

sensible into nonsensical place making and marking in transition. The stories shift and move with the numb, the haze, and uncontrollable movements towards chaos into the terror of the possibility of losing the love of your life, of possibly losing your life. I write this story and the stories to follow with “concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness” (Ellis, 2004, p. 38), to make it past and through the transitory radical, in order to narratively and emotionally stay alive.

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CHAPTER TWO



Negating the Inevitable *An Autoethnographic Analysis of First- Generation College Student Status*

Tabatha L. Roberts

AS A CHILD, I WAS RAISED IN SEVERAL APARTMENT COMPLEXES located in the southwest suburbs of Chicago. The suburbs are less “diverse” than the city. Many Chicagoans feel like suburban kids have it easy because we didn’t grow up around gangs or in heavily populated areas. We are also assumed to be one of two evils, either we are more naive than our inner city counterparts, or we are financially privileged and take advantage of our parents’ hard work. I hate those assumptions. I grew up in four apartment complexes surrounded by families that had been kicked out of the housing projects in the south and west sides of Chicago. Although these apartment complexes are located in one of the richest counties in the United States, they house poor, single mothers of several racial and ethnic backgrounds and their latchkey kids. These apartments also house gangbangers, drug dealers, sexual predators, and families trying to work their way up from lower-to-middle socioeconomic classes. I lived among these people. I am one of these people. I share some of the same stories as these people.

This essay is about my lived experiences as a first-generation college (FGC) student from a working-class background. I combine autoethnography and Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld’s (2005) theory of organizational sensemaking to reflect on my diverse experiences and how they informed my development as an FGC graduate/student in the process of attaining a master’s

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degree. By combining autoethnography with organizational sensemaking theory, I invite the reader to make sense of my personal development as I simultaneously make sense of my lived experiences. I offer a layered account autoethnography (Ronai, 1995), which interweaves my memories and reflections to exemplify the complex and evolutionary ways that my experiences with culture, social class, and power have impacted my positionality, development, identity negotiations, and status as a first-generation college student/graduate. As I examine these sociocultural topics, I am referring to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), specifically how the intersections of my cultural identities have informed my understandings of power and my experiences with oppression within higher education institutions. Through the stages of the sensemaking framework, I revisit the unconventional path I took to higher education—from undergraduate to master's level—and reflect on particular moments and relational dilemmas that informed my choices.

"Negating the inevitable" means fighting against labels, stereotypes, and judgments. This chapter is not just about my path in higher education as a first-generation college student—it is about my path leading to higher education and the stages of sensemaking I have experienced because of it. This chapter is also about the things life taught me before I went back to school. It is about who I was, who I am becoming, and who I will be. It is about negations and possibilities. Most importantly, this chapter is in response to those researchers and teachers who are convinced that first-generation college students won't make it (at worst) or will only make it against seemingly insurmountable odds (at best) (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

I wrote the following poem as an undergraduate student to demonstrate the powerful affects that culture and interpersonal relationships have on the development of a first-generation college (FGC) student.

I am

A daughter, born to a single mother, who is the youngest of 7; the strongest person I know

I am the "only child" to everyone else, but a sister to someone I've never met

I am spoiled even though my mother struggled for most of my young years

I am unable to explain it, but I am aware of what drugs are, what they look like, and how they affect my father, at age 4

I am, at age 5, also aware of what a crack house looks like, how "hypes" react over the pipe, and I am a new friend to a boy who is also stuck in the bedroom coloring on the wall

I am unable to tell my mother the events of my weekends with "daddy"

I am still in awe of him

I am older and no longer feel like it's okay to be absent in your daughter's life

I am bitter, mean, and absent in his

I am accepting of the drug world and most of my friends do them in high school

I am a raver, a pot-head, a mixture of Pink Floyd and Rhythm and Blues
I am confused when pot turns into heroin and my friends are no longer experimenting but are addicted
I am exposed to an "epidemic" of bratty suburban drug users and I am thankful my conscience is too strong to participate
I am a 17-year-old drop out with a G.E.D.
I am no longer accepting the darkness that is my past
I am, instead, aware that it is up to me to make decisions, and I am confident that I am capable of success
I am one of five national 1st place award winners in Philadelphia for comedic public speaking
I am proud, blown away, and more confident than I have ever been in my entire life
I am, again, reminded of my past
I am a god mother to a boy whose mother, my cousin, has forgotten him for the "snake bite" of the needle
I am hiding my purse at Christmas
I am angry that at 25 this is happening to her, when it should've been in high school when it was normal to be a moron!
I am pissed as hell at her absence in his life
I am aware that I hate her for her actions, love her for the person she is deep down inside, but I will never respect her for allowing the venom to turn her into a devil
I am at a wake for her sponsor
I am at a wake for grandma
I am at a wake for my best friend whose heart stopped working at 24 because the venom that used to run through his veins stopped the blood flow to his heart
I am a woman with no faith
I am aware that I have no answers to the scariest questions in the world
I am trying to be strong with my soul feeling empty
I am loved by the people who help me get through it
I am a daughter to a single mother who's the most amazing woman I know
I am a daughter to a father who has been clean now for over 10 years
I am still spoiled even though I try not to be
I am grateful for the opportunities I have had, the privileges I have been exposed to, the stages in my life that I have learned from, and the people in my life that have guided me through it all
I am a strong woman with a strong belief in herself
I am eventually going to have faith
I am eventually going to answer some questions
I am aware that because I am who I am ...

I am going to be anything I want to be.

I wrote this poem while I was a student at a private college in Illinois. The class was Intercultural Communication, and it was one of the first classes I enrolled in after my transfer from a local community college. At the time of my transfer, I was a 25-year-old, full-time bartender and part-time

2006 Award
 Best Poem, FGC

Arguing
 someone
 or
 the time/
 at 11:00

10:00
 Poem
 in
 in a place
 at 11:00

undergraduate student. I had spent the previous five years figuring out my place in higher education and the world.

The poem was written for an assignment titled “I am.” The premise of the assignment was to tell a story about yourself that described different aspects of your identity. I was excited about the assignment, but I worried about being judged by my professor for sharing personal information. I had always been open about my life with my friends, but what would a stranger think of me? I struggled with how I was going to explain myself without telling my story. The parts of the poem that spoke of sadness, confusion, disappointment, and heartache were temporary. Even as an undergraduate I knew that one day I would “find the answers” to the scary questions. Looking back, I realize that the scary questions were related to my path in higher education. I didn’t fit in. *What was I doing there? Why didn’t my professors appreciate my point of view? How was I going to get through it? How was I going to make change?*

I was poor growing up. My father was a drug addict. My mother raised me by herself. Neither of my parents graduated high school. I was a high school dropout. These lived experiences paint a grim picture for a young woman who is the first in her family to enter college. If I had asked a student affairs expert or a scholar publishing in higher education journals about my future in college, they would have warned me of the difficulties ahead. They would say that because I am a first-generation college student I am at a higher risk of dropping out my first year (Ishitani, 2003). They would tell me that because I am Hispanic and born to a low-income family, I have a higher likelihood of dropping out of college altogether (Braxton, Duster, & Pascarella, 1988). They would remind me that because my parents never attended college, I have a lack of cultural capital or low SES (socioeconomic status), so I am “at risk in nearly every step on the path to college, including completing high school, expecting a college degree, acquiring college qualifications, receiving parental encouragement, and understanding the college application and financial aid process” (Wells & Lynch, 2012, pp. 674–675). Accordingly, they would take two factors of my SES—parental education and parental occupation—and pair them with my other cultural identity markers, such as my race, ethnicity, and gender, and tell me that others like me have a lower college attrition rate than traditional students (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1978, 1980). But what they wouldn’t be able to explain about my future or educational path is that statistics do not define me. My parents did not graduate high school or attend college, but their lived experiences have influenced my life choices and my decision to continue my formal education. No one could have predicted that my father’s drug addiction and experiences with

depression would focus me. There are no quantitative methodologies that could explain how my mother’s struggles with single-motherhood would motivate me. *I will not recycle my parents’ mistakes or misfortunes. I will not add to these statistics. I will represent first-generation college students in a new light. I will write a new story.*

My mother gave birth to my sister when she was 15 and had me when she was 19. My mother raised me but gave my sister up for adoption at the insistence of her parents. My grandparents set up a private adoption when they realized my mother was pregnant, forcing her to give her child away. I was nine when I found out I had an older sister somewhere. Discovering this news made me think of my mother in new ways. As a child, I thought that my mother was the strongest person in the world, but as I got older, I started to understand that my mother was human.

My mother has two innate characteristics—patience and forgiveness. These qualities have enabled her to keep people in her life that are toxic—especially men. All of the men my mother married or dated were addicts. My father, who for the majority of my life was addicted to crack cocaine, was no different. It is because of him that my mother raised me by herself. After my father, she dated several men with addiction problems—including a recovering alcoholic, who she married and now shares her life with. For years, my mother dealt with my stepfather’s addiction. We would find liquor bottles hidden in our kitchen cabinets. My stepfather would fall down the stairs in his underwear. He got in a car accident with my friends and me in the car when he was drunk. She never left.

It has always been difficult to talk to my mother about the details of her life. The facts of my sister’s adoption, for example, have always been unclear. I was also never allowed to ask my grandparents about the adoption process. My family treated the situation as if it never happened. But I couldn’t accept that fate for my sister, my mother, or myself. As young as I can remember, I was always open about my life and my family’s struggles. And although my transparency negatively affected my reputation in particular social circles (especially high school), I never allowed myself to keep things hidden. My openness enabled me and my mother to build a strong relationship and has inspired her to gain independence from her parents. I began a search for my sister when I was 15. Last year my mother gathered the courage to join me in the search. We are now reunited with my sister, and for the first time in her life, my mother is free from my grandparents’ constraints.

One of the major lessons I learned from my mother's lived experiences is to never allow anyone to dictate my life. Whether it is a man, a teacher, or a parent, I make my own decisions. I choose my path in life. But watching my mother work as hard as she did to raise me by herself is what inspired me to *stay* in college. I made the decision to continue my education because I didn't want to be a single mother. I didn't want to make the same choices in men. Education gave me the tool to become a better person and motivated me to change the direction of my life. I am the first person in my family to attend college, and my mother is my biggest supporter. She and I have grown up together.

My father is one of five. In 1997 his sister was murdered. Her body was found tied up in a suitcase in the Chicago River. Both of my uncles have been to prison. My father's childhood reminds me that prejudice and racism still exist. His story shows me what my life might have looked like if I traveled down the same broken road.

My father dropped out of high school in the ninth grade. He joined a gang and became a crack cocaine addict in his later teens. I believe some of his childhood experiences contributed to his poor choices. When he was young, he was locked inside his bedroom by his brother's father and was forced to watch him beat my grandmother until she was unconscious. He uses this story as a justification for being absent in my life. He tells me about his childhood experiences to remind me how lucky I am.

My father lived in Skokie, Illinois, during his elementary school years. The population in Skokie was mainly Jewish, and my father experienced a lot of discrimination from his teachers and friends because he was Puerto Rican. He felt pushed out of the school system because of his ethnicity.

After my father dropped out of high school, he found haven in the streets on the west side of Chicago. However, after several stints in jail he felt that there was more to life than gangbanging and drug use, so he decided to give high school a second chance. In an oral communication class he was assigned to give a speech about his life. He chose to talk about his experiences in jail and the meaning of his tattoos. He received a bad grade. His teacher claimed that the topics he discussed were inappropriate, and she belittled his confidence. He felt judged because of his life path. He dropped out of high school again and never went back.

I wonder what my father's life would have looked like if his teacher recognized he was trying to turn his life around. I wonder what kind of grade she would have given him if she knew about his family life growing up and privileged his experience. I wonder if my earliest memories of spending time with my father would have been different if he would have been treated differently. I was five.

Strolling down the dark hallway I'm holding my father's hand tightly. I am in an unfamiliar place. The ceilings are high and a dark wood color. As we enter the room a woman is violently shaking back and forth in an old rocking chair. Her head is slightly bent toward her breasts. Her skin is dark mahogany, and her eyes are yellow and hollow. I notice that her hand has been amputated.

I look up, "Daddy, why is that lady missing her hand?"

"Because, Tabby, she fell asleep on it and lost all the blood circulation to her hand."

When I asked him about that woman later in my life, he told me she shot heroin in her veins for so long that a doctor had to amputate her hand. He also told me that when he returned to the crack house later that week, he found her shot to death.¹

As we pass the unfortunate woman, there are dozens of men fighting in the kitchen. The lights are faded to a dim yellow, and I can't make out what the conflict is about. Daddy pushes my butt and tells me to go to the bedroom; he will come get me when he is done. On my way to the room I watch to see what is going on. I realize that the men are fighting over a crack pipe. My dad joins them in the kitchen and makes his way into the crowd. There is a little boy with a curly afro in the bedroom. He is standing on the bed, coloring on the wall. I stand on the bed next to him, and we begin jumping up and down, drawing circles of blue and purple on the dingy walls. I had fun that weekend with Daddy.

My cousin is a heroin addict. Her story is intertwined with mine. She was like my sister growing up. She was older than me, but I felt sorry for her because her father didn't show her love and her mother was/is an epileptic who had to financially depend on men. My cousin got lost in the mix.

When we were kids, she was teased a lot. She had buckteeth and cross-eyes, and I spent many summers in my dress shoes, beating up the kids

in our apartment complex for calling her names. We lost our innocence together as children, and then in high school, we experimented with drugs, partied our asses off, and dropped out of school. After she had a baby, something changed. She began using heroin, and I saw—for the first time as an adult—my childhood being replayed through her son's life. She was everything I hated about my father.

I think my innocence was stolen from me. Even today it is hard for me to admit the things I have done. I was young, and I saw a lot, but it wasn't even half of what other people I knew were experiencing. I lost my innocence through their lives. Through their pain, I connected with a world I didn't understand, and to this day, do not understand. I was nine when I drank my first beer, smoked my first cigarette, kissed my first boy, and lied about my age. The constant moving from apartment complex to apartment complex made it impossible to keep any friends. Looking back, however, those apartment complexes were all located in the same town, but my nine-year-old mind imagined them being long distances away. Each new complex added a new layer to my identity. Each new complex made it possible to be another person. I met more and more impoverished, damaged young bodies. These people helped define who I was. Their stories are enmeshed in my childhood. As I reflect on those years, the more entangled the stories become. When you're young, nothing matters but the people you see every day. Every time Sonja's mom smacked her upside the head, I felt it. Every time Courtney's mom drank herself into oblivion and called her a piece of shit, I cried with her. Every time Casey shoved a needle in her arm to hide the pain of her father's drug addiction, I was there to hold her. But I was also engrossed in it all. I provided the vein when hers stopped working. I got high to keep from wasting the poison. I lost my innocence living their lives.

I made different choices when I decided to be my own person. Once I started college, I began to find my own power, but I quickly realized that I was not like other students. As an FGC student from a working-class background, I was different. I was an outsider. I didn't understand hierarchy or why professors had the title of Dr. in front of their name. At the community college I attended, I befriended most of my teachers. When I transferred to the private college, I assumed I would build similar relationships. However, I discovered in a meeting with one of my professors that the title of Dr. separated me from my teachers. When I sat down in one of my professor's offices, she told me that my voice should always be lower than a professor's. She told me that I should research my professors because most of them are experts in their field. She also told me that I should be careful of how I was building my reputation in the

communication department. It was obvious that she had heard about me from other professors. From that day on I learned how to play the game in academia. I started to understand why my father dropped out of school. I began to understand the power of labels.

Researchers have used a variety of labels to describe first-generation college students since the 1980s. For instance, researchers use descriptors such as *at-risk* (Educational Resources Information Center, 1987), *underprepared* (Bartholomae, 1985; Rose, 1989), *nontraditional* (Query, Parry, & Flint, 1992), and/or *socially or economically disadvantaged* (Lippert, Titsworth, & Hunt, 2005). Johnson (1994) contends that "*high risk students* first appeared in the Educational Resources Information Center's (ERIC) (1987) *Thesaurus of ERIC descriptors* in 1980 ... as 'students, with normal intelligence, whose academic background or prior performance may cause them to be perceived as candidates for future academic failure or early withdrawal'" (p. 35). Further, the U.S. Department of Education's National Longitudinal Study (as cited in Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2003) describes first-generation college students as "more likely to be female, older, African American or Hispanic, have dependent children, and come from lower-income families" (p. 14). First-generation college students are presumed to be less prepared than their "traditional" counterparts (Chen, 2005). Research (e.g., Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Engle, et al. 2003; Vargas, 2004) indicates that such students are less prepared because they have lower aspirations for college, they lack the social support to plan for college, and they cannot afford the cost of college.

I am a half-Hispanic, half-white *graduate* student who dropped out of high school. When I dropped out of high school I joined the National Guard. Before going to boot camp, I tested and passed the G.E.D. and began studying at a local community college. It was there that I began to see the value of education. It was there that I gained confidence in myself. I was 17 when I walked into my first communication class. My professor was funny, young, vibrant, and full of life. He saw potential in me and asked me to join the speech team. I began performing poetry, drama, and comedy. At a forensics competition in Philadelphia, I performed a comedic public speech about the lack of Latino leaders. Suddenly, I was one of five first-place award winners in the country. I was on top of the world.

After five years at the community college, I transferred to a private college and was assigned a temporary transfer advisor in administration. Her role

was to map out my educational career and introduce me to my departmental advisor. Instead of placing me in a sophomore-level class, my transfer advisor placed me in a 400 (upper) level class in media criticism during my first semester. The professor, "Dr. Milihan" was the director of the department. Interestingly, he had also been a judge at several of my speech competitions while I was in community college.

Dr. Milihan had a reputation. According to other students and faculty, he was very traditional and strict. As the semester began, I noticed that he did not seem to like me. I assumed he was frustrated because I was overwhelmed with the upper-level class and was experiencing difficulty learning rhetorical concepts. In an attempt to ease the tension, I used information I gathered about him to reach him on a more personal level. For instance, I had to write an abstract on an article for one of the first assignments in class. In an effort to build solidarity I decided to write a feminist criticism on the content. My attempts to impress him failed. In fact, my assignment was graded less than average.

Dr. Milihan advised me to sign up for his office hours to discuss my future in his class. When I entered his office, he immediately began questioning my educational background. He started by asking "what is your grade point average?" When I explained that my grade point average was 3.9, he responded with "no, I'm not asking what your GPA was at the community college—what is your grade point average here?" I was stunned! I didn't understand why he was questioning my answer, nor did I understand why I had to convince him I was telling the truth. He then proceeded to look at my personal information and ask me about my goals. When I told him I was interested in teaching communication courses at a community college, he snarled and rolled his eyes. When I asked him why he responded that way he said: "I always have problems with transfer students from community colleges. Their education is inadequate, and instructors from community colleges do not prepare their students to transfer to esteemed colleges like this one. We have to work harder for students like you. And frankly, I don't get paid enough to deal with this. In my opinion, students who start off as freshmen in a four-year school are more successful and prepared for difficult classes."

For the first time in my life, I felt class. I didn't know what it was called at the time, or what it meant, but what I was experiencing was class discrimination. I came from a working-class background. Not only was I the only one in my family to attend college, but I was unable to afford the tuition for a university. After I paid for community college, the only option I had to afford my bachelor's degree was relying on grants and transfer scholarships awarded based on my grades. I knew I could succeed in his class, but I had no idea how to convince him that I was a good student.

It wasn't just my working-class roots that produced this discrimination. Dr. Milihan is a white male scholar. I was a young Hispanic undergraduate student. His discriminatory comments did not stem solely from my choice in schools or his acknowledgment that I was in a low-income tax bracket. Although I am not sure which of my identities troubled him (i.e., my age, sex, or ethnicity), it was at that moment that the intersections of my identity were working against me. However, if he would have asked me about my story, I could have given him some insight into the hard work that it took me to get to a private college. I could have told him that I had struggled with my father's drug addiction and my mother's choices in men. If he would have listened to where I came from, he would have realized that I needed to go to a community college because I couldn't afford expensive tuition. He would have known that my grade point average enabled me to get the scholarships I got—and he would have appreciated my accomplishments at the community college. But instead, he relied on stereotypes. He compared my working-class background and my prior education to those of students who were succeeding in his classes.

Studies have shown that first-generation college students are not the only students unprepared for college level courses (Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Orbe, 2004; Putman & Thompson, 2006). Accordingly, many students find that their FGC status gives them a sense of pride and motivates them to act as role models for their siblings and fellow students (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Attaining a college degree for many first-generation college students means taking "the first step toward a better future" (Putman & Thompson, 2006, p. 134) and involves making a choice for a better life. Those who come from working-class backgrounds/neighborhoods also find haven in motivating their community by sharing their collegiate experiences (Orbe, 2004; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). When compared with non-first-generation college students, studies have shown that FGC students had the same expectations to obtain higher level degrees (Murphy & Hicks, 2006; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004). Students who do find it difficult to transition into college often comment on the low quality of high schools they attended prior to their college experience, while others reported having inadequate guidance from teachers and advisors in college (Engle et al., 2003).

I left Dr. Milihan's office and convinced myself that higher education wasn't for me. Having a highly esteemed professor tell you that you are not worth his time is disconcerting, to say the least. College should have been the place that helped me develop, but at the time it was darker than the crack

data
interpretations

houses I visited with my father. When I called my mother and told her what happened she encouraged me to stay in school. "Forget about him. He won't matter after you graduate."

After I completed Dr. Milihan's class, much of the confidence that I had gained in my academic abilities vanished. However, during my second semester I took two classes—a women's studies course and a communication theory course. Each class was taught by a feminist professor, and the curriculum and readings they chose to use for these classes enabled me to slowly rebuild my tarnished self. For example, muted group theory (Ardener, 1975) and co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) led me to a path of healing by lending me theoretical language to explain my experiences. I realized that in order to graduate, I had to strategically communicate with my professors to appease the power dynamics at play.

Writing the "I Am" poem was the first time I enacted (i.e., labeled with meaning) who I was within the context of the academy (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). It was the first time that I was honest about my past. Accordingly, the poem presents the first stage of *enactment* in Weick et al.'s (2005) notion of sensemaking as an intraorganizational evolution that begins with the process of categorizing discrepancies in normal everyday life circumstances. For me, these *discrepancies* (addiction, loss of hope, discrimination, and other barriers) were there all along, but I didn't understand how they affected my position within the academy or my status as a first-generation college student. I also did not understand how to emancipate myself from them. The second stage of Weick et al. (2005) is the evolutionary process of *selection* (writing about my experiences in college). By writing about these experiences, I am partaking in a "combination of retrospective attention, mental models, and articulation [by] perform[ing] a narrative reduction of the bracketed material [I discussed in the enactment stage] to generate a locally plausible story" (p. 414). In other words, as I write about my experiences through autoethnography, I am creating a new story; one that provides the framework for my commitment to help other FGC students and also for the third stage of the evolutionary process—*retention*. According to Weick et al. (2005), "when a plausible story is retained, it tends to become more substantial because it is related to past experience, connected to significant identities, and used as a source of guidance for further action and interpretation" (p. 414). Hopefully this chapter will be a source of guidance for other students—FGC or not—to work against the labels others impose on their identities.

For me, and many others, college offered a way to rethink my "identities and reconfigure them in new ways" (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2008, p. 11) and the "I Am" poem was the first time I began to see myself within the context of an organizational structure. However, the part of my identity that is a first-generation college student did not become salient until I entered my master's program (Azmitia et al., 2008; Orbe, 2004; 2008). Being a first-generation *graduate* student has helped me realize that my story reflects the experiences of other first-generation college students. I was born to a lower-income family (Engle et al., 2003), I dropped out of high school (Bartholomae, 1985), my parents never went to college or didn't finish high school (Chen, 2005), and I relied on governmental funding to pay for college (Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Engle, et al. 2003; Vargas, 2004). But having the unique positionality as both a teacher and FGC graduate student has focused my attention to a more engaged pedagogy (Pensoneau-Conway, 2009), and my experiences during undergrad have helped me understand the type of teacher I *don't* want to be. I want students to have a safe space to learn without constraint. Additionally, I want teachers and students to theorize difference (Warren, 2008) instead of relying on stereotypes. I want the classroom to be the site where teacher and student simultaneously learn and grow together (Fassett & Warren, 2007).

Reflecting on my diverse lived experiences has been an empowering process, allowing me the opportunity to give "power to" (Bate & Bowker, 1997) myself and others. Personally, this process of sensemaking and autoethnography means taking a critical step toward forging a new identity; an identity that involves giving agency to other FGC students so they might come to understand their own positionalities and identities in the academy.

Note

1. On a return visit to the crack house days later the author's father discovered the dead bodies of the woman with the amputated hand and other addicts he used drugs with. They had all been murdered. Though at the time she did not distinguish the crack house from any other place she visited with her father, she recognizes in retrospect that her father's addiction put both of their lives at risk.

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