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# "If I'm so smart...": memories of assessment and the role of standardized testing in forming an intellectual identity

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# "IF I'M SO SMART…": MEMORIES OF ASSESSMENT AND THE ROLE OF STANDARDIZED TESTING IN FORMING AN INTELLECTUAL IDENTITY

by

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

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Gregory Hamot

How could someone so smart be so dumb?

Jennifer, 12

To me, [my score] meant I wasn't good enough. It definitely defined me, and how I thought about myself intellectually for quite a long time.

Lori, 45

I felt like, if I'm so smart, and if this is as smart as I can get, then why is my life so totally fucked up?

Aevita, 28

The tests] are timed and a periodizing mechanism of the state…what they're saying is, 'Here's the norm. You have twenty minutes to do it. Be the most normal you can be in those twenty minutes.

Edward, 30

I knew standardized tests would not define my ability to do something creative; that they were not a true measure of anything other than can I read these questions and not think about butterflies or something random.

Shalonda, 31

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A great many months ago, I discarded a dissertation idea to examine the literacies within a nascent diversion program for at-risk youth when funding for the program did not materialize. While unfortunate for the children who would have enrolled, the turn of events offered a chance to reassess. My self-assigned role had been that of the proverbial fly-on-the-wall offering limited interaction. Instead, I wanted an idea that offered conversation and storytelling. At this point, standardized testing again reared its head. I say "again" because, when I was first considering a doctorate I took an historical foundations class with Dr. Linda Fielding. It was in her class that I first stumbled across the name Lewis Terman. My interest grew upon finding a reference to Terman agreeing with a colleague that a fellow named George Stoddard at the University of Iowa was a "dangerous man." It soon became clear that their story was bigger than Stoddard and Terman but from their story a question arose: if we are, as the saying goes, products of our experiences, why couldn't we consider standardized testing as one of those experiences? Still, I was uncertain if there were any links to be found between standardized testing and identity formation. I shared all of this with the person who'd been slated to be my primary informant for the previous idea and she responded with a story about how her parents moved their family to Iowa because it was the birthplace of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The story caught my attention as it hinted that oral histories about standardized testing experiences are far more complex than some might anticipate. I share this as prelude to an expression of appreciation to, first, Dr. Fielding since it was in her class that this idea found its beginning, and to my advisor, Dr. Bonnie Sunstein, who has been tireless in her encouragement, along with Dr. Amanda Haertling-Thein, Dr. Patricia Foster and Dr. Greg Hamot. Finally, and most importantly, I want to thank this study's participants. They entrusted me with their stories and their time. Without them, I might still be looking for a dissertation idea.

ABSTRACT

Written at a time when the number of students taking standardized tests in U.S. public schools is at an all-time high, this dissertation presents and analyzes the contribution of standardized testing to intellectual identity formation as portrayed within the oral histories of four adults from the post-"A Nation at Risk" (1983) and pre-"No Child Left Behind" (2001) eras. The study uses methods from discourse analysis and oral history research to find stories that serve as artifacts of the history of standardized testing and related educational and testing policies. Each oral history is unique and has a connection to the University of Iowa and its role in the history of testing. The four participants share stories exploring their experiences with the SAT, ACT, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, intelligence tests, and tests for Attention Deficit Disorder and placement exams. Each story explores what can happen to a person's intellectual identity when standardized testing forms relationships with that individual's history with trauma, race, class, gender, hetero-normativity and self-esteem. By design, this study is less focused on providing broad extrapolations than in placing individual oral histories in conversation with one another and contextualizing them within the history of intelligence testing and achievement testing. It does so with the goal of conveying the long-term effects of standardized testing on each of the four storytellers, and suggests researchers have not given enough attention to examining ways standardized tests interact with how individuals shape their intellectual identity. In doing so, it complicates the arguments of standardized testing advocates who claim the tests can achieve cultural neutrality even though they have sprung from norms and methods and measures deemed valuable by a culture. This study invites future research on similar questions, including how a belief in the objectivity of standardized testing imbues it with credibility and shapes the expectations we have of others and ourselves.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Written at a time when the number of students taking standardized tests in U.S. public schools is at an all-time high, this dissertation examines how standardized testing shapes how people think of their intellectual abilities. Looking at the oral histories of four adults, the study examines how their stories fit into the history of standardized testing. Each story is unique, has a connection to the University of Iowa and its role in the history of testing and explores what can happen when standardized testing forms relationships with that individual's history with trauma, race, class, gender, hetero-normativity and self-esteem. The test experiences include the SAT, ACT, Iowa Test of Basic Skills, intelligence tests, and tests for Attention Deficit Disorder and placement exams. By design, this study's main interest is in placing individual oral histories in conversation with one another. It does so with the goal of conveying the long-term effects of standardized testing on each of the four storytellers, and suggests researchers have not given enough attention to examining ways the tests interact with the test-takers. This study invites future research on similar questions, including how a belief in the objectivity of standardized testing imbues it with credibility and shapes the expectations we have of others and ourselves.

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# INTRODUCTION

"I have a traumatic SAT story."

One of the last people interviewed for this dissertation toward a doctorate in Language, Literacy and Culture, I'd known the person speaking these words as an acquaintance for several years, but knew nothing about her history with standardized testing. More than anyone I spoke with during this project, she came ready to discuss how standardized testing helped shape her intellectual identity, and she delivered her opening line with an amused smile that managed to be both confessional and conspiratorial. I wondered how others would hear it. Around us, families familied and students studented to the high-pitched and tuneless industrial house music of an espresso machine in a café shared by a coffee shop and pizza joint in downtown Iowa City. It was a peaceful scene, a scene that would provide a nice photograph for a brochure marketing the town's intellectual life. Upon entering, she'd greeted a couple of her former students who would soon graduate from the University of Iowa and I hazarded the guess that none of them had an inkling of what had happened in their former instructor's first attempt at college. I also suspected that of the fifty-odd people in the café, none were talking about standardized testing even though many surely had stories about how standardized testing touched their lives, stories that might not be so different from hers.

A traumatic SAT story. The line reminded me how, as her own story would reveal, these were more than tales of trauma. They were commentaries and reflections on how standardized testing shapes intellectual identity, but also how it shapes choices with lifelong consequences, including ideas on creativity. There was Lori, the Ph.D. student with the traumatic SAT story, who failed in her first attempt at college. There was Aevita, who shared a nanny's secret history with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and IQ tests. There was Edward, the graduate school dropout who went to Mitt Romney's high school and saw much of his academic life through the prism of a fourth grade math placement test.

Finally, there was Shalonda, the social worker who, as a child, was assumed to read poorly for reasons that were far too familiar. These four people were selected from a total of fifteen interviews and chosen because they shared a mix of stories that spoke to one another in a conversation. Between them, they shared experiences related to the ACT, SAT, ITBS, IQ tests, placement exams, and learning disability assessments.

As disparate as the conversations were, some lasting ten minutes, others pushing two hours, each one approached the question of whether a tool intended to offer an unbiased assessment in the interest of merit did as promised, rewarding those who epitomize the qualities most desired by this country—or if the tests did something else altogether.

It sounded like a question worth asking for the simple reason that children in U.S. public schools take more standardized tests today than at any point in the country's history. A hundred years after the first intelligence test came to the United States, most students in U.S. public schools begin taking standardized tests in first grade and, since 1968, the number of federally-mandated standardized tests given annually in public schools has leapt from essentially zero to 100 million today—a number that excludes the SAT and ACT. With total public school enrollment at around 14.5 million children, that roughs out to an average of almost seven standardized tests of one kind or another given to every child enrolled in pre-K to 12$^{th}$ grade each year he or she is in school (Henry, 2007, p. 40). The number sounded so implausible I couldn't stop checking it, finding that it was spot on. Testing advocates who support No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top defend standardized testing by talking about accountability but some students and schools are held more accountable than others. On the low end, students take standardized reading and math tests once in the Fall and once in the Spring. On the high end there's Florida, which requires some of its school districts to give up to 62 different standardized tests per year (Strauss, 2012).

The shift toward standardized testing is generational. People of my generation and older—who graduated from high school before funding and test scores became intricately linked in the early 1990s—are primarily the ones advocating for more testing yet they never took standardized tests in the quantities administered in today's public schools. They may have taken Regents tests or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and chosen to take the ACT or SAT but for much of the history of state-designed standardized testing, assessments were a single, day-long test taken once a year, at most. Today the picture is far different. In the most extreme case, some kindergarteners in Chicago Public Schools spend the first three weeks of the school year taking state-mandated standardized tests. Some are intended to assess teacher quality. Some are necessary to qualify for Race to the Top funding. Others are diagnostic. The rest are a combination of both. All are repetitive. By the time summer rolls around, standardized tests have taken up a full third—sixty days—of the school year (Joravsky, 2012). The impact on instruction time varies from school to school and state to state, but more typical numbers emerged from a study by the American Federation of Teachers of two mid-sized urban school districts. They found students spending 20 to 50 hours per year taking standardized tests and an additional 60 to 110 hours per year preparing for those tests at an average cost of $700 to $1000 per pupil. The time spent preparing for tests and taking them was the equivalent of subtracting—for one district—20 to 40 minutes of class time each day and up to almost an entire class period per day for the second district (Nelson, 2013, p. 3).

At the point when I began this project, supporters of standardized tests had been suffering through a few particularly bad years. Tying measures of school quality and job security and bonuses to rising test scores had resulted in a massive cheating scandal in forty-four Atlanta public schools by school administrators and teachers. An investigation by the *Atlanta Journal-Consitution* found 196 school districts nationwide with high scores spiking in a pattern similar to that of the Atlanta Schools. Of the 46 states that responded to their surveys on test security measures, 24 did not conduct a statistical analysis looking

for suspicious spikes in improvement, 21 didn't look at erasure marks for an improbably high switch rate from an incorrect answer to a correct one and 34 didn't look for similarity in answers that might suggest students cheating off each other or a teacher either providing answers or filling them after the fact. In 2012, 25 states used independent monitors and, when deployed, a handful of monitors within the state were asked to cover hundreds or thousands of schools. Iowa is one of those states without any state-level security measures, leaving the entire process to individual schools (Pell, 2012). In 2013, the State of Iowa began an investigation into an elementary school in Davenport that, for ten years, had reported "suspiciously high" test scores. Most recently, they were 25% higher than other elementary schools in the district, and investigators found a high number of erasure marks that were changed to correct answers. As of this writing, the investigation is still underway.

Gregory J. Cizek, a professor of educational measurement at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who assisted state investigators in their Atlanta probe wrote in *Education Week* that "Blaming tests or accountability systems for things we don't like is a dumb idea" akin to "banning thermometers for revealing fevers" (Cizik, 2011). If cheating is rare, it's easier to assess it as an act of a few unscrupulous people but if it's systemic, as the *Journal-Constitution* investigation implies, then it's harder to explain it as the behavior of someone who wishes to hide evidence of fevers. For critics of standardized testing, a better analogy might be that of a thermometer that is a lousy thermometer (perhaps leaky and filled with cheap, impure mercury?) but the larger point is that, while cheating as a practice is far from a recent phenomenon and is clearly unethical, assessing it simply as the behavior of the unscrupulous neglects to admit that, when widespread, cheating, as an act, is itself a judgment of the values at play within the test and reveals the degree to which those involved believe the benefits to outweigh the risks but also, and perhaps of greater interest, see the test as a high stakes event establishing requirements they cannot meet while also determining the measure as an

invalid means for providing beneficial outcomes to anyone involved. Again, cheating, including cheating by test administrators, happened before the implementation of No Child Left Behind, but it has raised the stakes and increased the motivation for teachers and administrators to cheat as they see themselves as the true subjects being assessed by the tests. The stress caused by evaluation based upon standardized testing is exacerbated by the fact that the yearly progress goals rise every year. According to the 2014 State Report Card for No Child Left Behind, Iowa City's school district is now one of 44 districts in the state labeled as "in need of assistance" since, for the second year in a row, the district did not meet the test score requirements. In a sense, the district is being punished for previous successes as its test scores were already high but grew as required by law to the point where its schools are now required to achieve 100 percent proficiency by all students across all categories. If the district continues to "fail" to attain high-level performance by every student, it risks penalties in the form of lost federal assistance (Vujicic, 1). Creating an impossible standard is precisely the sort of situation that encourages cheating, and rebellion.

In addition to cheating, the current testing culture has inspired, in Seattle, days of protest by teachers, students and supporters. In Chicago, students walked out of a state exam en masse. Inspired by Occupy Wall Street, "Occupy the Department of Education" events have been held in New York City and in Washington, DC (Popham, 2005) where teachers tell their stories about life in their schools; practices that include schools, on days when state monitors visit, suspending and placing certain students into special education classes for normal teenage behaviors (Brown, 2013). All of these students are of color, and most of them are poor. The practices are the result of zero-tolerance discipline policies and a "first of its kind" longitudinal study into national suspension rates that also documents their causes by UCLA's The Civil Rights Project finds that since 1972 national school suspension rates for all students have increased from 0.9% for elementary students and 8% for secondary students to 2.4% and 11.3% in 2013; white students have seen an

increase of a single percentage point (from 6 to 7%), and the most profound increase has been among black students who've seen their rates jump from 11.8% in 1972 to 24.3% in 2009-10. Suspensions of Latinos and English Language Learners rise significantly in secondary school but the racial disparity increases when gender is added to the mix as, in 2009-10, 36% of all black males were suspended, it's even higher when those students are categorized as having a disability. All of these numbers are for non-violent behaviors as incidental as writing on desks and count any student suspended as a single suspension, even if that student is suspended numerous times during one academic year. The disparity begins as early as preschool with 6% of school districts with preschools reporting at least one suspension (Losen, 2013, p. 8-11).

Using a dataset of school suspension patterns in Florida, David Figlio was able to analyze disciplinary patterns in the first four years following the introduction of Florida's new high-stakes examination used to evaluate schools. The picture is that of how the nature of a standardized test changes suspension patterns as, prior to the state test, students in Florida had been tested on nationally norm-referenced tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills since as least the early 1990s. Those tests did not carry the same weight as the new state tests, which were explicitly designed to align to state standards, rather than national standards, and at least as importantly linked scores to explicit rewards and punishments in a way comparable to No Child Left Behind. The result: as the test-taking window approached, if a student was low-achieving it became more likely he or she would be suspended, and for a longer period of time, if misbehaving. When it comes to suspensions, schools are more lenient during the testing window—suspending fewer overall students—as would be expected since they are investigated if too many students miss the tests, but that leniency is not applied consistently across the student population so that while schools reduced their suspension penalties for higher-achievers during the testing window, they raised their suspension penalties for lower-achievers, and if a student had already been suspended the length of the suspension for a low-achiever was

between 1.7 and 2.2 times the length of first suspension, and as suspensions increased, so did test scores (2004, p. 839-849).

The importance on test scores transforms schools into test-studying factories, which only increases student boredom thus exacerbating behavioral problems, so it's not surprising the suspension rate has continued to rise unabated over the past decades. This situation, along with the other negative consequences of No Child Left Behind have causes some of NCLBs original supporters to change their minds. High on that list is Diane Ravitch. An educational historian, frequent opponent of the progressive movement in education and former George H. W. Bush administration assistant secretary of education who also worked on the board overseeing the NAEP tests, admits she applauded when NCLB was passed into law and has long supported charter schools. Since then, she has performed an about-face on the uses and validity of standardized testing and has published several books outlining its problems, which she summarizes as "measure and punish." (She characterizes it as a return to the time before "I jumped on the bandwagon of organizational change and accountability, the time when I knew that the only changes that matter are in the classroom and in children's lives") (Ravitch, 2010). Even in Texas, where the since-debunked "Texas Miracle" under then-governor George W. Bush generated momentum for passage of NCLB when he was president, and where standardized testing is taken so seriously that 15% of a student's GPA is determined by performance on state tests, there's been a push to reign in the importance placed on testing (Rapoport, 2013). In 2012, Texas' state commissioner on education addressed four thousand school administrators and called the state's testing system a "perversion of its original intent." He later resigned his position (Smith, 2012).

A tendency to undermine its own stated goals is one of the more common critiques of standardized testing. As educational theorist Jennifer La Guardia (2009) put it, punitive No Child Left Behind-style high-stakes testing "undermines the support structures created by teachers and parents that enhance autonomy, and which are

necessary toward moving students through the stages of identity formation toward an identity that includes an intrinsic motivation toward academic achievement" (p. 98-99). The more testing is emphasized, say the overwhelming majority of those who've studied the question, the more it shrinks the curriculum. It defines success by scoring a number, not creating something from content. It disadvantages minority students. It redefines teaching as test preparation. It raises stress on teachers and students, increasing dropout rates of both. It intrudes upon instruction time. It's a poor way of evaluating teachers and schools. (Sadker, 2011, 370-376)

These criticisms of standardized testing are as old as the tests themselves. George Stoddard, who, beginning in the 1920s directed a research program at the University of Iowa that contributed some of the first studies to question the notion of intelligence as a fixed, unitary trait, was confounded by the prioritizing of protecting the test over the student. Defenders of intelligence testing credited the test with consistent results affirming expectations. If the results were inconsistent, however, and showed a change in measured intelligence, the results were discounted as impossible and the blame for the results went not to the test, but to those administering the test. As Stoddard (1943) put it:

> …the confusion is this: if we find some external physical "reason" for poor test performance, we tend to discount the testing; if the "reason" remains obscure, locked up in the internal mechanism of the organism, we tend to accept the results as bona fide…Neither test constructor nor clinician hesitates to say that a child's brightness has remained static when the IQ is constant; when he finds the IQ inconstant, particularly if the change is radical, then what has changed is something other than brightness! (p. 59-60).

This overvaluation of a person's disposition and undervaluing of situation would eventually be given a name: "fundamental attribution error." The idea is simple. In the process of making comparisons it's easy and perhaps tempting to discount context (Ross, 1997, p. 84). If someone does well on a test, it's because the student is smart or talented or motivated and if someone does poorly, it's because the person is dumb or lazy or

unmotivated. This selective blindness has been critical to the growing popularity of standardized testing and the trust it invites. While we study relationships between school achievement outcomes and wealth, neighborhoods, number of parents at home, smoking, physical activity, religion and many other attributes, researchers have spent little effort looking for the long-term effects of the tests on how individual test-takers see themselves. The fact that we know so little about how assessment affects how students understand themselves, and how it shapes their expectations for the future yet embrace it with such enthusiasm, is a situation that should concern all of us.

# STANDARDIZING THE APPROACH

> "…what I've learned [after a career spent interviewing others] is I knew that being listened to was important to people, but I don't think I understood how important it was. And how widespread it is that people feel like they're not listened to and never heard, and have things that they want to say and leave behind… [This project] has made me much more hopeful about people and you know, much more committed to the idea that we focus so much on what a very few people have to say. And that we would be such a better and stronger country if we kind of widened that out and listened to what the rest of us have to say and have learned in life." (Tippett, 2014).
> — David Isay

## *Toward a Definition of Identity*

The draw of this quote may be self-evident, but one aspect of its importance to this dissertation appears in the latter part where he invites the beginning of a definition of identity; "what we've learned in life" being a way of saying that we are able to see the identities we've enacted over the years toward a personalized idea of the self. Much could be said about the concept of the "self" and if a single self can exist, but in this dissertation, I define the self as a bricolage of multiple identities, of constructions tossed together by all of us in concert with the environments we inhabit. It's a collaboration central to what it means to be human and an act that is simultaneously dependent upon others and upon possessing enough independent awareness to consciously construct the self. It is both of the world and intensely private. To quote Sartre's dictum: "you can always make something out of what you've been made into" (Sartre, 1972, p. 101).

Identity is the material used in this construction of the self. When it comes to the word "identity," I'm using a modified constructivist definition of it as a word expressing how a person creates and presents a self that is a co-developed and socially-situated amalgam of relationships, conversations and expressions of knowledge. These ideas come in part from the work of Holland et al. who prefer the metaphor of co-development to co-construction toward "a way of naming the dense interconnections between the innate and public venues of social practice" (Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte & Cain, 1998, p. 270).

Their work focused on "the development of identities and agency specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed "worlds"" (1998, p. 7). So we might speak of the world of standardized testing or the world of Iowa City or the post-"A Nation at Risk" world of public education. Their use of "world" is a helpful metaphor toward defining the framework of the identities in question and in moving beyond—while including—familiar cultural identities such as race, class and gender to include other potential "worlds" within social life, as described by this study's participants. Some of the worlds implicitly present in the stories include those mentioned above as well as the worlds of mental and physical health and the academic and community worlds unique to each person. To varying degrees, each of these "worlds" were described by multiple participants. Only one world emerged in each of the four stories—a "creative world" that alluded to their thoughts on creativity, intelligence and the relationships and expressions between the two. In each story, a reference to creativity emerged without prompting and accounted for a comparatively small part of the interview, but it was the one point of commonality and raised unanticipated questions about how standardized testing contributes to ideas on what it means to be creative.

Finally, the term "intellectual identity" and what it doesn't mean. I am not using the word "intellectual" in the mode of a person tasked with the job of cultural critic; e.g. the "public intellectual." I build instead on the term's usage by Steele (1997) whose studies into stereotype threat became relevant to this dissertation. Since he was primarily interested in school achievement, he restricted his definition of intellectual identity to identification with the domain of school achievement and assumed school achievement depended on "forming a relationship between oneself and the domains of schooling such that one's self-regard significantly depends on achievement in those domains" (p. 616). My definition is less restrictive as I'm listening for ways standardized testing experiences form relationships between oneself and any domain, both inside and outside the domains

of school, that have high regard for school achievement and/or an interest in the so-called "habits of the mind," in ideas and invention.

Underpinning each of these stories is an attempt by storytellers to articulate the extent to which their self-regard significantly depends on believing they possess the capacity for school achievement as well as the capacity to form novel ideas and successfully engage in inventive problem-solving. If we agree that "creative" can be substituted for "inventive" these stories become ways in which storytellers demonstrate self-regard as creative thinkers, and part of how they define their intellectual identity.

*The Research Gap*

Any presence in a culture that is as ubiquitous as standardized testing and as interested in telling us who we are and where we belong deserves scrutiny. Yet research on standardized testing is sorely lacking when it comes to the question of whether the tests have any long-lasting effect on forming our identities—on a person's sense of who she is and where she fits into the world.

Ideally, the research literature would already include longitudinal studies examining this link. However, while the literature makes frequent examination of how identities, motivation and self-concept affect academic achievement, these studies also repeatedly set up a scenario asserting a one-way causal relationship where motivation, for instance, affects testing outcomes without asking how testing outcomes affect future motivation, future testing outcomes or a person's intellectual identity.

In the dominant conversations about testing, the test does not affect the test-taker, or the effect is minimal and this assumption—that assessment doesn't have an effect on the test-taker—exists despite longitudinal data demonstrating that academic self-concept is both a cause and an effect of achievement, which is increasingly quantified by testing (Marsh, 2005, p. 397–416). The literature acknowledges the gap, and explains the assumption as one where "assessments have minimal impact on [youth] subjectivities or

that youth concerns…are merely a backdrop to the assessment process." Because of this viewing of standardized testing as merely a backdrop, "virtually no literature which engages students' perspectives" [on testing] exists (Reay, D., & Wiliam, D., 1999, p. 343–354).

I was surprised by the dearth of studies asking about the long-term effects of standardized assessments on identity formation almost as much as I was surprised by the assumption that standardized tests—or any test—might be deemed to have little long-term effect when the point of taking a test is to produce an effect, to deliver information about a person's competence in a specific area that will then be used in some way going forward. Maybe he'll study more. Maybe she'll decide her strengths lie in one area and not another.

While standardized testing pre-dates studies into identity and has been a part of life in the United States since the 1920s, it was in no way as ubiquitous then as it is today. In the 1970s, when longitudinal studies asking questions about identity and standardized testing could have begun as a logical extension of the progressive movement, only a minority of states used them to gauge proficiency, or measures tied to graduation or grade promotion or teacher competency. Given their scattershot popularity, it would have taken considerable foresight to begin studying something that, at the time, was not yet as central to the American educational experience.

This situation changed in the years following passage of No Child Left Behind with researchers asking more questions about the relationship between test and test-taker, including what might be thought of as long-term "post-test" effects. After Steele and Aronson, stereotype threat studies looked at how imposition of undesirable identity affected results, but as with the studies I've reviewed, all of these instances focus on the student before the test, with the "after" limited to the test result. Theorists such as Lesko, 2001 and Te Riele, 2006, p. 129–146) explored the impact of educational policy on youth, but these studies—being relatively new—have not been able to examine the long-term

effects of standardized testing on children.

One of the few examples in the literature of research that does not operate using the assumptions of standardized testing as "effect-free" occurred not in this country, but in Canada. Laura Lee Kearn's 2011 study assessed the impact of standardized testing on youth by interviewing sixteen children who failed the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). This study is notable for several reasons, the first being that unlike most post-test effect research, she looked not at gifted children, but at children whose identities led them to expect success, but failed the exam. Classified as a high-stakes exam because all students must take it to graduate, Ontario tenth-graders began taking the OSSLT test on reading and writing in the 2001-2002 school year—coincidentally the same year the U.S. Congress passed NCLB into law. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, Kearns found the children experienced a profound difference between classroom literacy and standardized test literacy. In the classroom, feedback came in the form of teachers invested in the long-term process of becoming literate. The OSSLT feedback by, contrast, was not considered helpful by students, who described the feedback's impact using words and phrases like "degrading," "shock," "shame," "like a loser," and "a little less smart." The study undermines one of the assumptions embedded in the motivation for standardized testing: that it is a net-positive for students who fare poorly since, in theory, it identifies them for further attention (an idea traceable back to the original motivation for the first intelligence test by Alfred Binet). However, as the Kearns study shows, for students who underperform, the result is increased feelings of shame and further marginalization (2011, p. 112-130). Reading such reporting raises the question of the cumulative long-term and unintended consequences of standardized testing when, and if, a person experiences such feelings repeatedly and without any means of explanation, especially if the results contrast with the evaluations the student receives in school since when these tests undermine in-school assessments they risk undermining future learning both in and out of school.

The lack of studies cannot be attributed to a lack of evidence that a link might exist. Plenty of hints point toward standardized testing as being a likely contributor to forming an identity. Longitudinal research on the topic suggests a positive correlation between student perception of competence with autonomous motivation (i.e., choice, decision-making, and enjoyment) instead of obligation and pressure (Guay, 2010, p. 644–653); a relationship that cuts across genders and racial demographics (Reid, 1996, p. 3513). It cuts the other way too: an assessment of incompetence injects doubt and dependency. All of these studies approach then skirt around the specific role of standardized testing in forming identities.

*"Who is Writing These Tests?"*

In April of 2014, the standup comedian Louis C.K., in a fit of frustration over the questions his daughters were studying in order to prepare for the state assessments tweeted pictures of the confusing and poorly-worded study questions to his 3.4 million followers. "Who is writing these?," he asked. "And why?" The questions were written, he added, not by her teacher: "they were on a standardized test. written by pearson or whoever the hell." Then: "Their teachers are great. But it's changed in recent years. It's all about these tests. It feels like a dark time. And nothing is going on anymore."

While I can't know the precise test he referenced, NCS-Pearson has a five-year, $32 million dollar contact to write tests for New York State. Their first attempt at creating state tests to align with Common Core became a bit of a punchline after, in what is a rare event, a test question made its way into the public sphere. The question included a rewritten excerpt from a Daniel Pinkwater story in which, on the test, a bunch of talking animals have a race with a talking pineapple then eat the talking pineapple. The test then asks why the animals ate the fruit, and which animal was wisest. (In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* about the passage, Pinkwater said it was "hilarious on the face of it that anybody creating a test would use a passage of mine, because I'm an advocate of

nonsense. I believe that things mean things but they don't have assigned meanings. I'm on this earth to put up a feeble fight against the horrible tendency people have to think that there's a formula") (Fleisher, 2012). In keeping with this goal, the intended moral in Pinkwater's version of the story is "pineapples don't wear sleeves."

More seriously, since 2003, Pearson has had $120 million in contracts with New York City mainly to provide development materials to teachers and tests, including teacher certification exams, during which time they've had problems with a few questions that didn't have a correct answer and others with multiple correct answers. On a larger scale, in April of 2013, five thousand students in New York City were told they hadn't qualified for Gifted and Talented programs when they had due to three separate errors that took place in NCS-Pearson grading facilities.

Beyond the issues in New York, Pearson has had other struggles. Since 1998, the company has been fined or agreed to settlements in excess of $50 million after major scoring errors recorded in ten different states affecting a total of 445,000 misscored tests (200,000 in Washington and 180,000 in Minnesota). Students believed they'd failed tests they'd passed, including state assessments, delaying their graduation and altering their colleges acceptances (Farley, 2011). Thousands of children from elementary school on up weren't allowed to graduate and others lost scholarships and entry into gifted and talented programs while others received scholarships. In other cases, scores were simply lost. Despite these problems, they are one of a handful of for-profit companies at the center of the privatization of public education. As Gail Collins pointed out after the New York stories broke, it is now possible for a child to go to a public school run by Pearson, study from books produced by Pearson and have his or her progress evaluated by standardized tests written by Pearson. The only public participant would be the taxpayer paying Pearson, a for-profit company (Collins, 2012).

A company with offices and origins in Iowa City, NCS-Pearson is the result of Pearson's acquisition of National Computer Systems, a company that emerged from the

creation of the ACT and was located in Iowa City where it still operates under the name of Pearson Educational Measurement. Since the passage of No Child Left Behind, it has grown from being a minor player in test-scoring to—in a bit of historical symmetry—a resumption of its original role as the country's leading scorer of standardized tests. Within their walls, more than three hundred million answer sheets are scored by people whose primary qualification is a college diploma and availability to work as temporary employees twelve-hour days, six days a week for less than ten dollars an hour (Henriques, 2001). The scoring takes place across the country, in the hands of tens of thousands of temporary employees who work seasonal jobs as test-scorers in facilities that Robert Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest, describes as "essay-scoring sweatshops" (Lussenhop, 2011).

Of course, Iowa City is also home to the University of Iowa, the school that created what became ACT, Inc. One of the most profitable nonprofits in the country with profits at 140% the nonprofit industry average, ACTs college admissions test now surpasses the SAT as the test taken by more college applicants than any other (Americans for Educational Testing Reform, 2012). Of the 93,000 employers in the state, it's one of seventy with at least a thousand full-time employees (Iowa Workforce, 2012). As a result of its success in launching ACT, a research unit in the University of Iowa's College of Education developed the Iowa Testing Programs which authors tests for numerous states and is most well-known as the author of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a test that touched the life trajectories of two of the four storytellers in this dissertation. How many tests ITP writes, and for how many states, is closely guarded proprietary information by both ITP and their publisher, Riverside Publishing in Chicago, but it's safe to say they are one of this country's top test writers.

The answer to Louis C.K.'s second question of why they're being written is more complicated. The philosophical, psychological and social history of standardized testing receives more space in later chapters but, for now, I'll simply note that an economic

perspective reveals assessment as a profitable yet cheaply run business. Between 2001 and 2012, state spending on standardized testing increased from $423 million to $1.7 billion. When you add in study guides in the form of courses, books, CDs and even shower curtains patterned with vocabulary words for $28.99, it's a $2 billion a year industry. The state spending figures amount to about one quarter of one percent of all money spent by states on public education, and a relatively small amount of states' overall education budgets. Were the money reallocated to teacher's salaries, it would amount to a modest increase of about $550 a year (Chingos, 2012, p. 1-2). Overall, it's still a tremendous amount of money and it's captured almost entirely by five companies: CTB/McGraw-Hill, Educational Testing Service, Harcourt Assessment, NCS-Pearson and Riverside Publishing. Pearson Educational Measurement's growth, when measured separately from NCS-Pearson, has been so vast that despite being primarily a scoring company, they rival Riverside Publishing as the third-largest testing company in the country.

*Storytellers and Research Questions*

It's because of this history that each of the stories in this dissertation have a connection to Iowa City. I've chosen to address participants as "storytellers" in part because it best fits my definition of identity. "Participant" is an accurate way of describing their role; it's a suitable phrase but says little about a person's specific contribution. Since I've treated these histories as stories, calling the participants "authors" sounds logical. "Co-authors" would make more sense, since identity is always co-authored but, frankly, that sounds awkward. Instead, I've used "storyteller" as it describes the act and serves as a reminder that the identities emerging in each story are creations and therefore "popular fictions" authored by a person about social experiences that tell a story placing life within a comprehensible structure advocating on the storyteller's behalf (Holland, et al. & López-Bonilla, 2011, p. 46-67).

Untold numbers of "standardized tests" exist, thus referencing all of them would be impossible, so when I use term here it is in reference to tests that possess all of the following criteria:

- a promise of objective results related to intellectual abilities.
- a design meant for mass production, administration and grading.
- authorship by an institution not an individual.
- evaluation expressed numerically and without further explanation.
- intentional withholding from the test-taker of a copy of the graded test.

In listening to their stories, I attempted to answer two questions:

(1) How did the four interview subjects explain how their intellectual identities were, or were not, partially constructed by their memories of standardized testing assessments of intelligence/aptitude?

(2) What artifacts of intelligence testing theory, research and history could I identify in the interview subjects' stories?

*Oral History*

This dissertation uses the term "oral histories" to describe collected stories of individual experiences with standardized intelligence or aptitude tests and how these tests affected its storyteller's identities. Oral historians often use it as a tool for cultural preservation and creation of an historical record. Once completed, an oral history is an object unto itself and its value is in its existence as something relatively untouched by the hand of analysis. By resisting imposition of analysis, oral history allows future readers, viewers or listeners to perform that function of meaning making on their own. The work of Studs Terkel, StoryCorps and the Library of Congress, to name a few prominent practitioners of

oral history, also use it to teach interviewing skills as a research technique since it hones observation and question-asking skills. Terkel worked to minimize his own presence in his interviews, and rarely injected qualifiers or contextualizing devices, preferring instead to let each story stand on its own merits and set them in conversation with one another. This approach is typical to oral history with the result that a reader interested in how the story came into being has to imagine the sort of questions that would have been asked to elicit the recorded responses (Zieren, 2011, p. 158–174).

While this dissertation uses collection methods commonly used by oral historians, the results are not traditional oral histories because they have been exposed to an evaluative process and they have been contextualized within the public policy debate surrounding standardized testing. I've used the term because it provides the best imperfect fit for my approach. Ethnography also influenced the approach. Most ethnographic interviews are less formal than interviews typical of journalism or social science experiments, and are more likely to be with a person the researcher has a connection with outside the interview itself (Murchison, 2010, p. 12). This approach is a direct response to the positivist tradition that views research as a complex scavenger hunt, with pure facts existing and awaiting discovery (a tradition also underpinning much of standardized testing). This belief explicitly assumes that observed data has a clear meaning attached to it. Knowing what the researcher seeks beforehand, and orchestrating an approach to find it invites a standardized approach so as to maximize collection efficiency and simplify or eliminate anything that might clutter the results. It employs a hierarchical model where the researcher ranks as the best interpreter of the data. Ethnography, by contrast, prefers to encounter data in the wild where "the group teaches the investigator" (Peacock, 1986, p. 72).

My goal in this dissertation has been to invert the research paradigm often applied to standardized testing which, like its subject, is one of reduction and elimination of complicating and contradicting data, so I have embraced the clutter and eliminated as

little as possible with the intent of taking what the storyteller provides and seeing what emerges and what it can teach me.

*Critical Discourse Analysis*

An analytical approach largely credited to James Gee, critical discourse analysis (CDA) employs a set of theories and methods toward the analysis of how spoken and written language helps create social and cultural identities and perspectives. Some of the questions that interest him include what and how texts speak to each other, how texts speak to larger social conversations, how language shifts based on audience and context. My interest in critical discourse analysis resides primarily in what Gee has to say about class-based use of language, in particular his use of "I" statements.[1]

For instance, in looking at teenagers, Gee contends that it's more common for working class teens to use "I" statements that focus on action, affect and ability/constraint (p. 141). In other words, Gee finds that working class teens, more so than middle class teens, tend to "narativize," i.e. explain what they did and how they felt about it and what elements aided or limited their action (p. 146). Upper and middle-class teens tend to use "I" focusing on cognitive acts and achievement. In other words, they will spend more

[1] In Gee's work, and elsewhere in the world of critical discourse analysis, "utterance" is the preferred term for an oral or written communication. In Gee's words, an utterance has meaning "only if and when it communicates a who and a what…[where] a "who" is a socially situated identity, the "kind of person" one is seeking to be and enact here-and-now. [A] "what" is a socially situated activity that the utterance helps to constitute" (p. 22-23). Oliver Sacks puts it less laboriously as "an uttering forth of one's whole meaning of one's being," and invokes the German word *klangenfarben* for "tone-colour" (1998, p. 81). The tidiest definition, offered by Gee, is that an utterance "reflects the company it has kept" and, in a phrasing most appropriate for this dissertation, an utterance "reflects a history that has given rise to it" (1999, p. 22-23). Clearly, in terms of word choice, "utterance" is the way to go. Instead, I'm using the antiquated word "statement," and I do so with an impure motive as I prefer the word for purely aesthetic reasons, "statement" being less intrusive and less offensive than the word "utterance." Utterance, for a word intended to capture not just the act of speech but the imbedded implications in it, of tone and craft and context, culture and mood, is a cumbersome and ugly little word. A mashup of a teat and the latter half of "dunce," *udder-unce* is tolerable on the page but a travesty on the lips. Using it feels silly, even utterly silly, even as I know it's currently the most correct term. An error made willingly is not an error but an intentional invocation of preference and personality. One might even call it an utterance. But I am not that person.

time talking about what they know while projecting themselves into "achievement" space connecting their present ability with future achievement. To use a simple example, a working class teen might say she thinks something is "good" and an upper-middle class teen might say it's "good for now," implying she can imagine her future self in different circumstances. Gee also looks at "who did what" statements to examine how people see themselves in relationship to others and institutions (p. 79-80). For Gee, language is not only evaluative but creative in that it creates an identity. Its study, therefore, provides an entry into making the observations of central interest to this dissertation.

*Methods: Interview Format*

As part of my preparation, I modified the interview questions and topics found in the field kit used by the Library of Congress's Veteran's History Project. Typically, I began each interview with a question about why someone chose to participate, which I used as a way of easing into the interview. In several cases, the person gave a variation of "I just wanted to help out." I also explain how I know the storyteller. After establishing basic biographical information, including family history with formal education, and about the important people in the person's life and their values, I typically asked the person to describe him or herself as a student and asked about academic strengths and weaknesses and why they felt that way, and when they'd come to those conclusions. I then asked if they had a specific testing story. If they did not, I asked questions about which tests they remembered taking. Once a subject was introduced, I'd ask questions that helped with clarity, but I wanted the storyteller to tell me what context mattered to them so as each interview progressed the questions became increasingly open-ended and storyteller-led. At times, I tried to express them as storytelling prompts and requests for reflection. One of the many reasons why I chose the four people contained in this dissertation was their willingness to maintain at least partial control over the direction of the discussion. This is why, for instance, I didn't ask storytellers to report their standardized test scores and only

recorded the scores when they were shared by the storyteller. Such a decision could be seen as peculiar, but it emerged from the stance of trying to let them tell me what to be interested in; for some that meant sharing a score while others did not. I did, as needed, ask them to interpret their stories by asking some or all of the following questions:

- When I say the word "test" what comes to mind?
- How often do you remember or think about the story associated with this word? Why do you think that is?
- After [the testing story], what happened next?
- When do you find yourself thinking of this story? What people and experiences do you associate with it? If you were asked to analyze the meaning of this story, what would you say it's about?

Part of "embracing the clutter" meant I felt obligated to preserve and present large portions of text as they were spoken, without editing or condensing. I used the list as a check-list at the end of the interview to see if I'd missed anything. Interpretive questions that I had prepared, but never had to ask because storytellers answered them were:

- Is there a line or moment or detail that sticks in your head?
- How do you feel (emotionally or physically when telling the story)?
- Who else knows this story and do they tell it the same way? (Is there disagreement among those involved about what happened?)

Oral histories that minimize interpretation from the interviewer carry an agnostic elegance, but that approach wasn't appropriate for this project. As hesitant as I was to interpret other people's stories, it's what I'd signed up for, as had they. I had a quandary in that I could easily become as guilty of imposing an identity as standardized testing,

which meant that if I was truly interested in inverting the paradigm, I had to invite the storytellers help in assessing their stories. Toward that end, I gave each storyteller the opportunity to read and respond to their sections. Lori and Sholanda noticed places where timeline and other small details required clarification, as did Aevita, whose favorite line in her chapter was in its introduction as a story carrying "the subtle irony of a high score on a tool intended as force in service of standardization—of sameness—serving as a mechanism for igniting feelings of difference." Otherwise, they felt the oral histories presented a fair reflection of how they remembered the conversation and the period in question. Edward has since moved out of the state and he communicated via email from an undisclosed mountain range location. While he responded positively to a summary of his chapter, I haven't heard from him since offering to send it to him. My sense is that reading a portion of a dissertation is only of limited interest to him.

*Scope and Storytellers*

One requirement for inclusion in this dissertation was that each storyteller had graduated from high school no earlier than 1983 since 1983 marked the publication of "A Nation at Risk," a document assessing the state of public education and the work of President Reagan's Commission on Excellence in Education. Storytellers, therefore, were people with memories of standardized tests occurring after 1983. While it's a mistake to place too much emphasis on one event, 1983 can be seen as a point accelerating the generational shift in standardized testing referenced in the introduction. A more expansive history begins in "The Iowa Machine" section.

In reading through this dissertation, the reader will also notice that three of the four storytellers are female with one of the women identifying as white and two identifying as black. Everyone had achieved at least a four-year college degree and ranged in age from 28 to 45. Their high school graduation dates range from 1985 to 2002. In addition to a dearth of male voices, younger voices and voices from those who have not

attended college, I am the only heterosexual white male involved in the study. My intent was never to achieve demographic balance, but the gender imbalance deserves comment. I interviewed several men but, as discussed, I selected stories based on the degree to which they were distinct from one another while overlapping in some ways, but I also selected stories based on the depth and length of the interviews themselves. In that sense, the interviews included within this dissertation contributed to their own selection by not only participating, but participating enthusiastically because they had something they wanted to say. The men I did speak with wanted to participate but were perfunctory in their responses and tended to answer by saying standardized testing wasn't something that had affected them very much; this is interesting and deserves further exploration but when it came time to decide which stories to use, the stories I've included held more nuance.

It's also worth mentioning that every storyteller was a person who occupies at least one cultural role not typically associated with power. Most of the storytellers are women, and using the broadest generalities, women and girls tend to not do quite as well as men and boys on some standardized tests. There is diversity in terms of demographic markers such as those associated with class like family income and level of parent formal education and neighborhood, and there's some racial diversity. Finally, there is diversity of sexual orientation, which had the benefit of introducing the possibility of a relationship between sexual identity and standardized test performance, something I've not seen in the research, but more broadly it introduces the question of how "being outside the norm" in any way can influence performance on a standardized test, and how that test shapes the person taking it.

*Analysis*

The act of assessing assessment is central to this dissertation, and since narrative is a form of self-assessment, I've used Gee's approach to critical discourse analysis and looked at each interview for two types of evaluative statements.

The first type of evaluative statement, coded as a big "E" evaluation, and often an "I" statement, was one made by the storyteller in reference to the self or others. It's an evaluation in which the speaker expresses direct ownership of a statement or action that speaks to how the speaker sees him or herself. The second type was a little "e" evaluative statement attributed by the storyteller to other people and/or institutions. These might be statements where the storyteller reports what another person said or an action the person did or did not take, or they might be statements where the storyteller speaks on behalf of a non-human institution or entity, such as a test. I also looked for evaluative statements that expressed the extent to which the speaker internalized an idea or experience. For instance, "I have" compared to "I think" or "I know" all express different degrees of ownership and agency; if I say "I had to go to college" that expresses less internal agency within the speaker than "They had to let me in." Finally, I looked for statements that described the culture in which the event occurred. In some, but not all instances, these universalizing "how life works" or "who did what" statements took the form of "you statements" such as "College was a thing you had to do."

I treated these evaluative statements as starting points and then looked for themes or points of reference established by the storyteller to see if a testing story elicited other stories and ideas on, as examples, intelligence, creativity, race or socio-economic status.

These statements are of interest as they allude to ways the person sees identity as constructed by external forces over which she had little to no control. Compared to the "I" statements, these universalizing statements helped explore the extent to which the person felt the identity in question was co-authored by both the storyteller and others.

My analysis varied from story to story. Lori's story provides a means for introducing the subsequent stories and my analysis of her story, as well as Aevita's, use a separate analysis section. I coded each story using the methods noted above. I took a different approach with the last two stories, authored by Edward and Shalonda, which are more essay-like in style and incorporate analysis within the body of the interview. I've

done so as both Edward and Shalonda's story-telling styles are highly reflective and their self-assessments of the meanings in their stories encourage a dialogue within the text itself.

Since each story was told by a person narrating a former self at a previous developmental stage, age and time played key roles in the analysis. The ages when most of us take standardized tests are ages when the identities that guide the choices and areas of study and interest are most elastic and the moments that shape them carry the most weight in our memories. Mid-adolescence defines itself in many ways by its relationships, later adolescence is about incorporating others' ideas into their own identity. In a reference that speaks to the importance of this time period, psychologists reference the "reminiscence bump," a term used to reference the "tendency of individuals freely recalling past experiences to recall an unusually high number of experiences that occurred between the ages of 10 and 30" (Rubin & Schulkind, 1997, p. 524-535). The bump exists due to the period being so critical in terms of a person's overall life story and identity construction as it contains "the emergence of enduring dispositions, goals, and relationships." If we see testing that happens at this time as an examination of a person's relationship with him or herself and a time when the person is just beginning to incorporate the influence of others then they are particularly vulnerable to feedback in terms of how they are assessed by an outside entity (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000, p. 261-288; Thorne, 2000, p. 45-56).

I analyzed the data in stages. Initially, I listened to the interviews while jotting impressions on both what was being said and how it was being said as well as questions raised but not answered by the narrative. I later struggled with the decision of how to handle the amount of data involved in the twenty-plus hours of recorded interviews. Were I to use all of them, and include them as full transcripts and attempt to analyze each in a meaningful way, this dissertation would reach immense proportions. As an intermediate stage, I processed the interviews by using dictation software allowing me to

transform the audio files with relative speed to text. By listening to the storytellers on headphones and speaking their words into a microphone, which translated my speech into text, I was able to achieve transcripts while providing the opportunity to speak the words of my storytellers and thus hear them almost as if they were my own.

I then printed out the interviews and went through them taking notes and highlighting key moments (coding big "E" and little "e" evaluative statements) while looking for areas of overlap and difference and emergent themes. It was during this process that I managed to make the final choices as to which interviews I would include with the desire to select stories that, in some way, worked in conversation with at least one other story. Initially, I noticed that while each of my storytellers shared at least one aspect of Aevita's story, whether it was the increasing presence of prescription medication in education or the confluence of class, family and trauma in forming an identity. It was in speaking with Lori that I first noticed the trend of each person making at least a passing reference to creativity and standardized testing, and whether relationships existed between them. I also noticed that Lori, more than any other storyteller, needed the least prompting of anyone to share her story and its meaning. For this reason, and because of how concisely she did so, I've used her story to apply and demonstrate the analytical tools just described.

*Lori: "A Traumatic SAT Story"*

Born in 1968, Lori was the eldest of two children, in Berkeley, California, a city known for its progressive history, and grew up in Oakland, a city at one time known as "the Detroit of the West." Her story is unique in that by comparison to children in today's schools, standardized testing was not a ubiquitous part of her education so it offers a stark contrast between who she was before standardized testing came into her life, and who she was after. As introduction, she said that she had a traumatic SAT story.

Her mother was an English teacher and her father a computer engineer for IBM. Of her parents, Lori said, "Their experiences growing up poor and black inculcated in them the idea of the American dream" because while they encountered racism they exceeded their parents' economic achievements attaining "the trappings of middle class life," more prestigious jobs and a house and cars, and they wanted and expected her to live out the familiar narrative in American life of the child improving on the parents' accomplishments. At first, all went according to script. In 1985, when she was seventeen years old and like millions of other high school seniors, she took the SAT.

Being a strong student was vital to how she understood herself. It was "what I had; I wasn't one of the popular kids or look like a cheerleader or play sports. But I did well academically. That's who I was. I guess the SAT to me was a big deal test. It said if you were going to have a future or not, and it said how good of a college you were going to get into. I guess I grew up lower-middle class but deeply engrained in bourgeois culture. College seemed like a thing you had to do if you wanted to be valuable in the world, not just in terms of material wealth but of doing something that mattered."

She'd always struggled with multiple-choice tests and with math. As a result, "I was extremely worried" about the SAT. A student at a Catholic high school that was a "middle of the road school" in her area, it had its share of "geniacs," and talking about your performance was expected with her peer group assigning value based on how well you did.

"You kind of knew what you were shooting for: 11-1300 was the range in which people would report what they got [when Lori took the SAT, the top score was 1600] and if you were under a thousand you were an idiot. I got a 900." She recalls scoring well on verbal and "tanking" the math. Almost thirty years would pass before she understood why this happened and that it went beyond having done little preparation beyond a single practice test since, unlike her peers, her parents couldn't pay for additional preparation.

Knowing additional test preparation was available and therefore advisable added to the sense that "the test would make or break you."

"To me, [my score] meant I wasn't good enough. It definitely defined me, and how I thought about myself intellectually for quite a long time. I actually did get into a pretty good college [Princeton] even with my substandard school but it really hurt my confidence, so even though I got into a good college I didn't graduate from a good college."

Forced to withdraw for bad grades, she returned to parents who assumed she'd failed due to not taking her schoolwork seriously and were upset she was "screwing around when we're spending all this money we don't have to send you to Princeton."

She doesn't attribute all of her struggles at Princeton to her poor SAT performance. She had a few distant family members in New Jersey but was otherwise alone.

"I grew up in the suburbs and I figured I knew how to be around middle class white people and that it wouldn't be weird, but it was. It wasn't California. It wasn't Oakland. It was way more upper class than anything I'd ever been around. I thought I went to school with rich people but it was totally different; most of these kids went to boarding school, you know what I mean? The class division was different and they had better preparation than I did. I didn't realize until I got to Princeton that my education had been lacking. Having gone to Catholic school for high school, the literature I was exposed to wasn't as broad as what most kids had. I hadn't even read *The Catcher in the Rye*. But I felt like my SAT score was a bad mark or a dunce hat and I felt the same way about the GRE but the SAT was more devastating because I was younger.

"A lot of stuff went into [withdrawing from Princeton] but part of it was the SAT and I did not feel like a smart person for a long time. I don't know if I ever really got over it until I went back to school. I went to San Francisco State which wasn't a great school and I didn't graduate from there, and I worked for ten years [for a publishing company]

then I went back and I did graduate and got a B.A. then I got an MFA [in Creative Writing] and that's when I did start to feel like a smart person—the combination of feeling like I'd mastered the world of a professional person then going back and getting a graduate degree was when I got over how much the SAT score had defined me."

She entered San Francisco State as a pre-med major because "the only thing I wanted to do in the world was medicine." Required to take a standardized test to get into the necessary courses, she took and "totally failed" them. Instead of admitting defeat, she convinced a professor to let her take his neuroscience course. She got an A in a course she recalls as easy. As she progressed through college, changing her major to English, Lori became less intimidated by academic institutions. At the end of her senior year, her change in attitude worked against her. Ready to graduate, she was informed she didn't have enough upper level classes and "Being the obstinate rebel I thought I was, I decided, screw it, I don't need a degree from you, and I left. And then I decided capitalism was evil and I wasn't going to be a capitalist and I worked at the Berkeley Community Health Project and lived my life through barter and after a few years of that I was like, 'This is ridiculous, I need a job. I can't buy lunch and I'm living with my parents. 'Oh poor baby, you're not a capitalist but you're living with your parents.' It was silly."

Lori found a job in publishing because it "didn't feel too much like capitalism," and over the next ten years progressed from customer service to development editor at a self-help press. A lot of how-to titles. How to handle your own divorce. How to use Microsoft Word.

"I think that's what helped turn my life around. I stopped thinking of myself as dumb and thinking about the SAT and failing out of Princeton and I got turned around."

Lori's telling of her story reminded me that one defense of standardized testing is it's a good predictor of how well someone will do in college, especially in her first year. Furthermore, since colleges are increasingly viewed as responsible for preparing students to meet the needs of industry, standardized test scores are also expected to correlate with

success in the private sector. In Lori's case, standardized testing only retains its efficacy as a predictive mechanism if you stop the story with her departure from Princeton.

Three decades later, Lori understands her struggles at Princeton as having multiple causes but a major one was the moment she opened an envelope mailed from Princeton, New Jersey, with the return address not of the university but of Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT, GRE, AP and TOEFL exams, and saw in her SAT score an appraisal of herself as a number in black and white, and a number infused with such importance that it undermined an identity as a star student built through childhood and adolescence. She became someone else. The unexpected became the expected.

Eventually, her renewed confidence led Lori back to academia. While working with writers at the publishing company she became interested in pursuing an MFA in creative writing and did so then, almost three decades after leaving Princeton, she began a doctorate in English from the University of Iowa in Iowa City, perhaps the only school and city in this country with a relationship to a standardized testing company rivaling that of Princeton. Parental expectations of grandeur played a part in the decision but she also had a chip on her shoulder. Along the way, she'd revised her views on creativity—on what it was and who it interested—as she put it to me: "I don't expect my creative writing to have a presence in the world. My creative work is very personal. A PhD is a way for to make an intellectual mark on the world." She expects to graduate in 2015.

*Analysis Applied: Lori*

In looking closely at Lori's speech and aided by statements referencing the history of standardized testing, I found that her story had a lot to say about the relationships between testing, agency, and class. It also raised questions about the degree to which a test-taker's intellectual identity can be protected by having knowledge about what standardized testing truly evaluates prior to taking the test, and whether a person who

doesn't have this knowledge is more likely to extrapolate the results more broadly than someone who does. Finally, and more explicitly than anyone else I interviewed, she articulates the idea that thinking of the self as "intelligent" informs multiple identities, and to question that trait threatens a person's sense of self on multiple fronts.

While speaking with her, I was also struck by her story's polish. Its tight narrative construction contains all of the elements of a story. It introduces conflict and change when her test result alters her intellectual identity and offers a resolution when she regains her confidence and returns with renewed purpose to academic life. Her beginning—"I have a traumatic SAT story" suggests that she knows what she wants to say, but it also may suggest that she believed I was looking for "traumatic" stories. (Out of a desire to try and avoid a situation where storytellers felt a need to tell the story I wanted to hear, part of my initial process in explaining the project both in writing and in person included the statement that I wasn't looking for a particular kind of story. For this reason, and due to the completeness of Lori's story, I've concluded this was the story she wanted to tell and not the story she thought I wanted to hear.)

Due to both its content and delivery, I came away from our meeting with the impression that Lori had thought about the story extensively and that she had confidence in it being an accurate reflection and interpretation of the events in question. Because of its orderliness, an analysis of the story at first appeared to be a simple task. At several points, she'd explained how the SAT had affected her intellectual identity and when it came to sifting through the story in search of artifacts from the history of standardized testing, I found numerous references. Examining these references helped focus my analysis as each of them alluded to the idea of intelligence as a unitary and testable trait that could be expressed by a single number. When narrating her younger self prior to regaining her confidence outside of academia, at four separate points she made clear connections between her SAT score and how she measured her own intelligence when she said:

- "if you were under a thousand you were an idiot"
- "It definitely defined me, and how I thought about myself intellectually for quite a long time"
- "I felt like my SAT score was a bad mark or a dunce hat"
- "I did not feel like a smart person"

Her implication of a direct link between a standardized test score and intelligence reflects common attitudes about what standardized testing measures. The frequency with which this idea repeats in her speech suggests a shared cultural memory linking her portrayal of her thinking with the original theories and assumptions driving the first intelligence tests, tests that share a developmental history with the SAT.

Reading the statement "I think that's what helped turn my life around. I stopped thinking of myself as dumb and thinking about the SAT and failing out of Princeton and I got turned around" leaves the impression that due to a combination of positive experiences outside of academia and learning about the critiques behind standardized testing, Lori no longer believes this to be true. A closer look suggests her history with standardized tests may have left her with lingering questions about her intellectual identity.

*Critical Discourse Analysis Applied*

This statement: "I guess the SAT to me was a big deal test. It said if you were going to have a future or not…" provides an example of the two types of evaluative "I" statements I've examined in Lori's story. "I guess" is a big "E" evaluative statement of a younger self juxtaposed against the little "e" statement of "It said." The two statements reveal a weaker degree of certainty in her evaluation of the SAT as a "big deal test" when compared to her willingness to speak on behalf of what the SAT "said" to her, and what she heard. In every

other instance, with one exception, Lori's self-evaluative statements use verbs that emphasize confidence in the statements she's making. In two other instances, she uses self-evaluative "I" statements that use verbs associated with expressing doubt when she "figured" she knew how to be around middle class white people and when she was being "the obstinate rebel I thought I was." While it's true that in these instances she's using verbs that express doubt, she does so in order to convey confidence in her current perspective.

The third moment when she expresses uncertainty occurs at the end of the story when she says, "In brain time I have extremely slow processing speed but my comprehension is good once I get the information in there. I guess my comprehension was high enough on reading tests that it never took me so low on a test that anyone noticed it." With this third "guess" we see an instance of uncertainty about her ADD diagnosis. It poses a question: if she did well on other reading-based tests in school, what was different about the standardized test that ADD affected its result?

Her concern with this discrepancy on the heels of a long series of confident statements, combined with her narration about the effect of receiving critical feedback on her writing in graduate school, suggests that the return to academia reintroduced doubts about her identity as a person who reads and writes well—doubt first introduced by the SAT. The moment also reveals the link Lori creates between intelligence and reading and writing. Math, as she says later, is "not her language." She accepts this judgment and spends little time on it, and is willing to do so because her intellectual identity is synonymous with the language used in the reading and writing of graphemically-represented and phonemic-driven text. Referring to math as a language demonstrates her willingness to see the idea of language as free of alphabet and phonemic-driven forms and to differentiate between being good at math and being intelligent, while leaving us to infer that, for Lori, "being a good reader and writer" of her preferred texts is at least part of her definition of intelligence.

How Lori defines intelligence points to one reason why standardized testing unavoidably affects a person's identity. In order to see this relationship, we have to first think of language the way linguists might, and as Lori does, as a set of symbolic constructions and artifacts inherited through a culture for the purpose of engaging the attentions of others so they might access the perspective of the person speaking. From there, it's a short leap to suggesting that when a person links intelligence and the reading and writing of graphemically-represented and phonemically-driven texts to intelligence, what that person is really saying is intelligence is the ability to engage the attentions of others so they can inhabit your perspective, and do the same for others. Intelligence, then, is an ability to speak with an authoritative and comprehended voice, it is the ability to listen and hear and the ability to speak and make oneself heard.

Intelligence, within the world of standardized testing, is always about language use for the simple reason that standardized testing is, by necessity, dependent on language. Due to this dependency, standardized testing always delivers the message that language use is at least a partial measure of intelligence, which means what's at stake for those taking a standardized test is as stark as the difference between speech and silence.

We hear an example of this in Lori's reference to a non-standardized form of assessment when Lori discusses negative feedback in her graduate school program by posing the question "I was like, 'I'm not even a good writer?'" Writing is clearly important to her intellectual identity and clearly associated with feeling like she is able, and invited, to speak. When this moment is considered within Gee's approach to critical discourse analysis, which observed working class teenagers use narrative to project themselves into the "everyday" and upper middle class teenagers project themselves into "achievement space," it reveals how Lori cues us, by narrating the moment in dialogue, as to the competing discourses she is attempting to resolve.

"I was like, 'I'm not even a good writer?'" also reveals itself as using a working class "I felt" statement that narrates through dialogue rather than summarizes a moment

and uses "like" as an intensifier to draw attention to what she is about to say, making Lori's most ardent expression of how writing fits into her intellectual identity an artifact of exposure to working class speech patterns. The moment is all the more interesting when reminded that her first reference to class status was an uncertain one ("I guess I grew up lower-middle class") and noticing that as she moves forward in time her speech becomes less focused on how she felt, and more focused on achievement and increasingly agentic.

In these examples, we see class intertwined in her storytelling. When she mentions *The Catcher in the Rye*, we also see class intertwined with the types of stories she needed to know in preparation for college, and therefore what stories qualified as literature and of value by academia. A book about a white teenage boy leaving the rarefied world of an elite all-boys boarding school, the novel skewers elitist notions of class but it does so from the stance of an insider most accessible to those who, unlike Lori, have at least passing exposure to that world.

At the end of her interview, class emerges a final time in her use of a coda, a section at the end of a story where the narrator provides an evaluative summary of the events just shared (Hemphill, 1999, p. 275-302). Codas tend to be more elaborate in working class discourse than the one Lori uses here—in middle and upper class discourse they tend to be short or non-existent—when she says, "I can definitely see the class piece; I think the race piece is more about how class and race are interrelated in this country."

One implication from Lori's story is standardized testing can present itself as a high-stakes evaluator defining intelligence within identity "worlds." For students who value academic achievement as a sign of intelligence, yet feel a lower level of agency due to existing in a world where they don't feel wholly welcome, those stakes can be even higher. The situation is exacerbated when the test-taker knows little about how a standardized test functions or what it can and cannot measure beyond what she gleans from rumor and opinion of other test-takers.

I have to confess, and interject, that the deeper I moved into this dissertation, the more I struggled to understand the casual enthusiasm for standardized testing and the application of its results. If the embedded message in standardized testing, regardless of the test, is always at least partly about declaring who can speak, then it's possible that more is at stake in terms of identity formation with standardized tests than with other forms of evaluation. A test imbued with the power to deliver a more ambitious assessment than most forms of testing while narrowing down what qualifies as intelligence is a test that profoundly affects those who take it.

A second, more perverse, thought: that standardization is desired, and often performs exactly as designed and intended as a means of elevating some and excluding others. A narrowed, constrained life is a life with stabilizing boundaries. The impossible option is not an option, its elimination offering a freedom of not having to choose. The real pathos of a standardized society is it exaggerates the importance of dulling choices between slivered differences and celebrates knowledge provided rather than found. Life as a multiple-choice exam.

*An Ungentle Push*

It wasn't so long ago that the sum of what I knew about standardized testing flowed wholly from a few old memories, the occasional news story, and academic study. My interest was mostly theoretical and it likely would have stayed that way were it not for a brutal winter that froze to the street a car I'd driven since high school. Its freeing involved an indelicate process involving boiling water, an axe, spinning tires and an enthusiastic shove that finally launched the car free. Had I stuck the landing, I'm pretty sure everything would have been fine and this dissertation would have been on a different topic. Instead, I banged at a few too many miles per hour into a hill of ice and street sludge left behind by a snowplow. Maybe it wasn't the impact. Maybe it was the boiling water. Or the axe. Or maybe the thing was just old, I'll never know, but the car developed

a strong pull to the left and since I don't want a car that drives with an ideological bent, I'd soon added a bill for suspension realignment to a growing list of things in need of adjustment. Besides the hint that public transportation has a lot going for it, the situation led to the conclusion that I needed a way to make some extra cash in a way that wouldn't interfere with my teaching and class schedule.

During past budgetary shortfalls, I'd picked up extra money working for a moving company, but the work wore me out so this time around I aimed for something a little less physical. What I found was easier on my lower back, but it left me more preoccupied at the end of each day with questions about what I'd witnessed than when I'd been lifting old school big-screen cathode ray tube television sets and dusty rowing machines out of suburban basements. It was my first step toward exploring the pitfalls inherent in declaring through measurement what it means to be intelligent and—implicitly—what it means to be human.

Of *Hard Times*, Studs Terkel said, "This is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic" (2000, p. 3). So it is here, with attempts at detective work circling around these stories, attempts at looking within language for the elusive quality we call "identity," and for clues about how these coolly innocuous tests shaped the people they became. Suffice to say, my interest in standardized testing and identity is partly animated by the social justice elements at play but, in a broader sense, my interest is in memory. It has to be. Within memory we find our selves. And the formation of an identity is as dependent on the remembrance of an event as the event itself. With time, the two merge until memory and event are one. The result is this dissertation. It began one Saturday morning when I walked into a classroom to teach in a talented and gifted program in Iowa City.

CATALYSTS AND CONTEXTS

# INTO THE ROOM OF MARGINAL ENCOUNTERS

A yellow leaf fell from a black walnut tree. Traced lazy pendulums on its return to earth. Others followed.

This was several years ago in early September. In a few minutes, I'd teach the first meeting of a creative nonfiction writing class for gifted and talented seventh and eighth-graders called Advanced Language Arts, and offered by the Belin-Blank Center for Gifted and Talent Development, a research center at the University of Iowa. I stood before a floor-to-ceiling window in a room that felt like a training facility dreamed up by Frank Lloyd Wright and Steve Jobs. Cords noodled indecently into the guts of expansive tables. The presence of natural light alone was an improvement over where I'd been teaching, on the other side of campus, in a brick-walled basement room that vacillated between tropical and arctic. Slick.

In that instant, I'd yet to begin thinking seriously about standardized testing and the promises it makes and was more engaged by the multimedia console I'd lorded over moments before at the center of the room. Topped by a computer screen, I'd fiddled with every one of the switches and buttons arrayed across its surface—*Houston, we have liftoff!*—flipped on a digital video projector and unfurled screens from the ceiling. Soon I figured out how to lower the automated window blinds and dim the lights in the back of the class to give the front, where I'd soon stand, a more dramatic feel. I hoped the effect would shrink the size of a room meant to seat thirty-five to something more appropriate to eight people, seven of whom would be children, eight if I couldn't restrain myself from playing with all the buttons. The result turned the room into a black box theater so I opened the blinds and turned on all the lights.

In the job interview, the program's Talent Coordinator ran down the program's various offerings by walking me through a massive wall chart filled with stickie notes. People teased her about her charts, but organization was the key to everything.

"Impressive," I said, because it was.

I'd done some checking and learned she was a certified trainer in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and a licensed administrator and certified teacher without apparent K-12 experience who taught classes in gifted education and curriculum development. On first impression, she was friendly, if a bit official in bearing as she described the program's catalog, which sounded inventive and fun and spanned the arts and sciences. Kids came from all over the state to attend their programs. They'd bring a snack and it was okay to give them a break to eat, but breaks should be limited. If I wanted, the program had laptops the "young writers" could use. Would I like laptops?

"Not in class, no. I suspect they spend plenty of time on computers. Writing by hand helps you stay loose. I've never taught a class like this, though."

"But not too loose. If you need laptops all you have to do is ask. Because it's no trouble, we'll just bring them right in."

"Okay."

"Is that a yes?"

I returned to my one concern. I'd never taught anyone younger than a college freshman.

"That won't be a problem. It's partly why I brought you in. These are not average children. Their reading and writing abilities will equal or exceed the college freshmen you're used to teaching."

"Really?"

"Oh yes."

She explained their parents were eager and able to give their children all of the learning opportunities they could fit on the calendar and those parents would like that I'd published a few articles and had an MFA, which brought her to an important point. If I took the job, over the course of our five meetings she expected the children to make a publishable product.

"By a publishable product…"

"Preferably in book form. It would be a great thing to show parents of future students. We can arrange for the printing."

"Is that possible?"

"Oh sure, we'll only make a few copies. We have a budget for that sort of thing."

"I meant is it possible they can write a book?"

"Well, these are exceptional children. It won't be easy, though, that's true. The girls at this age can act a little silly and need someone to focus them, but don't forget these are serious and competitive children.

I'd never met a seventh grader who could read and write like a college freshman, even one distracted by the offerings at one of the top party schools in the country, and I wanted to so I emailed her a syllabus and a list of potential readings. Finding fiction for middle schoolers was easy, but the program wanted a nonfiction class, and there weren't many twelve and thirteen year-olds penning memoirs, so I went with adults writing about childhood. My selections included an article on the line between fiction and nonfiction, a couple of David Sedaris' lighter essays, a few Sarah Vowell pieces including one about a daughter coming to terms with ways in which she's different yet similar to her father, a short scene about a whale-sighting from Dave Eggers' memoir, a funny James Tate poem about fish and a Susan Orlean essay profiling a ten-year old boy; typical fair for a middle class white guy in his thirties. Would seventh-graders appreciate that sort of thing? Yes, said the Talent Director, they most certainly would. I took the job.

It was time to get down to business. Turning from the window, I slid a cardboard box onto the multimedia console. Water-stained and beat up, it looked even uglier in its new surroundings than it had in the far corner of my basement, so I quickly unloaded a stack of syllabi and handouts and stashed the box in a corner while trying to quell my worry as to whether I should be there at all.

After a few minutes of nervous pacing, the door opened and a man and a boy entered the room. The father shook my hand with a nervous smile and introduced himself and watched as his son drifted to the far corner of the room and near the window. We checked the roster and confirmed his son was in the right class. His son's English, he said, was not very good. And he was quiet. Shy. He didn't know why this was. We are not from here, he offered.

"Neither am I," I said, "Not from Iowa, I mean," realizing a beat too slowly he wasn't talking about the state.

"Somalia."

"That's great." I added something about how I hoped his son would share whatever stories he had with us. At some point in the conversation, I realized we'd stopped looking at each other and were instead watching his son who was perched on the front of his chair so his feet could touch the floor while he watched the leaves fall outside and other children amble toward the building. His father broke the silence by asking if I could tell him the direction of the parking lot—they'd wandered around the building so many times he wasn't quite sure where he was—and I walked him into the hallway and pointed him down what I hoped was the correct hallway.

An attempt at making conversation evaporated into monosyllabic answers and I left the boy to the window, greeting with relief the entrance of a girl with straight brown hair and socks that looked like a stack of giant Lifesavers worn as anklets. She could have been cast as the heroine in an illustrated children's book; the type who, once you got past the look of studied insouciance, revealed herself to be a fearless and irrepressible type

with a quizzical nature that led her into trouble and adventure. Instead of a backpack, she had a bag of multicolored fabric swatches stitched into a patchwork shoulder bag that shouted individuality and reminded me of about a dozen friends who I imagined as similar at her age. Even money said she'd go to a liberal arts college and major in English. The land of snap judgments is a geography of dead ends, but I figured we'd get along fine. Her mother introduced herself with a firm handshake and asked about my background. Where I'd gone to school. If I'd been published.

I provided a minimalist's answers, and parried by asking where they were from, what her daughter liked to read, and if they'd participated in the program before, nodding and making positive noises as appropriate. I learned they'd driven several hours to be here and lived in a rural part of the state, which was necessary to stay away from the troubles in the cities. The schools left so much to be desired, but you do what you have to do.

"You do," I said. The image of a car bumper banging against a frozen sludge pile came to mind.

"Do you have kids?"

"I don't, no. I was agreeing in the more general sense."

"Ah ha."

Cornered, I slipped into sales mode, culminating with the absurd lie that I was bringing a graduate-level curriculum to the class. It worked. She softened. Told me that sounded wonderful and left me to make a mental note to apply more deodorant the following Saturday.

Four more girls soon joined us. The five girls clumped together and started talking and the roster filled out with a second boy who migrated near the other boy and slumped into a chair in the back row. His parents were non-native English speakers from South Korea and his mother pulled me aside upon their arrival, explaining that his language skills weren't very good and he needed extra work, and that I should tell her what she

needed to make him do. He flushed in embarrassment and I made a bland comment about not worrying then failed to take my own advice. Having weaker English language skills when raised by parents who speak another language is common and didn't mean he wasn't a capable learner, but the description didn't sync up too well with what I'd expected, or planned for. Something didn't make sense.

"Guys?" I motioned for the boys to move closer. They squinted at me as if trying to make out some distant land on the horizon then complied by staying in the back row but moving a few chairs in our direction. Over the course of the five Saturdays we spent together, it was the closest we'd come to a meaningful exchange. Two empty rows remained between them and the girls. I didn't understand what the problem was and that night I'd call a friend who taught middle school to ask what I should expect.

"For them to be crazy."

"In what way?"

"Crazy. I like them, but they're crazy. The girls are mental and most of the boys really truly cannot handle being around the girls. The girls can't either but they're better at faking it. You see the maturity gap at that age. Don't you remember what you were like?"

I'd spent two-plus decades trying to forget. The fitful larynx. The suppurating face. The strange, new determination to look cool (whatever that meant) in the proximity of everyone…

"But these kids are gifted."

"All that means they'll be really good at being nuts. If you're lucky. Just remember their attention spans won't be what you're used to. How long is the class?"

"Three and a half hours."

Her laughter lasted a long, long time.

I'd yet to find the situation amusing and after distributing notebooks provided by the program I explained the course syllabus then a questionnaire asking them to describe

themselves as writers and to tell me why they'd taken the class. I'd done the exercise in every class I'd taught over the past few years but it was derailed when a girl named Jennifer tugged at the neckline on her t-shirt and chastised herself with a question that would stay with me long after the last of our five Saturdays together.

"How could someone so smart be so dumb?"

She followed this non sequitur with an exasperated sigh and slapped her pencil onto the desk. I asked if everything was okay and will confess to relief when she revealed the problem: she had a swim meet after class and, to save time at the pool, she'd put on her swimsuit under her clothes before leaving home—but put it on backwards. I suppressed a laugh. Despite her evident distress, or because of it, the question played into my expectations of the gifted as people possessing a mind working in so many directions it struggled to navigate the here and now. The charming trope of the distracted genius who wanders into traffic while computing the size of the solar system. The artist who paints a masterpiece but doesn't notice mismatched socks.

She filled out her questionnaire and I ushered her off to the restroom to rearrange her swimsuit. Upon her return, I asked everyone to pair with another student, share responses and introduce each other to the class. The girl with Lifesaver socks sought out the boy from South Korea and tried gamely to engage him. In my peripheral vision, he didn't appear to say a word. When it came to their turn, he shook his head when called upon and she introduced herself.

"I'm in this class because I like to write."

I dimly recalled from childhood that when speaking to children, adults often tried to sound enthusiastic to the point of insanity. I'd always found it terrifying, but other kids responded to it so I gave it a try, shouting, "Well, you're in the right place!" and asked what she liked to write.

She chirpily listed her bona fides: she wrote short stories all the time, found the work of Judy Blume simple. Her favorite book was *Little Women*. She'd read it three times

and received special permission to do a book report on it for extra credit and planned on writing something similar one day. In conclusion, she explained, she liked stories with good characters and a good plot.

I told her that sounded great.

So-smart-yet-so-dumb Jennifer went next, explaining in a rush that her sole motivation for taking the class was it got her out of Japanese language lessons; the child of Japanese immigrants, she took the class at the behest of her parents. Besides swimming and Japanese, her other obligations were piano and gymnastics. A girl whose parents had immigrated from the Philippines chipped in that she was lucky pretty much everyone spoke English in the Philippines because otherwise her parents would have done the same thing, and it was tough finding someone to teach you Filipino in Iowa.

The other girls, middle class white kids from the suburbs and small town, shared similar sentiments, leaving the impression that others deserved credit for their presence in the class. The boys said little. "Yeah," said the boy whose mother said he needed to work harder. His compatriot turned to the window when I called on him.

I recalled the promise that these students would be better readers and writers than the freshmen I was used to teaching. I tried to convince myself it was too early to make comparisons, but when it came to gestures of apathetic indifference, I judged them as on par with some of my more gifted recalcitrants.

The quietest boy turned in a blank questionnaire and the one who needed to worker harder explained his presence in a single sentence: "My mom is worried about my English."

I returned to the multimedia console where I'd stacked a pile of photocopied readings including a short essay on nonfiction, an interview with David Sedaris and one of his essays in which he explores his childhood appreciation for theater. I fanned them out on the front table, told them I needed to understand what interested them and asked them to poke through the readings and find ones that looked good. If someone else

happened to pick something similar, you'd end up chatting about it with that person. For now, just find something to read.

English Major was the first to worm her way around the edge of the table and paw through the stack. The other girls followed. The boys didn't move until I told them to come get a reading. They took little time making a selection—picking up the article on nonfiction, which happened to be the shortest option. Neither appeared to progress past the first page. It didn't surprise me, the offerings felt woefully inappropriate for kids who possibly qualified as second-language learners, and certainly qualified as resistant readers. I didn't yet know how to work with them and as I looked over our little group I felt woefully underprepared and wondered who was the bigger sucker: me, them or their parents?

After they appeared to have finished, I scrawled some questions on the board and broke them up into groups based on their reading choices. The girls did all the talking—the Filipino girl made a valiant attempt at including the boy from Somalia, but he was having none of it and the South Korean kid's cheeks maintained a red flush that wouldn't quit and his group left him alone. The situation was feeling increasingly tense; I couldn't remember an age when I hadn't enjoyed reading—hadn't enjoyed stories—and had always harbored an almost evangelical belief in reading as a transformational act that electrified brain cells and boomeranged a person into places both profound and exciting, so it was disconcerting in the extreme to witness myself traumatize children with the very thing that had always given so much pleasure.

I noticed English Major busying herself with the Susan Orlean essay found in another stack of readings and taking this as a cue to switch tactics I flipped through my notebook in search of another idea, settling on "six word memoirs." A somewhat gimmicky exercise based on a feature found in an online magazine that managed to get readers to create their own content by submitting pithy summaries of their lives, I

intended it as a brainstorming exercise. “Who knows where it might go,” I said, in introducing it, “we might end up with enough stories to put together in a…book?”

The suggestion failed to inspire a reaction but I passed the assignment around and their heads bent to the pages while I meandered to the back row where I plunked down next to the boy who said his mother was worried about his English and asked what he’d meant. He spoke softly and seemed embarrassed. His teachers said he didn’t read or write at grade level and his mother was concerned because Korean was her first language and she couldn’t help him. I assured him the class should be fun and to think about bringing an example to our next class of the kind of thing that he liked to read. Writing-wise, he could do whatever he wanted. You know, to make it fun. After a minute of this I realized I’d said the word “fun” six times and was starting to sound desperate and unconvincing. I switched to the other boy.

“How’s it going?” I tried.

“…”

“I noticed you didn’t fill out your questionnaire.”

He shrugged. “I put my name on it.”

This was true.

“So how about you tell me why you took this class? Do you like to write?”

Another shrug, then: “My dad.”

“Your dad…”

“Wanted me to.”

“Well, we’re going to make it fun. Fun!”

I took his nod as a sign I could retreat. Returning to the front of the class, I counted three heads down in concentration and four affecting the pose of those seeking answers to life’s great questions by studying the ceiling. Suddenly, five Saturdays seemed like a lot of time. Seventeen-and-a-half hours in total, to be precise. I looked at the clock. Sixteen hours to go. I waited until they stopped writing, which wasn’t very long, then

asked them what they'd come up with. The answer was: not much. The boys hadn't written a word, three of the girls had jotted down a few things they liked to do. Only Jennifer and English Major had managed a sentence.

Jennifer: "Too much to do today, okay?"

English Major: "I enjoy summers the most."

I heard the first as a direct plea for mercy, the second as an indirect one. A bit too loudly, I shouted, "Let's try this!" Someone had to pump some life into the room and if that meant I had to turn into a carnival barker then so be it. "Everybody up! Stand up! Up!"

Fully convinced I'd found the solution, I handed over some dry erase markers and pointed at the white board, commanding them to draw pictures in response to short prompts that would depict their lives in one way or another. I sat on the table in the second row to watch and see what they could teach me about who they were and how to direct the class.

Over the next thirty minutes, the girls told stories, giggled and drew pictures—English Major sketching an elaborate goldfish—and skipped intermittently to the window. The boy who hadn't filled in anything on his handout besides his name asked and received permission to play with the computer, and within moments had connected to an Internet radio site and given the procedures a more festive air by selecting Miley Cyrus' "Party in the USA." I knew I should make them stop and sit down but it was a Saturday, the most sacred day on the childhood calendar. Besides, a weird order was emerging—the girls were asking each other about their drawings, and in response they were telling stories. I jotted some notes, trying to eavesdrop for ideas they could write about. Someone asked if they could eat their snack and I told them to go ahead.

"Good morning, children." Like a specter or superhero tossing off an invisibility cloak, the Talent Coordinator had materialized into our midst. The door closed with a thunk and she stationed herself in front of the white board, blocking part of English Major's four-foot goldfish. She told them to be seated and introduced herself as the principal, smiling broadly and reminding them of the expectation that they do exceptional work, how lucky they were to have such a fine instructor and how special the program was and how excited she was that they could be a part of their long tradition of excellence. Did anyone have any questions?

We floated into a silence broken by her smile and admonition to go for it; I followed her into the hallway where I smiled through my admission that I wasn't sure all of them were that interested in being there. The boys and some of the girls—

She answered my smile with a more aggressive version. "These children are different. They're not used to being around their own kind. They can be shy. Your job is to inspire them. Let them bloom and see them fly."

I cringed. Could a flower petal unfurl then drift into flight? Maybe.

"We can get you laptops. Would you like laptops?"

"I think we're fine with notebooks."

"Just say the word."

"I will."

What happened next is best told beginning with an email that arrived the following Tuesday morning from the Talent Director:

> Steve-
>
> We need to talk soon, so I can respond to this parent in a positive way. I'd prefer to reply to the parent myself.
>
> A question – when I was in your room, I assumed you were on a break? Were you? Students were writing on the board, running around, etc. This is not the tradition we have for the instructional part of a class. As you may recall, I

> suggested to you that these "young writers" are ready to learn some serious skills that a real writer has – and have time to craft pieces (for an anthology?).
>
> Since parents are spending a good deal of money [a subsidized fee of $350 for five classes; approximately $20 per instruction hour] for their child to attend your class, I know they expect serious, focused instruction – and (probably) lots of reading, serious discussion, writing, and sharing of writing – with some praise, question, polish of various pieces. How can I help you to focus? What might I be missing here? As you think forward… might you need laptops after all? Flash drives? I am in a bind here – and from what I did see (if it wasn't a break) I think there may be room to re-visit with me your class activities? Also, we believe we pay well for the teaching of the class.. and we expect advance planning.
>
> How can I help? Are you in over your head?
>
> TD

I took a breath, felt a bit sick, then scrolled down to the parent's email; it was from the mother of English Major.

> Hi TD,
> I wanted to share some thoughts about the Saturday morning Advanced Language Arts class taught by Steve McNutt. I know there are two sides to every story, so I don't mind contacting him, as well. After the class, "Jenny" [pseudonym] was not thrilled about coming back; therefore, she didn't bring home the handouts. I would like to have copies of the handouts to see what they worked on during class if they can be sent to me digitally as an attachment. She mentioned another student questioned the instructor about attending the class next month, and he/she was told that was up to him/her. I'm not sure if the parent would agree since we are paying for the five classes.
>
> I guess from listening to Jenny, and asking questions of her, she felt like she didn't understand the point of what they were doing. I am encouraging her to return to the class, and to ask more questions if she doesn't understand. I also felt she just wasn't familiar with the style of instruction. It was more relaxed, and perhaps, student led, which is something most of our students are not familiar with in public education. Jenny loves to read and write, and I was hoping the instructor would give them something to work on between classes, and from what I understand, there was no assignment. I was also hoping that they could share their writing.
>
> Since I wasn't in the class, I can only hear Jenny's impressions, so I would also be interested in what other students gained from the initial class. Jenny is missing Saturday morning Mock Trial practices (through November only) to attend this class so I wanted it to be something that she felt was really valuable. This did not happen, and we were both disappointed since she had such a great time (and gained so much) from attending the Governor's Leadership Institute last summer. We will be returning to class on October 17 since Jenny will also be attending the recognition ceremony the next day.

> It is a four hour drive, though we are able to stay with family nearby so we only have an hour and a half drive on Saturday morning. We put great importance on learning and new experiences so we will make great efforts to provide opportunities for our children.
>
> Thank you for listening to my concerns. I'm sure Mr. McNutt is a fantastic instructor and writer, and I hope Jenny will feel that as well after the next class.
>
> Parent

And on to the Talent Director's initial response to the parent:

> Hello [Parent]-
>
> I am so sorry.
>
> As you might expect, I really appreciate your lengthy note alerting me to the situation. I ask for your patience until I know more. I visited the class myself on Saturday, and at that time the students appeared to be enjoying the class. My observation, however, was that the class was a bit "active" for a writing class.
>
> Please give me a few days to sort things out here. I have just scheduled a meeting about this with the instructor – for this week, to sort [sic] get more information.
>
> If need be, he can be replaced – and I have someone else in mind. If this happens, we would "begin again" and add another date to our schedule – to replace an unsuitable class – IF this is the actual problem. I don't have enough information yet.
>
> I am also happy to issue to you a full refund at any time, if you'd prefer. My secretary, [Name], can take care f this. Call 800-xxx-xxxx and ask for [Name].
>
> I reiterate how sorry I am.
> You'll hear back from me soon.
>
> TD

I responded that afternoon:

> TD,
>
> I don't have time to fully respond to everything here but, in brief --
>
> First, I'm sorry to hear about this if for no other reason than that Jenny (if I remember her correctly) struck me as far -- far -- more advanced (for lack of a better word) than the other students. She read the Susan Orlean essay on her own, pulling it out of the stack. Part of the situation is we have second-language learners, some serious shyness and students who, frankly, didn't strike me as really

> wanting to be in a creative writing class but in some cases were doing this because it got them out of other activities. We started class by them answering, in writing, a series of questions then sharing them with a classmate who introduced them...an easy getting to know you exercise. Jenny's partner, would not talk to her, or anyone. Single-word answers. Jenny is highly sociable and some of the other students were not. The other boy never spoke, wouldn't leave his chair then afterwards said the class "was too much pressure." As far as me apparently telling another student she did/did not have to come back, that's ridiculous. I believe she's referring to a comment made by one of the other girls who said "My dad said I didn't have to come back if I didn't like it but I like it so I think I'll come back." I said, "Well, that sounds good" and laughed.
>
> As far as what we did, we spent a good hour reading (they chose from a craft essay, a David Sedaris essay and an interview), I gave them a series of prompts to choose from and after they'd been working collaboratively on the board I pointed out all of the potential topics they'd listed and asked them to find one to copy down as a way of generating an idea for an essay. After that we sorted through the readings and I told them to choose ones of interest while making sure everyone had read, or would read two common pieces. I provided them with several standard creative writing prompts, and if I recall Jenny made up her own which is fine -- but here's what it was: "If a man named (I forget) came up to you and asked for a goldfish, what would you do?"
>
> My point: I'm not sure she's looking to be either Woodward or Bernstein. In a more general sense, all of them had trouble understanding the David Sedaris essay (which is rather simple) as it didn't follow a strict chronology and I think to expect professional-level writing from them is unrealistic.
>
> I asked them if they'd like laptops and they said yes, although there's some good evidence that computers cramp the creative process. I asked if they'd like to do some outside the classroom activities and they also said yes to that. My hope is everyone will be more comfortable with each other when we come together next time, and that was another reason for letting them have a break. I had a very prescriptive lesson plan worked out and had to rearrange rather a lot on the fly and at the end of the day the lot of them seemed much happier than when they'd arrived and, from my perspective, it had been a successful day. I have to send this so can't respond to the rest.
>
> Steve

I attached the class schedule and heard from the Talent Director the following night, who had responded to the parent, the chronology of the day was a bit off but close enough and, fortunately, in repurposing parts of my responses she left out the ill-advised Woodward and Bernstein line.

> Steve -
>
> THANK YOU for your help. Please know I am very supportive of you and your

efforts – and I'm available if you want to talk some about any of this. THANK YOU for patience and for your really helpful note to me – I have used a good bit of your comments in the reply (below) (which you'll see). I just sent it to Mrs. ____.

Sounds like you have some issues in the nature of the individuals in your class. I'll do some digging and see what I can figure out… if anything I will send a note at a later time. As did you – I am running out of time & need to get out of the office and on to other things….

Cheers and my gratitude-

TD

Hello [Parent] -
As you are aware and as advertised, the Advanced Language Arts course is for 7th-8th graders with interest in reading and writing. The class intends that students will focus on the writing of creative nonfiction. The goal is for each student to generate a finished work of creative nonfiction along with other notes and ideas and prompt responses. Toward that goal, students will read short memoir narratives and profiles. Twice during the class, students will hand in work to the instructor. The first "check-in" time will be after the third class, the second will be after the last class when students will hand in a portfolio of their work. The portfolio will be returned, with comments, upon arrangement between the instructor and students/parents.

The instructor and I agree that the class is to be serious in nature—we intend for it to be a class for those who are, within the talent development process, ready to think seriously as they learn skills, techniques, etc. that can/will take them beyond "formula" poems and the like. That is why, specifically, I chose a published author and college teacher as an instructor. I was lucky to find him.

[Instructor biography inserted from web site.]

The instructor has told me he finds Jenny of high ability. He notes that in class Saturday, Jenny read the Susan Orlean essay on her own, pulling it out of the stack of selections given to students. http://www.susanorlean.com/ He was impressed.

He further comments that there is diversity in this class (as I would expect)… and also he reflects that there are some students who, so far, have chosen not to speak or to speak very little (which is their right) I believe that some writers, in fact, are quite solitary—so this comment of his does not surprise me. One of those quiet students was a partner of your daughter during an early activity. Might this have bothered her?

As far as the teacher apparently telling another student she did/did not have to come back, the teacher believes Jenny must be referring to a comment made by one of the other girls who said "My dad said I didn't have to come back if I didn't like it but I like it so I think I'll come back." The teacher reports saying, "Well, that sounds good" and chuckling.

As for the class Saturday, this is what I know. Class started by students answering, in writing, a series of questions and then sharing them with a classmate who introduced them...this was an easy getting to know you exercise. Jenny's partner,

the teacher says, would not talk to her, or to anyone. When he did speak, he had single-word answers. He felt that Jenny was sociable and the boy was not, which might have been problematic for her?

Students and the teacher spent a good hour reading (they choosing a series of prompts after working collaboratively on the white-board). The instructor pointed out all of the potential topics they'd listed and asked them to find one to copy down as a way of generating an idea for an essay.

Then, the class sorted through the readings and the instructor told them to choose ones of interest while making sure everyone had read, or would read two common pieces. The instructor provided them with several standard creative writing prompts, and the instructor recalls Jenny made up her own which was fine – it was, he says, "If a man named (I forget) came up to you and asked for a goldfish, what would you do?"

The instructor, in this first-time-to-meet class, felt that the class had some trouble understanding one of the essays, which he felt was appropriate to have used, nonetheless. The fact the particular piece of writing did not follow a strict chronology, which they might not be familiar with at this time, is what he speculates might have been happening.

The instructor asked the class, as suggested, if they'd like laptops to use for their writing. Class members said yes. There is some concern about this, as there exists some good evidence that computers cramp the creative process. In any event, we plan to provide laptops next time. How or how much computers will or may be used is to be decided.

The instructor asked students if they'd like to do some outside the classroom activities. Jenny said they did. This he is incorporating into activities. (see class description in bold above).

Our hope is everyone will be more comfortable with each other when this class convenes next time.

The instructor had a very structured lesson plan in place and, in order to adjust to a new class and needs of students, he was able to rearrange rather a lot during the morning because of the the students' interests, differences, etc.. We both felt that at the end of the morning, class members seemed much happier than when they'd arrived and, from both of our perspectives, it was a successful day.

Also, my Program Coordinator, remembers Jenny from the _____ Program this past summer. We are happy she continues to experience our activities. I am the administrator here who is most involved with the hiring and training of all of our summer staff. Consequently, I know what a difference there is between that program's activities and this one's activities. Perhaps Jenny thought that this class would be more like that one? In reality, the programs are distinctly different.

If you choose to have your daughter drop this class, I will honor your request with a full refund. If you choose to have her stay (if she chooses to continue) – it would delight both the instructor and me.

TD

I smiled at her use of the line about computers hurting the creative process. I'd read it somewhere but had no idea if it was true, and figured it depended a great deal on what one was creating. Of greater interest was the changing of "second-language learners" to "diversity." A second-language learner has specific needs while "diversity" is too ambiguous to invoke a targeted pedagogical approach. Informing the parent they'd enrolled second-language learners would raise questions about the selection process. Better to employ the euphemistic and coded reference to "diversity" so the other person can insert into the narrative whoever comes to mind and blame difficulties that might arise upon culture/race/ethnicity, et cetera. Diversity is just one of those things. It sneaks up on you and mucks everything up. What are you going to do? When it comes to meeting needs for assigning blame, it's one-stop shopping. The word explains everything, and nothing. I left all of that out of my response; I had fiscal issues of my own to consider.

> Things will be fine. One thing I didn't mention is the students *did* have a reading assignment, which Jenny apparently chose not to do. By the way, you sent me what looks like your entire exchange with her mother.

She wrote back:

> I intentionally included all -- my strategy with parents is to diffuse anger and let them cool off first. (Working toward win-win). Actually, I was afraid you'd quit after the parent's remarks... my comments were not meant to alarm you... Please don't be offended... And your explanation etc. were to the point and VERY helpful. Also, it turns out [Assistant] remembers this child from summer -- more about that when we connect. YOU are IRREPLACIBLE -- and I hope you understand my intent. As I say in my note to Mrs. Parent -- you have my full support.
>
> On another front -- welcome to the world of strong opinions of parents of the gifted -- sometimes it feels like I'm walking on quicksand! THAT would make an interesting essay!
>
> As for this scenario -- I'm actually wondering if a drop of the class by the student wouldn't be a good solution for all?
>
> I hope we (the two of us) are OK as a result?

> Thanks again for patience with adolescents and adolescent behavior. Sometimes so difficult...
>
> Best to you-
> TD

I typed away:

> Hey -- sure no worries. I've got a good plan for next class. If she drops that's up to her but I thought she was fine, would be too bad if this got blown out of proportion. And actually I find all of this fascinating -- there are so many parents that teachers wish had more involvement, but it's possible to go in the other direction as well. I can't get into it all now but am sure we'll have a chance to chat one day.
>
> I got stuck in quicksand once (on the beach…long flat expanses of shifting sand). Anyway, I only had one leg in it but the trick is to lay on your back and don't make any sudden movements. Probably not helpful, but it's all I've got.

Closure and a lighter tone:

> LOL… I might try falling over and ceasing movement -- an interesting idea... it might work just due to the shock (value) it would create :-)
>
> Stay dry--and let us know if you need things (copying, etc.) in advance.
>
> Also--we'll be emailing about this later -- the Program Advisory Board members (VIP committee that meets once a year) will be touring classes this coming [date]. They don't stay long… but they do pop in to see various classes. I'm thinking they may or may not even get to Building. We'll see.
>
> Thanks again for your note -- on this grey day your most amusing anecdote brings cheer.
>
> Talent Director

All of the students stayed. The advisory board never stopped by. I entered the room for our second class to find laptops stacked in a single dark gray tower upon the multimedia console. Plugged in, the children quieted. I felt like a human resources person walking new employees through various benefits packages and by the third week I'd scrapped

most of my plan and thrown together some short stories and writing prompts pulled from textbooks aimed at 7th and 8th graders. I used flash drives to pull their work off the laptops and had them email their work from a networked computer to themselves and by the last week, three of the girls had made a passing attempt at a couple writing assignments, none of which could have been confused with the work of a college freshman; the enthusiastic-then-unimpressed English Major wrote an extended dialogue between three kids tracking down a space alien. I'd watched as she laughed quietly and typed away. After five pages, they still hadn't discovered the aliens and it read like a transcript:

> "Watch out for that rock."
>
> "Okay."
>
> "There sure are a lot of rocks on this trail."
>
> "Yes."
>
> "This is exciting."
>
> "Yes."
>
> "I wonder what they eat?"
>
> "I don't know. What do you eat?"

I suggested she condense things down and toss in a little description. She said she'd give it a try. The two boys did little beyond sit in isolation and stare at their feet, offering monosyllabic responses to my attempts at communication, their notebooks remaining empty, handouts left behind after class. Toward the end of the last day I talked to both boys about how they might talk to their parents about their interests.

As nicely as I could, I pointed out the upside to either embracing a situation or asserting themselves might, in the future, keep them from spending almost eighteen total hours in quiet resistance. Both offered little beyond a shrug and a nod. In the battle of

attrition, they'd won, and their vacant expressions left me uneasy and invoked a line from a Vivian Gornick essay about the death of an acquaintance who was no longer a part of the "landscape of marginal encounters," her term for the urban street of their shared neighborhood. Our inability to connect had turned the classroom into the most marginal of encounters, a place where "nobody watches, everyone performs," to borrow another line from the same essay. I began to view their passivity as a profound and determined performance that demanded attention. Did they dislike the material? Were they unable to understand it? Was their resistance my fault—one had said the class was too much pressure—or did it have nothing to do with me? Were they just adolescent boys nervous around girls? I couldn't know, and it grated on me—such is the tyranny of unanswered questions, and during our last meeting, I took a few minutes to ask all of them how they'd been selected for the class. Most had heard about the program through recruitment fliers and teachers familiar with the program. Jessica had been called to the principal's office and instructed to take home promotional materials for her parents. None were sure why they'd been selected.

"Tests," explained the Talent Director, during a quick chat in her office. "We have several that we use that are designed to identify the gifted. General intelligence tests. Subject tests." Authored by ACT or Iowa Testing Programs, they also offer psychosocial tests that measure motivation, social engagement and self-regulation and above level testing to help students "explore broad options."

Further information was explained as proprietary and something she couldn't share. She had relationships with schools and teachers and administrators would recommend students for testing, or she'd contact them on the lookout for recruits and to advertise programming. Sometimes children test as gifted in one subject but contrary to the program's advice, their parents enrolled them in other subjects. When asked why this was possible, she said enrollment policies for free classes were more stringent than classes, like mine, that charged tuition because the free classes attracted more applicants. In their

model, as costs decreased, interest increased. In order to manage demand, they had to raise their standards. It was an answer that flipped the paradigm equating cost with quality for one where affordability drove exclusivity. In opening wide the doors, they gained the luxury of a wider selection of students. It worked because applicants didn't associate low cost with low quality: you didn't get what you paid for, you got what someone else paid for, if they thought it was in their best interest to offer it.

I knew money didn't explain everything. I kept thinking about their age. That's what got me. They were kids, twelve and thirteen-years old. For me, those years had been a period of naïve but blissful certainty as to who I was and where I was going—a feeling I'm not sure I've managed to recapture since—and looking back on those five Saturdays, my mistake had been in listening to an equally certain assessment of children by someone who'd never met them, and whose only point of reference was a test score. I resist neatly packaged lessons, but this one was hard to ignore. Learning it over a period of five Saturdays sparked a forgotten unease with the standardizing goals of education, and another question about to what extent standardized testing is a tool used to mold the next generation into their predecessors' remembered selves. In search of answers both remembered and forgotten, I took inspiration from the oft-quoted Faulkner line about the past never being dead, about the past not even being the past, and took it as a clue hinting where I should look in the hopes of answering such questions. The location, as is likely obvious, was closer than anticipated.

# THE IOWA MACHINE

I was at a potluck talking about standardized testing when it hit me: It's true. I know how to party. The listener was generous after a rundown lasting much too long.

"Iowa City is a testing epicenter," he said. "It's in the town's DNA."

It was a good line given not only the town's history, but that all standardized tests for aptitude and achievement descend from intelligence tests that conceived of intelligence as a genetically-driven and unitary trait. A history of good intentions co-opted by ambition and hubris, the story that would eventually arrive in Iowa City and its university began in 1904, with Alfred Binet. Director of the Sorbonne's Laboratory of Experimental Psychology in France, Binet created the Binet-Simon Scale alongside Theodore Simon. The test was grounded in the work of Francis Galton and designed at the request of the minister of public instruction in France for the purpose of identifying "subnormal" children "unsuited" for a mainstream and mandatory schooling environment. The result was the world's first test for intelligence. The test attempted to set standards for age-appropriate tasks regarding abilities not taught in school like judgment, memory, attention and problem-solving skills and yet Binet warned against his test's potential for misuse, calling ideas that intelligence could not be improved a "brutal pessimism." Nor did he ascribe to the idea of "IQ" and the term "intelligence quotient" (Wolf, 1973, p. 172, 178). The idea that a single number could describe someone's intellect was the work of the German psychologist, Wilhelm Stern, who proposed the concept of "mental age" from which he then derived the "intelligence quotient" (IQ), a leap in reasoning Simon called *la trahison*, the "betrayal" or "treachery," for its redefinition of the test's results from something intended to cleave a limited sample from a moment in time for the purpose of hinting at a child's immediate readiness for school to a number able to determine potential over the course of a lifetime. In confusing a signpost along a path with the path itself, Stern, in a sense, helped form the central

conceit and tension between diagnosis and determinism that would direct the historical arc of standardized testing.

Neither Simon nor Binet accepted the equation behind IQ as mathematically valid or used the term, preferring the intentionally vague term "mental level" (Wolf). Binet was confident he and Simon had authored a test able to identify children of below-average intelligence, but he did not believe he had authored a test measuring the "richness of intelligence;" a concept he refused to either define or hypothesize as to its behavior (Wolf). Even though intelligence testing was a French creation, it became much more popular and invited greater faith in the United States than in France where they preferred to rely on the judgment of experts evaluating individuals rather than cede that role to a test (Carson, 2007, p. 5).

After the Binet-Simon Scale's initial translation and introduction to the United States by the psychologist and eugenicist Henry Goddard, a professor of psychology at Stanford named Lewis Terman revised, expanded and marketed the test as well as the concept of IQ. He produced its scale by using the test to determine a "mental age" score, using the mathematically suspect method of dividing the test-taker's chronological age, then multiplying it by 100. By 1916, Binet had died along with his qualifications about his test. After producing a few shorter, less ambitious versions, Terman published *The Measurement of Intelligence*, an expanded version of the test that would help launch the testing industry. Part test and part manifesto, the book employs every racial stereotype of his era alongside a distrust of teachers, preference for tests and belief in intelligence as a "unitary" trait (Minton, 1988, p. 195-7). In an inspired move toward the co-opting of Binet's work and reputation, Terman dedicated the book to his memory. Terman's views on the genetic basis for intelligence and the role of testing is unequivocal:

> Among laboring men and servant girls there are thousands like them [feebleminded individuals]. They are the world's "hewers of wood and drawers of water." And yet, as far as intelligence is concerned, the tests have told the

> truth...No amount of school instruction will ever make them intelligent voters or capable voters in the true sense of the word.
>
> …The fact that one meets this type with such frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods.
>
> Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves. There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding (Terman, 1916, p. 91-92).

In 1917, a year after Terman published his expanded version of *The Measurement of Intelligence*, the University of Iowa founded the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station (ICWRS) after years of wrangling with the state legislature, the swaying of public opinion thanks in part to newspaper editorials pointing out the state spent more time and money studying its hogs than its children (Bradbury and Stoddard, 1933, p. 25). The station found a home in a series of houses turned into offices, a preschool nursery and a library on a block of Iowa City now filled by the Henry B. Tippie College of Business—all dedicated to studying the "normal" child. In *Before Head Start*, Iowa State University professor of history Hamilton Cravens describes the station as possibly the first research institute in the world and certainly in the United States dedicated solely to conducting original scientific research on the development of "normal" children, and the first with a preschool nursery for research purposes. Terman was offered the directorship of the program and turned it down (Cravens, 1993, p. 104).

*On Being a Termite*

Terman, in 1921, began a longitudinal study tracking more than 1,528 children he'd identified as gifted; the longest running study of a single cohort regardless of discipline. Using his 50-minute exam in combination with recommendations from principals and

teachers, he tracked the children over the course of their lifetimes; publishing seven volumes of results along the way.

In his examination of Terman's legacy, Leslie Mitchell found that most of the participants remain anonymous, but those who revealed their participation went on to diverse careers in physiology, physics, journalism, film and other primarily white collar endeavors. They made twice the median salary of their peers and received bachelor's degrees at ten times the national rate. The women in the study went to college at a greater rate than their peers and had fewer children.

Their response rate was high and those who've spoken about the study say they felt a degree of loyalty and affection toward Terman. A loss of any attempt at objectivity or professional distance was one of the study's central problems as Terman felt protective of his participants, affectionately deemed "Termites," and that led him to interfere in their lives by writing recommendation letters, and using his influence in other ways to open doors leading to college admissions and employment. In most cases, they were unaware of his actions, which further complicates the influence he had on their identities. Certainly it undermines the notion their successes could be fully credited to merit even if, in Terman's mind, the test scores justified whatever actions he took.

Measuring the precise degree to which Terman's study influenced their lives and identities is a task I can't perform, but it clearly had an effect. Russell Robinson, a former NASA director of aeronautical research says knowing what Terman thought of him gave him confidence. At several points in his career, when in need of a boost, he reminded himself of how Terman assessed him: "I would ask myself, Am I up to this? Then I would think, Dr. Terman thought I was." Others said the study imposed an unwelcome degree of pressure to succeed or made them complacent. Even without knowing the ways Terman advocated on their behalf, a quarter of the men and almost a third of the women still said participating in Terman's study changed their lives (Mitchell, 2000).

Terman's behavior toward his participants undermined potential conclusions, but

it was a minor mistake compared to Terman comparing his study group to the general population. This decision wouldn't have been a problem except that his initial process for choosing which children would be tested skewed heavily to the selection of children of privilege so that he ended up with a study population where 82% of the children came from the highest socio-economic status backgrounds—a near inversion of the population of California in 1921. His selection process was so skewed he didn't bother canvassing segregated schools for Japanese and Chinese children and vastly underrepresented Latin American, black, Portuguese, Italian and Native American children as well. Because he believed female IQ hit an early ceiling he also tested and therefore selected more males. For decades, Terman's study was a staple in psychology textbooks and they often repeated his claim: that success is a measure of intelligence and that IQ is a strong predictor for career choice, earnings and educational trajectory. Unfortunately, all of those conclusions were based on an erroneous "apples-to-oranges" comparison Terman made between his students and the general population. Terman, and people who think like him, saw IQ as the cause of those advantages and were so committed to this idea they couldn't see the value in trying to eliminate other possible factors so they didn't do what they should have, which was compare outcomes of the high IQ kids to the outcomes of their classmates—who were products of similar schools and neighborhoods—as doing so would have helped control for social class and its attendant advantages. Much has been written about the problems with the study's conclusions, and some work has been done to make the comparisons Terman should have made and those who've done so have found steadily shrinking advantages enjoyed by those with high IQ scores. One example of many: when the men in Terman's study were compared to college educated men of the era their annual earnings advantage was a meager $224 a year. Overall, when later researchers made further comparisons between Terman's "kids" to children of the same social class the advantages held by Terman's participants in terms of occupation and earnings virtually disappeared. (Ceci, 1990, p. 56-68).

In other ways, the Termites were quite average; their rates of divorce, suicide and alcoholism all closely followed the national rates in those categories. None of the children would win Nobel or Pulitzer Prizes, although both prizes were won by children he tested who failed to score high enough for selection. Studies *within* his group further hurt assertions about causal links between IQ and success. Terman defined success based on employment, with scientists, professors, doctors and lawyers identified as professions signaling a person of high intelligence and employment in trades like carpentry and electronics as a sign of its absence. The notion is, of course, wildly problematic, but even when adult participants in Terman's studies were compared to each other based on participation in professions supposedly requiring high or low intelligence, their average IQ scores were nearly identical. Removing test scores from the equation, the factors that led to employment in white-collar professions were confidence, persistence and parental education level and encouragement (p.46, 49).

Terman's work has a modern corollary in the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth at Vanderbilt University, which over two decades has followed 286 men and 94 women who in a national talent search scored in the top one in ten thousand on cognitive-ability measures before their thirteenth birthday. Translation: before age 13, participants had scored an SAT-Math score of at least 700 or an SAT-Verbal score of at least 630.

Participants' career accomplishments over time were then compared to graduate students enrolled in top-ranked U.S. mathematics, engineering, and physical science programs. The result was most of the children ended up taking somewhat similar directions as the graduate students in the comparison group, finding occupations in science and technology associated with high standardized test scores in math. Since a high standardized test score in math is a primary measure used for access to those programs this outcome may not be surprising. They were then graded based on measures like tenure, articles published and patents.

It's unclear how the children were selected for the talent search or how selection affected them—the singular interest is in outcomes. Questions about whether a test affects those taking it did not interest these researchers; for advocates of standardized testing as a mass talent-identification tool, their interest is in tests as a means for revealing an enduring truth. The study concluded that those who do well on a standardized test before their thirteenth birthday have more to contribute to society because standardized tests like the SAT "assess much more than booklearning potential; they capture important individual differences in human capital critical for advancing and maintaining society in the information age through a variety of demanding professions, including medicine, finance, and the professoriate. Assessing exceptional cognitive abilities early uncovers a population with remarkable potential for occupational roles requiring complex information processing and creativity" (Lubinski, 2006, p. 198).[2]

Other studies of the same data went farther, decreeing that high SAT scores before age 13 served as a means for identifying "special populations" destined to become "outstanding creators of modern culture" with potential for both creativity and leadership, while tallying up "accomplishments per person" and admitting wide variability even within this narrow population with a few individuals being responsible for many of the quantified works whether it was acceptance by elite institutions, poems published or grant money acquired (Kell, 648, p. 648-659). Poems, novels and refereed articles – all of them were collapsed under the title "creative written works"—and participants were

[2] Two of the authors of The Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth, David Lubinski and Camilla P. Benbow, and their work, were contributors to *A Nation Deceived,* a 2004 report critical of the state of gifted education in the United States and authored by the Belin-Blank Center. Identifying Colleges of Education as "the silent problem" to blame for a lack of focus on measures like acceleration, the report says, "No one knows for certain [why educators don't focus more on gifted education], but one thing we do know is that America's teachers and administrators have one thing in common—an education degree." Having identified the culprit, Dr. Benbow, who serves as Dean of the College of Education at Vanderbilt University, explains that Colleges of Education deserve blame for worrying too much about social justice and equity and not enough about excellence; the primary evidence offered to justify this betrayal is a "cursory look" of course catalogues that reveals too few courses on the gifted (2004, p. 49). The real problem as they see it is too little attention given to the "top one in ten thousand."

tallied up as offering 5.3 accomplishments per person and 20.6 per person in the fine arts (music, sculpture, etc.). I'd never seen accomplishments flattened out and tallied up in such a manner where a grant-received earned the same tick-mark on the headboard as that of a poem or a patent. The thinking resembled an artifact of the unitary and numerical expression of intelligence that met opposition as this country moved into the 1930s.

*The Iowa Child Welfare Research Station Studies and an Accidental Study of Identity*

By the 1930s, work by ICWRS researchers Beth Wellman, Marie Skodak, Ruth Updegraff and Howard Skeels repeatedly questioned the notion of IQ in terms of what it was and whether it was, as hereditarians like Terman claimed, a fixed, unitary trait. Along with Skeels, Wellman authored numerous Iowa studies. In 1932, she wrote the first of numerous articles on the effects of schooling on intellect while questioning the innateness of intelligence, finding in one of the earlier ICWRS studies a greater increase in student IQ scores between the fall and spring semesters, when school was in session, than when it was not in session, implying the test relied at least partly on education (Minton, 1984, p. 161). The hereditarians, led by Terman, dismissed the findings, saying the Iowa researchers weren't properly trained and did not understand IQ, thus beginning a pattern of the ICWRS presenting research that was then rejected by the intelligence-testing community.

Several studies took place at The Iowa Soldier Orphan's Home in Davenport, Iowa which, by the late 1930s, was home to six hundred children who were either orphans or children of parents so destitute in the midst of the Great Depression that they could not care for them. The lead study was titled, quite transparently, "A Study of Environmental Stimulation: An Orphanage Preschool Project." With the help of state funding, the ICWRS built a preschool and for the next three years, the ICWRS tracked children grouped by age and IQ scores, monitoring the progress of those who attended the

preschool and those who did not. The primary finding emerged from the effects of long residency in the orphanage upon those in the control group. Instead of staying static as expected, the effect, "was a leveling one, tending to bring all children [regardless of initial IQ score] to high-grade feeblemindedness or borderline classification" (IQ range of 70-79). The two children in the control group with the highest initial scores lost 28.5 points, and two others lost 43 and 37 points. A follow-up study on Orphans Home children placed in foster and adoptive homes found that, after placement, adopted children saw gains in their IQ scores the longer they were with their foster or adoptive families, with the most substantial gains made by children who had been in the preschool. Their IQs eventually came to more closely resemble those of their foster or adoptive parents whereas the IQ scores of children who remained in the orphanage did not change (Skeels, 1938, p. 58).

The study would become a longitudinal study lasting fifteen years. Begun by Howard Skeels, when published in its final version in 1949 by Marie Skodak, it became known simply as "Skodak and Skeels" and "the most famous and most controversial adoption study in psychology's history." Its implications found expression in public policy in John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs and War on Poverty, the 1984 Equal Opportunity Act, Job Corps, Vista and Community Action Programs including Head Start (Locurto, 1991, p. 37-38). The results strongly alluded to the malleability of intelligence and raised questions about what the word even meant, and they did so using the same tool Lewis Terman used to advocate the opposite position.

The orphanage attracted research interest from others at the university who were drawn to the opportunity to study a fairly stable population of children who, as orphans, did not offer the problem of requiring parental consent. At the same time the ICWRS was moving toward the latter stages of its studies into the malleability of IQ scores, a smaller but eventually infamous study on the relationship between evaluation and speech began

that offers lessons in the long-term effects of an identity induced through a clinical or otherwise official mechanism of assessment. Known today as the "Monster study" and designed by Wendell Johnson, one of the pioneers in speech pathology, its intent was to test his "diagnosogenic theory" that stuttering was purely environmental and caused by over-attention from parents and others who made a child self-conscious. In an attempt to test his theory, he sent in January of 1939 a graduate student assistant named Mary Tudor to the orphanage where, over a period of weeks, she tried to induce stuttering in children who spoke normally by telling them they stuttered, and tried to lessen the stuttering of those who did by telling the stutterers that they spoke normally. The ten children who stuttered were divided into two groups. One was told they did stutter, the other was told they did not. The twelve children who spoke with normal fluency were also divided into two groups with the first told they spoke well and the second told they stuttered, even though they didn't. In terms of its anticipated outcomes, the study failed. It neither induced stuttering in those who spoke fluently nor did it improve the speech of those who stuttered.

It did, however, have one result that speaks directly to the discussion of standardized testing and identity: the children who spoke fluently but were told they stuttered developed the secondary behaviors of those who stuttered. They became withdrawn, self-conscious, unwilling to read aloud in class and hesitant to even speak during their sessions with Tudor—some going so far as covering their mouths when they spoke. The other children also treated them as stutterers, mocking their speech and isolating them. In two cases, children ran away from the orphanage to escape the teasing and shame associated with believing they had a behavior they didn't have. In short, Tudor and Johnson not only induced silence, but long before anyone spoke of "identity" they used trusted adult assessment to create and impose a false identity. To varying degrees it followed the six children branded as stutterers for their entire lives leaving them socially-

awkward and isolated. In 2007, six years after a public apology from the university, they would settle a lawsuit against the state for $925,000.

A *New York Times* article on the study described it in language that could apply just as easily to the standardized testing industry, saying the story revealed "the brittleness of children and the egos of driven men" (Reynolds, 2003). Aside from the ethical problems associated with the study, which would make its replication impossible, if it were performed today it would sound like an experiment on the effects of unfounded praise and criticism on self-esteem and behavior. It also suggests that an internalized identity, even one without evidence, when presented by a credible source, can direct behavior for a lifetime. Similarly, the stories I've heard over the past few years suggest standardized testing induces secondary behaviors comparable to those of "strong" or "weak" students.

Wendell Johnson called Stoddard his "academic godfather" and one of the four most influential people in his life, crediting Stoddard for helping Johnson gain initial admission into the university and securing a research assistantship. Johnson, more than Stoddard, embodied the stance of the strict "environmentalist" who saw, at least in the case of stuttering, a behavior that was wholly driven by social cues. When Johnson realized the ethical problems associated with the study he removed all references to it in his official papers and never published the work and did so partly out of fear that public awareness of the study could likely ruin his career. Burying the study saved Johnson's reputation, but it also delayed changes in speech pathology which for decades followed Johnson's ideas that stuttering was almost entirely a learned behavior.

### *Testing Becomes an Industry*

Popular excitement over the potential uses of intelligence testing was a product of fear driven by predictions of a failing society. Growth predictions of the U.S. population, which in hindsight would prove quite incorrect, foretold of a population expected to

eventually peak at 153 million in 1980, then decrease thereafter with immigration the likely solution to continued population growth (Jaffe, 1941, p. 64-68). By the late 1930s, motivated by fears that increasing levels of immigration would allow the entrance of undesirables, the hereditarians desired the means for preserving traditional power structures and avenues of privilege. To this end, the imported Binet-Simon Scale was a perfect tool for use in advancing that goal, and it did so by painting a gloss of scientific objectivity upon the idea of a meritocracy.[3]

Growing public interest and acceptance in the viability of the IQ test was a direct product of World War I, when Robert Yerkes convinced the U.S. Army to use his version of the IQ test as a means for sorting recruits. After initial resistance, it was accepted for use by many politicians and military leaders of high rank; but the tests were poorly administered and met with considerable resistance from seasoned officers. Many simply refused to take the test. The results showed the effect of their resistance as, according to the test, a large percentage of the Army scored as mentally handicapped, results that fed public fear and debate about a crumbling society that fed post-war fears of immigrants, people of non-Western European backgrounds and communists. Nonetheless, the United States emerged from the war victorious as did the IQ test. Despite objections from the Army that it measured familiarity with content and speed, but not intelligence, tens of thousands of young men had been habituated to the idea of its use as a tool for measuring intelligence (Carson, 210-218).

Shortly thereafter, Carl Brigham, one of the researchers involved in the Army tests, published a book making claims similar to other eugenicists who warned of the impending dilution of intelligence in the U.S. due to the population becoming more racially diverse. He went on to use a similar test on college freshman and was

[3] The word “meritocracy” originated in a satirical Ph.D. dissertation published in 1958 and set in 2030 to make the point that economic advantage for the few brings social disadvantage/unrest. Intelligence testing, in the "future," is used to determine social status. In a footnote the reader learns the purported author was killed in a bloody uprising.

subsequently asked to author what became the SAT. By 1935, Harvard required the SAT for admission. Other elite colleges followed suit, but adoption of the test was far from instantaneous.

The University of Iowa's symbiotic relationship with educational testing and technology began in earnest in 1955. Seventeen years before the invention of the more widely-known bubble-sheet scoring Scantron device, Everett Franklin Lindquist built and patented the first successful optical mark-sense scanner. Lindquist created "the Iowa machine" (it never received an official name) for use in scoring the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a test that had become commercially available in the early 1940s and emerged from the Iowa Academic Meet, a statewide academic contest Lindquist began at the end of the 1928 school year and in which schools and individual students competed at the local, district and state level against one another on subject tests. Known in the press as the "Brain Derby" and the "Cranium Contest," forty thousand students participated in the contest's first year.

In the beginning, schools were discouraged from placing too much emphasis on winning but encouraged to celebrate high-scoring students and, by the mid-1930s, the university stopped publicizing school rankings and schools were given the opportunity to participate on a noncompetitive basis so they might get the results outside the parameters of a contest. The tests, with a few exceptions, used multiple-choice, true-false and matching questions and were hand-scored. Their growing popularity made automation a practical necessity and Lindquist, who had created the Iowa Testing Programs to author and administer the tests, began work on "the Iowa Machine." Once complete, with the assistance of the university, Lindquist founded a for-profit company, the Measurement Research Center, for the purpose of using "the Iowa machine" to score the ITBS and the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED).

As the country's only electronic educational test scoring company, MRC was an almost immediate financial success. ITP had been an income-center for the university but

the founding of MRC marked the true beginning of the university serving as an incubator for the for-profit testing industry. Like a celebrated Silicon Valley start-up connected to Stanford, MRC began in a converted garage, and benefited from a university's start-up capital and expertise, all of which soon translated into profits that, in part, were directed toward the initial funding used in launching the ACT test for American Collegiate Testing. Envisioned in large part by Lindquist with additional funding coming from ITP royalties, the first ACT was a combination of four curriculum-based ITED tests, which MRC scored at below-cost.

In the early 1960s, ACT moved toward independence while retaining its non-profit status and Westinghouse Electric Corporation purchased MRC for stock in 1968, the same year MRC scored the first National Evaluation of Student Progress writing assessment (a test that became the NAEP). The stock proceeds went to ITP, to repay its initial investment, and to the university's creation of The Iowa Measurement Research Foundation, which tasked itself with extending the knowledge of testing within the university. The foundation's first act was the building of The Lindquist Center for Measurement, known today as The Lindquist Center. Westinghouse subsequently sold MRC to National Computer Systems (NCS) (Peterson, 1983, p. 90-107, 144-145, 168). Bought by Pearson, a London-based multinational media company, it's subsidiary Pearson Education is the largest educational company in the world, with offices in more than seventy countries, and annually scores forty million tests from fifteen states, more than any other test-scoring company.

Pearson also purchased World Book, the original publisher of the SAT, a test that had a significant head start on the ACT. By the midpoint of the century only around 80,000 children took the SAT, but ten years later in 1960 (a year after MRC established the American College Testing Program) that number rose to 800,000. The end of the decade brought federally-mandated reliance on standardized testing to tell us about the state of public education when, in 1969, the Johnson administration decided the

Department of Education should evaluate student learning with the National Assessment of Education Progress. A low-stakes exam that did not impact school funding, graduation or teacher evaluations, over subsequent years, use of standardized testing as a means for evaluating public K-12 education increased to the point where, by 1984, twenty-nine states had students take competency or proficiency tests, fifteen had high school exit exams, eight tied performance to grade promotion and thirty-two had competency exams for teachers (Airasian, 1987, p. 393-412).

In this brisk tracking of standardized testing's growing importance, the year 1984 deserves mention less in deference to the Orwell novel, than because it was a year after the publication of "A Nation at Risk," an assessment on the state of public education by the Department of Education. As mentioned in the "Testing Becomes an Industry" section, "A Nation at Risk" identified the academically gifted as a "key group" in turning back the "rising tide of mediocrity" believed to be leaving the United States technologically, culturally and politically vulnerable to the Soviet Union. The report has achieved a degree of infamy among scholars for both its exaggerated claims and as a seminal example of policy makers' desires to promote education as an instrument existing to secure national economic and military might.

By 1989, of 2.5 million U.S. high school graduates, 1.2 million took the SAT. Despite the SAT having an approximately thirty five-year head start, 1 million of those graduates took the ACT and standardized tests had achieved status as de facto tools for entry into college. With the advent of the ITBS and a similar test, the ITED (Iowa Test of Educational Development), standardized testing spread to younger schoolchildren and, in 1994, ten years after "A Nation at Risk," this country took the next step toward our present circumstances when the federal government mandated states design their own tests to monitor the annual achievement of third through eighth graders if they wanted to continue receiving Title I funding, and that those standards be identical to those of students that weren't in high-poverty schools. Known as the Improving America's School

Act (IASA) and a renaming of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first passed in 1965 (since reauthorized and renamed No Child Left Behind), its intent was equality but in its pursuit the law attached, for the first time in this country's history, test scores to funding. In addition to state-designed tests, the ITBS was already in use by many states to measure yearly progress, and those results now contributed to qualifying for Title I funding. After the legislation's passage, state and local decisions around standards, testing, teacher training, curriculum, and accountability measures were for the first time linked to the largest federal funding source for elementary and secondary education, setting the groundwork for the sanctions and punishment and narrowly-defined standards embedded within NCLB.

In 1993, a year before Congress passed IASA and supercharged the effect of testing on public education, the ITBS—funded by Title I—changed the life of a third-grader living in Tiffin, Iowa.

# THE STORYTELLERS

# AEVITA: "TALENTED AND GIFTED WAS FOR YUPPIES"

She sat behind a table and leaned against a brick wall. Above her head, a painting of a lone figure holding a spear hurdled through emptiness. Portentous or irrelevant, I'd yet to decide. I hadn't seen her in three or four months—maybe more—and long before the weather turned and she'd told me the story of a third grader, a standardized test and a state-mandated emancipation.

Then, as now, she'd held a cup of coffee in both hands as if staying warm was a trial; a swirl of ungoverned hair dyed vermillion escaping the ever-present floppy hat. Sandy-colored and made of a synthetic water-wicking, UV-resistant microfiber with a pull tie at the neck it's the kind of thing advertised as ideal for camping no matter the conditions. Rainforest one day and desert the next, it has you covered. Now and then if the circumstances don't seem to require a hat, a stranger will tease her about it—an older guy, usually, with a need to vocalize anything he finds unusual—and she has to explain the hat, the light cotton gloves, the long sleeves, the long pants. How if she doesn't protect her skin against direct exposure to ultraviolet light an allergic reaction kicks in and within a minute her skin turns a violent pink and small white blisters surface on her skin like tiny bubbles adhering inside the glass of a carbonated beverage.

The reaction is a side effect of lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease in which the immune system attacks its own tissues and organs including the skin, brain, heart and lungs as well as the circulatory system. When properly treated, it's no longer as fatal or as certain to cause disability but stress and fatigue—and sunlight—can cause a flare, which presents itself in unpredictable ways; it's gone after her joints in the past but the last one hit her kidneys and left her so tired she felt as if she'd been hit by a car. Her diagnosis came after twelve years of uncertainty due in part to the myriad ways it presents itself in the body. No one knows why it develops; some people have a predilection to it and it sits in the body waiting for stress or the wrong drug or the wrong infection—or even

sunlight—to bring it to life. A natural redhead, until I met her, I thought I knew what it meant to be sensitive to the sun. I also thought I knew what it meant to have your identity partly shaped by the environment.

"About time," she said.

I apologized for being late and slid into the chair across from her. I told her I was usually sometimes timely and handed over a book, which she quickly gathered into her shoulder bag. Outside, it was one of days when even those with the sunniest disposition can no longer avoid the reality that winter is happening and, earlier, I'd taken the weather as an invitation to stay indoors and work on this dissertation.

Naturally, the effort turned into the clearing of takeout containers from my kitchen counter where they'd obscured an unread book on the benefits of a vegan diet I'd borrowed from her after taking her oral history, a phrase that makes what I'm doing sound like the work of a metaphysical dentist. And it very well may be. There's little drilling and even less spitting, but like a trip to the dentist, recounting a history isn't always pain-free. Still, a healthy and necessary act.

In the months since we first spoke, we'd exchanged a few emails and met for falafel sandwiches to clarify a few points and in the process she trusted me with details about her life unknown to her closest friends, with the exception of her roommate who'd walked into her room and spotted her test results when she was sorting through some paperwork. One determined her to have dyscalculia, a severe math disability that makes basic mathematical functions almost impossible for her to process, another listed intelligence test results scoring her—to use the common parlance of such tests—as gifted. She guarded this secret as closely as she did her past. It was a complicated story that led to the Iowa state court system revoking all parental rights and she'd had no contact with her parents since she was sixteen and wanted to keep it that way. Thus, confidentiality mattered. Thus, our final bit of pressing business: her pseudonym.

Having changed her name after being emancipated, I assumed she'd have some ideas, but she wanted me to pick one. When you've put that much thought into reinventing yourself once, finding a similar level of energy and interest is difficult. She still wanted a good one and my suggestions had yet to impress. In deference to her interest in the Middle Ages, I'd already run through the most famous women of the era, none of whom were approved. And that was okay, because I was confident I'd come up with a winner.

Her chosen names (and she had several) used Latin bases that made allusions to feminism, teaching, music, resisting Roman rule and being a country bumpkin. I suggested the Latin word for lifetime, generation, stage, period of life, days of yore and immortality as her story referenced a brief period in time echoing throughout the rest of her life. From that angle, it fit everyone I'd spoken with. So how about it?

"Aevita," said Aevita. "I like it."

For her interview, we'd met in a coffee shop next to a copy store and tanning salon. A strip of four-lane roadway skirted past.

The gray, cloudy sky was fine by her. She'd received her lupus diagnosis three months before our conversation, and after the emergence of a facial rash that looked like butterfly's wings flitting upon each of her cheeks. At the behest of concerned friend, Aevita walked into UIs rheumatology clinic. For someone who'd absorbed a lifetime of ambiguous diagnoses, it was nice to have an answer, and the kind of thing that made her want to open up and share things kept tucked away.

Midway through our conversation, she'd step into a hallway in search of a bathroom and encounter a phalanx of fluorescent bulbs then show me the patch of red, welted skin where the light hit her skin between her glove and shirt cuff. In a sense, health is the central theme of her current life; vigilance over her own and that of children takes up many of her waking hours and focuses her attention on a question all of us try to

answer about why certain events happen the way they do, about why and how we become who we become.

For fifteen years she'd worked off and on as a nanny and until recently had been working nanny for six families before scaling back to three in order to manage her health issues. She avoids sharing personal information with clients, so in explaining to one that she needed to reduce her hours she'd kept it simple and said she "needed to get some testing done."

"What kind of testing?" the client wanted to know.

She'd meant medical tests but her vagueness tripped her up. "Testing," she repeated.

"I ask because a friend is looking for people with testing stories."

The client handed over a copy of *Little Village*, a free alt-weekly newspaper notable for its music reviews, the comic strip *Tom Tomorrow* and an intermittent series about the adventures of a local cab driver. Tucked in a corner, under a coupon for one of the town's many bars, resided a simple ad.

Have You Been Tested?

UI graduate student/writer in College of Education would like to hear about your experiences with standardized tests or assessments of intelligence and/or aptitude.

I'd borrowed the idea from Elizabeth Stone, a psychology professor with deeper access to funds than I and who'd run ads in the *New York Times Review of Books* towards her collecting of stories for *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*. At the bottom of the ad, I added an email address, a promise of confidentiality, and an invitation to "tell your side of the story" in assisting a research study learn, and portray, the different ways we're affected by the testing experience. It wasn't the best copy I'd ever written, but the university's Institutional Review Board rejected punchier versions. It

wouldn't end up mattering much as the ad only ran in print once. Since it was for a dissertation, the paper gave me a discount, but at $150 per, I couldn't afford to run it again.

"It's not that kind of testing," she told the (now) former client then sent an email to the address I'd listed for those interested in further information. It would be the ad's only response. I wrote back using the required pro forma project synopsis language approved by the institutional bureaucracy. Her return email was brief, saying, simply, that she was still interested. She would be my first interview for the project and we talked a few times informally before formalizing matters with signatures on consent forms and a recorded conversation. The conversation that follows is from that day, with some contextualizing details added later. Out of a desire to interfere as little as possible with stage direction, in the longer passages I eliminated places where I encouraged her to say more and have kept my descriptive presence at a minimum.

Within her interview, you'll find nine stories. They could be called situations or vignettes or anecdotes in service of a larger narrative. I'm calling them stories as each one functions as a narrative with a beginning, middle and end with a point of conflict and clear outcome. They also vary greatly in content and length; more will be said about both of those points later. For me, one of their central pleasures is in the subtle irony of a high score on a tool intended as force in service of standardization—of sameness—serving as a mechanism for igniting feelings of difference. My hope is the reader will read the stories for the ways in which a request for stories about standardized testing branched off in other directions, each one revealing Aevita's desire for affirmation and respect. In every instance, they circle around the question of what it's like to feel different, with testing as a force tasked with confirming difference. In every instance, they also reveal desires for respect within stories of life as someone identified as special yet existing within a situation absent a supportive family environment. Labeling stories as "good" or bad, "positive" or "negative," is simplistic but these labels serve as a starting place so, in reading them, I also

ask the reader to notice stories offering examples of positive differences—such as being smart or possessing a specific kind of knowledge or thinking "differently" or in a more creative fashion—and of negative differences, such as having disabilities or health problems, and the consequences of being identified as different. My reading resulted in the following tally, examined in the pages following her interview:

Positive expression of difference; positive consequences: 0
Positive expression of difference; negative consequences: 5 (Stories: 1, 2, 3, 7 and 9)
Negative expression of difference; positive consequences: 0
Negative expression of difference; negative consequences: 4 (Stories: 4, 5, 6 and 8)

The day we spoke, Aevita said she felt pretty good. The farmhouse she'd rented with a friend and moved out of in the last month had its charms—space for campfires and parties, an abandoned barn that yearned to be converted into a workspace, and loads of rolling, wind-swept beauty and top-notch stargazing angles—but a good view and abundant space only takes you so far. In the summer it turned into a sauna, in winter a freezer.

"Ask me how cold it was."

"How cold was it?"

"It was so cold, we had frost inside the house. On the windows. On the walls."

"That's cold."

"It is."

Her new place in an apartment complex populated by graduate students near the hospital looked less like a movie producer's idea of life in Iowa, but the utilities usually worked and were more affordable. It was closer, too, saving her a long drive every morning into town where she does "the nanny thing." The parents are professionals mostly, with multiple degrees and strong opinions. She's done it long enough that she can

interview the parents, not the other way around. There's a boyfriend in the mix. He studies physics and lets her steal his socks, which he has in both abundance and in quality.

Like most children in Iowa**,** Aevita's history with standardized testing began after she took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills as a third-grader in Tiffin, a town of less than five hundred people in southeast Iowa. Her ITBS story isn't told as a story—she doesn't recall the experience beyond thinking of it as a game and kind of fun—but as a single fact in the form of a score that transitions into other stories. For test-takers in third grade, ITBS reports scores on eleven tests (Vocabulary, Word Analysis, Reading, Listening, Language – including Spelling, Word Concepts, Math Problems, Math Computation, Social Studies, Science and Sources of Information). Each receives a three-digits score "normed" as either not-proficient, proficient, or advanced. Aevita doesn't recall these scores, but she does remember learning her NGE, or National Grade Equivalency, a number assigned by ranking other test-takers against each other. As a third grader, the expected score was 3.0. She scored a 13.9**.** The digits before the decimal point signify grade level and the digit after the decimal signifies month, so a "13.9" translates to mean she did as well as 50% of college freshman would do if they took the same test after nine months of instruction, and this is how the results were presented to her; that she'd scored at the level of a college freshman or rising sophomore. In the literature I reviewed, the top reported score is "13+" and means the person scored better than 50% of high school seniors in the spring semester of 12$^{th}$ grade. It's unclear how reliable a mean score can be if it references a group (in high school seniors) taking a test they don't take (an ITBS written for third graders), but regardless of that question and of discrepancies between a remembered number from third grade and the reportable number, what is clearest to her is the score was exceptionally high and that while many parents would be pleased with such news, hers were not.

"I don't know exactly what my parents were told, but they said I couldn't take special classes." The idea of giftedness made them uncomfortable; in her analysis they were proud to be "lower class" and saw themselves as hard-working and the gifted stuff was classist. As she put it, "Talented and Gifted was for yuppies."

Before the test, she remembers being in trouble a lot at home. In her telling of the story, she was always asking the wrong questions and reading the wrong books. Her mother was both pleased and disturbed that nine-year old Aevita was reading Edgar Alan Poe and Dean Koontz, who her mother described as "almost pornographic."

Story 1:

At age five: "My parents belonged to this kind of charismatic protestant church, very strict, and had this weekend Bible study summer camp. I had to go but kept to myself and spent the rest of the week alone at home with my older brother. We just hung out and watched daytime talk shows, and I guess from one of them I picked up the term 'statutory rape.' The next Sunday, we were in the Sunday School classroom talking about Mary and how she was a younger girl and found out she was having a baby—the son of God or whatever—and I was like, 'How old was Mary? How old was God?' And, you know, I put that together and I might have been slightly being a smart-ass but, I asked if that was rape and, yeah, I was sent right out of the room."

Under her hat, Aevita smiled, proud of her younger, precocious self; hers is a wide, toothless grin of deep satisfaction, and it retreated as she talked about what came next. Her goal became a simple one: to not draw attention to herself. She was afraid of being something other than normal, and normal, she'd learned, meant reading the Bible, listening and not asking questions. It also meant being average in all respects and in its pursuit, at school, she developed the habit of hiding her finished work from the teachers so they couldn't see she'd finished early. The ITBS snuck up on her, and her score outed

her. After her family's refusal to allow her enrollment in "special" classes, she was encouraged into weekly chats with the school therapist where they talked about her classes and family.

Story #2

At age eleven: "I met with a different therapist and she talked to me for like two hours then came out to meet with my mother, and she told her I had a lot of creativity and maybe theater or music or art would be a good way for me to express myself. My mother flipped [the therapist's] notepad out of her hands and said she knew what was best for her daughter, and to not tell her how to parent. I never went back to her again so I think if someone suggested I take more challenging classes, they might have thrown something off the desk or something and stormed out."

"So what happened in the years after you took the ITBS?" I was thinking about her academic life and her answer surprised me although, in retrospect, it shouldn't have.

Story #3

"My stepfather had road rage issues as well as liking to punch me. I don't know if you know those banana clips [long, skinny hair clips] but he liked to hit me on the back of the head, breaking them, and cutting my scalp with the plastic shards. I also avoided the basement stairs when he was near because, if he thought I was taking too long to go down them, he'd kick me to knock me down the staircase. Such a dick. Staircases still freak me out if there's a big man behind me.

"And there were a number of times he would just get mad about something, like, there are some foods if I like eat it, I'll get sick, and I knew what those foods were so, you know, I didn't make my plate and there were a few times where he'd restrain me in a chair

for hours until midnight and basically force me to eat. But I could be very willful and I wouldn't eat it if it made me feel sick. And at some point he would just be like "I need to go to bed, just fucking eat it" and then he would just like punch me.

"But if you punch a kid, you know, they bruise pretty easily and I would go to school. And I knew my rights, I knew it was wrong for a man to punch a child, and I would go to the counselor and nurse and say, 'This is what my stepfather did' and they would make a report because they were mandatory reporters. And enough of that happened, and knowing that I had a high GPA and was involved in almost every extracurricular I could get into just to avoid having to go home, the school knew me better than my family.

"And so then with the road rage, a couple times he would like drive between the bus and the school building and almost take out a bunch of children because he was so, I don't know, pissed off at everything, or he would go around the bus when it had the stop sign out in the middle of the road. So the school had him on record for doing that shit and more than once the cops were called to the house because my brother would hold guns on other kids—he had like little pump-action b-b guns and even threatened other kids, other kindergartners, with them or with knives or whatever. So like the family was kind of notorious in a bad way, so when my parents kicked me out [at seventeen], the first thing I did was call the school and say this has happened."

"Kicked you out? For?"

"Being disrespectful."

The school contacted county social services and prior to the court hearing to try and sort out what was going on. Aevita remembers the social worker assigned to her case as petite, in her late sixties and the sort of person who didn't suffer fools. They grew close. In the photograph Aevita keeps of them together, she looks happy and her chin rests on the social worker's shoulder in a pose that looks as if it belongs on a holiday greeting card. When I said the social worker looked like a sweet person, Aevita didn't disagree but

described her as talking like a sailor—"eternally up-to-date on current slang for illicit drug use and gratuitous sex acts, and quite happy to explain them in detail for anyone feigning ignorance"—but prone to going "all coo-ey at the sight of small, large-eyed creatures like babies and puppies." When she tried to casually complement Aevita's mother by saying her daughter knew how to do laundry and generally take care of herself, Aevita's mother "flipped." The judge entered the courtroom to a scene of Aevita's mother trying to strangle the social worker while Aevita's lawyer tried to intervene.

"The cops were just standing around. I think everyone was so startled it took a minute for them to react and I was just on the floor crying, I couldn't do anything, and at that point the judge was like 'We're suspending all parental rights.' Like then and there she cuts through all the red tape and it was done. That's when everything picked up for me and I got my own apartment."

"That's intense."

"Yeah, sometimes I wonder if I'm developmentally delayed, like stuck at seventeen somewhere in the back of my mind."

"Why is that?"

"Because all that shit happened like right then and from that time until my late 20s I was just so vulnerable it wasn't like I was learning how to be…"

"How to be?"

"Just how to be."

For six months, the state of Iowa held Aevita as a ward of the state while the courts tried to figure out how to handle her case. Friends and family offered to take her in but were told they'd have to be certified as foster parents and by the time that happened, she'd be a legal adult. A solution arrived in the form of her attorney who volunteered to become her legal guardian so she had an adult who would co-sign on her first apartment and open a bank account and other utilitarian matters necessary when living on your own.

Story #4

In a lifetime of testing experiences, the next one came when she took a college entrance exam and did well on everything except for math, which she "failed horribly." She couldn't recall the exam's name, but it wasn't the SAT or the ACT. In the chaos of emancipation then graduating a semester early from high school, she'd never taken those tests. Her math score was so low, and because she'd suspected something was wrong for awhile, she petitioned the university asking for a review of her application. For many students, that's where their attempt at attending college would end but because the University of Iowa had transcripts of the testing she'd done in school—including her ITBS scores—she was given the option of what she called "a summer of testing." For three hours a day for the next six weeks she sat down with a professor for "the most intelligence testing I'd ever had to do, and it showed I was above and beyond average but that I had a profound math disability. That exempted me from any math courses at all. I joked that I should change my major to math and just sail through and be done."

"How were your interactions with the professor who did the testing?"

"Oh, she was nice. She looks like she could be tough if she wanted to but she was really nice to me. At the very end I came in for my results and I was shaking because in my mind I was thinking I'm just dumb and lazy because I can crochet, I can follow a pattern, so why can't I do math? I was actually shaking and sad because I didn't think anything was wrong with me and I'd just wasted all my time there and I'd never get to go to college, and she said, 'No, you have a disability. You need a 15-point deviation to be considered to have a disability and you have a 100 point deviation. What you have is called dyscalculia.'"

"Dys—?"

"You say it like 'Count Chocula'"

"Thanks."

The whole experience was summed up in a twenty-page report comprising what she called "the first time I had any real information about myself."

In the past, she wasn't given much information because, she thinks, that in addition to her parents' reaction, there was a school of thought that said children shouldn't be told they had high intelligence to keep them from becoming arrogant. "Now," she said, "they figure we need to let them know that they think differently from their peers so they can manage. So that summer was when I was finally told that I had always had a very high IQ and this was why I had problems with reductionist thinking and interpersonal relationships with people. [The professor] explained all this as well as she could—knowing I couldn't figure out the math—and showed me that my standard IQ score without the horrible math scores was like 158, so it's fairly high. An average person is like 100 to 120 and an average college student is maybe 145. When they tested me a couple years later when I was on Adderall that pushed it to 162—the numbers are totally dynamic and change year-by-year, but apparently I scored consistently in the 150 range."

She began college that Fall, in 2002, at seventeen, but wouldn't graduate until 2011 after being forced to take medical withdrawals for unpredictable but profound flare-ups of fatigue and joint pain. The most peculiar problem being the development of light sensitivity causing her to burn within several seconds of direct exposure to sunlight, and to break out in a rash from fluorescent bulbs.

"So what happens when you do math? What's hard?"

"Advanced mathematics I can figure out easy but it's the day-to-day stuff like remembering my phone number or a repeating numbers back to people—credit card numbers are the worst. Door codes. Figuring a tip—oh that's impossible—I have to use my phone."

"But you run your own business, and you have to do your own billing."

"Apps."

Story #5

"How'd you pass high school math?"

"Cheated."

"Oh."

"It was totally unethical, I know, but everyone was in on it. I took Algebra I and Algebra II and Geometry and I could do geometry pretty well, but algebra was impossible for me. I'd sit in class with my eyes watering and ready to cry with the calculator in my hand and no idea where to start and surrounded by people who were figuring this shit out. That was a very uncomfortable situation for me because usually I did my schoolwork with no effort, which isn't really the point of school, but anyway our teacher was certifiably insane. Randomly, she'd be on the projectors and she'd start doing zeroes and just keep going and just go off the page, then she would start, like, mooing at the class."

"Mooing?"

"Yeah. Not funny mooing. Serious mooing. Like she was a cow. Walked around like she was a fucking cow and one day toward the end of the semester I had to leave her class and got up to take the hall pass, which was never an issue ever and she grabbed my arm and spun me around and started mooing at me, which wasn't that unusual, and I went to leave and she picked up a graphing calculator and threw it at me and almost hit me and the class gasped and someone went, 'What are you doing?' and she just looked confused for a moment and went back to the projector to write more zeroes. But when we checked our homework we'd pass it to the person behind us and there was kind of an unspoken rule where you just wrote in the answers for each other's work based on how they did in school. You didn't want someone who got Cs to get As. And we all worked together and passed the classes. When I get together with my high school friends we still talk about her."

"Where is she now?"

"Still working. Apparently she's stopped mooing and has started howling. But that was the reason no one noticed I had a math problem, because everyone knew I got As so I got As on all the homework. I failed all the tests. But it averaged out and homework was weighted more heavily than the tests. I just remember sitting there with my pen in my hand crying as quietly as I could. Tears staining the paper. Handing it in half-done. Getting everything wrong."

Story #6

The third major testing experience of Aevita's life was the briefest one of all with the worst outcome; she recalls her Attention Deficit Disorder test as a computer program test "where you look at the screen and something flashes and depending on what flashes you're supposed to click something." The test said she had ADHD, so she was given the ADHD medication but, as she'd find out later, she didn't. The result:

"I was grinding my teeth all the time, had panic attacks and went on massive cleaning binges. Oh God, I would take the meds at like 5:30 in the morning because it just wakes you up, you know, it's meth and I'd try to lie in bed and just think then my body would start vibrating and my boyfriend would be like "You're making the bed shake, get out of bed." He would sleep in until like noon and one of those days when he slept in he found me in my pajamas scrubbing the air intake vent for the furnace with a rag that had been shredded by my scrubbing and my fingers were bleeding and it was kind of funny at the time because I was so nuts about cleaning this grate when what I was cleaning was the texture of the metal—which was never going to get cleaned. God. So, he laughs and took it away from me and made me go to do something else to get my mind off it. You'd think they wouldn't push a student to keep taking something she didn't want to take, but they did. At one point, I came home at something like four in the afternoon and I went to feed the fish—then I noticed the fish were beautiful." Aevita laughed. "Well, he found me at

eleven that night still sitting there in my boots and staring at the fish. I had a really good attention span."

"It's interesting you told them you didn't like taking the stuff and they told you to take it anyway. Did you ever consider stopping on your own?"

"I did."

"What happened?"

"Well, I had these ticks that started because of the medication, like the nose rubbing. I had to rub my nose constantly. I've managed to stop that but I also started stuttering, which never happened before. No matter how many times they told me 'This is just something that happens with Adderall or whatever and it'll go away,' it did something to my brain and I still have these problems. I don't feel as intelligent now as I did before I took it, either."

"What do you mean by 'less intelligent?'"

"It means I feel less—creative? I feel like I have all this information in my head that I can't get out unless it's tripped in just the right way, when before it was just like I could squeeze it and it'd come out. Now, it's like you have to find the right button, otherwise I seem like a complete idiot all the time."

"That might be a stretch."

"Maybe you're just good at pushing the right buttons? I don't know."

"Okay, so you were working while you were in and out of school—what were you doing to support yourself?"

"Nannying mostly. And I worked at Starbucks and at Target for a while. And I was a housewife for a while after I got married, then after that ended I got a job as a relay operator."[4]

[4] A relay service allows a person who is deaf, blind or speech-disabled to use an assistive device like a keyboard to place standard telephone calls where the relay operator reads to the other party what the caller is typing.

"You've talked a little about knowing you have a particular kind of intelligence. Has that knowledge has been a source of frustration overall, or has it been a good thing?

"It's a good thing, but after the last round of testing showing that my intelligence was still quite high even after the medicine and stuff I'd gone through, I became suicidally depressed for like a year and a half or something because I felt like, if I'm so smart, and if this is as smart as I can get, then why is my life so totally fucked up?"

"How do you see that period now?"

"I think I had a really bad psychologist who was poking around in places without an idea of what the hell she was doing and didn't have prescription powers but was working with her nurse practitioner who did, even though neither of them had a background in psychotropic medications. So I was on drugs I never should've been on and had little social support. I have a lot of good friends but they're very arrogant about what they know. They're very close-minded. And few of my close friends have college degrees, or are just working on them now, and they tend to be the types who really go in for like reality TV programming and that show "The Doctors" so if I have any kind of question at all I'm the idiot. In general, I feel like I can't talk to them but I understand now it's because I think differently. So I just find that I don't talk about anything around them unless it's like cutesy or whatever and in general I act like the idiot and it's frustrating because I wish I had somebody I could talk to about different things."

"That situation sounds like how you described hiding your work as a kid. Have you thought about that?"

"No. It's kind of interesting that you bring that up."

"Is it weird I brought that up?"

"No. Good job."

Aevita laughed. I hoped I hadn't crossed into armchair psychoanalysis.

"Well, you told me that very few people know about the testing so I wondered where that—"

Story #7

"Yeah. If I were to bring this up to my closer group of friends they probably wouldn't believe me. My roommate saw the paperwork and he was like, 'What the hell?' and I said I didn't care if he read it and he says, 'This is psychological testing—are you a psychopath?' Just teasing me. Because he does research methods, so he knows how to read test results and he was like, "Holy shit, Aevita, what the hell is this? Why don't you ever talk about this?' And I said I didn't know, that it's not the kind of thing you just bring up. And now when he comes home with his physics books he'll say, 'Let's talk about this' and show me some tricks so I can get past the math and it's been kind of nice but even then I'm like, 'Can you just keep this between us?' Because with some of my friends, it's—okay, so I'm big on the ethics of circumcision. There are all kinds of problems with it but my friends will say, 'Well, I heard on TV that it was good for you and every boy should have it done. For years, I was taunted for being against routine circumcision and they would bring up stuff like 'If we have a kid and we circumsize him are you going to hate the kid? But one of our friends is a surgeon and the second this person who has the degree says the exact same thing that I said, suddenly it's gospel. And she's not even that bright. She's a good surgeon, but she's just a surgeon she's not God. I don't think I'm smarter than her but I feel like if I spent fourteen years studying something maybe I should get some credit. So that was one time I actually advocated for something that I really cared about, and I was just pulverized. It sucked, I'm making new friends."

"Lack of respect. A Rodney Dangerfield moment."

"Yes."

Story #8

We were an hour into the interview when she said, "My roommate always knew I was

allergic to life, that's what my friends say, that I'm allergic to life, but he didn't know I'm allergic to myself. And that's kind of where I am, I'm allergic to myself.

"Who came up with that?"

"It's kind of funny in a sad way. I started classes in MacBride Hall where they have nothing but fluorescent lights and I'd sit down and just start itching. I thought maybe there was a cleanser on the desk or something but it happened in every classroom in that building and in every building I went into on campus, even the brand new shiny ones. What happens is the skin rash kicks lupus into gear and then I get joint pain then I start to feel sick then I feel tired and then I feel like I'm going to die so I ended up withdrawing from school. At one point, I had an allergy test because I wanted to know what the hell was wrong. They did 160 of those back sticks and across my arms they did a couple other ones and basically I was allergic to every single thing. Usually they give a patient a folder; they gave me a binder. But they were focusing on things that were causing the allergies from the outside, but not looking at what was happening on the inside and responding to all of that stuff and trying to figure out what that was. So that's when a friend said I was allergic to life, and I was like, 'Oh, that's sad, because I always thought of myself as a healthy, happy, active person.'"

I sifted through my research questions to see if I'd missed anything. Each question sat upon a tasteful blue bar lording over a series of related, open-ended questions. I hadn't referenced it much, but a quick glance verified that I'd asked most of them already. Aevita said she liked the colors.

"Do you think about your testing experiences much?"

Story #9

"I think when I'm feeling down about my life and I think about where I am versus where I thought I might be, I get a little sad about the fact that with a test result like that why

shouldn't I be more successful and have my own home and that kind of thing, or some kind of savings, or a better job with benefits—or even the same job—and paid more with more respect. There've been many times when I've been at the library and someone's said, "Oh, those are beautiful children, how old are they?" and, of course, I forget because sometimes because they aren't mine, then they look at me funny as they try and figure out why I wouldn't know my own children's age, then I tell them I'm the nanny and they say, "Oh, okay, what are you going to school for?" And I say, "Well, I went to school for anthropology and graduated" and they say, "So when are you getting a job?" Because being a nanny isn't a real job, to them."

"When it is a serious job, to you. You take it seriously."

"The biggest irony of my life is I've spent most of my adult life and most of my adolescence learning about parenting just so I can never have kids [due to lupus]. Most of my friends who have kids spent less than nine months learning about child care."

The return of child care as a subject prompted a thought I'd been debating whether I should share. "It's interesting to me that somebody who had a difficult relationship with parents who were not very supportive or very nurturing would make a career out of being a professional caregiver."

Aevita picked at the seam in the cardboard sleeve around her coffee cup, folding the tip of an edge down to form a triangle. "Am I trying to break the cycle? That kind of thing?"

"Is that how you see it?"

"I didn't always know I'd never have kids, but I knew I'd break the cycle somehow."

"So you've always thought about it that way?"

"Mhmm. I wasn't going to be like them."

"The idea was to be really, really not like them."

"Exactly."A pause. "I want to give nannying street cred, but I do wish I could get out of it."

"If you were to hear the story that you just told about yourself, what do you think usually happens to somebody in that situation?"

"I don't know. I have no idea. If someone were in the situation that I had, I honestly don't know what I think they should be doing differently, but when I think of myself, like if I could do it over again I'd probably have advocated for myself better in college to get more support to get through the semesters instead of listen to the first person who said to take a medical withdrawal. And then I would have done my best to jump into graduate school afterwards, because I feel like I'm forgetting things I need to know for the GRE. A lot of people tell me not to worry, that I'll be fine, at the same time that's a lot of money to spend on a test then fail it."

She continued to shred the sleeve around her cup.

"I guess," I said, "what I meant is if you heard the story about your childhood and the things you had to absorb, what usually happens to someone in that situation?"

"I don't know. I'd probably be in a trailer park with eight kids and feel damn lucky to have it. Before I met ex-husband, I never felt like I belonged in a college setting and that I deserved more than a jackass for a boyfriend. After him and seeing more of the world and meeting his friends, who I could have an actual conversation with about anything then suddenly it was like, there's a whole different world here and I don't have to be that person anymore. I don't know, maybe it's a little classist to say but I felt like I broke through to the other side. This story also illustrates a change of identity not driven by testing. My whole life was, like, 'You're trash, basically' and then it was more like 'You're still kinda trashy, but a good person.' I don't know, it's hard to explain."

In that moment, I asked about the "bad person stuff and why she thought she described herself that way.

"Well, I've been homeless more than once since I was emancipated and there was a point where I figured the best I could do was find a guy who'd let me live with him and sort of take care of his house and clean for him and hope he wouldn't kick me out, and if I

could help him get to a better place that would be the ultimate. Then after my ex-husband, even though we didn't work out, I was more like, I can and should take care of myself and whatever I was hoping to do for other people I should do for myself first, and that I could deserve better than crap. I don't know. I'm trying to make a little tuxedo top for my coffee cup."

"I noticed you were shredding it. Nervous?"

"You're not making me nervous, but all the other people in here are."

"Why?"

"They're just sitting there. It's weird kinetic energy or something. It's not too bad though, I have my hat on. It's like blinders for a horse."

Off to the left, I pointed out someone I haven't seen in two years—a graduate student I'd tutored in academic writing. She'd been in the midst of a class where she'd learned how to administer an IQ test and needed a test subject. I agreed before finding out that since she was still learning she could not give me the results.

"Taking intelligence tests is really, really hard."

"It all seemed to come down to triangles."

"Triangles, word pictures, puzzles, essays, endless, endless audio number recall exercises. Do that for three hours a day for six weeks. I was like, this is my new job!"

What to make of tests that take as much as they give? An analogy in the form of a door that opens, only to reveal another door offers up something that feels like understanding but breaking this thing down was going to take some work.

As a way of organizing my analysis of her interview, I identified nine narrative arcs with overt attempts at meaning ascribed to each story. In total, I found a portrait of a person moving from test to test and craving information about herself while frustrated with the conflicting messages perceived within that information.

Aevita, like every other person I spoke with, spent little time talking about the taking of tests. They were important plot points along the way, but the real action occurred before and after those moments which underscores the idea of a test as part of a larger narrative, as something that can not be removed from a story or presented as its own story—and that, by extension, it helps shape identity.

Over the course of a seventy-plus minute conversation, Aevita for the most part condensed her telling of the actual taking of tests to saying that she took it, and the result. From there, she moves into the reaction of her parents and teachers, but the first story she tells that presents characters in a situation and in a conflict that results in an outcome with a discernible message is the "statutory rape" story from Bible study. In this story, she's precocious and outspoken and it was clear that she liked the person she described and it functions as evidence confirming the ITBS result. It also foregrounds a narrative repeated throughout the interview where her expression of an idea or posing of a question is rejected by family and friends, while encouraged by educators, counselors and other credentialed experts.

From there, she tells the story of her mother resisting her therapist's counsel; this story creates a contrast between mother and daughter. In this story, Aevita's mother—like Aevita earlier—resists the perceived wisdom of an authority figure but her resistance is physical in nature rather than through speech. The protagonist in each story rejects authority but in different ways and for different purposes; in Aevita's story she uses a question to defend a child while her mother uses a violent physical action to defend herself.

Story #3, the story about her stepfather and emancipation, is almost six times longer than the previous stories. At over four hundred words, it is also the longest of all the stories she told during our conversation. Measuring a story's importance by its length is as simple a measure as measuring intelligence by the speed with which a person answers a question, but it does serve as a starting place. The story about her stepfather is

more than four times the length of story #4 when a professor tells her she's smart and had a learning disability, almost twice the length of story #6 about the side effects of Adderall and story #8 ("allergic to life"), and four times as long as story #9 set in the public library and concerning the societal worth placed on her occupation.

In Story #3, she creates several scenes involving physical abuse that quickly move the narrative to her emancipation. The interaction with the stepfather is a battle of wills with clear evaluative statements describing his actions and none describing his thinking. From a Platonic perspective, he is all body/action and no mind/thought. She, by contrast, is mostly mind. Her self-evaluative statements describe herself as "willful" and self-protective followed by direct action on her part. She's highly agentic, describes herself in terms that differentiate herself from her family and mentions having a high GPA as one reason why the school trusted her explanations of what was happening at home. It's a tragic story but it finds heroes in a social worker and a judge.

What I hear in these comparisons is that stories about family, safety and emotional health overshadow stories about intellectual ability. In considering reasons why a discussion about standardized testing prompted the story about her stepfather, I'm left with the notion that the test itself exacerbated the abuse by further revealing family dynamics. This is not to say the test bares responsibility for what happened, but it does demonstrate how something as seemingly innocuous as a standardized test can never be "effect-free" once it enters into the dimensions of human relationships.

*Consequences of Giftedness*

One task of this dissertation is noticing artifacts from the history of intelligence testing, and how they influence our thinking about intellectual identity. In listening to Aevita, we hear echoes of debates about what it means to be gifted, how to identify someone as gifted and the consequences and expectations associated with an identification of giftedness. For Aevita, being identified as gifted is a key part of her intellectual identity. It influences her

analysis of her past and expectations for her future. She makes specific reference to these areas while sharing her familiarity with how thinking about intelligence has changed. The most apparent example of this familiarity occurs when she says, "Now, they figure we need to let them know that they think differently from their peers so they can manage."

In this statement, she makes notable shifts between the third-person pronoun ("they") to the first-person plural pronoun ("we"). "They" is first used as a substitute for those in charge of identifying the gifted before "they" becomes a substitute for the gifted themselves; "they" is both the object driving the action and the object of that action and in the midst of this transition she incorporates herself into the part of society—the "we"—tasked with identifying giftedness. In this one sentence, she includes herself as part of the examined and those in charge of the examining. It's a highly agentic and inclusive statement that demonstrates her strong desire to identify with, and be identified by, "the gifted" and even to share the responsibility that "we" have in telling these students who they are.

To be "gifted" is to be different, and throughout Aevita's interview, we hear her pride in self-identifying as smart, yet we also hear that she does not necessarily equate intelligence with happiness or with an easy life. When asked to guess at the life of a typical person (of average intelligence) with her childhood background, she says, "I don't know. I'd probably be in a trailer park with eight kids and feel damn lucky to have it." In this answer, she eschews the question's use of a third-person pronoun while describing an alternative life using the trope of a "trailer park" existence with multiple children and its implication of poverty and low social standing. What she does not do is reject it as wholly unwanted, even as she indirectly credits her intelligence as the reason why her life has taken a different turn. In this answer, high intelligence is desirable but does not guarantee a happy life. The statement appears to answer one of the most memorable moments in her interview when, earlier, she said, "I felt like, if I'm so smart, and if this is as smart as I can get, then why is my life so totally fucked up?" It was a clear expression of core

awareness of the contradictions embedded in the promise of standardized assessments to measure intelligence for the purpose of forecasting greatness.

Her way of resolving this contradiction is partly reliant on her understanding of the cultural acceptance of "differentness." In terms of consequences associated with being different, Aevita tells five stories (1, 2, 3, 7, 9) in which she portrays herself as having a quality that is desirable, elicits admirable behavior on her part and makes her different. However, in all of those five stories about her possession of a positive form of difference, that quality invites negative treatment from others, sometimes to the point of cruelty. These five stories bracket the entire conversation with story #7 coming the closest to portraying a good difference resulting in a positive response from a peer, but soon thereafter his positive response gives way to critical responses to difference that are thematically consistent with the other stories.

As expected of stories prompted by a discussion of standardized testing, only one story (#8) invokes an identity separate from an intellectual identity. In this story, which involves a physiological or wellness identity, an unwelcome difference brings negative consequences. Likewise, the remaining three stories (4, 5, 6) revolve around bad or unwelcome expressions of difference related to her intellectual identity with similarly negative consequences.

Overall, in the nearly symmetrical distribution of the eight stories about her intellectual identity where her "differentness" is a positive attribute in five stories as opposed to a negative attribute in the other three, it's striking that in every instance the consequences are hurtful or in some manner negative. While these stories initially appear to be dissimilar, in many instances what they reveal is her sense of conflict when it comes to how she views her difference. Even in the five stories where difference is desirable, its desirability is not portrayed as universally appreciated and is, instead, a source of shame.

*What we know. What we feel.*

As noted in the analysis of Lori's story, working class discourse makes more frequent use of affective "I" statements expressing the self in terms of emotion ("I feel/felt") than cognitive "I" statements expressing the self as a base of knowledge ("I know/knew") or thought ("I think/thought"). These are certainly not the only kinds of cognitive and affective statements a person can make, but it's necessary to point out because cognitive statements were used almost as frequently in Aevita's speech as affective statements. Overall, she made twelve first-person cognitive statements compared to ten affective statements with far more confidence expressed in what she knew in the past, than what she knows about the present. In those twelve cognitive statements, nine of them address what she doesn't know compared to three where she's confident about what she does know. The pattern reverses itself when she's speaking of the past. She makes fewer overall cognitive statements about the past, but four of the five express confidence in what she knew to be true: she knew the truth of the situation with her stepfather, she knew what made her sick, she knew that others viewed her as a well-behaved and good student and she knew she'd break the cycle. Only once does she use a cognitive statement to express something she "didn't know" in the past, and it's when she's trying to explain to her roommate why she kept her test scores to herself.[5]

The ratio is noteworthy for numerous reasons, one being that cognitive statements are also more common in academic language, which is more interested in the authority associated with knowledge than emotion, with knowing over feeling. This discrepancy is one reason why students coming from a middle and upper class background have an easier time assimilating into academic talk as it closely mimics their own, and I highlight this point because it demonstrates the degree to which Aevita's own

[5] She used "you know" five times to imply agreement with the listener, and while that phrase has an equivalent affective statement in "you feel me," I've categorized "you know" as lacking the agentic certainty of a cognitive statement made using the first-person.

language is reflective of the tension between her working class background and that of the backgrounds of the authority figures in her life (teachers, social workers, judges, professors, psychologists) who she sees as role models and/or people whom she, for the most part, respects.

Over the course of our conversation, Aevita made two "I felt" statements (one positive and one negative) and seven affective "I feel" statements, all of which were negative except for when she uses the present-conditional to detail an imagined alternate reality in a trailer park where she has less information about herself.

Again, the employment of simple accounting measures as a means of analysis has its limitations, but tallying up these "I" statements reveals a tension between what she knows to be true about her life and how to feel about that knowledge. Aevita is more certain about how she feels about her life than what she knows to be true about it, and while she takes pride in how she reacted to her childhood, she's critical of herself and the language she uses includes artifacts of the class background and her perceived relationship between it and her idea of intelligence. The interplay between her self-assessment and her history raises the possibility that even though someone experiences academic and intellectual success, a traumatic past can alter an intellectual identity into one that is not as confident as it might have been were it not for the trauma. In her case, even thought tests and teachers contributed to a positive intellectual identity, it was unable to survive unscathed challenges and undermining by family.

Aevita's story suggests that any identity informed by trauma may be less stable and, perhaps, in need of frequent reinforcement. Her stories suggest that a single test score is not enough to silence competing messages about what constitutes proper self-expression of an identity if that identity runs counter to the values defended by those in positions of power (like parents) over another person (a child).

*Beyond Verb Choice*

In listening to a person struggling with the implications of being identified as gifted talk about a mysterious, chronic and possibly genetically-driven disease, Aevita offered a reminder of how many of us talk about "gifts" and "talent" like she talked about lupus, as a mysterious something existing invisibly within ourselves and revealed only when triggered by the right circumstances.

An awareness of the relationships between emotional trauma and ill health has led many psychologists to associate childhood experiences with abuse, neglect, family dysfunction, mental illness and addiction with undesirable social outcomes later in life including smoking, alcoholism and sex in early teenage years. Caused by feelings of low self-esteem instilled in those early childhood experiences, there also appears to be a strong correlation between those early experiences and cancer, heart and liver disease and suicide. These illnesses and suicide are often linked to behaviors we can ostensibly control, such as whether or not to smoke, but the research tells us that the more childhood trauma a person experiences the more likely a person is to develop chronic illnesses even if she did not engage the behaviors commonly identified as their causes. These relationships, found by plotting survey responses about adverse childhood experiences against medical records, found that even among relatively affluent, highly-educated white middle class respondents, a person who experienced a high level of childhood trauma is 360% more likely to develop heart disease later in life than someone who did not. The likely cause is stress, and the reaction to it as regulated by a system called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis. If we're in a high-stress environment those systems react by flooding the body with glucose or increasing blood pressure. Too much of these reactions stress the heart leading to heart disease (Dube, 2001, p. 3089-3096; Anda and Felitti, 2006, p. 56).

These results found a link between trauma and a few of the most widespread diseases, such as heart disease, but other research has gone further, finding an association

with self-reported childhood trauma and an increased risk of a range of physical illnesses during adulthood. Physical abuse links with lung diseases and ulcers and arthritis; childhood sexual abuse is associated with heart disease; childhood neglect is associated with increases risk of diabetes and autoimmune disorders (Goodwin and Stein, 2004, p. 509-520). The idea that stress is bad is conventional wisdom—but it may be more sensible than we realize to expect children who experience high trauma to develop chronic diseases as adults. Like the doctors treating Aevita's allergies by looking to what was happening on the outside, we miss what is happening on the inside—which may be caused in part by what happened on the outside, perhaps years ago. We act as though trauma—like a high-stakes assessment event—has an expiration date after which its effect diminishes or disappears. In reading this research, I wondered if tests informed identities, the same way that trauma informed disease.

Standardized tests, as a contributor to Aevita's intellectual identity, remain in the backdrop of each story she tells as they provided positive evidence that she is different, but from Aevita's stories it sounds as if she has not yet fully resolved how she feels about her intellectual identity, if actively trying to do so—one way of viewing her decision to tell me her story is as an act of someone tired of hiding her work.

Over the next weeks and months, Aevita would make several changes in pursuit of a life that coheres with her intellectual identity. The first was the move from the outside of town to its interior and an environment surrounded by the kind of people who reflect the intellectual identity she wants for herself then, in January of 2014, she enrolled in graduate school as a non-degree student to take a class toward a master's degree in Library Science. A "baby step" taken until she could be officially admitted which she didn't think would be a problem—provided she does well enough on the GRE. By the end of the summer, she'd begun walking with a cane and the process of applying for permanent disability after having been released by all of her employers who feared she'd be unable to continue caring for their children.

## EDWARD: SLOUCHING TOWARDS NORMAL

It's easy, when examining the ways standardized testing shapes how we think of ourselves, to operate on the assumption of easily identifiable and simplistic dichotomy of winners and losers. The losers are students in schools tied to economically-depressed neighborhoods where drilling for state tests has replaced real instruction. Or there are students like Aevita who, when they perform well on a standardized test, suffer from the experience because of the conflict it contributes to within her own life where her behavior is considered abnormal. The winners are wealthy, suburban kids who attend schools with scores that keep the pressure off and students who arrive at school with the test-taking strategies, cultural knowledge and educational history to make the tests a minor and forgettable annoyance. In this framework, the thinking goes that if testing shapes a person's intellectual identity, the results are positive for students at "high-performing" schools and negative for those at "low-performing" ones.

Were it so simple.

This is a story about privilege and sexual identity and the lack of eros in high school mathematics—it's also a story about standardized testing as a proxy for what it means to be normal. It begins in the suburbs.

Bloomfield Hills floats twenty miles northwest of downtown Detroit, the city to which it owes its existence, as a planet adrift a dimming star. Home to 3500 people, it was farmland until the early 1900s when Detroit's wealthiest discovered in it the space for country homes and horse stables. In 1974, the election of the city's first black mayor, Coleman Young followed more than a decade of white flight, the 1967 riots and passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968. In his inauguration, Young issued a "a warning to all those pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road! And I don't give a damn if they are black or white, or if they wear Superfly suits or

blue uniforms with silver badges. Hit the road." An urban legend emerged from the statement that he told white people to leave and leave they did for places like Bloomfield Hills, one of the wealthiest of the 185 cities and townships in Metro Detroit.

Residents who've studied its history describe Bloomfield Hills as new money, especially when compared to Grosse Pointe, thirty miles east. Grosse Pointe is old money and so Protestant that, for a long time, Jews couldn't buy homes in the city. It served as the setting for *The Virgin Suicides*, a book about five sisters repressed and isolated from their peers to protect their virtue, and was satirized by the movie *Grosse Pointe Blank* as a place of preppy largesse breeding both assassins and their targets. Each town has a private day and boarding school attracting the moneyed and the ambitious. In Grosse Pointe, it's University Liggett School, with a high school day student tuition of $23,000. In Bloomfield Hills, the comparable school is The Cranbrook School. In 2013 its high school tuition was $30,000; it has its own science museum, art museum and an MFA program within the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign took a hit when it came out that while a student at Cranbrook he'd pinned down another student and cut his hair because it wasn't to his liking.

These impressions of Bloomfield Hills, and of Metro Detroit as a land characterized by borders both official and implied, belong to Edward, a graduate student in the process of leaving a Ph.D. program in English at the University of Iowa. I knew him from a class in a forgotten subject and as a person I exchanged a pleasant nod with in passing every two or three months. I'd emailed him for no reason other than a hunch that he could tell a story and might have something to say and I recorded his story on the front patio of a house converted into a bakery in an Iowa City neighborhood replete with houses renovated to comply with historical society guidelines.

It was early summer. The world was green, lush and sun-dappled and Edward, ponytailed and sporting cargo shorts and hiking boots, navigated the patio gate looking like a park ranger on vacation, like someone more interested in building hiking trails, as

he had after college, than in navigating the library. He asked me to choose his pseudonym and approved of Edward saying, he'd always wanted to be an Edward. "It implies a tall old sartorial man who is bald, wears turtleneck sweaters, suits coat and pants, and tasseled. It is a tasseled name."

The actual Edward was 30 years old and grew up in Bloomfield Hills, where his parents still live, and attended The Cranbrook School from sixth grade through high school graduation. Our interview began with his enthusiastic swiping from the table of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift.* In examining its opening pages, Edward admitted, with evident guilt, that he'd never finished it. I explained its presence as best I could, saying I'd become curious about ways to apply Hyde's thinking about gifts to ways we think about formal education. I wondered what would happen if we talked about education as a gift instead of—

"This thing you do to get a job so you can be a good capitalist consumer. Totally. I totally get it. Yes."

Months later, I'd recall this exchange when stumbling across a line from the theologian Walter Brueggemann's book *The Prophetic Imagination*. "Our consumer culture," he wrote, "is organized against history. There is a depreciation of memory and a ridicule of hope, which means everything must be held in the now, either an urgent now or an eternal now" (2001, p. 2). The book wasn't my usual fare, but it was a reminder that every attempt at telling a story is an act of faith, faith in both the abilities of the teller and the listener and that both can subvert the "urgent now" of a monetized present that is not conducive to ambitious imagination outside the realms of quarterly reports, interest rates and utility bills past due. "Nobody cares" is the mantra I heard from a journalist several years ago when approached with his thoughts on the value of memoir. "If you're Paris Hilton or Colin Powell, people care. Or if you've slept with them. 'I Slept with Paris Hilton,' that'd sell. Unless you've done that, don't bother." While libraries and bookstores contain evidence measurable by the metric ton that conflict with this (common) idea, and

while behavior and appearance in a market does not reflect the level of interest we have in hearing each others' stories, I realized he was doing what we are trained to do in conflating "caring" with "highly profitable." The latter is a weak but standardized and incredibly common measurement of the former, yet to say caring can only be measured in currency is as clumsy as saying a standardized test score unveils the quality and value of a person. Later, when I learned he'd failed to publish a memoir my take on the statement softened. He was repeating the message he'd heard from others and turned those readers into "nobody;" a case study of how feeling silenced can turn into myopic forms of distress, and a reminder that declarative sentences, even as I realize they are my stock and trade, can get a person into trouble.

"A book," said Kafka, "must be the axe for the frozen sea within us" (Pawel, 1984, p. 158). He could have just as easily said "a story," and the first one Edward told involved a standardized placement test used to assess ability within the separate ecology of the private school. Taken in June 1995, he described it as "the trauma from which my entire academic performance was trying to prove wrong for the rest of high school." I include it in this dissertation because exclusive private schools are often associated with high test scores and to demonstrate what constitutes a good score is an environmental construction co-authored by the test-taker and the test-taker's cohort as influenced by their awareness of how admission's bodies and others define a "good" score. Much of the attention paid to research suggesting that test scores align with parental income and geography and other demographic attributes tend to focus on those who score exceptionally poorly or exceptionally well and why this is the case. Edward's story taught me that scoring well, and maintaining membership in an exclusive, privileged, domain does not insulate a person from having an intellectual identity formed in part by testing, and in ways that follow the person for years. Edward's thoughts on this "defining moment" revealed a story of someone who wanted to fit in and, believing he didn't, learned to question the environment he'd been asked to accept, the norms he'd been

asked to aspire to and the values he'd been asked to replicate, support and advocate on behalf of. It's a story he thinks about a lot, and this is how he told it, slipping at different points in and out of the present tense:

"This is the crazy thing. [In 1995], at the end of fifth grade, I had to go to Cranbrook, I wasn't a student there yet, and I had to take this placement test and that was that and I get to school and I'm placed in the lowest math section. I didn't know it was the lowest at first because I didn't know anyone in this new school. So by default, from the very beginning of being placed in this elite institution, I was like, "I'm inadequate. I'm in the lowest one." But math was always my hardest subject. I think that set the tenor for the entire seven years I was at that school.

"It's taken me years and years to work through my own pathology because of how inadequate I felt as a student at this school. It's this weird double-edged sword because it empowered me to want to learn and to realize what learning can do but I was not a good student there in terms of what a good student was; it was really, really hard for me to get As in any class. It was so hard but I was also completely closeted and I knew I was closeted. It wasn't quite yet open to gays. Now, you can be gay there and it's not a problem, if it is a problem then that's a problem. When I was there I never felt like it was okay not because the school wouldn't have been okay with it but because my peers would not have been okay with it. I think one of the reasons I wasn't a good student—and, see I *was* a good student, this is part of the problem, I think I wasn't a good student—was based in this pathology that developed in a high school that was a bunch of really, really rich and not-rich kids who were on scholarship and knew really well how to execute, and everyone seemed to always be getting really good grades but I never could and I felt so inadequate, and everyone was going to Ivy League schools—or what I felt were elite schools to places like Middlebury or [your alma mater] Bucknell. I did apply to a few small liberal arts colleges in New England but I ended up going to the University of

Vermont and it was a much better fit because I would have turned out to be a horrible person if I had gone to a school like Bucknell. No offense," he joked.

"None taken." I knew what he meant, and shelved the idea for later consideration, asking him if he'd taken placement exams in another subjects. He had not. Cranbrook only tested math for their entrance exams. No language. What this taught him was "there's no division of mind in literature and language arts-type classes. Everyone got into every class, it was all mixed up. There was no lower, middle, upper." Math was an "objective, diagnostic thing" which he linked with being a clearer measure of how clearly a person thinks.

As Edward worked his way through his testing story, he peppered his speech with the word "normal," using it three times in quick succession. Over the course of our conversation, he used the word "norm" or "normal" or "normative" twelve times. No one I spoke with used it as often and most didn't use it at all.

In sixth grade, at Cranbrook, three options existed, in ascending order of difficulty: Math 6, Math 6 Advanced, and Pre-Algebra. He remembers who was placed in what class and in what section and that he did well enough in Math 6 to jump to Pre-Algebra in seventh grade. His reaction was, "Oh my god, I'm one of the smart kids at this school! Even though I wasn't. But at least I was on the normal track."

In eighth grade, he took Algebra I in a class consisting of "the lowest normal types in [in eighth grade] in a class with the advanced of the advanced seventh graders." He "failed horribly" and had to retake Algebra I in ninth grade, which ended up going fine and he got all As.

"They were going to put me in Data and Statistics my senior year and I was like, 'No, I want to be in the normal one.' And they did and I actually did really well in Pre-Calc because I had a tutor and he really helped me." Listening to the recording later, I'd hear a strong emphasis on "really" and "really well;" his voice carried a sense of wonderment as if he'd received some inexplicable yet appreciated gift. He continued to

trace his history with math, explaining that in college, bolstered with confidence found at the end of his time at Cranbrook, he took Calculus. A bad idea as it turned out.

"It was the only class in college where I got a B."

"In all four years of college?"

"I did much better in college. At UVM I had to confront who I was because even though [the student body] was very white, there is a lot more class diversity [ranging] from working poor Vermont families to rich, upper class people from Manhattan and kids from the suburbs like me who want to wear Patagonia and think they're outdoorsy. There's no racial diversity but there's a range of social classes. Had I gone to schools like the one you went to it would've been like part two of my day school experience. All that is to say I was a horrible test take-taker. I think I have ADD, but I've never been diagnosed with it and my therapist is like, "Whatever, who cares, it's just a label." Wait what were your questions?"

"I think you just answered most of them."

In examining his parent's background and their decision to send him to Cranbrook, Edward received the message that formal education was highly valued and linked to professional and financial success. Neither parent was from money. Because his parents "weren't from a WASPy background" they went to public schools, meeting at Michigan State. His mother worked to put his father through medical school and he became an eye surgeon, allowing them to send their children to private schools.

Edward never felt a sense of guilt or obligation to demonstrate himself as a worthy recipient of their hard work, instead the message was that "because they'd always worked so hard for that success they just wanted me to do the best I could and do my work and that was it;" to enjoy his life in ways they had not. The pressure came from fellow students. "They'd say, "I got a 1400 on the SAT" and I'm like, "Oh my god.""

Edward's referencing of the threshhold demarcating a "good score" as driven by his peers offers a chance to see how critical that comparison is in driving how a student

understands a score, and how flawed it can be. As it happens, students who gauged their score in 1995 based on what they'd been told was a good score in 1994 would have a skewed perspective on their own performance. In 1995, the SAT had two sections instead of the three it has today, with a maximum score of 800 on each section. That year, after years of the median score drifting lower, The College Board recentered the median SAT scores in deference to perception. Since, said The College Board, most people assumed 500 was average, they recalibrated the scale so it would be. The effect was that a 420-Verbal and a 470-Math in 1994 each became a 500 in 1995. The closer a person scored to the mean, the greater the benefit with Math scores over 650 actually skewed lower after the 1995 recentering making comparisons even more difficult. For instance, assuming identical scores on both sections, a student who told Edward he scored a 1400 in 1995 would have scored a 1350 in 1994 (a 640-Verbal and a 710-Math).

To keep up, Edward had math tutors and decided to take the ACT, for which he got a tutor, because he'd been told it was a better fit for people who were better at languages; an identity ("good at languages") he now finds ironic as he learned to love science in graduate school (so much so it impeded his progress toward a degree in the English Department and resulted in getting him "kicked out.")

He describes his grades as "not great—I got a lot of Bs," admitting that this was at a school where the students who got a lot of As went to Harvard. His classmates also "knew the game" while Edward's parents "weren't connected to that northeastern, New England-y, New York City idea. They knew about it, but from the Michigan perspective, which was 'You work really hard and go to the University of Michigan' because that's where all the successful Jews go, but they didn't go to U of M so they were on the outskirts themselves, but they still were drawn to the establishment. The idea that Mitt Romney went [to Cranbrook]."

For Edward, grades were how one measured both success and a sense of belonging. He clearly recalls each class and when he took it and how he did. Only in

college, when his grades soared, and he'd matured into adulthood was he able to assess himself in more complicated ways than the parameters established in his childhood. In hindsight, Edward's standardized testing story appeared to him as an example of how there are different degrees of acceptance, all of which feel provisional, and the ways in which identity formation is partly dependent on others accepting one's chosen identity.

When we spoke, Edward was in the midst of challenging, or perhaps changing, the intellectual identity he'd constructed, and had been constructed for him, since middle school. In listening to his story, I heard the narrative of a person trying to remake himself by returning to something that felt more tangible and real and more relevant than "close reading." He was highly aware of his own class status and privilege, and how it had opened some doors but also impeded his development in other ways.

The day before, he'd had a phone interview with a small middle school in western North Carolina—a boarding school offering outdoor education in farming in addition to regular subjects.

"It's very Quaker and consensus-based. No matter a person's job title or role, everyone is paid the same. No head of school. It's a very white, liberal model but it's an expensive, elite private school. I don't know how I feel about that. I didn't know such things were an option at eighteen."

In the statement, I heard a desire to have had such options for himself, yet uncertainty as to whether it would have been the right approach. He defended the model when I asked if he worried students who graduated from non-traditional schools would not be seen as having gone to a "real" school."

"A lot of [non-traditional] schools can be way more rigorous than regular schools you have to actually confront yourself as a learner in a way you don't have to when you're just copying information down."

"Yeah," I said, "the way I learned was very top-down. There were discussions but in college a person stood behind a podium and lectured, at least informally. It felt very normal to me, it's what I'd experienced and seen in movies as capital "C" College."

"You went to an establishment school. You knew how to exist in that model."

Let it go, I thought. This isn't about you. I asked if he thought the people he'd gone to school with were good at advertising their success.

"I think because their parents taught them how to sell it, because their parents worked for General Motors or Ford as marketing executives or in product design they knew how to do things that are about how to "curate your best self," as Vanessa Place would say it. I should clarify a lot of the pressure was from the Jewish community that I was a part of and not just from my high school."

Edward explained his involvement in temple as less about religion and more about "a social thing." He went to school at temple every Monday night for a class called "Topics in Jewish Life" and remembers it as mostly about Israel and that a lot of discussion about the sort of life a person was expected to lead happened there.

"If you're middle, upper-middle class there's a lot of pressure to enter a profession. Doctor, lawyer, business." Pressure flowed from parents to their kids, but Edward felt like his parents didn't pressure him as much. "My parents weren't like 'You have to get all As," they weren't like that at all. They just were like, 'If you do your homework and do your best and don't do drugs we don't care how you do in school.'"

"Here's a thing I don't understand. Based on your interests here and in college, and even in high school I'm curious why your math placement score was so important."

"In math, even though it was a hard subject, I was able to succeed in it when I had a tutor because it was not about personal expression. It was about impersonal algorithmic procedural models of knowledge that you just had to understand and memorize and understand and internalize and execute. The stuff I excelled at in college was all about personal expression. I was an English and Geography major but it was really English that

got me going. I'd always struggled with those classes in high school because I was asked to express myself and I was scared of myself."

At this point in the conversation, Edward still spoke rapidly and with precision but he'd stopped making eye contact and the impression was of someone turning further inward. At first, I was startled by the notion of being scared of oneself, but is that so uncommon? To not fully understand oneself is part of living. Here, as with many points in the conversations I'd have over the next months, the seductive promise of standardized testing overlapped with the promise of knowing the self. Consider the state of mind of a rising sixth grader offered the promise of an education implicitly meant to confer specialness. Granted entrance, an assessment suggested he didn't belong and that he'd be unable to hide all that he found frightening about himself.

Edward still cared about the math assessment because it was the only subject where succeeding would not risk exposing his true self, thus being assessed as below-average in the one place where he'd hoped to hide implicitly heightened his risk of exposure; if he wasn't a math whiz he'd have to do something else, and anything else meant exposure. The message absorbed from his math assessment test: you have nowhere to hide. The importance of the subject became clear throughout the conversation when, in clarifying a couple points in the latter stages of the interview, he used similar language to describe his relationship with the subject, saying, "I did better in math because even thought it was my hardest subject it was a way for me to not deal with myself and just follow the procedures in Algebra II or Calculus. Learn the cosine. Just do the formula."

The least hospitable place for a person hiding from self-expression was in writing, a place where formulas are harder to come by, and Edward recalls it as difficult but he also benefited from a teacher he described as difficult and a "pure type. Bow tie. Sweater vest. He had cultural capital. The real deal. He was why you pay thirty thousand dollars a year to go to a school like that." In his classes, Edward read Joan Didion's essays in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* and her depictions of cultural change and uncertainty as to

what the future held resonated as “a person who was talking about the problems I was feeling, who was even mapping that narrative.” He admired her for being “mainstream yet rarified. She doesn't operate in response to the academy, when you do that, you're still defined by what you're not, she’s on her own outside the institution.”

By the end of his junior year, he liked writing and understood “close reading as the one thing I was good at, thus when I went to college I knew I could do it and, hence, an English Ph.D. except now I don’t think reading literature is the answer to life, I actually think it’s isolating, dangerous and mediocre.”

In talking about his youth, Edward explained those years as one where he lived in “between different worlds,” there was the “normal” world (defined as inherited money, “WASPy” and heterosexual) and his world (earned-money, Jewish and homosexual). The word choice hinted at the source of tension he felt in those years as he was “between” those worlds, fully inhabiting neither. It was identity formation guided by what one is not versus what one is, and I could easily understand why he’d been drawn as a high school student to Didion, to someone who knew where she stood. Such voices appeal to those still trying to answer the same questions. Long-form “intellectual” journalists and essayists like Didion are establishment voices posing as outsiders. Validated by mainstream culture and publications they are able, because of fortune and circumstance, to survive without strong ties to an institution. They don’t live between multiple cultural worlds inasmuch as they live within many at once, easily flowing from one to the other.

Of the many points of difference between himself and his peers, his sexual identity emerged as the most prominent point of difference as it was the one aspect of his identity he did not share with his family. He compared himself to his older brother who played football and went to Michigan State and was “normal” in terms of family expectations. Edward allows that his parents didn’t support him, but they couldn’t because he didn’t fully share who he was with them.

"I didn't feel like I could because no one in my family is gay, which means of course there's someone. I had no one to look up to. If your parents don't tell you that's an option and that's okay then you don't know it's okay. I was in a really lethal, toxic community of rich white people who didn't dare talk about sexual identity."

"Of any kind."

"Exactly. Of any kind."

"WASPs don't do that. There are certain topics we just don't talk about. Being polite is what's most important."

"And even among the Jews, who are more accepting of gays, no one talked about it. I had one friend in high school who I knew was gay but he never came out. We'd been friends from a young age, we went to preschool together but neither one of us talked about knowing the other was gay until we went to college. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I don't think I came out, academically, I didn't really show up to the plate, because I was so closeted in my identity. The true 'me,' and I don't know if there is ever a true 'you,' but I guess what I'm saying is it wasn't until I got to college when I was like, 'I want to do intellectual work for my life.' In high school, I didn't know that because I was so worried about being proper and behaved and closeted so I could pass. I didn't get good grades because I didn't try too hard because if I tried too hard my true self would come out. My personal expression would come out and if that came out that was lethal because then I would come out and I didn't want that to happen at Cranbrook. It was like this whole line of events. I don't know if it's true across the sciences—I'm talking about language arts and the social sciences where you can speak your voice a little more—I still just think I was depressed from a young age in ways that just weren't addressed."

The subjects that required self-expression were at first threatening then a means for "coming out" in two ways. He at first relied on the subjects that didn't require self-expression. When he became comfortable with himself they became less appealing as they allowed less space to perform his identities. Free to choose his own interests, he gravitated

to those that would teach him about himself, not what they would obscure. The journey to this stance left him with little respect for standardized tests.

"Let's just say that standardized tests are totally heteronormative. They are timed and a periodizing mechanism of the state. That's what Elizabeth Freeman would say. She's a literary critic and has this thing called Chronopolitics. There are all these institutions of the state that inculcate us to work during certain time or follow normative times for marriage or have children at a certain time. They are all chronological forms that are politicized and I think standardized tests are a way of enforcing chronopolitics. I've always been horribly anxious about them because what they're saying is, 'Here's the norm. You have twenty minutes to do it. Be the most normal you can be in those twenty minutes.' If you give me those sorts of strict parameters I just feel totally scared and have anxiety. Since I grew up in an environment where I knew I had to act or code myself as normal a standardized test is a way of learning how to pass again, a way of being tested to see if I'm normal and that's also horrible because I have a really slow processing speed. I know that I take a long time to read things. It's part of why I struggled here. In a lot of classes, you had to read six critical articles and a novel a week. I need a couple weeks to do that and get anything out of it. I can do it in one week but I won't learn anything. Standardized tests do the same thing. 'Here's all this information. Do it in twenty minutes. That's not a way to work through things. It's the same thing getting a Ph.D. is about. It's not about learning or making something. It's about getting something done, to prove that you have the ability to start and finish something. You can do your real writing later. First, prove you can finish something in six years. Or first finish this part of a standardized test in twenty minutes. Fuck you. No. That's chronopolitics. That's totally enforcing heteronormativity. It's fascist. It's a way to control people and say this is what the norm should be and if you're not it then you're inadequate. To me, all it does is make the most mediocre people feel special. In the same way Ph.D. programs make the most

mediocre thinkers feel better because they follow the rules better. No offense. Sorry. I don't think you're a mediocre thinker."

"It's cool, I get what you're saying."

A lie. I didn't think it was at the time, but as the weeks then months passed and I was asked to explain my dissertation, I found myself returning to this moment, to this idea, and in each instance the reaction was the same. How is standardized testing heteronormative? They didn't get it. Faced with their confusion, I found I didn't have the language to explain. I went back to Edward's interview and listened again and realized the key was understanding the tests Edward referenced most directly were the SAT and the ACT and therefore, like the ITBS and intelligence tests and so many others, were norm-referenced tests.

"Reference" is a soft verb, softer than more accurate options like "norm-based" or "norm-dependent" or "norm-identified" or "norm-invented." Norm-referenced tests take the results and group them from lowest to highest to form the infamous bell curve shape trusted by statisticians as evidence that a test is appropriately difficult and doing its job of finding difference. Draw a line down the middle of the curve, and divide either side of the hill into percentiles and you have a way to tell people where they rank in relation to others. In saying the tests are heteronormative, Edward wasn't saying they are explicitly homophobic, or explicitly able to identify someone's sexual identity and punish them for it, but that they create and reinforce the idea of a "norm," and that this norm is the ideal. For Edward, who was highly aware that one attribute of the majority is its heterosexuality, and that he had an identity outside this norm that was constantly under assessment by the culture, taking norm-referenced standardized tests heightened preexisting anxiety about his non-mainstream identity. His story revealed how testing for a person's proximity to a norm can solicit feelings of otherness and invoke anxiety referenced in the stereotype threat described by Steele and Aronson (Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J., 1995, p.797–811 & Steele, 1997, p. 613-29).

As we ended our discussion, Edward allowed that he was trying to return to the place where he'd spent the years following graduation from college. A time of building hiking trails and teaching kids. Living in cabins and biking across the country.

"I need to get back to all that. I don't want to be a student of anybody but myself."

He said it with a defiance and sincerity I admired. I knew some would hear it the same way they hear the "Song of Myself" as an anthem to navel gazing. But self-involvement is not the same as self-study. The former is uncritical, the latter uses the self as a thoroughfare into the world.

Now and then, he thinks about a moment during an internship he had in Washington, DC with a national magazine. It was supposed to be a turn toward his professional self, but he broke down one day in the shower before work. In college, he'd fallen hard for Emerson's "The American Scholar" and when a police siren went by he thought, "I don't even know how a siren works. All I do is use, use, use. My fingers are separated from my body." He smiled in describing the memory, but said he was hit with an overwhelming frustration that the only thing he knew how to do with his body was walk—he didn't know how to do anything, how to make anything, he feared he was becoming, as Emerson put it, "the parrot of other men's thinking." Nevertheless, he went on to graduate school but the model of deep, narrow focus felt disintegrated and restrictive. He couldn't involve what soon emerged as his true interests: environmental studies and the politics of natural resources. Worse, he didn't believe in the writing he was being asked to do. He became depressed. The incompletes piled up. And now it was time to leave. Perhaps for a consensus-based middle school in the mountains. Perhaps for somewhere else. In the Didion essay, "Goodbye to All That," she begins her goodbye to New York with, "It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends." For Edward, it would be different. It was easier to see the end, this end at least. It was the next beginning that held him in suspension.

"If I don't get a regular job," he said as we ended our conversation, "I'm afraid I'll end up washed up on the shore in northern California. But what I really want to do is grow some carrots and meditate. Work at a farm. Wake up at 4 am. Read poetry and write. I need to get back to all that."

## SHALONDA: THE EDUCATION PIECE
## *OR:* THE BLATANTLY OBVIOUS CHICK TELLS YOU ABOUT HER EDUCATION

In attempting to reconstruct how I met Shalonda, the final storyteller in this study, the two parties shared a difference of opinion. We agree it happened in the grocery story, and in the canned goods section, but in her version I looked at her weird. In my version, she looked at me weird. In both versions, "weird" is a scrunched up face, the sort of face used when confronted with the peculiar. A pomegranate on the kitchen counter when you don't recall buying a pomegranate. A crossword clue written in hieroglyphics. Or recognizing someone, while being certain you don't know the person, or why you recognize her (or him). Being unable to place someone drives me crazy; I worry I'm either being rude or losing my memory—or both. It's also an almost daily occurrence in a small college town where the person could either be a former student or someone you buy coffee from twice a week (or both) or—as has happened—merely someone who is on the same schedule and the run-ins are based in nothing but happenstance. Finally, I confessed that I felt like I knew her, hyper-conscious that such a statement sounded like a terrible pick-up line. Fortunately, she didn't take it as such, and agreed I looked familiar. Small town, et cetera. Acknowledgment didn't provide answers, so I went back to shopping, right as she posed the question.

"Facebook?"

Of course.

We had a friend in common and had commented on some of the same articles—the most recent being one in the local paper about juvenile arrest rates, in which she'd been quoted. Mystery solved, I felt a little less weird, and I didn't expect to see her again, but from then on, I ran into her all over the place, usually in the grocery story and renting movies at a little kiosk outside of a pharmacy, often with her fiancé. She was a social worker with the county and, I suspected, someone I'd like to know, someone who would

see this town from an angle I couldn't access from within the academic bubble where I lived and longed, increasingly, to escape if at least on a temporary basis. After a necessary conversation about intentions clarified matters, we had lunch during which she said I was interesting, but for reasons she couldn't explain, which wasn't much of a compliment. Weeks if not months passed then, unexpectedly, she invited me over for Thanksgiving, correctly guessing that I didn't have anywhere else to be. Twice, she tried to fix me up with friends. I refused as I know from experience that sort of thing never works. Her offers were kind but surprising and I told her so. She said I seemed like someone who lived in my head a lot. I bridled at the analysis but didn't disagree.

"It's common in people from low-context cultures," she said.

I told her I didn't know what that meant, but it didn't sound right.

"Maybe you should look it up first."

I did as told. The idea comes largely out of the work of Edward T. Hall in the 1960s who described low context cultures like those of Northern Europe as exhibiting low emotional and personal involvement; being highly analytical and inexpressive with low dependence on context, i.e. abstract and symbolic. By comparison, cultures in Latin America, the Mediterranean, Africa and some in the Middle East are more oriented toward people and community. Communication in low-context cultures relies more heavily on writing and is more individualistic and more enamored with personal privacy and practiced today by those prone to spending a lot of time in coffee shops muttering into their laptops. High-context cultures tend to be more reliant on verbal communication and are more direct—and less deterred by the prospect of speaking to stranger in grocery stores. The theory isn't without its critics who say it flirts with confirming stereotypes of highly diverse groups (Hammack, 2001, p. 397-400).

The theory is reductionist, but I couldn't help but admit it worked as a way of describing our communication—and our trouble in agreeing on her pseudonym.

"You don't like 'Teresa?'"

"Um no. I want to be stereotypically black so then when they read my accomplishments it dispels myths."

"I like it when race is described indirectly at first."

"I feel you. I'm just the blatantly obvious chick."

"It's easy to just state it but some white audiences, in particular, will read a person as white by default so then you catch 'em. But I'm happy to change it."

"I got you. But if I'm going to be white I want to have a whiter name."

"Snow?"

"Yes!"

"Come on."

"Got you."

"Thanks. I just can't think of a name that doesn't reveal too much. You pick. And not 'Snow.'"

"Lori."

"I already have a Lori. Of all the names, you picked one I already have."

"Pick whatever wacky name you choose. What about 'Iowa?'"

"No. It's unethical to tell someone what they should be called and I want you to like it but I'm not calling you 'Iowa.'"

"You're imposing your culture on me. Trying to name me just like your people did back in the day."

"Wow."

"This is fun!"

"Is it?"

"It is. You could use my club name. Shalonda."

"Why do you have a club name?"

"Oh, I have that name when I don't want to give out my name because my real one is easily googled."

"Smart. I could use Shalonda."

"Go with whatever. I don't plan to introduce myself at you dissertation."

For awhile, I followed "Shalonda's" attempt at starting a diversion program aimed at juveniles on the cusp of a first offense for something minor. The intent was to keep them out of the system by enrolling them and their parents in a class that, among other things, focused on goal-setting, conflict management and impulse control. Her supervisors at the county social services office struggled to find funding and she put it on hold. In a short-lived attempt at becoming a better person, I volunteered for awhile at her afterschool program, helping with homework and snack time then stopped when it conflicted with a changing schedule. I hadn't seen her in months when I spotted her name on a church billboard that announced her as the speaker at an upcoming service with a perplexing "Underground Railroad" theme. She responded to my email by asking if I'd come so she'd know someone in the audience. I sat at the back and listened to her talk about moving to Iowa as a nine-year old; she applied little varnish to a tale that had its rough spots, and traced the arc of growing up in a home splintered by trauma, to a merit-based college scholarship, a master's degree and a job in social services. After she sat down, well-intended white people sang Negro spirituals and the 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein song "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught" from *South Pacific*:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year,
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear…

Afterward, I confessed to finding the musical selections outdated and heavy-handed. And a bit enamored with the exotic. And outdated. And clumsy. And…outdated. She'd told me to be nicer to my people.

"Those aren't my people."

"Oh? Who are your people?"

"I don't have people."

"Oh brother."

We are sitting on her porch, Shalonda and I. The chairs don't rock, but there is lemonade on the table and corn in the field. A fat, egg yolk of a sun cracks upon the horizon. Gives us just enough light to make out the seams in the yard where the builders lay down the sod. The neighborhood offers up a mix of ranch houses, duplexes and Cape Cod variations sprouting up in rows as orderly as the corn they're replacing; most are less than a year old. A neighbor walking a poodle approaches to say hello. Her dog attempts to leap up onto the porch, misses and falls splay-legged into a knee-high shrub. At the far end of the block, a police cruiser drifts out of a side street and parks on the curb. Pleasantries exchanged, the neighbor and her dog leave.

Shalonda studies the police cruiser. The recording of those seconds will yield nothing but the sound of wind, creaking chairs, ice cubes clattering in glasses and Shalonda speculating that the police are watching one of the houses down the block.

"This is not Watts," she says, speaking in the vehicle's direction. "This is not LA County. This is Iowa."

Shalonda's official job title at the county social service office is Community Projects Specialist. Half of her time goes toward coordinating a grant aimed at child abuse prevention. The other half is spent as the Disproportionate Contact Minority Coordinator; a position created in response to Iowa having the most disproportionate ratio in the country of minority juveniles involved in the justice system as compared to white juveniles. African-American and Latino youth are respectively five and eight percent of the state's juvenile population and combined they are four times more likely

than white youth to be incarcerated. It's a national problem as over 70% of school-related arrests or referrals to law enforcement are Hispanic or African-American.

In 2008, the State of Iowa became the first state in the country to require a "minority impact statement" to track how state legislation and programs impact minority statistics on crime, sentencing, parole and probation. Over the following years, the rate of minority youth in Iowa coming in contact with the police in the form of charges, stops or other types of interactions dropped to approximately the national average, but Shalonda's concern is an uptick in school suspensions. Using numbers from the 2009-2010 school year released by the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, of the 480,000 students enrolled in K-12 in Iowa, seventeen thousand were suspended, four thousand of whom were black or Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Nationally, about three million students are suspended every year. Suspensions matter because they result in lost class time and are a leading indicator of whether or not a student will drop out of school while increasing future risk of incarceration. For all racial groups, students with disabilities are suspended at a rate double that of their peers; one out of four black children with disabilities was suspended at least once in 2009-2010 school year.

According to the CRDC, black students in Iowa receive 13% of all school suspensions, meaning they are suspended at a rate almost three times that of white students, while Hispanic students are almost twice as likely to be suspended as white students. Conversely, in Iowa, black and Hispanic students are half as likely to be identified as Gifted and Talented as white students, who make up 89% of all students identified for those programs, an even higher percentage than seen nationally where 75% of students identified as gifted are categorized as either white or Asian.

While the population of black students in Iowa is less than a third of what it is nationally, the rate disparity in suspensions compares to national numbers where across

the U.S., black students are also suspended at three times the rate of white students. The disparity in expulsions is even more pronounced.

For the last five years, Shalonda has been part of an effort that brought the arrest rates of juvenile children of color down but she doesn't see much change in the police perspective. Their point of view, as she sees it, is that "people of color bring problems." If two white kids have a problem with each other, that's just how things are, if two black kids have a problem with each other, it's because they're in a gang. It's a perspective that applies different treatment to similar behavior and creates antagonistic relationships within communities. The result is punitive enforcement measures that reaffirm the set of expectations that initiated the behavior in the first place.

"There are these kids who call themselves the H-Block Boys because they live on H Street. Another that call themselves the Eastsiders. The police hear that and they think it's a gang. They don't have gang activities, they don't sell drugs. I had cliques when I was a kid. I have cliques now. My girlfriends get together and we call ourselves 'The Lionnesses.' People have a way of identifying themselves but the police see it as gangs because they're black males. But the city council has now signed off on the police going into the schools. Even after six months of research showing the problems with the police functioning in a top-down way in the community."

Earlier that week, the police arrested a group of kids fighting in a park after school. By dinnertime, Shalonda had text messages from parents. It was overkill. They were upset. They wanted someone to do something and thought she might. She does what she can. She makes calls. Sits down with the chief of police, a well-meaning sort who says the right things and wins election easily time and again.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't lock kids up if they've got guns. But kids are going to fight. The problem for me is when you put people into detention, arrest them, when all they're doing is yelling at each other saying, "I'm gonna bust your ass" or something. They shouldn't do it, but nobody is dealing with the emotional part of these kids. I don't

know why people act like kids fighting is brand new. It isn't about black or white, people have been fighting for years but now we're putting an adult correctional system into schools. I know this isn't what you came to talk about."

I tell her it's relevant, and it is, since standardized testing is founded in a motivation to sort and select for those fitting within what those in power determine to be the norm, and to punish those who fail to score well. The dynamic she describes of criminalizing misbehavior brings to mind the parallel growths of standardized testing and the increased incarceration rates of U.S. citizens. Over the past 25 years, according to The National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, the number of Americans under criminal supervision has increased by nearly 400% with long-term ramifications in terms of societal participation including voting rights, eligibility for federal college loans and many occupations. For legal immigrants, the stakes can be even higher. While I am not claiming a pure causal connection, it is a curious fact that between 1983 (and the publication of A Nation at Risk) and 2003 the U.S. has seen an 800% increase in criminal deportations (Lin, 2009). These trends bring to mind the punitive elements of standardized testing, which prioritizes punishment for poor performance over learning, all of which can be contextualized in terms of race and economics—as well as geography.

For African-Americans, race and wealth are as interconnected in the Midwest as in the South, which is often perceived as the country's most economically-challenged region, especially for people of color. The Kaiser Family Foundation, using U.S. Census data from 2012 and 2013, finds that nationally the poverty rate among black Americans is 35% (compared to 13% for whites) and while several states did not provide sufficient data, of the twenty states including the District of Columbia over the national average, seventeen are in the South and Midwest. Of the ten states commonly identified as constituting the Midwest, 35.5% of the black population lives in poverty, a comparable figure to the eleven southern states that have 37.8% of their black populations in poverty. Of the twenty states with higher than average black poverty, nine had higher than average

white poverty and eleven had poverty percentages among the Hispanic population average of 33%. Three states (North Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska) and the District of Columbia had black poverty rates over 35% and white poverty rates in single digits. The percentage of black Americans living in poverty in Iowa is 38%, compared to 25% among Hispanics and 12% among whites (Kaiser, 2014).

Poverty Rankings of Black Populations in the Midwest and South by State*

| Location | Total |
|---|---|
| 1. Florida | 1,045,600 |
| 2. Georgia | 947,400 |
| 3. North Carolina | 680,900 |
| 4. Louisiana | 624,600 |
| 5. Illinois | 616,400 |
| 6. Ohio | 548,100 |
| 7. Michigan | 512,500 |
| 8. Mississippi | 473,100 |
| 9. Alabama | 457,900 |
| 10. South Carolina | 455,700 |
| 11. Virginia | 433,600 |
| 12. Tennessee | 383,400 |
| 13. Missouri | 244,500 |
| 14. Indiana | 244,300 |
| 15. Arkansas | 207,700 |
| 16. Minnesota | 122,300 |
| 17. Kentucky | 122,200 |
| 18. Wisconsin | 120,400 |
| 19. Kansas | 63,200 |
| 20. Iowa | 33,600 |
| 21. Nebraska | 31,100 |

| Location | Percentage |
|---|---|
| 1. Arkansas | 48% |
| 2. Louisiana | 44% |
| 3. Mississippi | 44% |
| 4. Minnesota | 43% |
| 5. Indiana | 43% |
| 6. Wisconsin | 41% |
| 7. Ohio | 40% |
| 8. Nebraska | 40% |
| 9. Kansas | 40% |
| 10. Michigan | 39% |
| 11. Iowa | 38% |
| 12. Kentucky | 38% |
| 13. Tennessee | 37% |
| 14. Missouri | 37% |
| 15. Alabama | 37% |
| 16. Florida | 36% |
| 17. South Carolina | 36% |
| 18. Illinois | 34% |
| 19. North Carolina | 34% |
| 20. Georgia | 33% |
| 21. Virginia | 29% |

*Outside these regions but with rates over the national average are the District of Columbia (39%), Rhode Island (38%) and Pennsylvania (36%)

Poverty, of course, is much too complicated to be reduced to percentages among regions and states. I offer all of these numbers for a single, rather simple reason.

When it comes to test scores, contextualizing racial differences often references the euphemism of the “achievement gap,” a perennial topic reported in popular media

with little explanation to accompany a graph demonstrating differences between scores presented as Asian, black, white and Latino or Hispanic test scores. Notions of what constitutes "race" are anything but durable, but to many people they appear to be, so for those looking to explain a behavior without invoking an obligation to act, an attribute like race offers ethical cover. Even a cursory review of the history reveals race-based analysis to be a crude and mostly useless measure given that achievement gaps can be explained by other less nebulous factors. A few examples: ineffective test-taking strategies alone account for 19% to 25% of the variance originally explained by race (Dollinger, 2012, p. 511-517) and, as far back as 1992, we've known that 89% of the differences in test scores can be accounted for when test results are controlled for number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, community type, and state poverty rates. That study, of the math portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, found that whether a student has one or two parents at home accounts for 71% of the difference (Robinson, cited by Kohn, 2001, p. 16).[6] The report did not explore the causes behind these correlations but presumably, on this last point, the number of parents at home is a proxy for a higher level of supervision, which could be achieved through other means. As a point of comparison in Canada, where high-stakes standardized testing has also become much more common, approximately 70 percent of the variation in student learning is attributable to student, family and community characteristics, but not schools (Ungerleider, 2006, p. 873–883).

Ignoring the intermingled nature of race and poverty in the United States provides a cover of ignorance, but this cover has consequences. A disproportionate

[6] While this statistic invites the easy conclusion that a dual parent household solves the problem of low test scores, a closer look reveals the benefits are inconsistent and unequal. In the Midwest, the poverty rate among single-parent African-American families is 52% and 59% in Iowa but, in Iowa, having two parents at home does not benefit African-American households as much as it helps whites or Hispanics in terms of lowering the poverty rate. Elsewhere, the percentage of two-parent African-American households in poverty is two to three times that of two parent white households. In Iowa, it's more than six times that of the equivalent white population (23% to 3.6%).

number of minority students attend Title I schools, which are not only subject to federal sanctions and least able to absorb budget cuts, but their students typically score lower than their counterparts in low-poverty schools. With wealth tied to test performance and test performance tied to measures of school quality, the unsurprising result is that generally speaking the poorer a child is, the more testing he or she will receive**.**

Yet, in the name of high standards and a desire to counter what then-President Bush called, in an address to the NAACP in 2000, "the soft bigotry of low expectations," all students are expected to meet the same single mean proficiency level set using a standardized test as a single indicator for assessing the students and the school (Bush, 2000). It sounded good, and equitable. And yet, the result was predictable: having started out at a lower baseline, even when high-poverty schools improved their reading and mathematics scores at a rate similar to low-poverty schools, NCLB's formulas still identified them as failing, and the schools were punished or closed (Kim, 2006, p. 3–13).

Since the income of a child's parents or guardian is a strong indicator of test scores, any policies that measure school—and teacher—quality based on standardized testing are policies likely to generate a numerical justification for closing schools that teach students living in poverty. This is a cruel equation in a country where using data from 2011, low-income students are 48% of all students in public schools.[7] In seventeen states, mostly in the South and Southwest plus California, and for the first time in modern U.S. history they are the new majority. New Hampshire's rate is the lowest at 25% and 39% of all Iowa students qualify as low-income (Southern Education, 2013, p. 2, 14). The true performance of "poor-performing" students is that of poverty.

I ask Shalonda to remind me of what life was like when she moved to Iowa.

"Well, yes, Iowa has had its impact on my life. I've been here, geez Louise…a long time. Jesus. Man. With moving here, my parents argued and fought before but it either

[7] Low-income: defined as children who receive free or reduced school lunches, meaning their families are below 185 percent of the poverty line.

escalated when we moved here or I became more aware of it because I was older. My father was a very outspoken black man. And we lived in Dubuque, Iowa. They liked black folks who were like white folks. Not loud. And that wasn't us. He was in the military. He was in the hood. So he brought that skill set with him. My mom actually grew up middle class. Bought all her clothes at JC Penney. Had her own bedroom."

Shalonda's mother didn't finish high school, married and had three daughters and a son. In Chicago, her father worked for the railroad. He was injured on the job and, briefly, the family had money thanks to the compensation package.

"The problem is if you ain't come from nothing you don't know how to maintain it, so my dad went and got this expensive house in a suburb. A new two-story place. He wanted to be big daddy with people packing the house and the yard. He is now suffering from that lifestyle health-wise but that's another story."

The money bought a brief flirtation with indulgences Shalonda had never experienced before. All the Winnie the Pooh books and dolls she wanted. A fish tank. A live-in nanny and housekeeper who helped her learn to read.

Reading became a survival skill. Amid the chaos, stories gave structure to her life. ("With a lot of the moving, reading has been a hiding place for me. I started reading at three. I don't know if I was really reading or had just memorized the words.") She knew there would be a beginning and a middle and a happy ending. ("You know there's going to be a struggle, so that's easy, and in romance novels he was always going to get the girl. I never read mysteries. I read romance novels and teen books.")

The family went broke in two years. No heat meant roasting hot dogs in the living room fireplace for dinner. Shalonda went to live with her grandmother. It didn't help that Shalonda was allergic to dogs, cats, dust and who knows what else. For awhile, she was in the emergency room twice a week for asthma.

The return to poverty pushed her parents to leave Chicago. They'd had enough.

As she told her story, I couldn't let go of a seemingly simplistic question. Why did her family pick Iowa? The answer surprised me.

"The ITBS was a motivation to move to Iowa. Iowa was a place where the ACT was done. Where the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was done. They felt like if this is a place where the test is made, then my kid can go there and learn how to do well. It was a beacon. Go here. Field of Dreams. Opportunity."

I couldn't imagine a more sincere expression of faith in standardized testing and an acknowledgment of its primacy but kept this to myself, asking instead about a half-remembered story about Shalonda being placed in the wrong class upon arrival.

*"Little Kiddie Books," and the ITBS*

"Oh yes, before we moved to Iowa, me and my sister were really smart kids. Well, just probably average kids, but given the high poverty community we lived in, and because our parents had taken extra time for us to become strong readers, we seemed well above where people expected us to be. When we moved to Iowa, that was 1991. I was nine and when we got there, there was only one African-American kid in our class; he was biracial. There were a lot of biracial kids, which was very typical of Dubuque. Some weird thing happened there where a lot of black men ended up with white women so there's lots of biracial families there. But their teacher decided that transfer students had to start in the lowest of everything. Reading, spelling, math, whatever it was. So they put me in this kind of like Dick and Jane book type of reading class. And the interesting thing about where we lived in Dubuque is we lived across the street from the Carnegie Library, which is this massive building. There was no grass, we had no yard, it was kind of downtown so all we did was hang out in the library all day. And they had this thing where if you read a certain number of books you got a personal sized pan pizza from Pizza Hut. So don't challenge me. Dare not challenge me. My older sister and I were huge readers and she liked older books like romance novels and I'd try to read them too even though I didn't always

understand why boys and girls wanted to hang out together. So she would bring home these books and we'd have contests about who could read the most books and I'm not gonna lie, sometimes I skipped chapters, which probably helped me in graduate school because I learned how to get the main points so I could talk about it eloquently enough the librarian would believe I read it.

I ended up in this class and I was completely bored in there for four or five months before the time came around to take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. When I took it I was in like the 95th percentile, for a fourth grader, in the country, and they're like 'Maybe these books aren't challenging enough?' Anything in English I was somewhere in the 90th percentile. Everything else I was fine.

"You were doing what—"

"Yes, I was doing what a fourth grader should be doing. That was an interesting point in my life where I had to read what my mom called these "little kiddie books." And I knew I could read better than that and that's when I would turn in all these lists at the library with like two thousand of these little books on them. It was so bad that I couldn't go to bed unless I'd finished it. If I started a book at five o'clock I'd be up all night reading with a flashlight.

"That's what I always remember about testing is it tells other people to build impressions of your intelligence based on a score instead of taking the time to get to know you and look at your skill level and what you're able to do—and not just wait for some test. When I got there I could have taken some kind of test instead of them assuming I didn't know how to read well. What's interesting is now when I see other kids transferring in from Chicago to this area I see parents struggle with the same thing when you'd think after all this time they'd have figured this out."

In Shalonda's story about her experience with the ITBS, I heard a story about standardized testing forcing her teachers to take a second look at a child who'd been given an inadequate appraisal; it played into notions about testing serving as a safeguard but it

also raised the question of whether the promise of standardized testing functioning as a safeguard could invite complacency and a lessening of pressure to perform an accurate assessment. It is impossible to identify with any certainty the source of her teachers' expectation that she would be a poor reader, but it is worth noting that 1990, the year before Shalonda arrived in Iowa, marked the first year that National Assessment of Educational Progress test results were reported on the state level. Scores were released in four areas: mathematics, reading, science and writing, and while the NAEP test's history begins in 1969 as the only subject-area assessment given on a national level, it's not hard to imagine individual teachers in those days finding it easy to see their own schools and districts and states as different from national numbers so while notions of a black-white achievement gap were not new, and imposed racialized intellectual identities have a history far outdating this country's own history, it's necessary to acknowledge the day Shalonda walked into school in Iowa, it was at the beginning of the first year when teachers could have seen data about an achievement gap in their state, and an even larger one in Illinois. Her story, in this sense, suggests instances of standardized tests in competition, but it also illustrates how the general—in the form of state assessment data—can impose an identity upon the particular, upon the individual.

All these years later, she still recalls being jealous of the students in the other classes and frustrated at her spelling tests. As imperfect as spelling tests are when it comes to assessing reading, she feels they could have provided clues as to where she belonged because she did well every week but, unlike with the ITBS, her teachers ignored the results.

"It was almost like they didn't believe it. I spent a lot of time rolling my eyes. My parents joked about it like, 'She's testing off the—'" Shalonda stopped herself with a laugh. "I was about to use slang. 'She's testing off the charts.' That's what they meant."

"What were you going to say?"

"She's testing off the chain." It took her a moment to stop laughing. "I was at that school for awhile and ended up catching up and did really well. It ended up being to my benefit because by the time I ended up in high school all the reading I'd done ended up helping."

"So you did well but due to reading you did outside of class."

"Yes. Not because of Dick and Jane. They were not helpful. They were throwing it at me and I was throwing it back at them like 'This is such a waste of time.'"

If her first year of school in Iowa taught her how race would alter the expectations some of her teacher would have for her, it also taught her that she could expect to spend a lot of time feeling different.

"I'll never forget learning about Africa with all these white kids and you get to Niger and it comes out wrong and you roll your eyes and the teacher stops them and makes them apologize to you. You could tell he was hesitating. She could have helped him. I'll never forget that. She instilled that white guilt early."

Once I was able to stop laughing, I asked her what she thought drove her original assessment and the assumption she was a poor reader.

"There was some economics going on there. At the time, it's not that way now, but at the time, most of the kids at that school came from low-income families. We had one or two, a few, who were middle-income. The rest I would say were low-income so I would say there was not a lot of effort. It was actually an ideal-sized classroom of maybe twenty students so—we could have made some strides to another level."

*The Anxiety Piece, and the ACT*

Her family moved to Dubuque after a friend helped her father line up a job. It didn't last. He had a knack for alienating people, and the feeling of being an outsider made it worse—"killing his spirit." He got down on himself and depressed and "went street." He dealt drugs. Had women who worked for him. The family did have money; Shalonda

remembers him peeling off twenty-dollar bills from stacks of drug money on the dresser and giving it to his children so they could buy lunch. She shakes her head at the memory. What could she do with a twenty? Other than the money, he kept that life hidden. She's thankful that while she knows he sold weed, she never saw it and has no idea if he sold anything else. He was a middle-man, a distributor. He was also physically abusive to her mother and their children.

"I remember writing in a notebook how I liked this white boy and he saw it and he just lost it, and we had an abusive moment there that is kind of etched in my brain."

By the time Shalonda was fourteen, her father was in jail. She remembers going on visits to her father in jail and not understanding why her mother stayed. To support the family, her mother worked "everywhere, anywhere that would hire her. She cleaned construction sites. She did whatever she could get." Shalonda had been babysitting for two years but with the loss of income due to her father's arrest, she went to work cleaning school chalkboards, floors and windows during the academic year and the summer. During her father's first year in jail, she began putting some of the money toward a romance novel book subscription.

In high school, she was an A and B student—notably a 102% in Chemistry and an A+ in Geometry. She was a confident student, but a bad standardized test-taker.

"I didn't do well on the ACT. I did horribly on the GRE. I think what happened in those situations is I knew I was a good student. Even if I didn't always get an A in every class or on every test, I knew I was a good student. I always had the same exact GPA all the way until graduate school when I did better, but that was my field so, you know, it was going to be higher. The problem with standardized tests, for me, is the anxiety piece. When I took the ACT I probably should have taken it again but I knew the requirements for Iowa were you had to have one of three things: you had to be in the top fifty-percent of you class, which I was, you had to have at least a 3.0, which I did, and you had to have a 21 on your ACT. I had an 18. I knew standardized tests would not define my ability to do

something creative; that they were not a true measure of anything other than can I read these questions and not think about butterflies or something random."

"You knew how the system worked."

"I didn't know everything I needed to know but I knew enough."

"Why was that?"

She looked at me sideways, eyebrow taking a quick trip north. "Because someone told me."

"Right."

At some point in junior high or high school, she recalls being told that, look, those tests are not a good example of your scholastic achievement. Knowing this helped protect her from putting too much value on the result of an exam she took on little sleep; the anxiety piece in full bloom for reasons beyond the test itself. She was seventeen and her father had been released and was home for the first time in three years. For reasons she doesn't explain beyond saying it was for her own protection, the police were called to the house the night before the exam. She spent the night in a homeless shelter for teenagers.

On the advice of a teacher, she applied for a four-year scholarship to the University of Iowa from Principal Financial Group. She recognized it as a pure recruitment strategy and she applied even though she figured she had no chance. The final round required her to drive to Des Moines for an interview. Still living in the homeless shelter, she found her school guidance counselor's number in the phone book. The guidance counselor took her to Des Moines and a few weeks later Shalonda got the call. Going to college had been her goal since she was twelve years old, a goal she explains as linked to the feeling that, "I can't live like this. I have to get out of poverty. But you say that…"

"Not really knowing…"

"It was like—woah—this is real."

A scholarship was really her only option; she had no other resources and debt made her nervous. By 2006, she would finish college and her master's degree in social work without heavy reliance on student loans.

Her situation was atypical according to a 2010 report by The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center. Using data from 2007-08, it found of all bachelor degree recipients, 34% graduated with no debt, 50% with less than $30,500 and 17% in excess of $30,500. At public four-year universities like the one attended by Shalonda, the respective debt levels in those categories are 38%, 51% and 12%. Undermining memes associated with stances against affirmative action and claims of race-based preferential financial treatment in the name of diversity that make college more accessible to minorities, according to the report, more black students graduate with college loan debt amounts in excess of $30,500 than people in any other racial category in the United States; 27% percent owing more than $30,500 compared to 16% of white students, 14% of Hispanics and 9% of Asians. The report's authors speculate one reason for the discrepancy might be more black students come from lower-income earning families and while they may receive financial aid it doesn't cover the gap between themselves and other poor students (Baum, 2010, p. 2).

The question I wanted to ask was the question no one can ever answer with absolute certainty. Why did her life take the direction it did? The question introduced slippery terrain. As with all of the people I interviewed, her answers were revisions of her life. It's how she understands her life now, and that may not cohere precisely with how she understood it in the past when she was making the decisions that led her to where she is today. But caveats are boring, so I asked the question anyway.

When it came to the importance of education in her life, "It wasn't that my parents were pro any particular subject—well, my mother did think English was important—but they were pro getting a better education than you could get in Chicago. What was interesting is they had the philosophy that you could get a good education so

we could do better. That was their philosophy and I can see now as an adult how they had that as a good thought and they moved us, but they assumed it was the school's responsibility to teach us about the subjects you have in education and it was their responsibility to teach us about morality and life. It's interesting because as time goes on and more research comes out, the more a parent is involved the better the child does in school—my parents didn't go to parent-teacher conferences or do any of that, and because of that, that hindered me and I could have been a better student if my parents had been a little more organized and involved in the day to day. It would have helped me, but what happened is I ended up developing a coping skill where I'd push even if people weren't helping me because I'd look at them and think, 'I can't live like y'all.' You know? I need more out of life than going through the craziness we were going through. I could have been like, you don't care, I don't care, but that wasn't working for me and it pushed me through high school and college and grad school.

"My feeling was I'm going to support myself. You can look at it from a mental health perspective where you can say that, you know, you learned how to isolate yourself in order to help yourself and that meant you missed out on certain aspects of life. There's that give and take but, you know, I feel like most people who have PhDs have Aspergers." She laughed.

"Alright then."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't help it. I didn't say *all*."

"True. I can't say you're wrong."

I didn't notice until later that she was aligning herself with those who have PhDs, or at least those who've taken formal education beyond a bachelor's degree whose peculiarities she shared as someone who'd felt at times isolated yet also sheltered, and protected, by academia.

I returned to her mention of high and low-context cultures and her skill at moving between them. Did standardized tests fit the definition of low-context cultural

communication? They certainly seemed to. “Exhibiting (or inducing) low emotional and personal involvement while highly analytical and inexpressive with low dependence on context, i.e. abstract and symbolic” sounded like an apt description.

Authors of standardized tests like to assert they can control for cultural bias by eliminating culture-specific references. The embodiment of a standardized intelligence test that claims absolute cultural neutrality is The Raven's Progressive Matrices Test. A timed and non-verbal test originally designed in the late 1930s for research purposes, a version of it appears as part of the Wechsler IQ tests. It asks the test-taker to arrange various shapes to match associated illustrations and is often presented as a culture-blind intelligence test able to test native or “general” or “fluid” intelligence, often referred to as Spearman’s “g” factor. The Raven’s is commonly described as one of the best measures of fluid intelligence due to being “an optimal domain-independent measure of the abstract reasoning processes relevant to the management of novel problem-solving goals in working memory” (Hayashi). By eliminating any situational cues, the test aims to test ability to store and reproduce information and make sense of complexity, but if Hall was right, and there’s no single standard way of interacting with the world, and if some of us are more prone to abstractions than others, and if that predilection is at least partially based in culture, then by creating a highly abstract test with little dependence on context the test authors substitute one form of cultural bias for another and create a test that will be more difficult for anyone not habituated to both the format and the reliance on abstractions.

Listening to Shalonda’s story, I was reminded that who we appear to be is often a matter of which details in our lives are elevated and which ones are suppressed, and who is telling the story. Her story doesn’t make the news. Families with a pattern of upheaval and a parent “involved in the judicial system,” to borrow a phrase she uses in speeches, are often portrayed as devaluing education. If I wanted to introduce that idea, I could

emphasize how she and her siblings attended close to twenty different schools over the course of their childhood and how one sister moved out at sixteen while neglecting the fact that all three of the sisters still finished college. Two received master's degrees—one in social work, another in special education. Her brother didn't, but is thinking about giving it a shot. Her family valued education, but this didn't always translate into an ability to create the circumstances that supported it.

"When it came to the actual components of us getting an education, it was my responsibility as a child to go to school and get a good education. It was [my parents'] responsibility to work, to hustle, to make sure you eat. You get the best grades you can so you can get a job and get the hell out. You go, get all the information you can from them people then you come home. Straight home."

Aside from her ITBS score, her standardized testing scores conformed to expectations based on what the statistics say about test-takers living in poverty, and with trauma, and who are minorities—yet they were a poor indicator of capability and a poor predictor of what she'd do within academia, the realm privileged by the tests. The short period of relative comfort also complicates her story. How important had a relatively short period of tutoring had on her reading ability? It's tempting to credit much of her success to simple motivation. Motivation, like race, can appear as an enduring, immutable quality that is either there or isn't. An end point. But it's not.

"Do you think you're a competitive person?" I asked the question guided by nothing more than a hunch; her answer anticipated a question I didn't yet know I had.

"Yes. Here's how bad it spills into my everyday life. If I'm sitting in a conference or a meeting and we have to fill out a form I get irritated by people who don't fill it out the right way. I'm very particular about following the rules. I'm a perfectionist and a rule follower. If you're a victim of trauma, you can become a perfectionist so you learn how to not do anything to set off the people who caused the trauma."

We'd begun with standardized testing, arrived at family trauma, then circled back through education and found trauma again. Causes chased effects. In every instance, the test—which wished to operate untouched by the grind of daily existence—remained very much intertwined with everything from which it had tried to separate. A trauma that derails many lives had, in Shalonda's instance, served as a motivator and an example of the ways life resists conforming to predictive models. I heard it as a warning to proceed with caution in how I heard her stories. I put my last question to her in the only way that made sense.

"Please select from the following options. Your ITBS story was about:

A. a girl who, as the only black student in class, experiences discrimination.
B. a standardized test saving a student from inattentive teachers.
C. an example of what can happen when a test is treated with so much reverence that teachers trust it more than themselves and, as she put it, "just wait for some test."

"D," she said. "All of the above."

The sun, by this point, had long since left us but the night was still warm, the streetlights buzzing down the block where the police cruiser remained. I'd run out of questions and the conversation drifted. She talked about how she wished she had more time to read. How it would be nice if they didn't add another row of houses across the street. She liked the view. All that space would be nice for a kid to see.

# THE MAKING OF A B- REVOLUTIONARY

We live in measured times.

The insta-poll. The index. The predictive algorithm. The data mine…

I write these words after having examined my high school transcript for the first time since graduation almost a quarter century ago. Doing so is a far stranger and uncomfortable—and embarrassing—act than anticipated, and it reminds me that while I'm not sure if thinking about high school after you're in your forties qualifies as breaking a societal taboo, it probably should. I suspect I'm not the only person to commit this sin, but neither this knowledge, nor the rationale for requesting the transcript in the first place does much to diminish the sense of feeling a little silly while looking at the thing.

Received by request some months ago after it became clear that I too must divulge a few personal details about my academic past if I am to report on how others explain their intellectual identities and the role of standardized testing in how they came to think of themselves as thinkers, I slipped the transcript into a pile of notes and articles stored in a folder titled "Things to look at later." Apparently "later" has arrived because there it is, a study in black and white from more than half a life ago. The black letters and numbers on the faded photocopy are so pockmarked and distressed it's easy to imagine they've been left out in both rain and sun since their printing in 1991, but what I find most striking is its size. Seeing all that time and effort condensed onto a piece of paper able to fit without folding into a business-sized envelope manages to feel both anticlimactic and uncomfortably revealing. To study it is to study a document projecting a deep confidence in a message of koan-like opacity. It unbalances. It can function as everything from a fractured plot outline in an unfinished story to a map to a clue to a character. The latter as friend and foe. Expendable sidekick.

And yet I want more. A nice, bonded paper for starters. The retro typography can

stay but a watermark would be nice. It needs something to give the grades the import they had, or I thought they had. If it matters, the grades were fine. Except for AP History, in four years of high school, all of my As were in English and Art classes.[8] Otherwise the transcript mostly offers the avalanche of Bs I remember. Then I see it. The grade. The course title appears just a bit darker, and larger, than the others, even as I know it isn't. I'm being melodramatic here but can't help it; what I feel isn't contemplative or reflective, it's something more visceral and juvenile. It's…annoyance. And it's focused on one grade in one class: "Radical and Revolutionary Thought."

Mind you, I recall little about the experience other than that despite the name it was a conventional philosophy class taught by one of those universally-liked teachers who condense all of their antiestablishment energy into the intentional wearing of bad, Technicolor ties that convey credibility to a certain type of self-serious teenager, and that the class relied entirely on a fat, dense paperback titled *From Socrates to Sartre*. The book, which I still own, paraphrases each philosopher's original writing in textbookese and my notations are sparse. Considering that evidence, the final grade may have been generous,

[8] The B in Pre-Calculus was a pleasant surprise, and nothing short of a miracle after a flat C in Algebra in ninth grade. Cs in French put me off foreign languages for years, until I learned it out of necessity in my late-twenties while living in a French-speaking country. The C in Chemistry was my own doing—I spent most of the class trying with very little success to make the girl sitting behind me laugh since she was more interesting than learning how to properly identify and draw compounds. The only time I remember facing the front of the class for an extended period was when the teacher accidentally set fire to a trash can. In that context, I'm lucky to have done as well as I did, but the final tally for those four years posed a question. Discounting the "Satisfactory" evaluations in gym, the twenty-six classes over four years resulted in seven As, fourteen Bs and five Cs; the distribution a near-perfect bell-curve. Absent a D or an F it was the distribution I'd been encouraged to achieve in my own teaching as evidence a course is appropriately difficult. This discovery felt like more than coincidence, as if my high school academic history functioned as doppelganger of a mathematically-fabricated notion of competitiveness. The individual as reflective of the group, the mean. It was a reminder that whatever the environment, a bell curve can be imposed to create a picture of competition and difference. I took solace in the idea that, for the purposes of this narrative, like my SAT score, the history was ideal if my aim was to present myself as someone who'd done reasonably well and drawn to this topic motivated for reasons other than personal history. It was tricky sharing this information at all since it would be tempting for the reader to ingest my numbers the way we've been trained to, and to use them to inform these pages. But the history felt like an ideal counterweight to that possibility. Perfect, even.

but that doesn't mean it hurts any less to absorb the proof—right there in print—that I am a B- revolutionary.

The umbrage taken is even harder to justify when I admit that reliving old high school grades isn't even why I requested the transcript in the first place. I asked for the thing for an even more craven reason. I wanted a look at my SAT scores.

Before I go any further, I feel obligated to insert that I'm quite aware that, like talking about money, discussing grades and test scores is a bit *déclassé.* I've mentioned the high-minded reason as one of ethical necessity and fairness to those who've trusted me with their stories. The less high-minded reason is I'm attempting to settle—and win—an argument.

As with all families, within my own, certain historical events remain in dispute. In keeping with the tradition of such stories, there is a marked disproportionality between the current importance of the event in question, and the amount of energy invested in defending competing versions of said event.

In this case, the point of contention is my SAT score. This seemingly indelible fact is anything but and it comes up—frequently—by which I mean that at least once a year, certain family members take it upon themselves to bring up not just the raw numbers, but what they represent about the test-taker himself. What usually happens is I mention some minor irritant or disappointment (job stuff, artistic conundrums, romantic troubles, political frustrations, certainty that climate change will irreversibly alter the planet in my lifetime, toilet on the fritz). The rejoinder: "Well, just remember what happened with the SAT…"

From here follows the story of what "happened." The point in contention is that, drumroll please, in 1990, when the SAT had two sections and the top score on an individual section was 800, I took the SAT a second time to crack the 600 barrier in the SAT-Math section, as I had in the verbal section, just to prove I could. As math was not my area of expertise, the point illustrated is complimentary and generous—I was a

character out of a Horatio Alger story, a plucky type using hard work and a can-do spirit to prove myself in an area of difficulty. If at first you don't succeed, et cetera. Or so goes this version of the story.

I dutifully trot out the competing narrative, that while I did take the SAT a second time it was with the intent of cracking the 600 barrier in the—drumroll again please—*SAT-Verbal* section and the knowledge that I could combine the two highest scores meaning I could put most of my effort into the verbal section and not sweat the math. I did so to compensate for a low math score and to advertise what I deemed my true area of strength and a more appealing number for any potential arithmophiliacs working in college admissions. In my version, I'm not a Horatio Alger character, I'm a strategic game-player and a realist who surveys the landscape and applies his strengths to put up points on the College Board's scoreboard. Since we were in agreement I'd taken the test a second time to raise a score on one part of the test it followed that, in all likelihood, the section with the higher score in the second attempt would reveal the original goal. The verdict resided in the scores at the bottom of the transcript, now in hand.

Before I get to the numbers in question, I should add that, for many years, I've thought of the score as a minor detail in a minor story that mostly illustrated my own somewhat overdeveloped need to be right, to be an A student in the classroom of life, if you will. For that reason, confessing to my participation in an argument lasting almost twenty-five years is even more embarrassing than admitting that I'm a B- revolutionary but I've since realized maybe the story is not as inconsequential as I once thought. It offers a glimpse into questions of character and personality, of how a self sees—and therefore becomes—itself and how a product of that process is the intellectual identity it enacts and creates, all of which spills into other aspects of life. This particular debate over how a person approached a standardized test, as somewhat lunatic as it may sound, is really about who gets to decide who we are—it's a story about the ways memories of the past become the past, and at whose command.

The verdict: sure enough, as both parties remembered, I took the SAT twice. The first time around the math score of 580 was higher than the verbal score of 560. After the second attempt, the verbal score was 610 (after recentering: 670) and the math was 570 (after recentering: 580) for an aggregate score of 1190 (1260). So either the Horatio Alger character failed, or the strategist's plan worked.

Faced with near incontrovertible evidence that I was right about my approach to the SAT, I feel no sense of pleasure—as much as I wanted to be right, I really wanted to be wrong. I didn't want to see my former self as a cold-blooded strategist. I wanted to be a Horatio Alger character.

I massaged my ego by reminding myself it was a college prep school with a 100 percent college acceptance and attendance rate. The sort of place my parents had never attended, but wanted for their child, and seen as a launching pad toward an accomplished upper or middle class adulthood. The school's prominently advertised list of colleges attended by graduates looks like a list of the *U.S. News and World Report* top twenty-five. Over the most recent four-year time span they've sent students in double-digits to three schools: Harvard (16), Duke (61) and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (61). Touted by The *Wall Street Journal,* according to the school's web site and without further attribution, as one of the "most successful high schools in America," Durham Academy invites stories told with numbers: a ten-to-one student-to-teacher ratio and a pre-K through twelfth grade enrollment under 1200 students. In the last twenty-plus years, ninth through twelfth grade enrollment has more than doubled to over four hundred students making it one of the larger private schools in North Carolina but less than half the size of an average public school. Its students tend to be excellent standardized test-takers: the 2012 graduating class SAT average in reading and math was 1334 with an overall 2006 on a 2400 scale. Despite the school's size it usually produces around ten National Merit Scholarship winners each year—totals that are three to four times that of

the largest public school in the city, which is four times as large. A contest into which you're entered based on scoring in the 96th percentile of the PSAT during junior year, the PSAT figures are of mild interest as the year I took it I'd been two percentage points shy of qualifying, but I've always found the ultimate sign of the school's regard for its education in the one number it doesn't provide: class rank. To do so, goes the thinking, would make some students appear weaker than they are. Even without an official class rank we still knew our rank.

Sufficiently calm in the aftermath of learning I'm a B- revolutionary, I realized the fact that I didn't remember the grade makes it hard for me to make the case that it was a formative experience. The same cannot be said of my fraught relationship with the French language, which reminds me of one reason why we have standardized testing. Spotting those Cs, in a subject I began in middle school, wasn't news precisely because over the years they became so familiar. A fair case can be made that teaching a foreign language as one would teach any other subject is an approach that will only work for a certain subset of students, and that for others who've spent the whole of their existence around easy-talking southerners, French will sound like the ululating gargle of a turkey call recorded then played at slow speed and backwards, but such rational arguments were of little help in softening the daily fifty-minute exercise in incompetence and failure that was French class. In high school, and ever the strategist, I piled up points on cultural and historical questions, most of which had something to do with Charlemagne, to balance out tanking on demands to master the imperfect, the pluperfect, the future perfect, the conditional perfect, the past subjunctive and the pluperfect subjunctive to name but a few. French verb tenses, I gathered, also had moods, and in my case they were always either anxious or irritable. The humiliation began early, in fifth grade, and with my first oral exam in my first year with the language. I had a premonition it would go poorly when I realized the word I'd been hearing for weeks describing the test as a "cohn-versassy-yohn" was *conversation.* I knew enough to expect an exchange where the teacher would ask

simple, but to me, indecipherable questions since I couldn't hear where one word ended and the other began. I was not alone. Something about the North Carolina accent common among my classmates, which normally softened most consonants in English, when applied to French, turned those same consonants into concrete. I only have two clear memories of the class, one is of our teacher trying to get a kid known as Bubba to properly elocute "bonjour" with the rumination of a proper Butterball and him in turn howling "bonjer!" at increasing volume, then insisting he was saying it the way she was. The second is of the "conversation."

To prepare for the test, I'd adopted a strategy that had the dual benefits of being both complicated and ineffective. I would keep my answers as short as possible and, failing that, fall back on prefabricated answers I'd memorized hoping that whatever I said would just by chance correspond with her questions. Failing that, I'd rearrange whatever sounds she made and repeat them back at her. I'd used all three tactics to make it through holiday meals with extended family and could see no reason why it wouldn't work here.

Our teacher had studied in Paris and only later would I realize that she'd likely had other aspirations than teaching the language of love to a bunch of prepubescent prep school kids in North Carolina and that the pain she caused was likely mutual, but her test would stay with me through high school and beyond. We sat outside, near a remnant of forest, in chairs facing one another. It began with her saying, predictably, one of the few phrases I could recognize.

"*Comment ça va?*"

"*Bon,*" I said.

"*Bien,*" she corrected.

"*Oui.*"

"*Oui, monsieur?*"

"*Oui. Monsieur je m'appelle Etienne.*"

Lips tensed, she made a tick mark on a piece of paper, looked up and ululated. In the distance, feathers rustled for it was spring and a time when the turkey is easily bestirred.

*"Oui,"* I repeated.

She loosed another turkey garble. It sounded like the previous one, but slower. Something about enjoying the *"bon temps."*

*"Oui. Je suis bon temps. Charlemagne et le roi du France. Il est formidable* and *fort."*

*"Charlemagne?"*

*"Ou-est la biblioteque?"*

*"Non,"* she said.

*"Non,"* I said, thinking I was in the clear.

She sighed and dropped the French, which she'd told us she would do under no circumstances.

"You are incredibly skilled," she said, "at butchering the French language."

Years later, I would laugh at this moment, and feel a bit proud. If you're going to be bad at something, be memorably bad. I'd also remember her as a nice person. It didn't seem her style to bury the blade up to the hilt. Was it supposed to be a joke?

At the time, not having yet learned the value of failure or of thick skin or the art of the comeback, what I heard was that when it came to learning foreign languages, I couldn't do it and should choose silence, and I did so for the next five years, saying and doing as little as possible in those classes until I was no longer required to take a foreign language halfway through high school. That outcome speaks to one of the rationales for why we have standardized testing in the first place, which is as a counterbalance against the inherent flaws in assessments by human beings. People have bad days. We get tired. We miss things. We can be cruel and ignorant and impatient. We can make jokes that fail. Most importantly, when it comes to assessing each other, we can be myopic or just

simply wrong, and in addition to the more scurrilous desires for social control driven by bigotry and hubris, this is why standardized testing became attractive as offering a pristine truth divined free of human interference.

I share these stories not because I think they're unique, but because I don't believe they are. I also share these stories so you know this is not the work of a crank, of someone harboring a grudge over an old test score. The truth is I always tested pretty well. It is also true that, unlike some testing advocates who did well in school, but didn't trust teachers, I usually did and while I've had plenty of experiences that taught me how the conversation between teacher and student can be akin to a conversation between people speaking different languages, I've also yet to meet someone who doesn't recall a teacher who said the precisely right thing at the right time and those moments remind me that if miscommunication is possible, so is translation, whereas an education centered around standardized testing isn't a conversation at all.

# IMAGINARY VAGABONDS

"Wake up, you young vagabond!"

— Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick Or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks* (2005, 1)

As it turns out, I was almost completely wrong about Horatio Alger's novels. My chief mistake was in not reading any of them and, instead, trusting their usual presentation as offering a Gilded Age expression of the bootstrapping American Dream. Young lad makes good through perspicacity and so on. Paging through *Ragged Dick* (1868), the book credited with establishing Alger's formula, I found a young boy living on the streets and making ends meet as a shoe shiner, a high-spirited, street-smart prankster and spendthrift ("it seldom happened that he commenced the day with a penny"), who smokes and dreams of going "to Barnum's to see the bearded lady, the eight-foot giant, the two-foot dwarf, and the other curiosities, too numerous to mention" (including lions and bears). I assumed I knew where it was going; it sounded familiar since Dick superficially resembled other characters from the era—for a time, Alger was as widely read as Mark Twain. Published eight years before *Tom Sawyer*, *Ragged Dick* employs many of the boyish interests of Tom and Huck but little of their independence.

This difference between the Alger and Twain is immediately apparent in *Ragged Dick* as Dick's life takes a positive turn when he's placed in service to a wealthy boy to whom Dick confesses in terms more supplicant toady than perspicacious bootstrapper that, "I'd like it if some rich man would adopt me, and give me plenty to eat and drink and wear, without my havin' to look so sharp after it." The other boy then lays his hand on Dick's shoulder and says he'll take care of him. Impossible to imagine coming from Twain, scholars find these lines and situations unsettling coming from someone who, prior to embarking on a career as an author, had to leave the ministry after confessing to charges of child molestation. Unlike Tom and Huck, who rebelled as a reaction against a

culture of strict religiosity and racism, Alger's characters rebelled as a plea demonstrating their need for guidance. To paraphrase Alger, the "streets" are a stage upon which the poor perform in competition for the popular favor. This favor usually presents itself in the form of attention from an older gentlemen who, impressed with an honest act, employs the boy in a series of tasks that function as loyalty tests. Each test elicits charity in the form of basic needs such as food and drink and clothing until, by the end of *Ragged Dick*, the boy is wearing the best suit he's ever owned, has learned to educate his fellow ragged friends in the merits of hard work and has traded in his old "Ragged Dick" identity for that of Richard Hunter, Esq. It is a rags-to-riches coming-of-age story, but less of a hard-working and honest boot-strapping boot black, than of a boot-shining boot black shown the path to middle class respectability after demonstrating his fealty and desire to be of service to wealthy benefactors who can be trusted to parent the unfortunate.

A similar tension in how to anticipate how others would hear a story emerged in mentioning to friends and family and acquaintances that I've been collecting stories exploring experiences with standardized testing. Some of those responses appeared as expressions of grim dislike, while others spoke with the compliant pragmatism of the "hoop jumpers," as more than one person put it, who saw the tests as a means to an end. Of the people I interviewed for this project, the "hoop jumper" response was almost universally expressed by those still enrolled in college. One of the reasons I decided against including them in this project is they had less to say about what standardized testing meant to their intellectual identities leaving me to conclude they had not yet had enough time to look back and reflect on experiences that were so recent their effects had not yet been fully felt. A third response was common enough to merit comment. This response can be summed up as "I didn't know there were any [stories]" followed by the assertion that the only people who complain about testing are those who wish to cover up poor performance without acknowledging they lack a can-do, (Alger-like) spirit.

I hope, by this point, it's clear that more is at stake here than the desire of a few people to complain about a weak test score. To say these are stories of complaint dismisses, and misses, what they demonstrate: that standardized testing can help and impede the formation of a coherent intellectual identity.

*Storytellers in Conversation*

Every story offers multiple meanings and in writing this dissertation, the effect of conflicting meanings on the formation of an intellectual identity emerged as one of many themes. Others I've detected are as follows:

1) Age and Time matter. Sometimes.

The role of time, an artifact of intelligence testing, was a point of commonality in some, but not all, of the stories. With the exception of Lori, all of the storytellers began their oral histories with testing stories from early in their childhood. For Aevita and Shalonda it was third grade, and for Edward it was the summer before sixth grade. While this dissertation covers only a handful of stories, the significance of early standardized testing in beginning the building of an intellectual identity is important given the steady increase of standardized testing.

2) Less standardized testing isn't necessarily better, but neither is more standardized testing.

Lori, by comparison to the other storytellers, did not have a standardized testing story from childhood. She took the test in an era in which there was less testing and she also took it without anyone tempering her expectations of how she should interpret the result, yet she took it with the mentality of a person taking the high-stakes "make or break" tests

we see with increasing prevalence today. It's tempting to speculate how she would have felt about her scholastic ability had she scored higher than expected on the SAT. Such questions can't be answered, but she provides an important comparison point to the other stories which offered multiple testing experiences. Multiple experiences could be seen as informing each other and modifying or canceling each other out, in which case more testing would not necessarily equate a solidifying of an intellectual identity through repetition and one could argue it might have the effect of lessening the effect of standardized testing on an intellectual identity except in each case that first and early test was the prevailing experience that informed interpretations of subsequent tests. In both Aevita and Shalonda's case, they would have taken the ITBS multiple times before graduating from high school, yet it was the initial story that each felt compelled to tell. The others merely confirmed what they'd already learned from the first.

While each standardized test may represent something different depending on the person, for many they feel like "make or break tests," as Lori put it. This statement is more than the expression of a single person in reaction to testing, it is a precise reflection of commonly held notions about standardized testing serving as a valid measure of both students and schools. The SAT isn't alone in contributing to this attitude but I concentrate on it here as one reason for the public's perception about the meaning of SAT scores is the College Board has been publishing aggregate SAT scores for individual schools, school districts, states and demographics since the 1960s. The College Board seeks publicity around the release of test scores even though they know the test to be a misleading indicator of school quality.

SAT scores, however, do not correlate with tests that, unlike the SAT, were designed for the purpose of assessing student learning. During the early 1970s to 1990 when SAT scores showed a modest decline, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests showed gains for all age groups in both reading and math. The largest gains were by black, Hispanic, and lower scoring white students; the very populations implicitly

blamed in "A Nation at Risk" for risking the country's future. The reason for the disparity in NAEP scores and SAT scores can largely be attributed to two causes. One, the pool of SAT-takers, which was initially quite small, grew larger and more diverse over the decades as college became a viable option for more students. Two, the largest gains in the NAEP were by people who weren't going to college. Since they didn't take the SAT, their improvement "helped" aggregate NAEP scores but was absent from aggregate SAT scores (Grissmer, 2000, p. 223-232).

The relationship between the publishing of SAT scores and public opinion about school quality is more than a matter of speculation. Since the 1970s, a Gallup poll has asked Americans to grade school quality by assigning grades to local schools and the national state of public education overall. Over the years, respondents have tended to give higher grades to local schools—which they can judge based on their experiences and knowledge — and lower grades to national schools, which they judge based on media reporting. A second finding alluded to the role that reported SAT scores have in contributing to perceptions of school quality. When researchers mapped fluctuations in the grades that respondents gave schools, the changes in higher or lower grades closely followed the change in publicly reported SAT scores. As SAT scores rise, so do the number of As given out. As they fall, so does the public's grading of public education. Only in one year did public attitudes about school quality, as expressed by these grades, deviate from SAT scores, and that year was 1983, when "A Nation at Risk" was published. In that year and, in sharp contrast to SAT scores, public grading of public schools dropped sharply (Grissmer).

When Lori took the SAT, she had very little information to help her prepare for the test and prepare for the results. In the years following her test, numerous studies questioned the test's fairness and predictive ability for success in college as well as evidence the test put too much of an emphasis on speed—which disadvantaged test-takers like Lori who had little test prep—and finding race and gender differences in

answering everything from analogies to antonyms to the types of content embedded within word problems. They even found differences in responses based on where a question appeared with some test-takers (skewed toward black students) doing poorly on the early easier questions before scoring well on the difficult questions as the test progressed. One potential explanation is that some students had more exposure to the format beforehand while others and were learning how to take it on the fly (Schmitt, 1987 & Carlton, 1992 & Dorans, 1988 & Freedle, 1991). The studies are compelling as they question what the test is really testing, and did so in some cases almost a quarter of a century ago, and because they are the work not of well-known opponents of standardized testing like Alfie Kohn, but researchers within Educational Testing Service, the company which administers for the College Board the SAT, GRE, AP and TOEFL exams.

3) How a test is presented matters. Usually.

When listening to Shalonda's story in relation to the stories told by the other storytellers, I noticed that an early experience with standardized testing informed how the person thought about future tests, but just because she had a positive experience with the ITBS that didn't guide how she viewed the ACT. The likely reason for this difference had to do with how the ACT was presented to her as a test unable to fully assess her abilities in all areas. What both Lori and Shalonda's stories clarify—in different ways—is that coaching a person on how to think about a test's contribution to how the person interprets the results, and that coaching happens both formally, from teachers, and informally, from peers.

4) An early positive experience with standardized testing does not necessarily correlate with a confident intellectual identity, and vice versa.

Aevita had an early positive experience with testing. Like Shalonda, the test that made an initial imprint on her life was the ITBS, and that imprint has a positive outcome from an academic standpoint. In terms of her family relationships, it only complicated an already difficult situation. Unlike Shalonda, it had a more profound effect on composing her intellectual identity. In Edward's case, his approach to the math placement test most resembles Lori's approach to the SAT. He did not take it with the same level of anxiety as Lori, but he took the results as seriously as she did. The test spoke to both of them in clear, unflinching terms and delivered a clear verdict as to their intellectual identities. In Lori's story her SAT score shaped her intellectual identity for at least a decade. In Edward's story, the math placement test shaded his intellectual identity through high school and, arguably, still informs it in the present.

5) Standardized testing shapes ideas on relationship between creativity and intelligence.

The word "creativity" is open to wide interpretation, and in these stories we hear that idea. The word surfaces at unexpected intervals as shorthand for not only the capacity "to make," but as a capability to express one's true self and to do so in a way that is of interest and value to others. In Shalonda's story, we hear a modest, at best, respect for standardized testing. Looking back on the moment as a third grader, it's just "some test" that told her what she already knew to be true. "Intelligence," as a word, appears in her appraisal of standardized testing only once when she says what she remembers about standardized testing is "it tells other people [how] to build impressions of your intelligence based on a score instead of taking the time to get to know you and look at your skill level and what you're able to do." In high school, it's only one of many steps necessary for acceptance into college and one she had been explicitly instructed to not interpret as an indication of whether she could do something creative with her life. For Shalonda, whatever it is that standardized tests assess, it can't be described as a "creative"

aptitude, or intelligence. Since she also said she believed the tests were not a good measure of scholastic achievement, it sounds as if in her mind academic achievement and creativity may be related when they are separate from those abilities assessed by standardized testing.

Lori drew a clear line between her creative work and academic work, which is valued and relevant to others. Without contextual guidance in forming her understanding of what the SAT measured, she applied the results broadly and in a way that undermined the achievement record she'd established up until that point. At some point in reconfiguring her intellectual identity, she separated it from an identity she'd describe as "creative." I reach this conclusion having listened to the section in her interview when she said, "I don't expect my creative writing to have a presence in the world. My creative work is very personal. A PhD is a way for to make an intellectual mark on the world."

I heard her saying that pursuit of a Master's of Fine Arts in a creative writing program helped rebuild confidence in her intelligence, but she doesn't expect it to have a presence in the wider culture, so in this story, valuable work is intellectual and academic, which are interrelated, but it's not creative, meaning academic and intellectual work are separate from creative work, with "creative work" loosely defined as being "a good writer" and "personal expression."

In the context of a story in which standardized testing served as a gatekeeper and definer of academic values, it sounds as if her experience with standardized testing contributed to a separation between the "creative world" of personal expression and the "intellectual world" and that the abilities used in the creative world are of little value outside of itself, including in intellectual and academic worlds. In her story, creativity and intellect were unrelated and since standardized testing promised to test intellect, standardized testing therefore promoted a separation between creativity/personal expression and intellect. It was an explicit defense of a separation between the mind and the body, between the head and the heart and the belief in thought untouched by, what

Plato would call "appetites" and "spirits." For students who value academics, if they test poorly, it meant they might receive the message that not only are they not "smart" but they aren't creative, and if they are creative it doesn't matter, nor does personal expression, because sharing or portraying of individual identities and selves fails to interest the test and therefore the world.

In 2004, the psychologists Ellen Langer and Adam Grant created a scenario in which two groups of people were given a reasoning skills test presented in ways designed to measure their interpretation of it as objective and subjective and the outcome of that event in how they approached subsequent tasks. To the first group, they presented a ten-question test as being a reasoning skills test developed by the Miller Foundation. In doing so, they presented the test in the way most standardized tests are presented—as a product of a faceless organization with no comment on the test's generation. To the second group, they added that the test was taken from a larger 200-question test developed by eight people at the Miller Foundation. In this presentation, they reminded the group that people wrote the test and in doing so chose questions that were just some of many that could have been used. In other words, they undermined a sense of infallibility by giving an accurate description of a standardized test's development.

Without regard to the participants' actual responses, Langer and Grant then reported to each group that half had done well and half had done poorly. They then assessed the groups' feelings about the test and how it directed subsequent behavior. The results offer an explanation for why Lori took her SAT score as seriously as she did, and why Shalonda did not.

In both groups, the ones who did well were prone to believing the test was objective. For those who did poorly, and who'd been told eight people designed he test, they saw the test as subjective and not a true reflection of their skills as critical thinkers. They then assigned simple tasks to each group asking them to help out in moving a set of boxes from one room to another, saying they would understand if they didn't feel they

had time to do. Those respondents who saw the test as "objective" were less likely to help. In both groups, when presented with imaginary scenarios that differed based on the degree of specific personal information included about a person (for instance "a nurse" versus "a nurse named Betty Johnson"), the more personal information given, the more likely the respondents were to choose actions that showed them exerting control over the situation. The implication of the study is that including people in how we understand a test meant to assess our abilities or a situation testing our behaviors induces feelings of empathy, creativity and agentic behavior which Langer and Grant associate with an awareness of the subjectivity of the situation while a heightened focus on objectivity, whether on a formal test or an informal scenario, induced passivity, selfishness and limited creativity (Langer, Grant, 2004, p. 113).

Considered in light of Lori and Shalonda's stories, we can see how, in Lori's case, the test was presented as objective and authorless—it had the people removed from its presentation. In Shalonda's case, she reports being told the test had limitations as to what it could do which has the effect of questioning its objectivity and acknowledges its limitations. She was also aware of the ITBS as originating in Iowa, which may have worked to remind her that people made the tests, they did not materialize on their own. Shalonda also mentions that she did not believe the test measured an ability to add something creative to the world. When her reactions are considered in comparison to Lori, who did not see the test as fallible and subjective measure, and who does not see creative work as being interesting to the world, it's hard to resist the notion that emphasizing an authorless, standardized and objective outlook—while heightening a belief in the measure's efficacy—triggers feelings of low-agency and low creativity.

One tempting conclusion applied to those who shared their stories for this study is that those who had the most negative early experiences with standardized testing created an intellectual identity they would not describe as "creative." Their testing experience had the effect of drawing a distinction between the idea of "creating" and

performing in a way valued by academia. One reason for this distinction could be a desire for a person to feel creative; deciding standardized tests cannot evaluate such measures protects that ability from the prying eyes of standardized testing. It's telling that the only storyteller who reported doing consistently well on standardized tests (Aevita) saw it as related to intelligence, creativity and her intellectual identity. In sharing how she felt after she'd been on Adderall, she interrelates them when she explained the sense of feeling less intelligent as a feeling of being less creative. It was "like I have all this information in my head that I can't get out unless it's tripped in just the right way, when before it was just like I could squeeze it and it'd come out. Now, I like you have to find the right button." So, for Aevita, intelligence, and creativity are interrelated, and both are about the capacity for effective self-expression.

Edward was the only storyteller who did not use the word "creative" in relation to his test stories. He did, however, express a desire to build hiking trails and engage in other activities requiring a closer relationship between physical action and personal expression in the hopes of feeling more of a connection between his body and his mind, and with good reason, since action—behavior—relies upon the mind. Without the mind, there can be no action, and no creativity. Without the body, creativity can never find a form.

*Descartes and an Outside Perspective*

Not long after I met with Aevita to finalize her pseudonym, she began struggling with a peculiar series of headaches. Considered in combination with her lupus diagnosis, her doctors ordered an MRI, which revealed a brain stem glioma—a tumor. If correct, none of the outcomes were, as she put it, cheery, and as of this writing, she's begun walking with a cane, but she'd also been told the odds on survival timelines were the kind of thing you didn't want to get caught up in unless you had a background in statistics; there were too many variables to juggle. That was fine with her, she had a complicated relationship with math anyway so she'd decided to ignore the numbers until advised otherwise. Part of

the diagnosis process involved her taking an intelligence test to see if the tumor was causing cognitive decline. Amid the bad news of the diagnosis, the doctor reported she had a high IQ and, as they talked about her MRI results, kept interjecting that he couldn't believe how intelligent she was.

"It was really interesting to him. I'm like, I know, I get high scores. I was like…" she trailed off. Shrugged. "I know I'm smart or whatever, but what's going on with my brain?"

Aevita's story necessitates I do what I don't want to do, which is write about the brain and the mind. The subject presents itself as offering ample opportunity for failure, especially when restricted to a few paragraphs. And yet, it is where all of these stories really begin.

In 1943, a year after he left Iowa to become New York State's Commissioner of Education, George Stoddard published *The Meaning of Intelligence*, a nearly five hundred-page rebuttal to the hereditarians. Referring to the cerebral cortex as "our luxury of luxuries," he wrote:

> …[it] takes no frontal tumor to knock out the brain. The abscesses of fear, magic and murderousness serve equally well and are more readily distributed…for the most deadly and universal afflictions, starting from the impact of man upon man, it is necessary to postulate healthy tissues, in order that the phobia may take hold…All the tumors the world has ever known have not been so destructive of human beings and human aspirations as single-purpose concepts like *witchcraft, divine right, original sin, heresy, racial superiority* and *might makes right*… (1943, p. 472).

In contemplating this quote—which I latched onto early as an expression of the philosophical North Star I've followed since long before this project began—I appreciated how he blurred the distinctions between the brain and the mind, the distinction between diseases of the brain and diseases of the mind. Without disappearing fully down the Cartesian rabbit hole of the mind-body problem from which a B- philosopher might

never return it feels critical to understanding how standardized testing shapes an intellectual identity.

I mention the idea central to Cartesian dualism of a mind (the world of thought) and a body (the world of the material and physical) existing in separation from one another because separating the intellect from the world appears to be a central goal of standardized testing, which places its value in a status of cultural-independence. It's a tricky proposition since, on one hand, the concept of standardization is wholly dependent on the world—the culture—that establishes the standards by which test-takers are measured. Without that world, that culture, we can't have the means to identify concepts of value and transform those concepts into questions and measures that have meaning to the world. And even if we could, doing so would undermine the aims of standardized testing since producing results that have meaning in the world is the entire rationale for standardized testing. So standardized testing does not pretend to be separate from the world, but it does pretend to do something else. Standardized testing imagines that having sprung wholly from a culture and in response to norms and methods and measures deemed valuable by that culture, that it can perform a sleight of mind in assessing its takers in culturally-neutral ways, to use an industry buzzword. But culturally-neutral is not the same as culturally-independent, and even if it was, standardized testing can fulfill neither promise. All it can truly deliver is consistency. In asserting otherwise, it confuses consistency with neutrality and invites what might be thought of as a "mind-mind problem" in that the mind behind standardized testing pretends to be unaware of itself. Put another way: when we confuse consistency (standardization) with neutrality we try to separate the mind from the world. The mind-world problem—the difficulty in cleaving one from the other—is exemplified by the glioma at the base of Aevita's brain. Her brain (like any brain) is a physical entity existing within the world, and subject to its whims and the whims of other physical entities,

including disease, which attacks its physical functionality, and thus threatens the action of the mind.

I felt too close to the thing, and uncertain, as if my thinking was devouring itself. The best way to disappear down a rabbit hole is to concentrate myopically on not doing so. So I turned to someone who didn't fit the criteria established for this project. Tosin was eighteen-years-old and a student of Lori's who'd written a paper on standardized testing and asked if we could talk.

The only problem with her qualifying for inclusion in my study was she hadn't gone to high school in the United States. The daughter of a doctor and an accountant, she'd come to the U.S. for college after going to private schools throughout her childhood in Nigeria. She'd been admitted to the university after scoring a 29 on the ACT, a high score for a multilingual English-speaker who'd grown up outside of the U.S., and was otherwise untouched by U.S.-style standardized testing. She'd seen plenty of standardized testing in Nigeria, however, where cheating is rampant on the West African Examination Council (WAEC) university entrance exam. Testing English, Nigerian English, Math, Reading and Biology, students routinely hire others to take their tests, while others receive answers via text message and families buying scores. The score truly is all-powerful and seeing the corrupting influence of a measure that erases all other means of evaluation caused her to distrust the tests, even when she did well. Her experiences in the United States, in both testing environments and in classrooms, had been different. She felt as though instead of being told what would be on an exam and told to memorize and regurgitate it, she'd been forced to apply what she knew to a new problem.

"In Nigeria, I felt like it was just a memory game. The only time you'd have to use your mind more than just memorizing something was with math because you had to actually do it. Here, they want you to get the concept so they'll teach you the concept then the test will ask you something based on that concept."

She was familiar with cheating problems on standardized tests in the United States and other criticisms. They reminded her of Nigeria.

"Teachers teach by the book and to the test so they look good and the school looks good so they get funding, but that's bad for the kids in the long run because they don't get the concepts, they just get what they need to know for the test…I've heard stories, even from people I know, of the teacher coming in and writing the answers on the board. That's crazy." In college, she aced her first chemistry test and was happy with the grade, but not the test, which was multiple-choice. Her favorites are tests combining free responses with the questions "because that will really tell me if I know it or if I don't. I can pick 'B' and get it right but not know it."

She wondered if anyone was looking for alternatives to standardized testing "because I'm really not for it, especially the multiple choice ones. I just don't think it's the best way to determine how much knowledge someone has attained over a period of time…I was wondering, 'Are they trying hard enough [to find an alternative]?' Because I'd like to try."

Even though she'd been successful, the multiple-choice format made her nervous. She wants to become a doctor. Or an artist. Or maybe both. And seeing so much emphasis on scores changed the purpose of education. A score, after all, can't diagnose a disease, or make something beautiful.

In listening to her talk about testing, and education, I was as impressed by what she didn't say as what she did. She never contended that standardized testing had special goals separate from other forms of testing. She didn't say standardized testing should be used to measure schools or teachers. She didn't say it provided meaningful information about the strength of a nation and its place in the world. She didn't task it with assessing her value as a worthwhile and able human being or calculating her capacity to contribute to GDP. She didn't say it was a hoop to jump through. She didn't say it was an obstacle or a game or a validation of an immutable quality.

To her, the test didn't exist to further the aims of test-designers or administrators or parents or politicians or even teachers. It wasn't a mysterious and magical device promising access to the mysteries of the mind. It wasn't assigned the lofty responsibilities of defining intelligence, or creativity, or intellectual identity. It wasn't supposed to make us feel a certain way—smart or dumb, good or bad—it wasn't supposed to reveal the true self. It existed for one reason, and it wasn't to please someone else, it was to help her know how well she was able to do what she wanted to do. If it did it was a good test. If it didn't, it failed.

"Because," she said, "at the end of the day, the reason why I came to school and paid all this money is to learn, so I need to know I'm actually absorbing knowledge. If I'm doing everything based on numbers, how's that going to help me do what I want to do?"

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