

# FRESHGIRLS: OVERWHELMED BY DISCORDANT PEDAGOGIES AND THE ANXIETY OF LEAVING HOME

*ABSTRACT: Drawing from a semester-long ethnographic case study of three freshmen at Lehman College of the City University of New York, the author looks at the very difficult situation underprepared students encounter. To succeed in college, they must change nearly everything about themselves – particularly their class and cultural identification. Resisting this change, the freshgirls fail. What teachers can try to do to help students relax and learn, this study suggests, is to exercise flexibility in their pedagogies.*

## The Context

In the Fall of 1995, I conducted an ethnographic study of three first-semester freshmen at Lehman College, the only four-year college of the City University of New York (CUNY) in the Bronx. Evone Morales, Monique Vasquez, and KiKi Cook, my three case-study subjects, were enrolled in the Freshman Year Initiative (FYI), a program designed to combat the high freshman attrition rate of almost forty percent. Students in the FYI take all four classes together in a block, and their professors (ideally) coordinate curriculum.

Recent state budget cuts to CUNY compounded the dynamics of this inquiry, resulting most significantly in the dissolution of Academic Skills classes at Lehman and a substantial rise in tuition CUNY-wide. Fall '95 was the first semester in which all full-time Lehman freshmen were mainstreamed into the FYI, regardless of placement test scores. While the freshgirls were not all Academic Skills students in terms of test scores, they certainly were in terms of their estrangement from school culture.

I scribbled down their words and actions as I observed them on-site in the classroom, mostly in their composition class for two hours per week. Shirley, the composition instructor, was my most willing participant of the study. I also met with KiKi, Evone, and Monique for interviews and collected samples of their writing, taking care in everything I did or said to demonstrate an objective control. I did not push

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the freshgirls for more than they were willing to reveal — it was a miracle to me that they cooperated at all. I give my case-study subjects the moniker “freshgirls,” for not only were they new to the whole experience of college, but they were also both urban fashionably “fresh” — and also “fresh” as in mildly obnoxious. I am well aware that “fresh” (meaning cool and hip), a usage outdated even in 1995, is considered even more so now. And despite the way it seems politically incorrect, I cannot bring myself to call Evone, Monique, and KiKi any gender term but “girl.” Although legally adults and KiKi the mother of year-old Taequan, they were simply too unformed, too vulnerable, to be called “women.” Besides, the word “girl” carries with it the optimism and resilience of youth, which the freshgirls need to have in abundance.

My expectations for the results of this inquiry were high at the beginning of the semester: each of my three subjects seemed bright-eyed and reasonably energetic, and I hoped to chronicle the freshgirls’ triumphant segue into college culture despite such serious obstacles as poverty, fear, and instability. Yet college itself proved to be an obstacle. As is all too common with many underprepared students, the freshgirls failed nearly all their classes and have yet to successfully complete another semester at Lehman College. Did we, the college, fail them? Or did they sabotage themselves? Or are the cards so stacked against them that there isn’t anything anyone can do?

Fall ‘95 was a turning point in the freshgirls’ lives, a time when each had a harsh introduction to what it means to become an “educated person.” What follows here is an attempt to understand their dilemma through a “thick description” (Geertz) of the classroom. I try to heed the fiction writer’s maxim “show, don’t tell” whenever possible — because, above all, a sense of empathy is essential for instigating change.

## **Humanities Class—1 Hour**

“Let us BEGIN with *Dubliners*, providing easy access into the JOYCEAN universe.”

It is eleven o’clock on a Wednesday in November. Fifteen freshmen are jammed into the last row of the classroom; the other half of their classmates are late.

“Note the sentences COLLIDING into another, the ABANDONMENT of syntax, the repetition and ASSOCIATION . . . . Joyce really MASTERS and conveys the THOUGHTS, the musicality of WORDS, stylistic TRAITS. The SUBSTANSIVENESS of things. AND the OPRESSIVENESS

of that PROCESS." Dramatic pause. "Throughout MY analysis of the stories . . ."

With a flourish worthy of the cadence of his speech, David the Humanities professor gestures toward the notes he's written on every single inch of the blackboard space behind him. He is a white guy about my age (28), a PhD candidate at the Graduate Center who is heavy-set, with holes in the knees of his bluejeans. David's student audience is busying copying his notes from the board: it doesn't seem to me that anyone is listening to his words, nor does he seem to notice that he's lecturing to no one. A few restless students whisper. Their voices grow louder, until David cuts them short with his first direct eye contact of the hour and bellows "Excuse me!"

With David's permission, I am sitting in his class, furiously looking around the room, listening, writing field notes, trying to see what the freshgirls make of this class. The fall of my freshman year at Fordham University, ten years before and just down the road from Lehman, and throughout my education there, most of my professors lectured. They would never supply the notes for us. Of course not, we took our own notes. For the most part, I loved the seeming scholarliness of their oratory skills (though sometimes, intensely bored, I would resort to listing the fifty states).

But in this classroom, I'm stewing at David's disregard for his audience, even more annoyed because my freshgirls are AWOL. Then two of my case studies make a fashionably late grand entrance: the pretty Nuyorican (New York born and bred Puerto Rican) girls, Evone and Monique. They clomp into class on their heavy Timberland hiking boots, reeking of cigarette smoke. Both wear deep red lipstick and their long hair is pulled up into high tight ponytails. They look so much alike that early in the semester, I mistook Monique for Evone, who had been my only volunteer, and so Monique agreed I could study her as well. We exchange hello smiles and the two girls sit down in front of me and start copying the notes from the board. Monique's handwriting is a uniform fat print—it's slow going. Evone (pronounced Yvonne) writes faster, in a loose script, as she chews gum and shakes her legs.

As David lectures, moving on to the story "The Encounter," his voice rises and falls with an irregular and unpredictable frequency. It makes me jump, but the students stay slumped in their chairs. I'm not entirely sure if my presence is affecting the proceedings—is David showing off for me?—but from what the freshgirls tell me, it's not far from the usual. Said KiKi of David in an interview: "I don't understand what he talking about, period." Said David on the phone when I called to explain my study: "Frankly, many of them shouldn't be

allowed in college.”

David continues discussing “The Encounter”: “Joyce’s narrator here is reflecting on the boredom of school with the typical HYPERBOLE of EXUBERANT YOUTH! The Joycean style, as always, is SUBTLE, using MUSICAL METAPHORS.”

Into class KiKi saunters, eating a Twinkie, about thirty minutes into an hour-long class. She sits down without removing her fire engine yellow triple-fat-goose-down coat, nor does she unpack her backpack, which looks empty anyway. A very pretty and delicate African-American girl with dark even-toned skin, KiKi has a gold marijuana leaf planted in her left nostril. KiKi is her nickname; she’s really Lakifah and she keeps her face expressionless, her eyes dull. She did not volunteer to be a freshgirl; in fact, Shirley, the composition instructor, suggested that I invite KiKi to participate in my study, as a way to give her a sense of academic support, and KiKi agreed.

David is now discussing the practice of corporal punishment in Irish schools. “You hit me, I hit you back,” I hear Evone’s husky voice mutter. Monique giggles. Both have their heads down on the desks by now, the busy work of note-copying completed.

David lectures on: “The HYPERBOLE of this PUNCTUATES the SHATTERED EXPECTATION, in a sense PUNCTUATES the NAIVETÉ.... Yes, Tim?” Tim, a lanky African-American guy, is the only student David seems to recognize by name. His unsolicited question is the only student comment offered or taken during this class period.

“Were they inside that old man’s house?”

“NO, in the PARK.” David seems annoyed at this specific textual question.

Evone gets up and spits her gum out in the garbage can. Monique is back to copying the notes, now in lavender ink. “I don’t understand anything I’ve done in that class,” Monique once told me, “and he can’t teach, in my opinion.” KiKi gets up and walks out of the classroom, her deflated backpack left behind.

“Again, there is a setting of CONTRASTS punctuated by the fact that he is an EXOTIC figure . . . this story is really about ENTRAPMENT, this OPPRESSION, all these various SECTORS of LIFE!” I am laughing to myself, thinking how oblivious David is to the irony of his words. And he goes on and on, until I stop writing because Monique and Evone appear to be sleeping, with KiKi gone for nearly fifteen minutes.

The class is near over. Evone pulls on her wool cap, Monique cracks her back. KiKi returns in time to retrieve her backpack. All three slip away before I have a chance to talk to them. I know they run from me.

## Composition Class (ENG 090)—2 Hours

A few weeks earlier, I arrive to the composition class a bit early, and watch the students interact. Ethnically, they are a very eclectic group, with almost half foreign-born, from the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Jamaica, Guyana, the Philippines and Albania. Little flirtations and alliances shift from week to week, without any seeming animosity. My freshgirls, of course, are nowhere to be found, but they also contribute to the camaraderie of the group.

Shirley, a petite white woman in her early 50s with a cap of soft brown curls, walks in carrying a pile of papers and books and gives an exasperated grin. "Oh come on, everybody!" she says, "Don't wait for me to tell you to get into a circle." An adjunct with a master's from Teacher's College, Shirley is teaching traditional-aged freshmen for the first time in many years. She is accustomed to the enthusiasm of Adult Degree and New York City Writing Project students; these petulant teenagers puzzle her. "Their lack of guile both charms and alarms me," Shirley told me with a smile.

The students shove desks around into a misshapen circle, then some get down to the business of freewriting, which is always the first activity of every class meeting. Shirley practices process pedagogy, a teaching style that was alien to me until I came to Lehman. At Fordham, we never kept double-sided notebooks or wrote process notes. That is, as far as I knew, we didn't: I was exempt from taking composition, so I really have no idea what it is to be a freshman in a comp course, except from what I can ascertain from the freshgirls.

Most of the students are not freewriting. Shirley is sitting at the focal point of the circle, her brow knitted in concentration as she writes. A boy and a girl, sitting nearly on top of each other, sing "Endless Love" to each other in soft breathy voices. Another student, Jorge, throws a nickel at the lovebirds. "You could make money singing on the subway," he says.

Monique and Evone waltz into class—late, of course—munching on potato chips and a candy bar and sitting down out of Shirley's line of vision. Evone gets to writing, her thick head of hair in a curtain around her face. Her high school English teacher taught writing process style and Evone told me, "I already did the English." But she likes to write and says she doesn't mind doing it again. Monique, her leg jiggling, digs into the bag of chips, clasping the chips with manicured fingernails. KiKi walks in, drying her hands on a paper towel, and sits down next to Monique. Bangs hanging over her eyes, KiKi begins to write, her hand changing from print to cursive and back. Eventually the class settles down, and nearly everyone is writing. The community feeling of quiet focus is very powerful.

Shirley gently breaks the mood and calls on volunteers to read their freewrites out loud. KiKi reads in a sleepy voice: "I'm so bored. I have cheerleading practice after school. I joined a club: MAT. That stands for "Mature . . . something, I don't know." Her classmates laugh, swinging their legs restlessly, chewing on pen caps, twirling strands of hair. "Tomorrow is my son's birthday and I don't know what to do with him."

"Thank you, KiKi," Shirley says, and without further comment, suggests for the class to break up into groups, to read conversations they have overheard and written down, to each other. This assignment will later be developed into papers analyzing dialectical variations in English. Evone slams her hand down on the desk and stage whispers, looking straight at me, "Damn! I left it at home!"

"Would you like to count off and work with different people or is there anyone in class that you haven't worked with before that you would like to work with?" Shirley asks, looking around the room.

Her question elicits no response, except for Monique who mutters, "Who cares?" She begins to mock her teacher's gentle loopy movements, the way Shirley cocks her head and smiles. I want to go over and twist Monique's ear. Shirley has no idea this is going on, and Monique's classmates pay no attention to her antics.

I follow Monique into a group with Tim and Eddie, a chunky good-natured Ecuadorian boy. She doesn't have her assignment done. "Why are you even here?" Time demands, only half joking. "Go sit in the corner."

"No," Monique protests, pulling the plastic off a lollipop, "She'll follow me, get on my nerves. You think she's cool? She's a little snotty with me." I almost laugh out loud—look who's talking! Monique flips through pages in her notebook mumbling insults in Spanish and I catch a little English mixed in: "She's a stupid ass."

The two boys ignore her. I wonder if Monique gets satisfaction out of instigating dramas for me to write down, even though she, KiKi, and Evone seem to treat me with friendly indifference. I'm just always sitting as close to the thick of things as I can, writing it all down, and nobody seems to take any notice.

"Can I at least see the stories? Anybody have?" Monique holds out her hand, snapping her fingers. "I don't know what we're supposed to do," she complains. I end up explaining the assignment, playing the role of teacher when it is not my place. I even go so far as to prod Monique to think of how she talks to her friends on the phone and what elements of dialect and accent come through. "I don't got no accent," she says.

Tim and Eddie each read their dialect transcripts out loud, to no comment except for "sounds good." "Time for a break," announces Eddie, rubbing his hands together, "the best part." Tim turns in his

chair to talk with a different group. After just ten minutes or so, the whole activity has lost steam, and Monique and Eddie start talking about Calvin Klein fragrances and the cafeteria's french fries. Shirley appears to check on their progress.

Monique graciously speaks for the group: "He had Spanish in his, and he wrote about someone from down South, and I had one about a conversation on the phone with my friend."

"How interesting," says Shirley, "I'm glad you got that phone conversation down—" Shirley seems to be looking on Monique's desk for the paper which, of course, does not exist.

Monique interrupts: "Can I ask something else? Do you have any more of the articles . . . ?"

"I'm glad you reminded me." Shirley is unruffled, looking at Eddie's paper and murmuring encouragement, "Great, Spanish and English, great." She turns her warm motherly gaze on Monique, "What about Monique, when you were on the phone reporting that conversation. What did other people notice about it? Any particular feature of the language?"

I am enjoying Monique's squirming, as she hides a smile under her hand, and Eddie covers for her. "You know, talking like 'how you doin?,' this and that," he says lamely.

It all goes beyond Shirley. "Sounds like you've got a lot of good meaty samples already. Now the question is, where to take it?"

I feel like exposing Monique's lie, but I'm no snitch. "The English class is easy," Monique told me once, "Everyone knows how to play her."

Later, Shirley asks students who wrote particularly strong observations to share them with the class. Some read in Jamaican and then Guyanese patois, another in Spanglish, another in Tagalong. Anna reads in Albanian, then gives a line by line English translation.

"Dag!" Evone interrupts, exclaiming, "You said all that in one little sentence? I be like, huh?! But my mother, when she's mad, she speaks the best English. I mean sentences—this lady, she don't speak sentences. Curses up a storm, she good at that. We start snapping on her, trying to get her to laugh or something."

Shirley gives Evone a brief sweet smile, then signals for Anna to continue. KiKi stretches her arms over her head. She's wearing a midriff-revealing t-shirt and I can see stretch marks on her little belly. Monique darts her head around, looking for some amusement. Evone scowls and doodles in her notebook.

"Let's take a few minutes to write a process note on how we might develop these explorations into dialect," suggests Shirley. The class hardly has the energy to pick up their pens.

Each student, then, reads a few lines of their process note.

Monique reads the same one she always does: "My writing group was helpful. I have to work on the introduction and add more details."

Before the freshgirls bolt out of class, Evone tells me the ceiling in her apartment's bathroom fell on her head while she was taking a shower and she plans to sue for millions.

## **Location, Location, Location**

Eighteen years earlier, the Bronx burned as Evone, KiKi, and Monique lay snug in their cribs, playing with their toes. The mid-70s saw hundreds of apartment buildings set on fire by landlords looking to collect insurance money, or building strippers in search of valuable copper pipes, or even the tenants themselves, hoping to be relocated from crumbling buildings to brand-new public housing. The freshgirls spent their babyhood serenaded by sirens.

Meanwhile, I played Lenne Lenape Indian housewife in my backyard treehouse in semi-rural New Jersey and watched a hard-hatted President Carter on TV as he toured the ruins of the South Bronx. Shirley walked her three children to their progressive private school along the tree-lined streets of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, less than ten miles to the south of the freshgirls' playpens. David was no doubt locked away in a garret somewhere, reading *Ulysses* at the age of eight, a boy groomed for brilliance.

Growing up, Evone and KiKi were often kept home from school to babysit their younger sisters and brothers. KiKi wrote: "When I was little, I was free. I hardly had anyone there to tell me what to do. We played outside, running around." When she was ten, while I pretended to read Plato under a tree on Fordham's gated campus, KiKi and her siblings were taken from their mother and placed in foster care — where she remains, living in a group home in the notorious Hunts Point section. She became a mother herself, giving birth to Taequan in September of her senior year of high school.

At sixteen, Evone left her overcrowded home, where nine assorted relatives and friends live in a three-bedroom apartment. "My mother's house is disgusting," she told me, "There's no respect for anything, and my mother's always fighting over money. You gotta buy your own food in that house — and hide it." Evone graduated from a small alternative high school and now lives with friends, three brothers from Guatemala. They do construction work, and Evone shares a room and a bed with one of the brothers. "I tell him, 'If you pull anything stupid while I'm asleep, I'll hit you, I'll hurt you.'" Fall 95 is actually her second semester at Lehman — Evone is on academic probation for her poor grades in Spring 95. She works two part-time jobs to support herself, a work-study job in a Lehman administrative office and an after-school stint as recreation supervisor at a community center.



Like KiKi and Evone, Monique grew up with no father in sight. An only child, she lives with her secretary mother and her grandmother, who speaks no English. "We argue about everything and anything," Monique told me, "If I have an argument with my mother, then my grandmother won't talk to me. And my grandmother is not a sweet old lady." Monique and her boyfriend also fight a lot, when they are not watching trash talk shows on TV. She attended Mount Saint Ursula Academy for Girls, a Catholic high school just up the hill from Lehman; she hated it.

Now, here they are in college, at Lehman, with its proud and embattled 25-year-old tradition of open admissions, although there are plenty of professors still reeling from the shock of opening the gates. Lamenting student preparedness is one of the prime topics of conversation in department offices, as if Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* had never been written. Many teachers struggle with adjusting their pedagogical philosophies and expectations to accommodate student (especially freshman) needs.

"We've all got concerns about 'college level' stuff," Shirley confided. "Many are not getting what you hope they would because they're not starting where you'd like them to be starting. But they're here now." Given their scores on placement exams, the freshgirls are stamped "underprepared students" or "basic writers" — euphemisms, in each of their cases, for someone who is deeply estranged from school culture, someone who, though she has spent 13 years of her life in school, has found no comfortable place in it.

Each freshgirl told me at one point or another that she envisions herself in ten years with a house, a car, and a husband and children — all the trappings of a middle class life that Shirley, myself, and (I presume) David experience as a given (if not now, then in the past or hoped-for future). The freshgirls believe that a college degree is a guaranteed ticket of admission to this lifestyle. Each girl told me she is at Lehman to "get an education," a stock response. It's a directive every child, regardless of class status, hears again and again. The freshgirls have a desire to change their economic status; they know it is important to do well in college to achieve that goal. But somewhere along the line, perhaps the very first day of class, it becomes apparent to the freshgirls that in order to change their economic status, they must change their class allegiance. And they fight it — sabotaging the bottom line, their final grades.

## Join Us or Fail

The issue of class is an uncomfortable one, especially in the field of composition, where most faculty are adjuncts like myself, Nancy, and David. Our yearly gross income from teaching a few classes a

semester puts us among the lower classes of society, but the level and quality of our education, as well as our dedication to it, place us among the upper crust. And most of us are white, raised in middle- to upper-middle-class families, or have a spouse who makes a good living. Part-time faculty comprise the martyr ideal of a literate culture: we value reading, writing, and teaching above making a decent wage with benefits. No wonder students think it's easy to play the teacher.

Domination and resistance are central to class dynamics (Willis 88). The proverbial struggle between labor and management is enacted in classrooms between teacher and student and in offices between teacher and administration. It's Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones" every which way you turn, essential to the very idea of a university. Without the struggle of debate, ideas stagnate. Within our universities, as elsewhere in society, culture and values clash and negotiate, as the points of contact are redefined. Yet the freshgirls are at the margins of the contact zone. They are not given the choice of give and take; they can only surrender.

I doubt they are consciously aware of the issue of class, but also I believe it is the factor that does the most in determining their behavior. When Evone interrupts, as she is wont to do, when Monique flips Shirley the bird (as I saw her do several times), when KiKi slumps in her chair with a vacant gaze, these disruptive behaviors are rooted in the tradition of working-class anti-intellectual attitudes. They are an attempt to undermine the authority and credibility of the teacher—first off, by the refusal to know or call the teacher by name. In an interview with Evone and Monique, they kept saying "she, she, she" until I barked: "Who's she? The cat's mother?!" (something my grandma would always say), and they burst out laughing.

Whereas middle-class students are wise to what Jane Nagle terms "school literacy," defined as "feeding the teacher back her words, (23)" the freshgirls and many of their classmates attempt a different tactic. As they resist the teacher's efforts to engage them, they experience what Ira Shor calls the "illusory power of someone who thinks she is beating the system" (59). Even the best-intentioned teacher, like Shirley, who wants so badly for the students to love her class, is met with the resistance of disruptive behavior, silence, and/or whining to take a break. There was also a bit of love-hate mother-daughter stuff going on there too, further complicating matters. "What I'm seeing here is learned helplessness," Shirley once told her passive sleepy class in a rare show of temper, "smart people who go dumb in school."

Think of what is being demanded of the freshgirls as they hit college: to conform to a whole social system, a different body of reference that they've hardly been exposed to at school, and, from what I could ascertain, certainly not at home. This body of reference derives from literate culture, whereas the freshgirls live in what Walter Ong

differentiates as an oral/technological culture. Their references all relate to television, music, and who beeped who at what time and how come you didn't beep me back? They are not being asked to simply adapt, but to utterly change their class and cultural identity—an overwhelming task, especially at such a young age.

Evone and KiKi are children of the underclass: raised in desperate poverty and neglect. Evone mentioned in offhand comments to me how she was physically and sexually abused. KiKi, who, I am sure, has been poked and prodded by countless social workers, psychologists, and lawyers, revealed nothing so personal. Daily survival, rather than intellectual achievement, has been their focus. Although Monique's background is more secure working class, with the disciplinary benefit (or curse) of a Catholic education, she is the most resistant student of the three. Her main activity in life seems to be sulking.

All three are the first in their families to attend college. The pressure on them is intense, and certainly showed as the semester progressed. KiKi, Monique, and Evone, with their legs jiggling in class as they chewed on their fingernails or chipped nail polish or played with their hair, seemed to exude anxiety. Nervous energy just radiated out from them. Here they are, at a point in their lives when they can begin to exercise their free will and start on that road to middle class comfort, but their choices are limiting and confining. In fact, there is no choice: either change or fail.

## Leaving Home

The crisis of the uprooted intellectual, which Victor Villanueva and Richard Rodriguez so eloquently describe in their literacy narratives, is the price paid for turning one's back on class and ethnic identity to become fluent in the dominant culture. They will never feel fully at ease anywhere, least of all in their family's home. For an eighteen-year-old Bronxite freshgirl, a life in exile is a daunting consequence of "getting an education." Home may not be the sweetest place when your shrew of a grandmother is screaming in Spanish through a locked door, or when you are raised as a ward of the state, or when your mother beats you for breaking a plate—but it is that one and only place best known to you.

As students attending Lehman College, a place devoted to learning within the confines of the poorest borough in New York City—indeed with "the most adverse conditions in the State" (State University of New York study 29)—the challenge of redefining themselves doesn't get much support. Tutoring and counseling services offered by the college, as well as the beauty of Lehman's campus, with its Gothic buildings and lush lawns, can only go so far. The freshgirls live and

attend college on a huge hunk of rock where sixty percent of high school students are welfare recipients, where the little spending money people have at their disposal does not get them much. What one can buy for a dollar in most places costs \$2.13 in the Bronx. Supermarkets are few and far between, and I know of only one bookstore in the thick of the Bronx, which largely handles trade in used textbooks.

The freshgirls do not have the privilege, as I did, as Shirley did, of going away to college. Funny, how I went to the Bronx, and they need to get the hell out of there. Certainly, commuter students miss out on what many college graduates recall as the most pleasant aspect of "getting an education": the whole social scene, the thrill of getting out from under your parents' thumbs. Monique felt this acutely; some of her girlfriends from the Mount went away to college: "They partying away, and I'm just *stuck*, ten minutes from my old school. Still in the Bronx."

I remember asking Monique if she understood that in order to transfer out of Lehman to a "good school," she would need to do well this semester. "I can deal with difficult work when I want to, because I'm smart," she told me, "If I'm interested, I'll do the work."

## **Pedagogy Woes**

Susan Miller and Lester Faigley have both criticized writing process pedagogy for not addressing issues of class and resistance. Writing process, they contend, demands an "engaged sensibility" (Miller), assuming the cooperation of the students. Many students in Shirley's class, including my freshgirls, did not keep a process journal, nor did they bring multiple copies of their work to writing groups when they saw Shirley was not vigilant about enforcing these duties. No one in the class cared enough about their writing process to do any work that was not collected.

However, comparing process pedagogy to the standard lecture format of the Humanities class makes it clear that a classroom which aims to be student-centered is preferable to one in which the teacher embodies Freire's "banking theory of education." Yet I would argue that it is an important experience for students to have professors that are difficult to contend with. In some ways, I can safely say we need more of the "transferrals of information" in the classroom, though Freire argued against them. Underprepared students need to learn more *facts* if they are to find pleasure and connection in this class transformation that is demanded of them.

Reflecting on the painful situation of Shirley and David's classrooms, I see that we are all guilty of hubris — the false pride of thinking that what we know is best. David, Shirley, and me; Monique, KiKi,

and Evone, we are all at fault. As Freire writes: "Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility" (71). Students are accustomed to throwing around the word "respect," and teachers bemoan the lack of respect in the classroom, when perhaps we should all strive to be humble.

We need a serious reassessment of our rigid views of what a college experience "should" be. Richard Larson writes that teachers often expect students to be apprentice versions of themselves. Many of us teach because we loved school so much we never wanted to leave. Can we expect that same attitude and devotion of our students? We can encourage it yet also exercise a flexibility in our pedagogies that will help us all, teacher and student alike, to relax and learn. We must be prepared to use a number of approaches—mix lecture and note-taking with creative writing with critical pedagogy (Shor) with writing process, and so on. A flexible pedagogy, I believe, can better assure finding the place of "common language" (Burke).

However, developing a pedagogy of humble flexibility is fruitless—perhaps even perilous—without significant changes in the political atmosphere. I would argue that even students as unengaged and perhaps ill prepared as the freshgirls should be allowed the opportunity for a college education. They need more support, not less. What is the point in dismantling Academic Skills departments or decreasing the number of credits for the BA degree? What is the point in limiting access, as CUNY's Board of Trustees has voted to do—denying entrance to senior colleges to students who fail any of the three placement tests? The point, it seems, is to shut out students like the freshgirls.

## Mercy

What would need to happen for Evone, KiKi, and Monique to stop resisting and surrender to school culture (or, better yet, prevail within it)? When will their anxiety turn to determination? I did see them performing covert little literate acts of their own free will—not too often, but at least the seed. KiKi would make "to do" (take baby to doctor) and "what I want" (bear coat, gold ring, gold bracelet) lists. Monique read *Teen* magazine in class. I know Evone kept a journal and has a sense of herself as an artist; indeed, from the work of hers that I read, I think she has a gift for vivid imagery. When and how will they begin to transfer this meaning of purpose to their studies?

When I presented a part of my thesis at the CAWS (CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors) Conference, one colleague commented: "It sounds as though these students will come back to college years

later to finish what they couldn't start." Well — they haven't — yet. From what little I know in trying to track them down, life has continued to show the freshgirls little mercy.

Evone is a single mother of twins, Cane and Evone, born on Christmas day 1996. She lives with a friend, is not working, and told me on the phone that she "misses school so much." Surprising me, Evone remembers the Humanities class with the most fondness. I mailed her an Adult Degree application, but she is worried about leaving her children with a babysitter. She has no time for writing but reads regularly to the twins.

I was unable to speak with KiKi, but I did speak with a social worker who knows her and gave me some more background information on her, including the fact that she lived for several years in a residential treatment center for children with emotional problems. According to this social worker, he last saw KiKi during the summer, and she looked well, was living with family members, and may have had another child. He couldn't remember for sure, because he saw her with a group of former clients and couldn't keep track of all the babies. Her Lehman transcript shows that she has registered several semesters since Fall '95, the last in Spring '98, but withdrew from all of them.

As for Monique, I had no luck in locating her — the phone number on her transcript is "temporarily disconnected at the customer's request," and I received no response to the letter I sent. She did complete the Spring '96 semester, though she failed biology. But I have a feeling (hope?) that Monique may now be a proud graduate of a SUNY or a small Catholic college. She alone of the freshgirls had a stable background in terms of education and family.

Shirley is studying writing process teachers at Theodore Roosevelt High School, I'm working on my Ph.D. at the CUNY Graduate Center, teaching, and coordinating various programs offered through Lehman's Office of Individualized Studies. I don't know where David is.

The whole experience of doing this ethnographic research left me unnerved. Never again will I expect to think that I can really know the way things are for someone else. I got reasonably close to their experience, but I can never fully understand the freshgirls' dilemmas and anxieties. Still, I know enough to know how much a chance to "get an education" matters to them — even though they may have acted as though it didn't matter. I hope we can make that chance more real and realizable. I feel sure we cannot allow the class mobility an education offers to slam shut in their faces.

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