Meatpacking District” we bordered (they were still packing meat there then), the area was rife with crime, gangs still monopolized the local playground, and our street corners were known hot spots for sex workers of all kinds to ply their trade. These issues surfaced most vividly for me in relation to school—beginning with the journey to and from the building, which was always laced with fear and trepidation. In that pre-disappeared-kids-on-milk-cartons era, we thought very differently about child safety. We were “latchkey” kids by the time we were 7, 8, and 9, which was the norm in our building.

Because of our move to Manhattan, and my bump from kindergarten to first grade mid-semester in Brooklyn before that, I had been placed in three different classrooms (and two different schools) in my very first year of formal education. This inauspicious beginning was compounded after my parents separated and we moved several more times, resulting in my attending six different schools by the time I dropped out at sixteen. From the first, school was a place of dread and humiliation for me and I would even assert that *none* of my academic learning took place there. Instead, my mother made sure she read to me and my siblings every night, took us to museums and (free) theater, and generally instilled in us a love of ideas. This experience planted the seed in me that “learning” was not the problem—the problem was much more complicated than that. Just as with my students, it involved a mismatch of the values and customs of my home life and the school culture and conventions. Nobody (either at school or at home) identified these contradictions, tried to rectify them, or attempted to help me resolve my internal conflicts. Well-meaning teachers would generally recognize and acknowledge some level of intelligence in me, and would write comments on my failing report cards saying that I had great “potential” that I was not meeting. They were completely missing the point, however, that I had absolutely no way of knowing how to meet my “potential.” Nothing in my home life supported the type of learning I was supposed to be doing in the school (we were not the type of household that checked homework), and the opposite was equally true. Even the few times I had good relationships with my teachers (which I measured by my slightly lesser degree of discomfort in their classrooms), most of what was expected of me academically felt intangible and mysterious.⁸ So, assumptions were made about me in the school context that both my teachers and I adopted and internalized. I was trapped in a negative cycle of a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. My students are stuck in a similar cycle of negative assumptions and low expectations, but because they are majority black and Latino, their struggles are also impacted by the weight of the legacy of individual and institutional racism in this country. Although I am half Latina, I am generally perceived as white. The white privilege I am granted because of this,

coupled with my access to cultural capital (if not economic capital) through my artist parents eased my journey back to formal education. Most of my students did not have this advantage.

Travis

Travis, who is Latino and from the Bronx, had already distinguished himself in the MySpace project with his wit and insight, and by taking a lead position in the actual teaching. The double entendre of his 2008 film title, *Blocked* [link], perfectly characterized the paradox he presented in the video. He talked about how he not only “loves the block,” but he “loves the whole idea of the block [link].” By the “block” he meant the immediate neighborhood that housed the bulk of his family and childhood friends. While this love was strong, he also recognized how in some ways it had trapped, or “blocked” him from moving beyond or outside its strict physical and social parameters. He framed his discussion in his own specific struggle to finish high school. Travis shared how the pull of the block was a powerful force in his life, and how the ‘rules’ of his neighborhood were diametrically opposed to those of school. Part of what was so powerful about Travis’ film was that he managed to tell a very personal story, while simultaneously surfacing the multiple familial, social, economic, and logistical issues that contributed to his struggle, and that of so many others from similar circumstances.

In 2012/13, when we began to work together again, Travis spoke more specifically about what impact being a Latino male living in poverty had on his quest for formal education. In our conversations he told me how he felt like he “was always expected to be mediocre, and to live a mediocre life.” He also spoke about the “competing norms” of the block and larger societal expectations. He asserted that completing high school and going to college is a given for middle class white kids, but he instead was double messaged with low expectations from educators (and institutions) who underestimated his intelligence, and ridicule from his friends if he displayed an inclination toward school and learning. He is acutely aware of these expectations, and thinks

consciously about how to manipulate them. In our first conversation he described how he played various “cards.” So, for example, if he did not complete everything for an assignment for school, he would play the “poor Latino male card.” As he says, “I’m a Latino male, I’m going through this, people should be, like, taking notice to how far I’m actually getting instead of... noticing like, what I’m not doing... Instead of, like, taking the blame on myself, the individual, I placed the blame on the group [link].” He is also, however, acutely aware that there are possible repercussions from those manipulations, and believes they “took away from [his] potential” and allow other people the power to determine when and how he can change his “situation.” Travis’ relationship with the block continues to evolve, as do his complicated feelings around his own intelligence and pursuit of formal education. After a few stops and starts, he completed his associate’s degree, and is now considering going back to school for either culinary arts or filmmaking.

Ally

Ally, who still identified as Alfredo in my 2008 class, but has since come out as a transgender woman, was messaged that she did not belong in school at all because she was “different.” This was conveyed through the constant bullying she endured starting from her first days of school. She recounts a story in her 2008 film, *Overprotected* [link], of being tormented in kindergarten because she liked the yellow Power Ranger best, clear evidence (apparently) that she was a “fag.” She, like Travis, also received the dominant discourse messaging of school not being for her, by being Latina, from the Bronx, and coming from poverty. In the film, she spoke about how her parents were “overprotective,” which (in 2008) she found oppressive, but also her excitement about her life ahead. She says with a smile, “I want to finish college, be a great fashion designer, singing, dancing, acting... I just want to do everything. I want to be in a relationship... I just want to do everything [link].”

Ally made a very specific choice to redefine her academic identity (while also redefining her gender identity) by not only going to college, but also moving out of her neighborhood and living on a small campus far away from the City. She speaks to this choice in one of our 2012/13 conversations where she said she loved the people at home, but had to get away. On her college campus, she was clearly identified as female (Ally), while at home she was still identified by her family as male (Alfredo), even though she had undergone significant physical changes that clearly visually identified her as female. After being referred to as “him” by one of her nieces in a piece of video she shot, Ally says, “Some girls have problems with pronouns!” While in college, Ally embraced many of its rituals, including being a model in fashion shows, where she fully and publically enjoyed and displayed her femaleness. She also spearheaded the first ever pride parade in Potsdam (the town that houses the college), an accomplishment that gave her a taste for organizing and educating the public. She had some interruptions in her college career, but has since graduated with her bachelor’s degree in communications with a minor in sexual health. When she graduated, she won an internship to work as a sexual health educator for Planned Parenthood. She was on the verge of accepting an offer of a job for them when her mother fell ill. She had to stop work altogether for a while to take care of her mother, who sadly passed away a short time after. She is now deep in the job search process, which has been tough and discouraging. Ever the optimist, however, she is sure something will open up soon. She was considering pursuing a master’s degree in social work, but her mother’s death has reoriented her priorities toward home and family. She says “my life is my dad right now... I want to make sure he’s happy and he’s taken care of.”

Richmond

Richmond, who moved to the Bronx from Ghana (his film was titled *My Journey*) [link] when he was 18, had the opposite messaging about school from his home life. It was not even a question that he would go to school, of course he would! He did, in fact, complete high school in

Ghana. But, two things complicated his relationship to formal education – first, he never valued school (in Ghana) and said he “considered [himself] as a dropout, because [he] was doing horrible [link]” and he never learned anything. Second, coming to this country, with its’ unfamiliar social dynamics and language challenges, complicated things in a few ways: 1) he was unable to transfer his diploma, 2) he joined a GED program where his initial social relationships were with young people who did “drop out,” 3) he was seen as a young *black* man (rather than just a young man, as in Ghana), which carried all of the requisite prejudices, assumptions, and fallout directed at young black men in this country, e.g., frequently getting stopped and frisked on the street and/or pulled over in his car. It was his first experience of being an object of suspicion and mistrust simply because of the way he looked.

His relationships with his father and his stepfather also complicated his relationship with school and schooling. When Richmond came to this country, his stepfather (who brought him over, “through the grace of god!” as he says in Richmond’s 2008 film) insisted that he go to school so he could be credentialed here and get a job to help sustain the family. They agreed to send him for a high school equivalency, since at 18 trying to earn a diploma with no provable academic track record would be arduous at best. When Richmond repeatedly failed the GED (he had trouble with the ELA sections), however, his stepfather wanted him to quit and just find any job. The principal of our program stepped in and insisted that Richmond stay and finish so he could go to college. Our principal was an important early male role model for him when he arrived. Richmond finished his associate’s degree and is now completing a bachelor’s degree in studio art. He never told his stepfather what he is studying, partly because he might not approve, and partly (I think) as a declaration of independence. He plans to go directly to graduate school for studies in special education, since discovering a new found love of working with physically challenged children through hippotherapy. His college connected him with this program [links, service corps & gallopNYC]. Now that he is in college, he is immersing himself (like Ally) in

many traditional college rituals. For example, he joined a fraternity, which on one hand is helping cement important relationships with other men, and on the other is helping redefine his relationship with school.

A final thought about my relationships with my participants: there is a dynamic that has formed between us (albeit one-sided) from my spending so much time immersed in the video data. Although not in person, it feels like I have spent intense amounts of one-on-one time with each of them, listening, questioning, dialoging. Over time, I have felt my understanding of them has become more rounded and nuanced. I do recognize that the thousands of moments I have spent with them are frozen in time, but they nevertheless feel like daily interactions (perhaps more acutely because of the nature of video). Travis, Ally, and Richmond did not have that same opportunity with me (hence the one-sidedness). It is an important reminder that even in this collaborative project, ultimately it is my construction alone. A colleague of mine, after viewing a short experimental video piece I did as an initial exercise a while ago, said it was very clear that I “loved” my participants. This is true—not blindly, but certainly and unconditionally.

DATA COLLECTION:

Stories are data with a soul.

- Brené Brown

In this section and the next (Data Analysis), I go into some detail about how I actually collected and worked with the data. I take this practical approach for two reasons. First, because I believe it is important to be transparent about some of the trial and error involved in charting new methodological territory. There are starting to be many multimodal dissertations (far fewer that take the form of a website), and just as many possible approaches. Two of my committee members are founders of the Collaborative Seeing Studio [link], and as such we were familiar with many of the ideas and issues raised by multimodal scholarship, but less experienced with actually doing and evaluating the work. There is obviously not a set blueprint of how to do this

work, so the ability to experiment was important. I was fortunate my committee was as curious about how to do this work as I was, so together we charted a path. There was agreement that we valued and wanted to stay connected to the scholarly tradition, but we also shared a desire to contribute to its expansion. This desire and agreement was reflected in my initial proposal.

Second, I offer my step-by-step report in order to aid fellow researchers who are looking for more concrete descriptions of *one* form this work can take. I emphasize *one* for obvious reasons. Importantly, however, for numerous reasons (many of the same kind that have complicated the academic lives of my participants) I at times strayed from my proposed and agreed upon path. This led me to make several choices that I would not now repeat, and some that I could not “fix.” So I had to figure out how to make things work in spite of those choices and just move forward. My hope is that my readers will be able to learn as much (if not more) from my mistakes as they do from my successes. Another hope my committee and I share is that as professors delve more deeply into the potential of multimodal research with their students, their students will become bolder in their research designs, and our institutions will inevitably begin to embrace these ideas and create the necessary infrastructure for support. I am lucky to be part of an institution that has done just that.⁹

Overview

As stated above, my participants’ archival films from our 2008 digital storytelling class serve as the foundation for this project, and as such were the first pieces of data collected. As has also been discussed, these films were instrumental in choosing my participants. My methodology is grounded in the films, my relationships with these three young people, and *Looking Back*, the follow up to Wendy Luttrell’s longitudinal study, *Children Framing Childhood* [link]. Inspired by her project, I was interested in how my participants would reflect on their films over time. I wanted to revisit with them the issues they originally raised, so I began with individual semi-

structured interviews with each of them, which were filmed by my former co-teacher, Shannon Taggart (see appendix 2 for sample interview questions). Similar to the archival films, I wanted to provide my participants the opportunity to record their own footage, so they were each given a small video camera to keep for two weeks, after the initial interviews. There were no specific instructions given as to what or how to film, other than to keep in mind the content of their original films, and what they might want to share about their lives now. We later came together for a reunion of sorts, a roundtable conversation, which was also filmed by Shannon. This roundtable was specifically designed as an audiencing session, where we viewed and discussed each of their 2008 films in turn. Audiencing (also discussed above) is a basic tool used by the Collaborative Seeing Studio [link]. It connects to several of our six tenets—most directly *Multiple Audience Eyes*, where “collaborative seeing” allows for a richer read of the material offered by considering multiple understandings and perspectives, in multiple settings, over time (see appendix 3 for the guiding questions for this “roundtable” audiencing session). Finally, after receiving and viewing their new footage, I had follow up interviews with all three participants where we had the opportunity to discuss what they chose to share with me on film and discuss updates of where they were in their school trajectories. Unfortunately, my original hope of having the participants co-edit the three new films proved logistically impossible. They have final say, however, on anything that I produce for public consumption from the data that they created and/or in which they are involved.

Shannon Taggart and I have been collaborating on various projects since we were first paired in the classroom in 2008 to teach the digital storytelling class. Shannon’s unique role in our school and close relationships with the students predates that by a year. She was hired by our principal in 2007 to be the school “documentarian,” and as such spent a great deal of time behind her camera inside our classrooms, our student life center (communal space used for everything from lunch to assemblies), our offices, and our surrounding community. We all (including the

students) quickly became accustomed to Shannon's camera-toting presence in any and all of our daily activities, including classes, meetings, trips, and events. She had an unusual gift for blending into the background and making people feel very comfortable in front of the camera, even those of us who abhor that position. In fact, when I was still teaching, Shannon would walk into my classroom while filming and the students would acknowledge her (she was much beloved) but not the camera. She would film freely, including at times getting very close to the students while they were working, and they would not lose focus or become self-conscious. In contrast, a few times we were asked to set up cameras on tripods to film our classes as professional development exercises. This would *always* upset the students, and I would have to go through a long explanation about how the camera was trained on me, not them, and that no one would ever see the footage aside from the principal and me. The way I made sense of these two very different responses was by understanding how so often in the students' lives, cameras (especially disembodied cameras) were tools of surveillance and symbolized a lack of trust and safety. Whereas Shannon's presence humanized the camera, so it became just another participant in that space.

The videos she went on to produce also became integral to the life of the school. She reflected the students' ambition, brilliance, and talent back to them in short pieces about special projects, or events, or the always eagerly awaited end-of-year wrap up videos shown at graduation. These videos substantially helped to strengthen our school culture, and helped to show new and perspective students a bit of what to expect when they came through our doors. More than that, though, they set the tone for the kind of active, engaged, and creative school we wanted to be. We (the faculty and staff) saw this, the students saw this, and stakeholders outside the school saw this, and expectations began to shift from us being a "dropout" program, to us being an innovative, challenging school.¹⁰ This was the backdrop in place when Shannon and I started to work on our digital storytelling class together.

The intention and result of the MySpace video was discussed previously, so what I want to clarify here is the method employed. The original idea was mine (in relation to David Chapin's visual research class), and when I proposed it to Shannon, she immediately agreed it had the potential to be the icebreaker/group bond we were looking for. It evolved naturally that I was the lead in the roundtable discussions we had with the class, partly because I was the main "teacher" in the room (this was the first time Shannon was going to be teaching at the school), and I was also the least tech savvy adult in the building. It was just as natural for Shannon to be the videographer for the project, because this was her expertise and niche in the life of the school. The project progressed over (at least) four class periods, two devoted to our discussions and two set aside for the students' teaching, i.e., helping me make my page. Shannon joining in on the discussions happened organically as our conversations went on—she asked questions and made comments when they occurred to her.¹¹ I believe this was part of what made the camera so unthreatening in her hands, because one was always so aware of the person behind it. She never attempted to make herself or the camera invisible.

When it came time to edit, Shannon and I brainstormed the specific categories we wanted to highlight and made a rough outline according to those categories. Our categories were mostly informed by the reading I was doing at the time for David's class.¹² Our process involved us sitting side-by-side, with Shannon "driving" (i.e., doing the actual editing on Final Cut, because it was brand new to me at the time) and me dictating. Shannon knew what was possible to do with Final Cut, so for example, when I said I wanted to call the piece "2008: A MySpace Odyssey," she came up with the idea of the "trailer" which became the opening sequence, with its' rolling titles and Kubrick-inspired music. We shared a very similar sense of humor, and we knew it was the kind of tone we wanted to set for the larger piece, so this worked for both of us. That move on her part made me bolder about asking for what I was visualizing and not just

assuming we could only do one layer of talking heads. For example, for the credits I asked her if we could have “windows” pop up with the students signing off to the camera with their MySpace page URLs, and she made it happen. Ultimately the project was collaborative, with me taking the lead on the content piece and Shannon taking the lead on the “technical” piece, but both of these areas inevitably informed each other. When we showed the finished product to our class, they became inspired with ideas for their own films, for which they had begun to collect footage. We had them create storyboards (i.e., outlines) and write and record narrations. Shannon also did some loose interviews with them to have another layer of storytelling available for their final pieces. When it came to the actual editing, Shannon did with them what she had done with me—sat side-by-side while they told her what they wanted to do and she did the “driving.”¹³

At the very beginning of 2012, I defended my dissertation proposal and immediately after, applied for IRB approval on my project. Several months had passed, however, by the time I was approved and was actually able to schedule the interviews and by then Shannon had begun to think about creating some “follow up” stories specifically for the school. It was always very difficult to pin down former students for appointments of any kind, so Shannon approached me about joining in on the interview time I had set up with my participants for purely practical reasons. When I agreed, we fell smoothly into our old roles. Shannon stood behind the camera while I took the lead on the interviews. When the students came, we explained to them that we were working on two distinct projects that would borrow from the same sources, i.e., the archival videos, our conversations, and their new footage. We each had separate consent forms for them to sign, which contained basically the same agreements about the participants having the final say about anything they were part of included in the final products, and reserving the right to withdraw at any time, etc. They did not hesitate to sign and we began our work. Shannon was behind the camera for all of the interviews (including the roundtable) except one, my first follow up with Richmond, for which we used a tripod.

Participants' relationships to the camera

Ally, Travis, and Richmond each had quite distinctive relationships to the camera, and as such approached their “data collection” (i.e., filming) in very different ways. The approaches that Ally and Travis employed were similar to their original 2008 films, but Richmond had a wholesale change in the way he handled the camera. In fact, in 2008 he refused to handle the camera at all, necessitating a visit by Shannon to his home so he could capture his family interviews on film, and so she could film him (as requested by Richmond) with his sisters and engaging in art making. The participants' three different approaches (discussed below) were challenging to reconcile with my own style of storytelling, in which I strove for some consistency in approach. My goal of having the video modules stand alone *and* work when strung together as a whole piece required some uniformity in my framework. Thinking about “their approach” vs. “my approach” and how *I* was the one who ultimately was deciding how to put these together (the original hope was to co-edit, which proved logistically impossible), shined a light on the myriad possible ways to define working “collaboratively.” After describing three different approaches to three different participatory¹⁴ projects, Chris High, et al. (2012), conclude,

The diversity revealed by the vignettes we have presented reflects the breadth of the field of participatory video. We would suggest that the issue is not so much how to define participatory video or whether a particular initiative is orthodox. Instead, the focus could more usefully be on the conditions under which participation is generated or regenerated. Participatory video practice arises from a history of exuberant innovation, of individuals, organizations, and communities learning their way to novel applications of filmmaking to social issues and, in doing so, tuning their strategies to meet a myriad of local challenges. The resulting practices and histories of engagement are so varied that trying to reify them into a single orthodoxy risks obscuring the important lessons in their development. The freedom to innovate and develop ones' own ideas about participatory video is an important part of the tradition” (p 45).

In this project, the collaboration takes the form of collage—taking distinct elements and marrying them to create a whole. The elements are comprised of the footage from my participants’ original 2008 films and new footage and images they brought me from their current lives. Their interviews serve as the glue. The editing program (Final Cut) provides the support upon which to assemble the above.¹⁵ As I said, the “elements” varied greatly according to their creators.

Ally’s camerawork

Ally had a long running love affair going with the camera that predated our digital storytelling class. It was not until the current project that I found out she already had a “vlog” (video blog) going on YouTube well before our MySpace project. In retrospect, there were signs of her experience that surfaced in class. For example, in our roundtables she was the only one who would speak directly to the camera, which she did on several occasions when she wanted to say something to “the people.” Also, she was the only one to include confessional style footage (again speaking directly into the camera—this time not to instruct, but instead to share a “moment”) in her offerings for her film. For the current project, her skill has evolved to a remarkable ability to hold the camera very steadily on herself while walking and talking into it. In fact, her in-motion camerawork tends to be much steadier when the camera is trained on herself rather than pointed out into the world. She is clearly quite conscious of how she presents herself, preferring to shoot from above and often winking or smiling or making cute faces into the camera. Conversely, in a shot where she is not dressed to be in front of the camera, she pans her bedroom and we catch a glimpse of her in the mirror as she exclaims “eww, do not look at me!” Her flirty humorous style evokes what Watkins (2009) calls the “aspirational self,” where young people adopt strict popular culture defined roles of hyper masculinity or femininity in their use of social media. He says of young people’s online self-representations,

The incessant desire to control and use their bodies as a source of pleasure and personal expression is a key theme in young people's journey toward greater social, emotional, and physical maturity. In the MySpace universe this is realized in spectacular fashion (p 43).

Whereas Watkins ultimately sees these roles as “...more limiting than liberating, imprisoning instead of empowering” (p 44), one senses the opposite for Ally (especially in her early footage). She was always able to express her femininity in tangible ways in her online profiles, even before she was able to in her daily life. Ally also narrates much of what she shoots, whether giving us a tour of her apartment, telling us we are going to visit the neighbors, or showing us what food is being cooked that day (a recurring theme). The overall impression is that Ally is quite conscious of the camera as a portal to a specific audience (in this case, a teacher/researcher audience), and as such, she is careful to include things she thinks will be of interest. With Ally, however, one does not feel like she is merely presenting the “self” she thinks the teacher/researcher wants (Pini 2001), but instead, by being mindful of what we might want to know or hear, she is simply being a good host as she invites us into her world.

Travis's camerawork

Travis' camerawork runs a wide gamut of approaches. It often feels completely indiscriminant, as if he just turns on the camera when he thinks of it and lets it record, sometimes (seemingly) forgetting it is in his hands. One gets this impression because the images recorded are often so shaky and unfocused as to not being able to identify (visually) much of what is going on. This is in contrast to other times where he is completely tuned into the camera, and carefully records a conversation or a shot of the neighborhood, for example, using the zoom lens to emphasize certain features or actions [link]. Other times, he props the camera on an object to act as a tripod, usually when he wants to “perform” in front of it (there are long sequences in his raw footage of him “freestyle” rapping). Lastly, he occasionally hands the camera off to someone else to record, as he did while taking part in a community fashion show. There is a lot of footage of

Travis with friends smoking, drinking, and “talking smack,” which seems to be informed by two things. Firstly, youth social media practices, especially around identity work (boyd 2014, Watkins 2009, et al), with a nod to the tradition of YouTube “how to” videos¹⁶ (in this case “how to” roll a blunt). Secondly, Travis’ choice of subject is likely informed by his 2008 video. Specifically, a segment where he is seen smoking marijuana and says, “Sometimes this is why I can’t even make it to school... constantly hitting this shit up [link].” That segment in particular depicted a resonant experience for many of our students, and was part of why his film became such a touchstone at our school. As stated earlier, his 2008 film was shown in orientations for new students, many of who came from Travis’ neighborhood, and as such, Travis became a minor celebrity of sorts. One cannot help but feel like he was trying to “up his game” in the new footage, as some of his “bad boy” behavior was so aggressively communicated. Travis’ self-representation as a ne’er-do-well party guy in his own footage was in stark contrast to the Travis we met in his interviews with me, which was not true for the other participants. His interviews show him to have an insightful, sophisticated understanding of the world, and a remarkable vocabulary with which to communicate that understanding.

Richmond’s camerawork

Richmond’s camerawork trajectory mirrors somewhat his social trajectory. Since 2008, he became much more willing to work with the camera (agreeing this time to actually take a camera and use it) and to try different techniques, including standing still while panning, handing the camera off to someone else, and even a humorously failed attempt (on Ally’s prompting) to talk into the camera while walking [link]. Similarly, Richmond has become much more extraverted and social himself, as shown in a sweet segment from his raw footage where his dear friend Charles says, “it’s pretty cool” how Richmond has become such a “social butterfly.” This transformation is something that Richmond takes great pride in and comments on a few times during our interviews. He also, however, speaks about the importance of privacy, and how he

carefully controls what images and information he puts out in the world (mainly on Facebook) about himself.¹⁷ He shares with us some footage of himself drawing in an artist's studio (handing the camera to his teacher to shoot) and some of his family. The bulk of his footage, however, is of his new campus, Queens College, of which he says while panning the camera 360°, "beautiful campus... who doesn't want to be here?" Also, there is a lot of footage of his fraternity brothers and their pledging exploits. Some of these are rituals that we (I believe) are not meant to entirely understand, but there are also segments of meetings and events, where Richmond will hand the camera off so we get more of a sense of his participation within the camaraderie of these young men. As one might expect, Richmond's more extraverted persona comes through strongly in the fraternity segments, but there is also a marked progression in his interviews from 2008 to 2012 to 2013 to 2015. In each interview, his voice and posture are stronger and clearer and more confident.

DATA ANALYSIS:

The shortest distance between two points is under construction.

-- Leo Aikman

There were three stages to my data analysis: 1) putting it all together, 2) organizing it into constructed categories, 3) making video memos, and working with Shannon to create the final videos. The first step in doing this was my own deep immersion in all of the data, which included the multiple interviews, the footage from the participants, and the archival films. The next step was trying to create categories to make some sense of all of it. Finally, I had to make decisions about what I wanted to include in the final pieces to be able to do justice to the rich data my participants shared. The four video pieces that came out of this process were the introduction piece and the three biographical pieces (Travis, Ally, and Richmond). For the final video pieces, I am reminded of what my favorite drawing teacher used to tell me—when beginning a drawing one must pay close attention to the model, but at a certain point, the drawing takes over. That is

similar to my process here (and seemingly with the research that has been most resonant to me over the years)—work hard to get it right, but ultimately one must trust the material.

1) Putting It All Together

Once my data was all collected, I wound up with a total of about 30 hours of video. Having never done a project like this before, that number was a little daunting to say the least. I knew I needed to winnow it down to a manageable size, but I did not want to lose anything important along the way. The only thing for it was to immerse myself in the video and carefully watch and listen to *every* clip (multiple times). In retrospect, I can see that there was a lot I could have done to make the initial run-through more efficient (more on this below—I did make some clumsy early attempts at pulling resonant pieces out of the raw footage before feeding them into Final Cut Pro, but because I had not yet clearly established a “system” this became a losing effort). At the time, however, my main focus was trying to get a handle on what I actually had. So, I watched and listened and watched and listened some more, and finally decided to just go ahead and import everything into Final Cut, assuming I could slash and burn large chunks of the data within this one tool.

2) Organizing It into Constructed Categories

After some trial and error, I took baby steps toward an organizational system, which became the foundation for my analysis. The first step was to simply separate the data by participant. Three participants became three categories, labeled by name. The roundtable discussion, which included all three participants, did not fit into this scheme, so it became its own category. Then, I began to tease out some themes and coded the data accordingly. My codes were developed after multiple viewings of the data while listening for three things; repeated and shared experiences, words or phrases, and/or actions that resonated with the theories I was exploring (explained further in my partner article [\[link\]](#)), and, of course, anything I felt related to my

research questions. I constantly asked myself, “What are the words and intonations I am hearing? What are the ideas being shared? What am I reading from their body language, gestures, and/or facial expressions?” I freely brainstormed my responses, trying not to edit as I went, and distilled my answers down to eight main categories, which contained several subcategories (repeated elements of the main categories—see below).

The categories (in alphabetical order) were:

CARING/CARE WORK

external responsibility –taking care of family –distracting responsibilities –context

EXTERNAL MESSAGING

hegemonic narrative –adopting the stereotype – labeling – pull yourself up by the bootstraps

FIGURED WORLDS

self-understanding – identity – agency – improvisation – bravado –success stories

IDENTITY SHIFT

identity change – arc – shift – development –roles –gendering –self sufficiency & care

INTERNALIZED BLAME

internal blame –internal failure – *lazy* –self-blame –internalized –*self-sabotage* –*poverty mentality*

INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES

navigating bureaucracy –problems not by addressed school –irrelevance of school –awareness of low expectation – *expected to be mediocre* –purposeful degradation of school system – requiring conformance –non-stair step life –non-linear life –non-linear

SCHOOLING: NON-SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

culture of dropping out – *drugs* – socializing – *bullying* – *harassment* – *poverty* –lack of role models –*hanging with the wrong crowd* –school-free zone

SCHOOLING: SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

safe space –*cuny prep* –institutional possibilities –place attachment

I erred on the side of inclusiveness in naming the categories, because I did not want to throw out any of what came up in the initial review. I was able to do this by identifying what I felt were the larger ideas (the main categories), and allowing the sub-categories to exist within that larger frame. Further refinement became necessary as I began to think about language, mine versus the participants. For example, the category I called “Internalized Blame,” included a subcategory “*lazy*,” which was something Travis said of himself in one of his interviews, but is a word (and therefore a label) I would never use in this context. This distinction of participant vs. researcher language seemed important to acknowledge and could only be made clear in my text (by color coding—red for the main categories, black for my language, and blue for my participants’) and

not in my video, at least not elegantly. That did not seem necessary, however, because my interest in the language was more about informing my thinking about the project rather than needing to surface it directly in the research product.

As described above, my data had three distinct types—semi-structured interviews (that I conducted with my participants), archival footage (the films my participants made while still my students in 2008), and the participants' own new footage. My codes were developed primarily based on the co-constructed interview data for two reasons: 1) because it was the bulk of my data—two interviews with Travis, three interviews with Richmond, two interviews with Ally, and one three-hour roundtable with all three participants (see appendices 2 and 3 for sample questions), and 2) because the interviews were guided specifically by my research questions, whereas the participant footage was more varied. As discussed above, the participants had each developed his or her own approach to their own contributions. Travis trained his camera on just about everything in his purview, and conducted some semi-formal interviews with folks from the “block.” Ally often spoke directly into the camera and acted as a guide to elements of her world by narrating what she showed us (i.e., “Hi guys, this is my room...,” etc.). Richmond experimented with different approaches, but often settled on handing the camera off to someone else, while he carried on with whatever activity he was involved in (e.g., drawing with his teacher).

3) Making Video Memos, and Working with Shannon to Create the Final Videos

Once my data was organized and coded, I needed a way to begin to explore what it all meant, so I began to put together what Final Cut calls “projects.” The “projects” function for Final Cut is a means for building a narrative. Projects are created on a “timeline,” and are basically sequences of (usually somewhat edited) clips. I used the “projects” function to create visual “memos,” which aided my thinking as I worked toward conceiving my final video modules. Memos are a

familiar writing tool for qualitative researchers, and serve to help “...spark our thinking and [encourage] us to look at our data and codes in new ways (Charmaz, p 189).” Visual memos serve the same function, but do so (in my case) in video. I created a handful of visual memos (see appendix 4). Some worked well to serve the larger project, and some did not—but all allowed me to explore ideas on a small scale without an inordinate investment of time or resources.

Finally, when it came time to create the finished video modules, Shannon and I once again worked together in our familiar way. I walked her through all of the organized data, and explained the outlines of the stories I wanted to tell. We created a loose storyboard for each participant, and I pointed out clips that I knew needed to be included. As I did with the memos, we built the finished videos on the Final Cut timeline described above. Through Shannon’s expertise, we were able to layer the interviews with footage from the participants, creating rich collage-like narratives. As hoped, we were able to treat each participant’s story as a separate module. These modules work on their own, as well as when strung together into one longer film. The introductory piece is designed to fit at the beginning of the modules, both individually and when shown as a whole. The idea is to allow the finished videos to reach a large audience and to be used in multiple contexts and for multiple purposes, e.g., presented in after school programs, youth centers, and teacher professional development sessions, and used to inform classroom practice, schooling policies, as well as help rewrite the script for out-of-school youth themselves and the actors in their lives.

Takeaways

As previously referenced, since I was learning the tool of Final Cut simultaneous to starting my analysis, early attempts at organization and system creation were based on trial and error. I tried things that I thought would make sense, and found through *doing* what did and did not

work. Final Cut works well for this approach because it is a non-destructive editing tool. Everything you decide to trim or pull out of a larger clip never destroys the original, which stays easily available for when you need it again. This gives you tremendous freedom and fluidity so you can experiment and try different things without completely destroying your data. Much of my “trial and error” occurred as I was trying to figure out both my “system,” and what the program (Final Cut) would actually support. The coding mechanism in Final Cut X is “keywords.” With keywording you can take any clip and put any label (or multiple labels) on it. Once you keyword a clip, you can click on it and it will show you all of the codes applied to it. Conversely, if you click on a keyword, it will show you all the clips in that category of code. Initially, in the name of not losing anything important, I would pull a clip and attach *all* the keywords I thought *might* apply. Unfortunately, later when I started to create “projects” that caused it to become really complicated, which surfaced the flaw in this method. Clearly it was not an effective system because it became overwhelming to try to keep track of where exactly the clips were and if (or how often) they were repeated in different categories. It became difficult to untangle with my enormous amount of data. This confusion made a strong case for exclusive coding, which would have simplified my process tremendously. It also had implications about how much time one should spend with the data before beginning to code. If I had been able to make stricter decisions then, I would have saved myself a barrel of trouble and a great deal of time. Also, with Final Cut X, you can go back and un-code clips, but when you do it un-codes *everything* with that label. So it is much more efficient to frontload with as much clarity as possible. For example, one solution would have been breaking the raw data up into much smaller clips and labeling them in QuickTime first, and then importing into Final Cut (where their imported labels would have stuck).

To clarify, I followed both a case and a cross-case analysis, for two reasons. First because I was interested in countering the monolithic view of the “dropout,” so it was important to feature the

individuality of each case. Second, because there were resonant themes across the participants. Also, throughout my process with this project I used audiencing as a method to check my analysis. I have learned from my mentors and colleagues that one gets a much richer analysis through this sort of collaboration. Audiencing opportunities with my participants, my advisee group, my mentors, and even conference attendees, provided valuable feedback and helped me understand my data from multiple perspectives (see appendix 4 for some specific examples). Audiencing also meant that some of my data collection and analysis happened simultaneously. For example, at the roundtable I held with my three participants, we came together as a group to re-watch and discuss the films they made in 2008. They each commented on and discussed each other's films (analysis), which was videotaped (data collection). Also, in my follow-up interviews with Richmond and Travis, I asked them questions that arose while viewing our original interviews and their own raw footage (see appendix 3 for sample questions). Analysis took shape through those discussions. This type of data analysis is not fixed, but rather is a "simplified, constructivist version of grounded theory (Charmaz p 186)."

By expanding the reach of collaboration, this use of audiencing speaks to the possibility of change in the way we traditionally do academic work—from solitary, competitive, and hierarchical, to collaborative, participatory, and inclusive, in supportive research spaces. Collaboration has been an important aspect of my entire process. People I have collaborated with were sometimes my mentors, sometimes my colleagues, and sometimes the youth with whom I was working. Many qualitative researchers (who rely heavily on relationships, and are cited throughout this project), particularly participatory action researchers (PAR),¹⁸ are already taking the academy in this more inclusive direction. The affordances of multimodal scholarship, particularly web based projects, are well primed for taking this non-hierarchical approach even farther by easing and encouraging access, opening many more doors for different types of learners and educators. Ethical issues are inevitably raised, however, when working with data

collaboratively, especially visual data, particularly when it is youth generated. Questions of what is and what is not okay to share and with whom, even with clear consent, must be considered. In the Collaborative Seeing Studio we are committed to taking a *need to know more stance* when looking at youth generated media. This means we do not take an image (for example) at face value, but instead appreciate that there are multiple possible intentions and meanings behind it (Luttrell, 2010; 2011; Luttrell, et al 2012, Fontaine & Luttrell, 2015). We also understand, however, that *larger social forces* inform how people will *see* and interpret (and possibly judge) young people's lives in particular ways (see appendix 1). It is therefore imperative to be judicious, especially with an online project such as this where the media shared will have a long life and will quite possibly be taken out of context.

CONCLUSION:

Use your methodology to discipline your passion, not deaden it.

- Gillian Rose

Joyce Yee (2012) asserts, "Research methods should not be seen as passive and rigid constructs that can be 'picked off the shelf' to fit a research question, but instead must be explored, negotiated and adapted" (p 488). She encourages a spirit of "bricolage" saying that it is "a powerful concept for qualitative researchers as it allows them to deploy available and established strategies and methods, but also grants them the licence (sic) to create new tools and techniques in order to do so" (p 464). Those of us exploring new territory with multimodal and web based scholarship would do well to heed her words. Yee continues,

The bricoleur views research methods actively, rather than passively, meaning that the researcher actively constructs methods with tools at hand rather than accepting and using pre-existing and universally applicable methodologies (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 317).

Final Cut was definitely a tool "at hand," and my still novice understanding of it, combined with certain limitations inherent in it (especially Final Cut X, which has been altered greatly from

earlier versions), made for a frustrating exercise at times. If I were to do it again, I would frontload most of the initial organization, which would help avoid some of the pitfalls I experienced. That said, it is exciting to work with a program that is relatively intuitive, and because of its non-destructive feature, affords a great deal of experimentation without risk of losing data. Also, working with the website idea altered the way I thought as I was writing the text. Although this paper can still stand alone as a traditional linear document, within the frame of the website, it can also become a more three-dimensional hyperlinked experience, one that will ideally allow for multiple entry and exit points, and thus expand its possible audiences and uses. The construction of this dissertation has often felt like “one step forward, two steps back.” Not having a clear roadmap inevitably leads to wrong turns, unfamiliar neighborhoods, and can even leave one completely lost at times. It is also, however, how adventures are found and new territories are charted. It is my sincere hope that the above will serve, if not as a map, then at least as a suggested itinerary.

Appendix 1

The six tenets of the Collaborative Seeing Studio [link]:

Reaching Multiple Publics

Extend the idea of what is the “public” we want to reach—thinking more in terms of multiple publics, including networked publics.

Youth-Centered Methods

In the collaborative seeing approach, youth are positioned as media producers and interpreters of their own and each other’s self-representations, and treated as expert analysts of their work by researchers who serve as curious and interested viewers.

An Image and a Million Words

We are extending upon the old adage that an image is worth a thousand words—meanings are made and remade as young people *use* their photographs and videos for different purposes.

Multiple Audience Eyes

Collaborative seeing takes shape through conversations in several relational groupings, in different contexts, and over time.

Need to Know More Stance

We assume a “need to know more stance” toward children as knowing subjects. There is no single or “correct” answer to the question, “What does this picture/video or series of pictures/videos mean?”

Larger Social Forces

We are committed to taking into account how larger social forces and relations of power press varied audience’s eyes into seeing (and not seeing) young people and their social worlds in certain ways.

Appendix 2

Sample questions for semi-structured interviews with student participants:

Where are you now in your educational arc?

How do you think of yourself now in relation to formal education?

Does the fact that you left high school impact the way you think of yourself as a student today?

How far do you imagine yourself going with your formal education?

Do you think of yourself as a “dropout” today?

How would you define the word “dropout” today?

How do you think about young people who “dropout?”

Appendix 3

Sample questions for semi-structured conversations with student participants at the roundtable:

What do you remember about making this video?

Do you feel like you have changed since making this video? If so, how? If not, how are you the same?

Do you remember thinking of yourself as a “dropout” when you made this video?

How might you have defined the word “dropout” at the time you made the video?

How do you think other people perceived you at the time you made the video?

Appendix 4

Video Memos—descriptions and lessons learned:

Most of the video memos I made were untitled, so the titles used below simply reflect how I came to think of them.

Travis 2008-2012

This was my first foray into the data, and consisted of some edited clips from Travis' 2008 film of him talking about his love for the "block," juxtaposed with some clips from his 2012 interview with me. I strung these later clips together with simple titles in between. The titles alluded to the content of the clips, for example, "dropout stereotype" or "running into trouble."

This memo helped me to begin to think about how I wanted to tell Travis' story, and offered a peek in to the richness of the data. It also helped me begin to think through the connection of the archival to the new footage.

"Success Stories"

Originally this piece was conceived as a possible entry point for the website. In my mind it was a humorous, light, satirical lark that was intended to gently poke fun at people's typically negative assumptions about "dropouts" and challenge (on a very superficial level) the stereotypical visual image of a "dropout." It consisted of a montage of photographs of famous and semi-famous people who had "dropped out" of school, ranging from Henry Ford to Princess Diana, with many folks in between, flashing on the screen while the song "I am not a juvenile delinquent" by Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers played.

This was a great example of the power and importance of "audiencing." The unanimous response of my research group was that I was playing into the neoliberal pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps "success story" trope perpetuated by so many Hollywood movies. They found no humor in it, and instead wondered why I would hold the people pictured up as some kind of mythical exemplars. They were much more interested in the stories of my real participants. These unexpected responses made me think hard about my own assumptions and biases (especially as a "dropout" myself) and turned me back toward my own data to continue my exploration of the subject.

Bravado Piece

This was an experimental memo where I was trying to play with the idea of demonstrating theory without actually spelling it out. Working with Holland's (2001) theory of "figured worlds," I imagined moments of (what I called) bravado demonstrated by my participants as moments of transition between figured worlds. Their displays of bravado were glorious moments of self-affirmation (e.g., from Richmond, "this is who I am! If you don't like it, go your way," waving his hand in a "move along" gesture), which seemed to surface when they were doing something outside the expected "norm" of a given context (Richmond said the above in response to conservative family members questioning his tattoo) as a way to claim it. I strung together clips of these displays from my participants, interspersed with quotations from Holland's book that I felt best described the idea of "figured worlds."

The response to this piece was complete confusion (again, the power of audiencing)! So, I learned that if you are trying to communicate something specific (which to me is the defining difference between research and art), then you really need to give people context and something concrete to hold on to.

Travis Rant

This was really just a couple of clips I pulled from Travis' raw footage in which he showed a completely different side of himself, in stark contrast to his interviews where he was so remarkably eloquent and expressed himself with such sophistication. The clips came from a session he shot sitting in a parked car (camera propped on the dashboard), with a friend,

smoking and talking. The clips I chose from that session were of him engaging in a long, ugly misogynistic rant, peppered with some pretty foul language, while looking directly into the camera. I chose these clips because I was trying to square the two very different personalities I had evidence of in my data of Travis. I worried that if I ignored this footage, I would somehow be misrepresenting him in some way.

Once again in an audiencing session, the responses to the clip were unexpected (although in retrospect I am not sure why). People were very upset and offended and felt that the rant was directed at me. My perspective was different (partly because I had seen all of the footage and knew that this was just one small piece and not necessarily representative of the rest), but the lesson here was to take great care with sensitive data, even in a controlled environment. I really understood for the first time, the power of the researcher position, i.e., I had fodder for representing Travis in either a very positive or a very negative light and the credibility and position to make folks believe either one. It also forced me to think concretely about how to authentically surface Travis' complexity in the project.

Travis Take 1,2,3,4

This was really one piece that went through four iterations. It was a first attempt at trying to take a layered approach to telling Travis' story, by integrating his new footage with the archival and interview footage. First I worked only from video clips and later (after feedback from an audiencing session) added text and still later added voiceover. All experimenting with different techniques that would help tell Travis' story.

Lessons learned on this one were mostly technical—figuring out how to use certain functions on Final Cut and working on layering without losing coherence. It helped my understanding when it came time to make the final videos.

Richmond and Ally Scratch Sheets

I worked informally with footage from both Richmond and Ally in initial experiments of how I might want to tell their stories, and what elements I wanted to be sure to include. I did not share these in audiencing sessions because I was really using them more for my own thinking and sequencing purposes. Also, many of the lessons I took away from my other audiencing sessions carried over to the work I did with Ally and Richmond. For example, how to make things work technically, and more importantly, understanding viscerally the importance of taking great care in my representations.

PART II

Introduction:

It is time now to explore the creative potential of interrupted and conflicted lives, where energies are not narrowly focused or permanently pointed toward a single ambition. These are not lives without commitment, but rather lives in which commitments are continually refocused and redefined. We must invest time and passion in specific goals and yet at the same time acknowledge that these are mutable (p 9).

-- Mary Catherine Bateson

In the above quotation, Bateson (1989) refers to the careers of women artists, but it also resonates strongly with the lives of the young people with whom I have worked for many years, especially in relation to school and schooling. These are young people who have left or been pushed out of high school before completion, and have then sought ways to reengage with and finish their formal educations. For this study, I worked with three young people over time, in multiple modalities to co-create and understand narratives of their evolving learning experiences.

Bateson's phrase, "interrupted and conflicted lives," certainly describes my three participants, but perhaps less obviously, so does the phrase "these are not lives without commitment." The "commitment" in this case is finding the time, means, and wherewithal to be in school at all in lives that do not have a lot of spare space. For my three participants the investment of "time and passion in specific goals," means completing some level of college, be it an associate's, bachelor's, or more and more often, a graduate degree. Finishing requires more than simply finding the material means to return to school (although this is certainly a factor), but for young people who have been branded "dropouts," it also requires a reimagining of one's academic potential, identity, and place in institutions of higher education. For many of these young people, completing an academic milestone manifests within remarkable cycles of resilience, recommitment, and reinvention, where they often leave and return to school multiple times before completing. Finishing relies on a gift for improvisation, as they must be ready to adjust

and adapt to whatever circumstances arise. Incredibly, many of them have finished in the face of what is often a lifetime of messaging that school, and especially college, is not for them. This is the substance of what Bateson refers to as lives “continually refocused and redefined,” and my three participants experienced this iterative and irregular pattern in their lives. This is deep identity work, which is not simple, linear, or finite. It is, however, emancipatory as Freire (1968) would imagine it, and specific to “figured worlds” as Holland (1998) would describe it. What follows will expand on these concepts.

Complementing and enriching the accompanying videos [link] and my partner article on process [link], this paper is organized into four sections:

1. **Context:** What is the climate of education with which my participants are grappling?
2. **Questions of and about Identity:** What are the theories and environmental factors that help us understand my participants’ identity development, most especially academic identity?
3. **Insights on Participant Videos:** Gaining a deeper understanding of what is presented.
4. **Observations and Implications:** What are the lessons learned?

CONTEXT:

Passage of the *No Child Left Behind* act in 2002¹⁹ ignited the current neoliberal, linear, test heavy, “reform” climate of education and education policy, which was then exacerbated with the establishment of the *Race to the Top*²⁰ fund in 2009. This climate closely relates to Freire’s “banking” concept of education, “...in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (1968 [1970] p 72). By removing themselves from this context, my three participants had been labeled “dropouts.” Rather than being perceived as persons with agency and ambition (Fine 1991),²¹ carrying the dropout label

implies that they had failed. Education in this country is a formula that seeks to define school “success” in a linear, time regulated way. This linear formula begins with kindergarten, and is meant to glide smoothly through elementary, middle, and high school, and straight into college, where an initial degree is to be earned in two years. Any deviation from this formula begins to mark a student as somewhere on the spectrum from “at risk” to “failure.” Current metrics that inform education policy (most of which are quantitative) represent this view—from the standardized tests that now permeate public education in every state, to graduation, dropout, and college admission and completion rates. The linear formula works for some who are privileged enough to live their lives on a similarly linear trajectory. It begins to seriously breakdown, however, for those whose lives take a more circuitous route.

A student’s circuitous route to education often begins with marginalized socio-economic status (i.e., poverty). Many other circumstances can also blow them off the path. Related elements will have an impact:

- Geography and environment (marginalized and underfunded schools, having to cross unfriendly borders to get to school, environmental health, etc.);
- Physical and emotional health and wellbeing (physical health issues related to poverty—asthma, diabetes, etc.—emotional health issues such as depression, social anxiety, fallout from bullying, etc.);
- Family circumstance (young people caretaking parents, grandparents, younger siblings, their own children, and/or having to contribute financially to the home, moving in and out of foster care, homelessness, etc., as well as issues raised by immigration and deportation);
- Social and peer pressures (gang affiliation, bullying, social codes of the “block,” etc.); and

- Institutional racism/classism/sexism (negative messaging and assumptions made regarding school, future potential, fear and disrespect from adults in positions of authority, etc.).

Many of the young people whose educational accomplishments are being captured as data points have a much more complex road to credential completion than those against whom they are measured. It is not about a young person not wanting an education, or not being capable of learning, or not being interested in or understanding the importance of credentialing. It is simply that young people who walk a circuitous path in life inevitably do education differently.

Mismatch of Linear Schooling vs. Circuitous Lives

There is much work from the last several decades in critical and culturally relevant pedagogy, sociocultural theory, and the “hidden curriculum,” which is both powerful and practical. This work offers insight into why public schools are so often hostile places to young people who come from poverty and live complicated lives, and it offers specific guidelines for how to help schools make meaningful change to better support those students (Authors who address this issue include: Darling-Hammond 2005, Delpit 2006, Gonzales, et al 2005, Kohl 1994, Lewis, et al 2007, Ladson-Billings 2003, Villegas & Lucas 2007, Lave & Wenger 1991, Gee 2007, Noguera 2008). There are also a number of poignant and revealing ethnographies focusing on education which powerfully illuminate the lived experiences of students, teachers, and school communities, adding further insight into how we could make schools more nurturing and effective for a greater variety of young people (Examples include: Willis 1977, Fine 1991, Luttrell 1997 & 2003, Ferguson 2001, Ogbu 2003, Pascoe 2007, Suárez-Orozco, et al 2008, among others). Unfortunately, these important and compelling works have yet to impact on a large scale what schools are mandated to do and how they are directed to do it. The change from a conservative republican administration to a somewhat more liberal democratic one did little to alter an almost entirely quantitative and punitive approach to federal education policy. This

approach is at odds with the recommendations of the scholars cited above who have very different ideas for how to make schools better and more effective. Even one of the chief architects of *No Child Left Behind*, Diane Ravitch (2010), has famously, loudly, and completely reversed her thinking in the face of the obvious failure of that policy,²² but has been unable to alter the prevailing rigid public education system. The paradigm continues to be linear and time constrained, and not meeting particular benchmarks on target can trigger severe repercussions such as teacher firings and school closings.²³ Under Mayor Bloomberg, New York City was also saddled with letter grades for schools, which only served to increase the general anxiety felt by entire school communities.²⁴ Meanwhile, alternative credentialing programs (such as the one in the Bronx where I met my participants) are being beaten into the same mold as our traditional houses of learning. For example, the “GED 2014” which was recently launched, is based on the new Common Core State Standards that are being designed for traditional public schools and promise to make students more “college and career ready.”²⁵ This has left alternative schools and programs scrambling to equip their teachers and physical plants (the test is newly computer based) with the proper training and tools to be ready for the change. This is even more of a challenge, because so many of these programs are underfunded and often have only part time teaching staff and very basic spaces in which to work. In recent years, the same inflexible timetables and mandates followed by public schools have been imposed on more and more of our alternative schools. The result is that these schools become less of an “alternative” and instead risk driving out their primary constituency—young people who fled the proscribed linear path of public school.

Lessons from Higher Education

So, what would happen if we adjusted our thinking to a more open and supportive, less linear time restricted approach to public education? It is difficult to say for the K through 12 years, because of all of the above mandates imposed on public schools. We do have some evidence

from higher education, however, that an adjustment could yield positive results. A longitudinal study by Attewell and Lavin (2009) from the City University of New York focused on a cohort of “underprivileged” women in the CUNY system who benefitted from open admission when it was first instituted. These women were chosen specifically because they wanted also to measure impact on their children. The 30-year follow up considered two important questions,

“First, are young people from underprivileged backgrounds able to benefit from higher education, given their poor preparation in high school?”

Second, what is the impact of higher education upon the next generation? Do the benefits of college opportunity produce an intergenerational momentum that carries over to children of the next generation” (p 2)?

Their findings revealed that the answer to both questions is, as the authors say, “...startling and unprecedented.” The research showed that by framing the study in a longitudinal approach, graduation rates among this group proved much higher than previously thought, and the benefits were clear *regardless of how long it took for them to graduate,*

The findings that emerged from our analyses are startling and unprecedented. Other research stops short of the truly long-term picture needed to evaluate the payoff of opening the doors to college. Our long-range perspective shows that disadvantaged women ultimately complete college degrees in far greater numbers than scholars realize. Fully 71 percent of the CUNY cohort earned a degree, and over three-fourths of these completed a bachelor’s degree. Twenty-six percent completed a master’s or higher degree (p 4, 5).

Simply by approaching and measuring the data differently, i.e., not in a linear, time restricted way, this research team revealed that given time, flexibility, and the proper support, working class and low-income students with complicated lives can and do complete college credentials, and those credentials do make a positive difference in their lives.²⁶ These students want to, and do, go farther with their credentials than the associate’s degree that most college support

programs expect. The study documented a beneficial economic impact and influence on the next generation, as well. For example, the women’s college experience impacted the way they guided their own children’s learning, “From increased educational expectations to greater involvement in schooling to the presence of computers and books in the home...” (p 6), all yielding better educational outcomes for the next generation.

From the Community College support service side, another study is relevant here. The Community College Research Center at Teacher’s College (Columbia University) published a report about the importance of non-academic supports for students transitioning into community colleges. They argue that for many students these supports are as essential as any academic supports they may be receiving.²⁷ Melinda Mechur Karp (2011) and her team did an exhaustive review of the available literature on student persistence, as well as support program evaluation reports, to provide a perspective that would more thoroughly include what she terms “academically vulnerable” students.²⁸ From that research she concluded there were at least one of four “mechanisms” present in the most successful programs. These were: (1) *creating social relationships*, (2) *clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment*, (3) *developing college know-how*, and (4) *making college life feasible*. She asserts,

Students are often unaware of the non-academic help in which they are of need, particularly with regard to college know-how and clarifying their aspirations. Moreover, they may view the use of such support services as an admission that they “do not belong in college” or that they are somehow deficient. Making non-academic support an integral part of every student’s experience means that all students will receive help, even if they think they do not need it. Moreover, it moves support services away from a deficit model and toward one that views all students as in need of some assistance (p 25-26).

The importance of these supports, and the difference they can make in the lives and academic performance of our students is remarkably familiar to those of us working in non-traditional

educational settings. The elevation of “creating social relationships” to the number one position is also no surprise. It was quite clear in my decade of teaching in the Bronx that no learning was going to take place until our relationships with the students were cemented with love and authenticity.²⁹

Finally, from the world of journalism, the American RadioWorks recently created an in-depth audio documentary called *The New Face of College*.³⁰ The documentary discusses what that “new face” looks like, and how colleges and universities are trying to adapt. Startlingly,

Just 20 percent of college-goers fit the stereotype of being young, single, full-time students who finish a degree in four years. College students today are more likely to be older, part-time, working, and low-income than they were three decades ago. Many are the first in their families to go to college.

In other words, the type of student our colleges and universities were designed to serve, are no longer the majority of students they actually *do* serve. Clearly, if institutions of higher education wish to remain engines of social mobility, some changes are in order. Taken as a whole, the research above points to specific evidence that shows given the opportunity, time, and proper support, all students can and do benefit from higher education, and no students should be denied that privilege. It is troubling, to say the least, to see that education policy is going in the opposite direction from what the research shows is effective. The persistent stereotype of what a college student “looks like” is problematic and so are entrenched ideas about who does or does not belong on a college campus, or in any classroom for that matter. Finally, if we know the “face of college” is changing, and that time and support are both essential components to making higher education accessible to all, we need to ask what should we be doing on the K through 12 side to be more aligned with these findings?

QUESTIONS OF AND ABOUT IDENTITY:

Making issues of identity, agency, and power is essential at this historical moment... with political discourse about “scientific” research having persuaded the public that literacy is a neutral skill and that “achievement gaps” can be addressed without attention to histories of power relations or group and individual struggles for identity (p 3).

-- Lewis, et al

...we conceive persons as composites of many, often contradictory, self-understandings and identities (p 8).

-- Holland, et al

Academic Identity: Messaging and Agency

Much of the work that my three participants had to do in order to propel themselves from out of school through higher education revolved around shifting and developing their academic identities. Although the term “academic identity” is used more often to refer to the lives of “academics,”³¹ I use it here to mean the way one imagines and positions oneself in relation to school and schooling. This understanding of identity is not fixed, but instead tends to shift according to the ebb and flow of life (and in this case, school) events. Academic identity in particular is tricky ground for my participants because of the multiple messages they receive about their place in the world of education. This messaging comes from many sources (popular media, family, peers, school personnel, etc.) and is often contradictory, running the gamut from “dropouts are losers” to “school is for geeks” to “college is the way out of poverty” to “the achievement gap means people of color do not graduate” to more subtle messaging from teachers, professors, school administrators, etc., who often make assumptions about “good kids” and “bad kids” based on things such as attendance, classroom behavior, and engagement. This messaging can impact student behavior both overtly (as in adopting an oppositional identity, Ogbu 2003, Kohl 1994) and covertly.

The classic study, *Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development*, (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) demonstrated that teacher expectations drastically impact student performance. Their study set up teachers in an elementary school to believe that

a sub-set of their students had performed higher on an intelligence test than the rest of their classes and were expected to make greater gains over the course of the year. The chosen students did, in fact, rise to those expectations even though the test administered was bogus (there was absolutely no distinction between the children). Further, the researchers found that the teachers described these students as “...more appealing, better adjusted, and more intellectually alive and autonomous than the other children” (McLeod 1995). Later research surfaced the specific ways these expectations were messaged to the students, and found that teachers more often smiled, nodded, and touched the students whom they believed to be more intelligent (Harris & Rosenthal, 1985). Of the many other related studies done over the years, most have shown the similar results over and over again: students whom teachers thought would perform better, did perform better, regardless of actual academic ability (Hamre, Pianta, et al, 2008, Good 1987, Babad, et al, 2003, etc.).

In a more current series of studies, Claude Steele (2010) explores the relationship between stereotypes, identity, and intellectual performance. He speaks of what he calls “a particular kind of identity contingency [i.e., being black, a white male, gay, old, rich poor, female, etc.], that of stereotype threat” (p 5). He goes on to define it this way,

...whenever we're in a situation where a bad stereotype about one of our own identities could be applied to us—such as those about being old, poor, rich or female—we know it. We know what 'people could think.' We know that anything we do that fits the stereotype could be taken as confirming it. And we know that, for that reason, we could be judged and treated accordingly (p 5).

Steele believes, on some level “...it happens to us all, perhaps several times a day” (p 5). Most relevant here is his research on intellectual performance (he has also studied athletic performance, with similar results). His research shows that stereotype threat alone can negatively impact student performance on tests. For example, he conducted an experiment with

two groups of equally high performing “math motivated” men and women. One group was spoken to of the cultural stereotype that women do not do as well in math as men, and one group was also reminded of the stereotype, but then told that for this particular test, it was not true. The results were startling, with the first group of women significantly underperforming and the second group performing equally as high as the high performing men. In later experiments, he found he did not even need to remind the control group of the stereotype, because it was already culturally ingrained. All he needed to do was tell the second group that whatever the stereotype was, it was not true for this particular test, and the results were the same.

Steele next turned his attention to the much discussed “achievement gap” between black and white students. He gave the first group of students “a very difficult test of verbal reasoning” (p 50), under normal testing conditions (without a stereotype prompt of any kind). As expected by the research team, the white students outperformed their black counterparts by a significant margin. He told the second group that the test was actually a “task” for studying problem solving and did not measure intellectual ability. As in the math experiments with women, black students in the second group performed at the same high level as their white counterparts, and significantly higher than the black students from the first test. This was the same exact test, given to two groups of students of equal ability—the only difference being the removal of the stereotype threat with one little sentence.

Steele’s work is an important link, because rather than focusing on teacher beliefs and behaviors, it surfaces the internal workings of the *student* (or other person) on the receiving end of those expectations. He also points to the group/cultural dynamic—in other words, when under stereotype threat, being a member of a certain cultural group can impact intellectual performance, behavior, etc. Although Steele (to date) has not conducted this sort of experiment

specifically with “dropouts,” it is not a stretch to imagine a similar dynamic at work in the experience of my three participants and their peers. In fact, one could imagine the multiple stereotypes at work in their lives—being young, of color, from the Bronx, poor, and “dropouts”—could negatively impact their relationships to formal education greatly and, in turn, their academic performances. Steele makes the point that part of the fallout from this dynamic is over time people begin to avoid situations where the stereotype threat might occur, i.e., fewer women pursuing careers in math, or perhaps in the case of my participants, leaving school altogether.

Pedro Noguera (2008) points to some of the specific ways messages contained within stereotype threat are conveyed in schools. He says (for example),

“In many schools, there may not be explicit messages about race, but students receive implicit messages about race all the time that informs what they think it means to be a member of a particular racial group. When they see Black students overrepresented on the basketball team but underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses, or Latino students overrepresented among those who’ve gotten into trouble but underrepresented among those receiving awards, they get a clear sense about the meaning of race. The hidden curriculum related to race presents racial patterns as normal and effectively reinforces racial stereotypes. When it is operative, it can completely undermine efforts to raise student achievement because students may believe that altering racial patterns simply is not possible (Noguera 2008, p 13).”

These multiple messages, whether overtly expressed or not, are absorbed by the young people they are directed toward,³² often simultaneously and/or contradictorily, compelling them to navigate multiple selves in response to multiple messages and situations.³³ Remarkably, they *do* often navigate these selves, messages, and situations. Not in the rigid and unforgiving “pull yourselves up by the bootstraps”³⁴ mythology, but rather by finding agency through improvisation born of resilience.

The concept of *figured worlds* put forth by Holland, et al (1998), provides a useful framework in which to imagine this navigation. Building on the constructivist ideas of Vygotsky and the dialogic understanding of Bakhtin, they define it this way:

By “figured world”... we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. ...The ability to sense (see, hear, touch, taste, feel) the figured world becomes embodied over time, through continual participation. ...Figured worlds could also be called figurative, narrativized, or dramatized worlds (p 52-53).

Figured worlds, then, can be understood as sites for identity development and expression. Agency afforded within a figured world is granted through the improvisation and adaptation of the participant. The process of video editing mirrors much of the definition above—i.e., *socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others*. The use of video in this project puts my participants’ figured worlds on display, while simultaneously reinforcing, or perhaps even co-creating them. This is particularly true for Travis, which is further explored below.

As I am considering identity formation in relation to school and schooling, I also look to Lewis, et al (2007), and their formulation of sociocultural theory through a critical lens. Here we find a more direct frame for issues of pedagogy and power, especially in relation to opportunities to learn. They remind us that:

Sociocultural theories have refocused education researchers away from often well-intentioned, yet deficit oriented, research agendas to research programs that seek to understand the social and cultural practices of people from many different backgrounds and experiences (see e.g., Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Guitierrez, 2002; Lee, 2006) (p3).

This reframing of what is so often understood through a deficit lens (i.e., dropping out), to an asset lens is foundational for this project. There is a growing mountain of reports on why young people leave school. I offer three recent studies here [link]³⁵ which I think are helpful to varying degrees. One consistent problem, however, is that when one looks at lists of “reasons” why young people leave school (even when self-reported) the short-hand answers rarely capture the full story. For example, “missed too many days” or “fell behind in class” (two consistently cited reasons), give us no understanding of *why*. Looking at that same data through a critical sociocultural lens, one would gain a more nuanced understanding of individual students’ histories, circumstances, and motivations, thus easing the tendency toward reductive framing. Lewis, et al assert, “Learning... has the potential to make and remake selves, identities, and relationships” (p 18). The potential of this “making and remaking” is also at the heart of this project. It applies not just to students, but also their teachers, principals, parents, guardians and other adults in positions of authority within their school communities. The main site of this “learning” for my three participants and myself in relation to this study was the school where we all met, developed, and thrived—CUNY Prep.

CUNY Prep

CUNY Prep [link] is a second chance school in the Bronx, New York, which provides a bridge for out of school youth to complete their high school equivalencies and make it into and through college. CUNY Prep is key in this discussion because it was a site of important change for all of us. I was a founding faculty member in humanities, motivated by my own bad experiences in school to become a “dropout.” Shannon Taggart was the school documentarian, whose video work operated within the school to reflect ourselves back to ourselves and also served to present us to the outside world. All three of my participants—then CUNY Prep students—left their previous (traditional) schools for different reasons. Travis was expelled for (as he tells us in his video) bringing a bong to school. Ally chose to leave a chaotic and unsafe school. Richmond had

actually graduated in his country, but still needed a high school credential when he arrived in the United States. These varied reasons brought them through our doors. Finally, our principal, Derrick Griffith, brought a combination of personal experience and theoretical grounding to the creation of the school. We, in CUNY Prep, paid thoughtful attention to environment and pedagogy, both of which were rooted in emancipatory educational theories. Environment, in this case, relates to physical space, as well as to social relationships. Pedagogy includes curriculum and instruction, but also individual and community development.

Environment

In their longitudinal study of first generation immigrant students' experience in the United States, Suarez-Orozco, et al (2008), spelled out and measured the impact one of the most powerful negative factors of school environment—the threat of violence. They found,

The school environment has a tremendous influence on the engagement and performance of students. It is hard to be open and eager to learn if you have to be constantly on guard against being attacked.... To gain perspective on the student experience of school problems and school violence, we developed a scale to determine the frequency with which students perceived violence and bullying in their school and in the adjoining neighborhood (for example, with the statement “I do not feel safe in my school”). Not surprisingly, we found that students’ perceptions of violence in their schools and neighborhoods were correlated with declines in not only academic performance (GPA and achievement scores), but also supportive school-based relationships, intellectual curiosity, cognitive engagement, academic engagement, as well as levels of proficiency in English (p 41).

Creating a “safe space” (or an “oppression free zone,” as our principal used to call it) was paramount in our thinking in the development of the school. CUNY Prep was originally housed in a shared and unmalleable space. There, we faced many constrictions—immovable computer tables, no natural light, and disjointed classrooms. More importantly though, we were not allowed to hang anything on the walls and the staff in the reception area were afraid of our

students. We learned the hard way that creating a “relational” environment was crucial to our work, meaning that every person in the school had a stake in place. For example, at one point a weapon was brought into the school, which ignited an extended intense conversation about whether or not to install metal detectors. The decision was made to not install them. It was determined that metal detectors offered a false sense of security at best, and what really made a space safe was the relationships between the members of the community within it. This meant that we needed to increase our efforts to build trust with the students, requiring that we see every interaction and communication in the light of community building.

Another important component of the environment of the school was how we used messaging (as defined above) to our advantage. The shared expectation from the principal through the teachers was that every student coming to CUNY Prep would succeed (“success” in this case defined as going to and through college). A basic tenant of the school was that every adult in the building was responsible for the education and well-being of every student in the building. Also, the expectation of every adult in the building was that every student in the building not only could learn, but wanted to learn, even when they said they did not. Therefore, we saw messaging working in a number of different ways, individually and institutionally. For example, a crucial shift happened with the messaging the students received upon entering the new building. Instead of being greeted with fear and suspicion (or for that matter, metal detectors), they were greeted by people who knew their names and their stories and were happy to see them.

Place Attachment and Identity

Once we moved into our own building, we were granted many affordances absent in the old space. The conception of environmental “affordance” as developed by James Gibson (1979), define these affordances as what it is that the environment has to “offer.” The new space, for example, afforded personalization because we were free to decorate the walls however we chose.

Also, the layout of the classrooms surrounded a larger central room, which afforded people coming together, and therefore a much greater sense of community. The walls became collaged with images of the students, their work, college posters, career possibilities, and our community rituals. Thinking about this kind of personalization leads us from issues of messaging to issues of place attachment and identity.

Through having safe space and welcoming messaging, we saw students become more vitally attached to, and an integral part of, the community. This “place attachment” (a feeling of being welcome and at home) was essential, given that part of our challenge was to simply have the students show up consistently. It is important also to say that the content reflected back to them identified this place as a serious academic environment—an environment that would prepare them for their future college life. Manzo and Perkins (2006) say, citing Pretty, Chipuer, and Bramston (2003):

If people’s identity and values are indeed informed by places they deem significant, then it follows that people’s bonds with those places will impact their engagement in such places, whether it be to maintain or improve them, respond to changes within them, or simply to stay in that place (p 337).

In order to achieve this engagement, we at CUNY Prep purposely disrupted traditional classroom dynamics. For instance, we used the “back row syndrome” to interrogate habitual ways of being in school (often by simply eliminating “rows” in the classroom). Shannon Taggart’s video work reflected the best of all of us back to ourselves. We constantly (and consciously) demonstrated mutual awareness and respect. Students were then free to experiment with new academic identities, or to use Holland’s (2009) lens, to imagine themselves as part of new figured worlds.

Pedagogy

The influence of Paulo Freire (1970) was deep and pervasive in the culture of CUNY Prep. Freire stood for critical thinking as opposed to the “banking approach” to education. As he says in the foundational work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970):

The banking approach to adult education, for example, will never propose to students that they critically consider reality. It will deal instead with such vital questions as whether Roger gave green grass to the goat, and insist upon the importance of learning that, on the contrary, Roger gave green grass to the rabbit. The ‘humanism’ of the banking approach masks the effort to turn women and men into automatons—the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human (p 74).

“To be more fully human” at CUNY Prep meant that we emphasized the critical thinking and identity work that would serve the students far beyond “bankable” knowledge.

INSIGHTS ON PARTICIPANT VIDEOS:

Travis: school and the “block”

“Finally, insofar as it can be situationally induced, stigma consciousness resembles the notion of stereotype threat (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995), the feeling that occurs when situations instill in targets of stereotypes the fear of confirming the stereotype about their group. Although a susceptibility to feelings of stereotype threat may certainly covary with stigma consciousness (in fact, see Pinel, Swann, & Rentfrow, 1998), the two constructs differ in at least one important way. Stereotype threat refers to a concern about one's own behavior (e.g., “Am I going to confirm the stereotype?”); high levels of stigma consciousness reflect an expectation that one will be stereotyped, irrespective of one's actual behavior.” (Pinel 1999, p 115)

When asked what he thinks the “dropout” stereotype looks like, Travis asks, “...if it had a physical manifestation and, like, it was right in front of my face? I guess it’d look like me... it’d probably look like the man in the mirror [link].” In some ways Travis does fit the “dropout” stereotype. He is a Latino male from the Bronx, who grew up in poverty and was expelled from high school for bringing in drug paraphernalia, as he tells us in his 2008 film, *Blocked*. As with all stereotypes, however, these descriptors merely skim the surface of a very deep well. Travis has a remarkable ability to see and articulate the micro and the macro at the same time. In our

interviews, he spoke about “playing” various “cards” to “manipulate” certain situations, e.g., the “dropout” card and the “race” card. He frames his use of these “cards” as a way of placing “blame” on a group, rather than on the individual, i.e., himself. He adds that the “problem with doing that is then you need to wait for society [i.e., the group] to change in order for your situation to change.” Whereas, if he placed the blame on himself, “the individual—it’s up to you to decide; it’s up to you how you’re going to do [link].” He speaks of this in the context of the guilt he feels for some of his decisions, “dropping out” included. It is a framing in which he at once deflects and internalizes blame. In order to manipulate stereotypes so expertly, Travis has to have an acute awareness of how they function on both a personal and societal level. In the quotation above, Pinel refers to the effect of “stigma consciousness” making one expect to be stereotyped, regardless of actual behavior. By that definition, Travis has a high level of stigma consciousness, which at once hampers him, and through his ability to improvise, grants him a certain amount of agency.

Travis’s complexity is visible in the video right from the start and on to the end. He rarely says or shows anything without also saying and showing the opposite. He hates the ride, but loves the block. “Even if they don’t like you, they still love you [link].” He shows us images of himself smoking weed in a backwards baseball cap, and comments on them while interviewed in his white button down shirt. This makes his metaphor of “the man in the mirror” all the more meaningful. Travis seems to see both sides of every story. He is fully conscious of using *excuses* to grant himself a certain agency. For example, he sometimes uses excuses to get out of doing things like assignments or homework, without repercussions. He explains how he approaches it, “I’m a Latino male... I’m going through this... people should be like, taking notice to how far I’m actually getting, instead of noticing like, like what I’m not doing...” By playing off cultural stereotypes, as described in the previous paragraph, and employing his considerable charm and eloquence, he can *manipulate* situations to his advantage. Yet as he says, this also means he

hasn't done the things he thinks he should have done by now, i.e., limiting his own potential. Travis' dichotomous nature can severely frustrate efforts to put him into a simple compartment.

Another way of seeing the complexity of Travis is his ability to *code switch*. I use the more colloquial definition of code switching here, to include not just language, but dress and demeanor as well. He shows us that he operates on different levels depending on where he is and who he is with, or to again draw from Holland's frame, which figured world he occupies. For example, the scenes he chose to share from the "block" (one figured world) often show him in a "party" mode, smoking, drinking, and hanging out with friends. Whereas in his interviews (especially his first one) he presents himself more as a young scholar with an outstanding vocabulary and savvy understanding of the larger world (the figured world of a research participant). Both these presentations are genuinely Travis, and he seems equally at home in each. In this light, one understands that *excuses*, *manipulation*, and, *code switching*, are all parts of Travis' improvisation tool box. Seeing him in these different figured worlds helps us understand how that framing grants agency—he is able to fully function in the figured world of "research participant" (and school, as shown in his graduation footage, for example), while maintaining his position in and connection to the "block." He does not have to betray important familial and social relationships in order to hone his academic identity. This agency is not always seamless for Travis, however, and part of what we see over the seven-year span of this project is his sometimes conflicted feelings about each of the figured worlds within which he is a member.

Complicating Travis' ability to move between these worlds is the video he made in my class in 2008 (excerpts of which are shown in our new video for this project). More than any of the other videos made in that class, Travis' video resonated with many of the students who attended CUNY Prep. Our principal recognized this immediately after viewing it for the first time, and

decided to use it (with Travis' permission) as a teaching tool. First used to spark classroom discussions about the challenges of coming back to school, it ultimately was used in our orientations to begin that discussion earlier in the process and to help demonstrate to new students that our school approached teaching in a different way. As a result, several hundred young people from the Bronx not only saw that video but also discussed and deconstructed it.

An unforeseen outcome of that decision was that Travis (as depicted in the video) became well known in the area, to the point that total strangers would approach him to talk about it. Initially, Travis enjoyed his semi-fame, but ultimately he said it began to make him uncomfortable. It is probably not a coincidence that this discomfort arose right around the same time he was trying to resolve his then current school situation (finding himself out of school again just three credits shy of an associate's degree). In his 2008 video, Travis provides an insider's perspective into his figured world of the "block." Travis shows us what he sees and also takes part in what he depicts, in other words we see him both in it and looking at it, as is inherent in this kind of video making. From this perspective, I think that the video work here adds an interesting dimension to the concept of figured worlds. Through video we see Travis participating in (and perhaps creating) more than one figured world at a time, i.e., the figured world of the "block" and the figured world of the research participant. Another inherent quality of video, however, is that it fixes and freezes a particular moment in time, selected (as it necessarily is) from a vast range of potential choices. The Travis represented in that film had just turned 18 and had not yet completed his high school equivalency. At 24, when he ultimately completed his associate's degree, a lot of time had passed for his real time self, but not for his video self. As time went on, a natural tension developed between the "fame" he received for that early version of his life—the version of his life for which he became known—and the "trapped" feeling he talked about in his later interviews. Using video, then, requires caution, and for Travis I think it is safe to say that to some degree it had an unanticipated, but palpable effect on his life.

Ally: school and her transition

“Since you were little boys you’ve been told, ‘Hey, don’t be a little faggot,’” explained Darnell, a football player of mixed African American and white heritage, as we sat on a bench next to the athletic field. Indeed, both the boys and the girls I interviewed told me that fag was the worst epithet one guy could direct at another. Jeff, a slight white sophomore, explained to me that boys call each other fag because “gay people aren’t really liked over here and stuff.” Jeremy, a Latino junior, told me that this insult literally reduced a boy to nothing, “To call someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that’s like saying that you’re nothing” (Pascoe 2007, p 55)

C. J. Pascoe (quoted above) spent a year and a half doing fieldwork in a high school trying to understand the peculiar role masculinity plays (for both boys and girls) in identity development during those fraught years of late childhood. The above quotation mirrors Ally’s school journey precisely. It painfully illustrates her experience, not only in high school, but beginning in her very first year of formal education. As she explains in her 2008 video, she was in kindergarten when she made the fateful error of picking the wrong color Power Ranger as her favorite. This social misstep led to the first time the label “fag” was hurled at her, and that epithet then marked and marred her subsequent school years up until the time she left. Although at that young age, the full meaning of that word might not be understood on either the hurling or receiving side, it was obviously clear to Ally that the intention was to hurt and ostracize. The fact that she did not yet have the language or context to fully understand her own transgender identity must have compounded the confusion. Ally continued to be harassed all through her school years, until after transferring out of three different high schools (as she tells us in her video), she finally left. Clearly, the supportive quality of place attachment that I reference above was not available to Ally. School, as a place, was full of messages telling her that she did not belong.

To reinforce the pervasiveness of this harassment, consider Maryann Dickar’s *Corridor Cultures* (2008), an ethnographic study of an urban school that focuses especially on the cultural production of space. The title of the book is significant for not focusing directly on the

classroom, in that Dickar is studying the environment of schooling as experienced by students themselves. In her chapter titled, “Hallways as Thirdspace,” Dickar notes,

“...I became intensely aware of my powerlessness in the face of this assertive student hall culture. Students taunted, teased, insulted, and sometimes came near blows (on rare occasions, fights actually began), and my efforts to contain such volatile behavior were met with indifference and even laughter”
(p 77).

Later in this same chapter, Dickers invokes Adrienne Rich’s term, “compulsory heterosexuality” in her subheading, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Hall Culture,” and goes on to say,

“Homophobic remarks were heard frequently in the halls and classrooms and students often expressed violent hostility toward homosexuality... Though the halls were coded masculine and the classrooms feminine, both spaces were ‘straight’ spaces” (p 101).

The public debate on schooling in the United States seems not to focus on this aspect of school, but for Ally this palpable and pervasive hostility was central in her decision to leave.

As un-encouraging and hostile as school was for Ally in her early years, conversely her home life was nurturing and loving to the point of her feeling “Overprotected.” In a humorous exchange with her mother in Ally’s 2008 video, she asks why her parents feel the need to protect her so much, and from what? After a long silence, her mother looks straight into the camera and unleashes a tirade reminding Ally that she is her only child and if she doesn’t like it, well “too bad![\[link\]](#)” It is clear in the film that although Ally is already visibly pushing the boundaries of her (to that point) assumed and familiar gender identity (male), her place in the center of the family is untarnished. In fact, all through the years of video footage Ally provided and through the many conversations we had, there was no visible or verbal evidence of her parents ever rejecting *or* accepting her evolving identities. They always just seem to steadily relate to her as

their child, whatever her outward appearance was at the time. Ally did tell me once about “coming out” to her mom as a gay boy (before she understood herself as transgender). She said her mother cried a little, but then it seems like life just went on as before—her mother never fully acknowledging or rejecting her child’s identity. Ally said of her dad, “he’s like me, he doesn’t like to be bothered,” so as long as she did not demand anything of him, he left well enough alone. It is not exactly a question of denial from either of her parents, but more an unarticulated acceptance. This live and let live attitude when it comes to gender roles is unusual in what Ally shows as a fairly traditional Latino (Dominican/Puerto Rican) household [link].³⁶ It does, however, help demonstrate the strong bond of unconditional love that her parents obviously hold for her. It also helps illustrate the nurturing, warm, and accepting environment of “home” in harsh contrast to the aggressive, intimidating, and unwelcoming environment of school, which Ally experienced from kindergarten through all her years of traditional schooling.

Ally’s time at CUNY Prep was crucial to her identity development. She describes in her early video that CP provided a sense of safety she had never had before. She met other LGBTQ, as well as unbigoted heterosexual young people, who helped her understand and accept her own identity. In this environment, she was able to become the student she had always hoped to be. She reclaimed the schooling she was robbed of for so many years. That experience sowed the seeds for her college life, where she struggled somewhat, but ultimately prevailed. As her gender identity came into focus, so did her academic identity. She made school, which had been so tortuous for so long, go from doing things *to* her, to doing things *for* her. It is important here to state some obvious points. Ally left school, not because she did not like school or did not want to study or could not do the work. She left because school was not safe, physically or emotionally. Without a feeling of safety and acceptance, being in school simply did not make any sense. It is as basic as Maslow’s (1962) Hierarchy of Needs—safety and acceptance are needs two and three, right after the basic physiological needs such as food, water, and oxygen! According to Maslow’s

Hierarchy, Ally cannot be dealing with higher level needs such as Self-Esteem and Self-Actualization without first having dealt with these lower, *prepotent* needs. Based on my own years of experience in thinking about why young people leave school, I would put feeling unsafe at the top of the list.³⁷

Ally details her own transition (of which she says she is most proud out of all of her accomplishments) in video that she shot of herself. When she first begins to experiment with a more female identity, she looks to her idols for help—Brittany Spears and the cast from “Sex in the City.” She fully immerses herself in the feminine pleasures of hair, clothes, and make up as she enters the figured world of womanhood as defined by her television mentors, i.e., confident, in control, and often hyper-sexualized. Improvisation for Ally manifests as a form of resistance to the bullying and harassment she endured for so much of her life. Embracing her womanly tools of transformation as weapons, Ally becomes a woman-warrior ready to take on all foes. She explained that in the face of disapproval from some “kids” from her college, “I stood my ground, it’s whatever, you can’t change who I am, I’m still going to be me, so... go ahead about your business and I’ll go about mine [link].” She describes how while in school at Postdam (still mid-transition) she instituted “heel Saturdays,” where she went out dressed in fully feminine garb and unapologetically flaunted her sexy figure. Also while in college, she became heavily involved with campus fashion shows. While looking for some shots of her in footage she sent me from one of the shows, she said with a laugh that she was easy to find, because “I’m the sexy one!” She takes great pride in always being “flawless” when she is out in the world. As time goes on and she becomes truly at home in her female identity, there is a calm and poise that accompanies that move. I see a particular *beauty* in Ally and her video composition. I see her precision in depicting objects arranged with care as a communication from her to us about the aesthetic quality and importance of things as ordinary as lipstick, fluffy pillows, and her pink hairdryer, tangible symbols to her of her emerging femininity.

When tragedy hits and her mother passes away, we see another transition in Ally's video. She must now step into a different figured world of womanhood, that of nurturer and caretaker. She speaks of how her father is her life now, and how she needs to take care of him because he is on his own. This time she takes cues not from Brittany, but from her own mother. In a touching exchange of texts Ally and I had soon after the holidays this year she said, consistent with her video depiction, "last year was tough but this year I managed to do all her wonderful holiday traditions like music, food, the tree..." She glides smoothly into this more *maternal* figured world, drawing on a new and different set of tools and practices, as evidenced by her text. She is as at home here as she is in the figured world of "femme fatale". One gets an awareness in her video that Ally is very busy with the responsibilities of adulthood. As Ally says of herself at the end of her video, "I am more than just a trans woman... I'm a grown woman."

Richmond: school and family expectations

Schooling is particularly important for immigrant youth. For them, it is the first sustained, meaningful, and enduring participation in an institution of the new society. ... It is in their interactions with peers, teachers, and school staff that newly arrived immigrant youth will experiment with new identities and learn to calibrate their ambitions.... The relationships they establish with peers, teachers, coaches, and others will help shape their characters, open new opportunities, and set constraints to future pathways. It is in their engagement with schooling most broadly defined that immigrant youth will most profoundly transform themselves (Suarez-Orozco 2008, pp 2, 3)

Richmond, like Ally, shows a marked transformation in his video. Some of the change one sees in these videos is due to time passing, which is inherent in the use of video/images over an extended period. The seven years from the first CUNY Prep video to the last interviews span the late teens to early adulthood for all three of my participants. With Ally, even though she suffered from being bullied and ostracized at school, she always had a strong social network in her very large extended family. Her visible transformation is in her body. From Richmond, we witness both a social and cultural evolution. The video shows that the way he speaks and his body language alter dramatically over the years. In his 2008 video he speaks very softly, is slightly

hunched over, and does not make a lot of eye contact. When we get to the last interview in 2015, he sits comfortably erect, his voice steady, and his eyes direct. While we see images of his caretaking role with his family throughout, we witness the growth of his social relationships when he begins to highlight images of interactions with his friends and his fraternity.

The archetypal immigrant story is vividly expressed by Richmond's stepfather in his 2008 video. Speaking at home in his kitchen about the "hard work" it took for him to get the family from Ghana to America, he says, "all my mind was to work hard to bring this family which I left behind... working two jobs three jobs, it's a long process, to get somebody here, it's a long process, but I did it, through the grace of god [link]." This story helps us understand some of the heavy expectations with which Richmond was burdened, especially because he was the only son. The expectation was that he would, through college, secure a career that would enable him to support the family. This expectation causes tension for Richmond between his strong commitment to his family and his own ambitions. His stepfather's expectations in particular conflict with Richmond's own hopes and desires, most especially with becoming an artist (although he worked at least part time right from the beginning of the time I knew him). In fact, when he transferred into Queens College, he did not tell his parents about being a Studio Art major. When we see him working alone in his room and later in a teacher's studio making art, his longstanding and deep desire to be an artist is quite evident.

When Richmond arrived at CUNY Prep having just immigrated to the United States from Ghana, he had little confidence in his English, which was still rudimentary. This was a major challenge when faced with the GED, a standardized test. In fact, as he tells us in his video, Richmond had to take the test five times before passing, which in a traditional school would likely have meant negative repercussions like being left back, tracked into SPED, or worse, being expelled altogether. CUNY Prep was an unusual learning space in that it did not assume that all

students would progress at the same pace, and it remained supportive of Richmond's efforts. At the time he was going through the multiple disappointments of not passing, he was very discouraged and had the added tension of the family pressure. This led to an intervention between the CUNY Prep principal and Richmond's stepfather, setting up the needed time for Richmond to finally pass the GED. Later in the video Richmond tells us he was grateful for the extra time spent in classes at CUNY Prep, because the classes helped better prepare him for college. He speaks directly about how "failing" the test multiple times was actually essential to his success. In this framing of his experience with the test, one witnesses some of Richmond's improvisatory skills within the figured worlds he is navigating. Stepping into the figured world of "college student" required a solid academic grounding, which, in Richmond's view, the extra time granted.

We see more of Richmond's figured worlds on display as he shows us the increasing scope of his growing social life. Richmond's beloved friend Charles (who Richmond told me was the first student to talk to him when he entered CUNY Prep) describes him as going "from the shy boy to a social butterfly [link]." As we see this change (for example, in the bowling alley with his friends), we also see an evolution of male role models in his life. A few times in my interviews with Richmond, he speaks of searching for male role models who can help him figure out "what kind of man" he wants to be. Specifically, he mentions the principal of CUNY Prep Derrick Griffith, Charles (his first American friend), and his many fraternity brothers—all of whom could be understood to represent different figured worlds of "manhood." In the video, Richmond demonstrates more open and playful interactions with male friends as time goes on and his body language becomes more self-assured [link], which can be understood as demonstrating the accepted male behaviors in these figured worlds. The quotation of Suarez-Orozco, et al (2008) above speaks to the importance of peers in helping immigrant youth to "experiment with new identities and learn to calibrate their ambitions." We see evidence of this in much of Richmond's

footage as he skates between his various figured worlds. He shows us his purple and white-clad participation in the figured world of the fraternity—where ritual and regimentation are key. We also see his figured world of carefree downtown club-kid in his sing-along car ride with Charles, emphasized through the lens of a very shaky camera. Also included are his figured worlds of hard-working college student, and family caretaker—all various possible versions of manhood. Richmond shows us in his video that he is becoming the “man” he can now conceive as his future self, which can and does include multiple facets. Starting with his dedication to taking care of his family, and as he matures, deciding he wants to devote his career to “anything related to special ed,” we see a man who is deeply invested in caring for others. While he did continue to be an artist, he decided that by pursuing special education he could resolve some of that tension between his own passion and a family-sustaining career. He always stayed connected to caregiving in the family and with his friends. He even chose his fraternity based on its motto, which emphasized chivalry and service to others. Richmond ends his video by talking about plans for graduate school. It seems that he has merged his immigrant background and responsibilities with a more typical American attitude of following his bliss, again demonstrating his skills of improvisation within multiple figured worlds. He says in the end he wants to find something “suitful” for his life—“something that is going to make me wake up every morning and put a smile on my face.”

OBSERVATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS:

Many of our students tell us that they left school because they were being told “what to think” and not “how to think.” Some students were entangled in the courts and foster care systems; some felt too beaten down to get up for school. Others were forced to work, translate, care for a sibling or elder, saw the absences piling up and soon realized that the prospect of passing the class, much less the Regents, was very slim. And finally there are other students who succumbed to the adolescent pressures of peers, drugs, and the need to belong (or not), and thus school became a distant afterthought. Needless to say, it has been a challenge to develop a program and school for young people who “know” exactly what they need out of school, but still confront many of the challenges described above (p 34).³⁸

-- Derrick Griffith, Principal, CUNY Prep, 2007

The above excerpt is from the *Lessons Learned* section of the first comprehensive report written about CUNY Prep, the second chance school in the Bronx where I taught and first met the three remarkable participants. This quotation provides a useful backdrop to this whole project. Although our students (including my participants) were “entangled” in many of the situations above, their awareness of wanting and needing the tools for “how to think,” rather than the disconnected rote learning offered in their previous schools, was evident from the very first days in the classrooms we shared. These were young people who left or were pushed out of their previous schools for myriad reasons resulting in being saddled with the “dropout” label. However, these same young people maintained a genuine hope and desire for a pathway to experience real learning and complete their educations. As the stories that Travis, Ally, and Richmond shared with us demonstrate, these young people have complicated lives requiring them to shoulder an enormous burden of hard work that has nothing to do with school! They show us that the actual person behind the “dropout” label is much more complex than the stereotype could ever allow. As we have seen above, messaging has a huge impact. The messaging that accompanies labels (i.e., stereotypes) like “dropout” can be limiting at best and crippling at worst. Just as messaging matters, so do opportunities for *agency* through *improvisation* within figured worlds to help combat those negative effects. Holland, et al, say, “We attend to improvisation because we speak from a critical perspective... [and so choose] to document and support those local openings and social movements which seem liberatory.” Also,

“Improvisations command our attention because they may be excluded only at the risk of missing the back-and-forth of engagement. Even within grossly asymmetrical power relations, the powerful participants rarely control the weaker so completely that the latter’s ability to improvise resistance becomes irrelevant (p 277).”

As we have seen with all three of my participants, this “ability to improvise resistance” is in full effect. They all three find agency in figured worlds through improvisation born of resilience [link].

My students fundamentally changed my life as an educator when they invited me into one of their figured worlds in 2008 with the making of the MySpace video in the digital storytelling class I taught with Shannon Taggart (see my partner article on methodology, and the intro video module, links). In that class, my students took the lead role—teaching me how to make a MySpace page—and I took the role of completely baffled student [link]. Initially, this role reversal was not intentional, but because I was genuinely ignorant of all things social media at the time, it became inevitable. I had to trust the students to run the class. In doing so, the traditional classroom power dynamic was flipped, and amazing things started to happen. First, far from the chaos many teachers fear will result from stepping away from conventional curriculum, the students took great care to lay out a clear path for me, and to make sure I was actually learning. They would occasionally reprimand each other if someone lost focus or left something out of the information I needed, but mostly partnered beautifully with each other in their instructor positions. In retrospect, I suppose I should have been more nervous about allowing myself to be so vulnerable with the students. They had expressed specifically, however, that, as Ally said, “We already know how you are as a teacher. We want to really know how you are as a person.” They were convinced (and convinced me!) that having a MySpace page would help. By taking them up on their invitation into this very important and revealing figured world of social media, we learned a tremendous amount about each other, while simultaneously building a deep and genuine trust. It was a trust that carried over through the rest of the school year and beyond. That trust was the foundation for the safe space our classroom became, and it cemented my relationships with the students to this day.

I share this story for a few reasons. First, because I want to emphasize the framing of figured worlds as powerful sites of agency granting identity development for both students and teachers. Second, many of us find ourselves in generally hostile educational environments for the reasons described at the beginning of this paper, and sometimes the only place to create any sort of nurturing environments for our students is in our own classrooms. I want educators (teachers and others who work with classes of students) to know that this is absolutely possible, especially if they allow themselves to relinquish a bit of control and leave space for their students to become partners in the endeavor. Third, although often dismissed as less important than academic priorities, I want to emphasize that the single most important ingredient in any effective classroom is cementing authentic and reciprocal relationships with the students. This is especially true in a classroom full of young people who have been labeled “dropouts,” i.e., been messaged that school is not for them. From my perspective, absolutely no genuine and/or lasting learning will take place until those relationships are in place. Lastly, my committee Chair recently said of my participants and this project, “While the mainstream defines them as ‘dropouts,’ your dissertation is not about ‘dropouts.’ It’s about young people who are committed to education but are *defined* as ‘dropouts.’” This observation is spot on, and in this light it is clear that the figured world of “dropout” is not one of their choosing, but one that has been forced upon my participants. It is interesting then to see how each improvises within that figured world thus creating the agency with which to navigate it (see participant videos, link). Travis claims to *be* the stereotype, Ally embraces the label and wears it “with pride,” and Richmond rejects the label, reminding us that he graduated in Ghana, but then also claims it, saying he might as well have been a “dropout” because he never learned anything of value in high school. These varied responses remind us that no matter the “mainstream” definition of “dropout,” the lived experience of the label is as individual as the person to whom it is attached.

We have learned that the “dropout” label in no way reflects the actual desires for school and schooling these young people harbor—desires that are ambitious and do not have set limits. At the same time, how they are actually able to participate in school does not match the way most schools are organized to work with students. As the quotation above says, it is a “challenge” to create a program that addresses both the outside demands on students and the very real demands of delivering effective schooling. The forced timeline of traditional schools, however, is at odds with the lives of the students whose stories we have just read, and the many more they represent. It is imperative that those of us charged with providing educations for students grappling with circuitous life paths are not only cognizant of our students’ individual circumstances, but also actively seek to understand their individual needs, hopes, and dreams. We can learn something about this from our colleagues specializing in trauma informed care. A report published by the National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth³⁹ reminds us that,

“In typical youth work... “good” behavior is rewarded and “bad” behavior has consequences. Trauma-informed youth work, on the other hand, views all behaviors, good and bad, as information. There’s always a reason for a particular behavior... and the youth worker’s job is to figure out what people, events, or things consistently trigger, or set off, particular reactions... Building trusting relationships is key to helping young people feel safe and open to accepting needed resources... You really have to be less rule-oriented and more relationship-oriented.”

The idea of reading any given behavior of a student, not as an indication of the *character* of that young person, but instead as *information* about them, is powerful. Certainly the labels of “good” kids and “bad” kids do not capture what Travis, Ally, and Richmond have shown us in their stories, nor does the label “dropout” as traditionally understood. When we look more closely at the young people actually assigned these monikers, we see a much more complicated picture than the labels allow. Also, once again the subject of *relationships* pushes forward. Creating authentic relationships between young people like my participants and adults in positions of authority, especially in their school worlds, needs to be given the focus (and guidance) it

deserves. We already have a lot of solid information from many experienced and committed people about how to create better access, support, and school relationships for young people living in the margins. We already know how to make schools more effective for a wider variety of students who may possess intelligence, talent, and zeal, but face circumstances that deter them from a straightforward path toward education. We also know that Travis, Ally, and Richmond are representative of thousands of young people not being served by our current system, which makes it imperative that we start listening, take real action, and make real change.

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Notes PART I:

¹ Jennifer Stone (2007) describes, while teaching in an after-school program, her epiphany about the potential pedagogical power popular websites held for her students:

I noticed that during times in the computer labs, students were often sneaking peeks at websites. I would see several students huddled around a computer, talking, laughing, reading, and writing, all while deeply engaged. Then, as adults would walk past, they would quickly close the sites and switch back to the official work of the program (p. 49).

Laughing, reading, writing, all while deeply engaged—this is the stuff of educators’ dreams! Unfortunately, schools have much work to do to catch up to how students are already taking charge of their own learning. The field of New Literacy Studies (i.e., the role of new media in literacy) has still not taken hold the way I had hoped when I first encountered it in 2008. See Stone (2007), Gee (2007), Watkins (2009), among others.

² “Make explicit what is *implicit*” is the first of what Luttrell calls *The Four “I’s” of Qualitative Research*. See Luttrell (2010, p 7).

³ Yamada-Rice (2012) talks about “the historical division between the written and visual modes and their separate affordances into two distinct areas.” She goes on to suggest, “that through the use of digital media, this division is beginning to blur.” Finally, she asserts, “not only is there a need to understand the specific lenses of each mode, but also there will become an increasing need to understand how these differ and support one another—to develop an understanding of a ‘multimodal lens’” (pp 163, 4).

⁴ Reissman (2008) says, “...although I emphasize the importance of careful transcription... it is limiting to rely only on the texts we have constructed from single interviews, and we must not reify our “holy transcripts” of these conversations (p 26). She goes on to show the same excerpt from an interview transcribed in two completely different ways, reinforcing her argument that transcription is not separate from interpretation (p 29). For a very helpful and comprehensive review of thirty years (1979 – 2009) of transcription literature, see Davidson (2009). Among other issues raised, she reminds us that there is no universal approach to transcription (although attempts have been made in various fields over the years), which contributes to the range of possible challenges and emphasizes the highly constructed nature of the practice. She cites Bucholtz’s (2000) examples of two possible approaches that she terms “naturalized” and “denaturalized” transcription (p 38). Naturalized, Bucholtz asserts, is “when written features of discourse have primacy over the oral,” i.e., periods, commas, and other punctuation is included. Denaturalized “preserves the features of oral language such “ums” and “ers (p 39).” She explains that although denaturalized transcripts might seem closer to the original interview, they might actually be more opaque and confusing to a reader unfamiliar with this form of text. Transcription, it seems, says as much (or as little!) about the transcriber as it does about the

person whose words have been transcribed. Lastly, in the same work above, Riessman cites Luttrell (2003), who was “confronted [with] silence” when trying to elicit stories verbally from pregnant teens about “key events,” only to have the floodgates open through art and performance opportunities she provided instead. As we know, silence speaks volumes, as do all sorts of non-verbal communications, which raise interesting possibilities from visual/video transcription techniques.

⁵ The *Looking Back* project planted the seed for the idea of working with young people *over time*, and made me realize the rich data I had access to from my participants’ 2008 films.

⁶ From Merriam Webster online:

<http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/access?show=0&t=140855741>

⁷ There is a growing mountain of reports on why young people leave school. I offer three recent ones below which I think are helpful to varying degrees. One consistent problem, however, is that when one looks at lists of “reasons” why young people leave school (even when self-reported) the short-hand answers rarely capture the full story. For example, “missed too many days” or “fell behind in class” (two consistently cited reasons), give us no understanding of *why*.

First, a roundup of several “nationally representative studies” from the 1950’s to the 1980’s, which they reframed into three categories of dropping out factors: push, pull, and falling out. This allowed them to look at trends over time, and attempted to capture a more nuanced understanding of the data: <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/3/4/2158244013503834#sec-13>

Second, a literature review from an international perspective looking at “western” countries, including the United States. Their focus is on methodologies of how the topic has been explored, and the relative merits or limitations of each:

<http://www.tierweb.nl/assets/files/UM/Working%20papers/TIER%20WP%2014-14.pdf>

Finally, a recent study that attempts to put student voice front and center in the discussion:

<http://www.gradnation.org/sites/default/files/DCTD%20Final%20Full.pdf>

⁸ In retrospect, there were several factors contributing to this discomfort. First, right from the beginning I was sure that everyone in the room knew more than I did, so I was too embarrassed to ask questions. I believe that suspicion was related to the number of times I had to start over in new schools and classrooms. Also, because of my early bump to the first grade and my January birthday, I was always one of the youngest students in class. I was (and continue to be) a very slow reader because of (at the time) undiagnosed dyslexia. Finally, I was nearsighted (also undiagnosed), but because of my general discomfort, always sat in the back row where I could not see the board. The crazy thing is that at the time I did not understand that I could not see the board, I just thought I was stupid. Amazingly, as a teacher I have witnessed this same phenomenon in my students several times!

⁹ See: <http://gedi.commonscs.gc.cuny.edu/> and <http://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Masters-Programs/Liberal-Studies/Program-tracks/Digital-Humanities>

¹⁰ When I became an administrator at the school, Shannon and I also worked together to create several professional development videos, where we looked at things like classroom culture, student challenges, curriculum and instruction, etc., specific to our school. These are all publically archived on the school website.

¹¹ This was not a formal research project, so no IRB was involved. The students all signed release forms upon entry into our program, because we did so much with video in the school. Even with those releases, however, we had a conversation with the students about the video being seen in public (posted on the school website and Shannon’s website), being shown to my class at the Grad Center, and later being shown by our principal to a group of folks from CUNY Collaborative Programs, of which we were a part. There were no objections lodged publically or privately (I always encouraged students to come see me or contact me privately if they were in any way uncomfortable voicing something with other people around). In fact, they were very excited at the prospect of people seeing it (and their films) outside of the school.

¹² One book from David’s class that was essential to my thinking about the visual and (re)presentation (at the heart of the MySpace project) was MacDougall’s (2006) *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (see works cited). For an extensive, glorious, and ever-evolving resource for readings and other ways into visual research, see David Chapin’s syllabus for his class *The Visual in Field Research* [link].

¹³ The main goal of this class was the storytelling part, not learning how to use the editing program—that came in later classes.

¹⁴ In the introduction of Milne, Mitchell, and de Lange’s (2012) invaluable *Handbook of Participatory Video* they assert,

The focus on participatory and visual methodologies, specifically participatory video, is a growing area of research and a tool among nongovernmental organizations, practitioners, and researchers working with communities. Over the past 15 years there has been a burgeoning interest among research councils, researchers, policy makers, professionals, and activists in using methods that encourage deeper engagement with communities, offer greater agency in research and decision-making processes, and bring about social change. This has been fueled by the desire to use more emancipatory and decolonizing methods (Smith, 1999); the desire of funders to contribute to research with policy outcomes and high-impact materials—particularly in the age of the internet; and the low cost (and ease of use) of film equipment (p 2).

Inevitably, as the field grows and deepens, controversies arise about “...power, agency, process, and empowerment... (p 2).” This book draws from multiple disciplines and types of practitioners and researchers, and provides a crucial grounding in the issues in the field.

Also see, the Participatory Cultures Lab founded by Claudia Mitchell at McGill University. <https://participatorycultureslab.com>

¹⁵ If I were to do this again, I might have made some different choices around how I used the video data, especially the participant footage. The idea for the website came later in my process (after my proposal), and was originally conceived as a framework for the videos and text pieces. My ideas around the website evolved to a place where the website itself became (in my mind) the dissertation. Had I understood it that way from the beginning, I might have created a framework where rather than making video modules (essentially short films), I could use raw clips from

both the participant work and the interviews, possibly framed by text. In other words, a more seamless design that exploited the affordances of a website more fully. I believe such a design would have provided the opportunity to use more of the data, and perhaps use it more effectively.

¹⁶ See Clement Chau (2010) on youth culture and YouTube as a participatory space. He tells us, “One of the main categories in the large corpus of user content is how-to videos on a variety of topics, from cooking to skateboarding to hairdressing” (p 69).

¹⁷ boyd and Marwick (2011) describe how youth, especially in networked public spaces, understand privacy this way,

When trying to locate privacy, young people circle around the tropes that adults use to discuss privacy. They speak of secrets and trust, and highlight particular spaces as more or less private. Throughout these conversations, teens consistently come back to the importance of control and personal agency. They believe that privacy has to do with their ability to control a social situation, how information flows, and when and where they can be observed by others (p 5).

¹⁸ If you are unfamiliar with PAR, a good place to start is here: [http://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Centers-and-Institutes/Center-for-Human-Environments/Research-Sub-Groups/Public-Science-Project-\(PSP\)](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/Page-Elements/Academics-Research-Centers-Initiatives/Centers-and-Institutes/Center-for-Human-Environments/Research-Sub-Groups/Public-Science-Project-(PSP))

Notes PART II

¹⁹ See: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/no-child-left-behind-overview-definition-summary.html>

²⁰ See: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>

²¹ In the introduction to her classic book *Framing Dropouts* (1991) Fine says,

My naïve notions of what constituted a dropout and what made for educational persistence were uncomfortably disrupted. Dropouts could be reconceptualized as critics of educational and labor market arrangements. The act of dropping out could be recast as a strategy for taking control of lives fundamentally out of control. I began to suspect that public schools were not merely organized to serve some at the expense of others. Committed to taming critique in those who stayed, schools were also exiling critique in those who left (p4).

²² See: Ravitch (2010), and she also runs a lively and informative blog <http://dianeravitch.net>

²³ For a concise round up of some the issues raised by RTTT see:
<http://www.epi.org/files/2013/bba-2013-race-to-the-top.pdf>

²⁴ See: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/14/nyregion/bloomberg-issues-final-letter-grades-for-new-york-schools.html?_r=0

²⁵ The same is true for other high school equivalency exams, such as the HiSet and TASC.

²⁶ There is another relevant finding for those of us working to help young people transition from High School Equivalency exams to and through college. While shorter term studies have shown a negative correlation between having to take remedial courses on college entrance and completion rates, Lavin and Attewell found, “Contrary to critics’ contentions, our analyses suggest that remedial courses do not depress graduation rates for most students, and that remediation may reduce college dropout rates in the short term” (p 7).

²⁷ See: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/new-understanding-non-academic-support.pdf>

²⁸ She defines the term this way:

I use the term “academically vulnerable” to refer to students from backgrounds that are correlated with low levels of postsecondary success, including those who are academically underprepared, from underrepresented minority groups, students with low socioeconomic status, and students who have low levels of parental education. I use this term to emphasize the fact that while most efforts to increase rates of student persistence focus on students enrolled in developmental education, many students—even those possessing the requisite academic skills—are at risk of postsecondary failure and in need of non-academic support (p 1 footnote).

²⁹ For a helpful roundup of the literature about the role of relationships and supportive school environments, see: <https://www.collaborativeclassroom.org/research-articles-and-papers-the-role-of-supportive-school-environments-in-promoting-academic-success>

³⁰ See: <http://www.americanradioworks.org/documentaries/the-new-face-of-college/>

³¹ See, for example: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/research/airole.aspx>

³² Both Ferguson (2001) and Noguera (2008) recount stories of school administrators referring to students (both black and male) as having “a jail cell” in their future. Even more distressing, both administrators were also black and male. In my fifteen years in the world of education, I have heard this exact judgment leveled at more students than I care to remember.

³³ See: Steele (2010)

³⁴ For the ultimate rumination on navigating this mythology (specifically in education), see Villanueva (1993) *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. He says of himself,

“He has made it by the bootstraps: GED to Ph.D.—an American success story. But he knows that for most like him the bootstraps break before the boots are on, that too many have no boots. So he tries to grasp at concepts like colonialism and ideology and hegemony and the ways they are imbricated with language, tries to figure this out: this book (p 13).”

³⁵First, a round up of several “nationally representative studies” from the 1950’s to the 1980’s, which they reframed into three categories of dropping out factors: push, pull, and falling out. This allowed them to look at trends over time, and attempted to capture a more nuanced understanding of the data: <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/3/4/2158244013503834#sec-13>

Second, a literature review from an international perspective looking at “western” countries, including the United States. Their focus is on methodologies of how the topic has been explored, and the relative merits or limitations of each:
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Finally, a recent study that attempts to put student voice front and center in the discussion:
<http://www.gradnation.org/sites/default/files/DCTD%20Final%20Full.pdf>

³⁶ At the risk of stereotyping, I base this assumption on the many hours of footage Ally shared with me, much of which included her mother and visiting female friends in the kitchen preparing meals and setting the table, etc., while her father and visiting male friends sat in the living room watching television or doing some other activity, which both fall into those sorts of traditional gender roles. For some interesting research on these roles in a specifically Latino/a context, see: Raffaelli, M., & Ontai, L. L. (2004) Gender Socialization in Latino/a Families: Results from Two Retrospective Studies, in my works cited.

³⁷ I recently visited a program in Boston that works with gang involved youth to reengage them in school and see them through college. They target the young people they call “core influencers,” who are by their definition the toughest of the tough, involved in some of the worst gang related violence. In their work to identify barriers to school that these young people are grappling with, the barrier that topped the list by far (outdoing lack of childcare and of funds) was safety. I raise it simply because I found it illuminating and distressing to think about the role fear plays in the lives of even our “toughest” young people.

³⁸ See: <http://www.cuny.edu/academics/evaluation/library/CUNYPrepSchoolRred.pdf>

³⁹ See: <http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/features/asking-what-s-happened-you-focus-trauma-informed-care/trauma-informed-care-tips-youth>