

COMPOSING NEW IMAGINARIES WITHIN ENGLISH COMPOSITION: ENTERING  
BORDERLANDS WITHIN CRITICAL SERVICE LEARNING SPACES

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**Abstract**

Alexandra Fields

COMPOSING NEW IMAGINARIES WITHIN ENGLISH COMPOSITION: ENTERING  
BORDERLANDS WITHIN CRITICAL SERVICE LEARNING SPACES

Despite over thirty years of service learning research, the vast majority of research in America conducted on service learning in higher education, both within composition courses and across other academic disciplines, focuses on college students attending four-year universities, with little attention given to their two-year counterparts (Kozeracki, 2000). And, more often than not, perhaps because these studies are conducted on four-year campuses, the students engaging in service learning within these studies are often depicted as homogenous, primarily White, middle and upper class students who are more privileged than the community partners with whom they engage in service and who are, therefore, “strangers” - breaking and entering into community spaces that are physically and culturally different from their own (Green, 2003; Himley, 2004; Mitchell, 2015; Bocci, 2015). However, community college classrooms are often much more socio-economically, racially, culturally, and ideologically diverse than what is found at the vast majority of four-year institutions, with many students existing in similar spaces of precarity as the community partners with whom they engage in service learning (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Thus, this researcher-participant study utilizes narrative inquiry in order to share the lived experiences of two community college students and one juvenile detention center resident who participated in a critical service learning English Composition course within either an immigration detention center or a juvenile detention center. The results of this study provide counter narratives to common misperceptions about the identities of students and community partners existing in these spaces, and they also argue for further research to better nuance our understanding of each of these

populations and the role that social justice literacy pedagogies can play in challenging deficit-oriented approaches to literacy instruction within these spaces.

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## Introduction

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

Service learning is a pedagogical approach to civic engagement instruction that has proliferated within college and university classrooms over the last thirty years. Specifically, “Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Thus, unlike volunteerism, service learning experiences are directly tied to the learning outcomes of a class, are designed to promote civic engagement, and include structured opportunities for reflection that help students make connections between their service experiences and the course’s learning objectives.

Within the field of English composition, service learning pedagogies have proliferated across university and college campuses, and with this proliferation, a growing body of research has also emerged that highlights both the benefits and challenges of engaging composition students in service learning experiences (Sax & Astin, 1998; Dean, 2000; Herzberg, 1997; Ball & Goodburn, 2003; Butin, 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Gries, 2019); for example, in a study of 3,450 students across 42 higher educational institutions conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute of UCLA, researchers Sax and Astin (1998) identified “significant positive correlations between service and student outcomes in...civic responsibility, academic attainment, and life skills” (Dean, 2000, p. 4; ), and in a study of 1500 college students at 20 different higher educational institutions, researchers also identified service learning as a significant predictor of

“two student outcomes that are of particular interest to composition teachers: the capacity of students to *see problems as systemic* and the ability to see things from multiple perspectives” (Dean, 2000, p. 3). Moreover, qualitative studies have also identified the benefits of service learning in helping students become more empowered writers and agentic citizens (Herzberg, 1997; Ball & Goodburn, 2003). However, despite a multitude of studies highlighting the benefits of service learning on composition students, other studies have also problematized service learning (Butin, 2006; Mitchell, 2008; Horner, 1997). For example, Butin (2006) and Mitchell (2008) have argued that service learning has the potential to reinforce problematic binaries that can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes and biases, and Bruce Horner (1997) suggested that “using service learning to traverse the boundaries separating the academic from the public or the “community” can reinforce the academic/real world binary, leading again to the derogation of student writing as somehow less “real” than work more recognizably “public” in its forms, effect, or mode of distribution” (p. 70). Consequently, for the past three decades, scholars have both embraced and complicated our understanding of the benefits and challenges of engaging both college students and, more specifically, composition students in service learning pedagogies.

Unfortunately, despite over thirty years of service learning research, the vast majority of research in America conducted on service learning in higher education, both within composition courses and across other academic disciplines, focuses on college students attending four-year universities, with little attention given to their two-year counterparts (Kozeracki, 2000). And, more often than not, perhaps because these studies are conducted on four-year campuses, the

students engaging in service learning within these studies are often depicted as homogenous, primarily white, middle and upper class students who are more privileged than the community partners with whom they engage in service and who are, therefore, “strangers” - breaking and entering into community spaces that are physically and culturally different from their own (Green, 2003; Himley, 2004; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2015; Bocci, 2015).

However, community college classrooms are often much more socio-economically, racially, culturally, and ideologically diverse than what is found at the vast majority of four-year institutions, with recent research highlighting that not only do community colleges now “serve nearly one in two undergraduates”, but they also “enroll by far the most economically and racially diverse students”, many of whom are facing basic needs insecurities such as lack of access to stable housing and food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Moreover, community college students are often members of the same communities as their community partners, with students commuting to and from campus and returning home each day to the neighborhoods where their community partners also reside (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Consequently, because community college students represent close to half of all undergraduates in America and yet have substantially different college experiences and intersectional identities than their peers at four-year colleges and universities, more research needs to be conducted to understand who students engaging in service learning within community colleges are, how they make sense of these service experiences, and in what ways their experiences complicate our understanding of college students engaging in service learning (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017).

Additionally, although service-learning research that highlights the benefits of this pedagogical approach to college student participants abounds (Stoecker, Tryon, & Hilgendorf, 2009), limited research has been conducted to identify how the community partners whom service learning is intended to “serve” feel about their participation in these service-learning partnerships (Ball & Goodburn, 2000; Stoecker, Tryon, & Hilgendorf, 2009). In fact, the vast majority of service-learning research both in the field of composition studies and throughout academia at-large has often “erased” the voices of community partners completely (Ball & Goodburn, 2000) or has made claims “of the positive impact that service learning has on communities” without supporting these claims through any substantive research studies and by, instead, utilizing “superficial” research methods such as “Likert-scale questionnaires” that paint broad-stroke pictures of community partner satisfaction (Stoecker, Tryon, & Hilgendorf, 2009). Consequently, the lack of substantive research demonstrating any benefits of service-learning on community partner participants has led scholars to question “whether service learning truly serves communities” (Stoecker, Tryon, & Hilgendorf, 2009, p. 3), and if, instead, it may be unintentionally serving as a problematic “charity model” that reinforces “negative stereotypes and students’ perceptions of poor communities as helpless” (Tryon & Stoecker, 2008).

Therefore, in this paper, using a practitioner-researcher narrative design, I identify the intersectional identities and lived experiences of two community college students and a community partner juvenile detention center resident before, during, and after their engagement in a community college English composition service learning course. In doing so, I hope their stories serve to complicate the persisting binary within service learning scholarship of privileged

students/underprivileged community members as well as to speak to what this more complicated understanding of college students and community partner participants might mean for critical service-learning and its potential as an emancipatory critical literacy pedagogy within community college composition classrooms and community partner sites.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

Identifying social justice pedagogies that help students communicate across ideological and partisan differences and become agentic citizens is more important now, perhaps, than at any other time in American history. Americans currently live in a nation where we often define ourselves and our ideals based upon party lines, religions, cultures, races, and even geographical locations. According to recent polls by the Pew Research Center, “86% [of Americans surveyed] describe the country as more politically divided today than in the past” (Banta, 2016).

Additionally, the disparity between wealth and poverty is also at an all-time-high, and with this disparity comes a divide between those residents with access to privilege and power and those residents living marginalized lives, often due to sociopolitical forces and institutionalized forms of oppression beyond their control (Norton, 2014). Moreover, although we live in an increasingly globalized society, new research suggests what many of us can anecdotally confirm: “access to broadband Internet increases partisan hostility,” hate crimes, and white nationalism (Lelkes et al., 2017, p. 5; Daniels, 2018). Thus, despite the fact that we have the ability to interact more with Others across distance, space, and place through the internet, most people are not using the internet to better understand others, but rather to access partisan and often divisive information which can lead to an increase in “fear and loathing” across social, political, and

ideological distances (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014; Lelkes et al., 2017). Consequently, critical scholars have argued that educators must engage students in a border pedagogy - a pedagogy that “is attentive to developing a democratic public philosophy that respects the notion of difference as part of a common struggle to extend the quality of public life” (Giroux, 1991, p. 51). And so, a multitude of scholars have engaged their students in service learning pedagogies with the idea that these pedagogies might serve as a practical means for engaging students in the critical work of entering both physical and metaphorical borderlands in order to “cross boundaries in new, in different, and in critical ways” (Hayes & Cuban, 1997, p. 13).

Service learning has been understood to have the potential for engaging students in the critical work of crossing borders and entering “borderlands” - “sites both for critical analysis and as a potential source of experimentation, creativity, and possibility” (Giroux, 1992, p. 34) - which could then lead service learning students to better understand Others whom they may have previously misunderstood (Hayes & Cuban, 1997). The service learning scholarship that emerged throughout the 1990’s further propelled the argument that service learning has the potential to help students cross both physical and metaphorical borders, with many studies suggesting that service learning pedagogies allowed students to better understand and empathize with people whom they previously othered (Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Bacon, 1997; Herzberg, 2000; Green, 2003; Taylor, 2002; Himley, 2004). And, within the field of English composition, the 1990’s shift to composition theories that value engaging students in empowering, social justice oriented writing experiences within public spaces led numerous composition scholars to embrace service learning pedagogies and the opportunity to engage students in these “border

crossings” (Cushman, 1999; Brodkey, 1996; Herzberg, 2000; Gorzelsky, 2009; Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017) by asking composition faculty to work with “students and community members” to “enact the kind of civic-minded knowledge-making that engages broad audiences in pressing social issues” and has the ability to generate benefits for “those inside and outside the university” (Cushman, 1999, p. 335).

Although service learning is rooted in critical pedagogies and theories, as service learning courses and programs continued to expand throughout college and university campuses, they also began to remove themselves from their critical roots, often claiming to be apolitical (Butin, 2006). For example, Herzburg (1997) and Ball and Goodburn (2000) suggested that service learning, by removing itself from critical theories, was reifying existing stereotypes supported by student beliefs in America as a meritocracy, which in turn was also leading to exploitative relationships with community partners whose voices often went unheard and/or were inaccurately represented. Moreover, in Dan Butin’s (2006) article highlighting the limitations of service learning, he stated that because service learning has attempted to position itself as an apolitical pedagogy, “there is a distinct possibility that service-learning may ultimately come to be viewed as the ‘Whitest of the White’ enclave of postsecondary education” (p. 482). Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law (2012) echoed this concern six years later by suggesting that service learning has become a “pedagogy of whiteness – strategies of instruction that consciously or unconsciously reinforce norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, White people in the United States” since it is “being implemented mostly by White faculty with mostly White students at predominantly White institutions to serve mostly poor individuals and mostly people

of color” (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012; p. 612, 613) Thus, service learning has been problematized as being yet another colonising pedagogy in which privileged white students and white faculty engage in “charity work” for impoverished Black and brown communities. And, with most of the service learning scholarship focused on students attending four-year institutions, these calls of concern certainly have merit since only a limited number of studies have attempted to deconstruct and problematize this binary of privileged white students engaging in service with underprivileged community members by studying service learning pedagogies within more diverse contexts, and even fewer studies have attempted to understand what service learning looks like in the higher educational setting when used as a border pedagogy for students who are, themselves, disenfranchised or oppressed (Green, 2001; Green, 2003; Henry & Breyfogle, 2006; Butin, 2006; Yeh, 2010).

In response to the concern that service learning has removed itself from its critical theoretical roots, critical service learning, defined as “an approach to civic learning that is attentive to social change, works to redistribute power, and strives to develop authentic relationships”, has been developed as a means of ensuring that service learning does not reify existing power structures between privileged students and oppressed populations being served, and that it instead leads students to develop an understanding of institutionalized forms of oppression in an effort to create social reforms that upend these injustices (Mitchell, 2015, p. 20). In order to achieve this goal, “Readings, assignments, dialogue, and reflection are selected to highlight multiple perspectives, to critically analyze issues, and to promote action” (Mitchell, 2015, p. 20). Therefore, critical service learning advocates argue that through critical service

learning, students can engage in service work within their community that serves to meet community needs; works to upend systemic injustices; helps students better understand the diverse lived experiences of people within their community; and gives students the opportunity to broaden their understanding of social, ideological, and political perspectives (Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2015). Within the discipline of composition, these experiences can then be directly linked to composition course outcomes through students' analyses of course texts, the development of reflective and argumentative literacy assignments, and students' engagement in reflective and analytical dialogue that is informed through critically reflective synthesis of course texts and service learning experiences (Deans, 2000).

Unfortunately though, this renewed focus on critical service learning within higher education has continued to assume that the students participating in service learning are more privileged than the people whom they serve and has focused almost exclusively on students attending four-year institutions with little attention given to community college student participants' experiences or the experiences of community partner participants (Butin, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Tryon & Stoecker, 2008). Consequently, despite over thirty years of service learning scholarship within higher educational institutions in America, limited efforts have been made to understand how community college students and community partner members experience critical service learning and whether or not service learning, when tied to critical theories, can serve as a border pedagogy for participants engaged in service learning work within the community college and community partner settings (Butin, 2007; Mitchell, 2015).

Therefore, this paper takes up the need for more research on critical service learning within community college classes and community partner sites by examining the lived experiences and intersectional identities of a community college Composition I student, a community college Composition II student, and a community partner juvenile detention center resident. Using narrative inquiry, this paper seeks to understand the lived experiences of three participants throughout their lives leading up to our service learning work together as well as during our service learning work. In doing so, this paper seeks to better understand how each participant's unique lived experiences and subjectivities informed the ways in which they made sense of their own identities and the identities of Others, how they were experiencing the world prior to participation in our coursework and during it, and where they are today. By examining participants' narratives before and throughout their service learning experiences, this paper also seeks to understand how critical service learning can be used as a border pedagogy within the community college English composition classroom and community partner site and, what, if any, liberatory potential critical service learning has within these spaces.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The goal of critical service learning has been defined as encouraging “students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). However, the bulk of scholarship on service learning and critical service learning assumes that students engaging in service are outsiders who are more privileged than their community partners, and this scholarship also fails to consider the identities or experiences of community partner participants. Thus, in this paper, in order to better understand who community college students and community partner members are as well as how

their lived experiences and positionalities inform their critical service learning work, I turn to narrative inquiry in order to answer the following questions:

1. What do the narratives of two community college English composition students and a juvenile detention center resident convey about their identities and lived experiences prior to engaging in critical service learning within an English Composition class?
2. How do participants' identities and lived histories inform their experiences of critical service learning within an English Composition class?

## **1.4 Conceptual Framework**

### **Researcher Positionality**

“Hey, Ms. Fields. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“My cousin told me to take your class. He told me you could help me like you helped him.”

“Help you with what, exactly?”

“He said you can teach me to read.”

I will always remember craning my neck to look up into the courageous face of this 6’2, 19-year-old African American male student, a student who had somehow managed to get through 12 years of schooling without ever learning to read more than a few words that he had memorized and who was brave enough to pull me aside, a woman whom he had only met for the

first time a little over an hour ago, to ask such a personal request. How could I say no? “Of course,” I replied. “It will take a lot of work outside of class, but I can definitely help you learn how to read.”

I look back at this conversation now, over ten years later, and I am filled with a mixture of pride, sadness, and regret. I am proud of my younger, naive self for embracing this student and many others like him, and working tirelessly outside of classroom hours to help him and other students who requested reading support learn how to sound out and break down words, sentences, and paragraphs. I am even more proud of each of my reading students and their willingness to never give up on their dreams of feeling confident in their reading abilities, their courage in confiding their biggest secret to a stranger, and the strength they displayed day after day in their work with me. However, I am also filled with sadness, for although we made progress, not one of the students whom I worked with - and through the years there have been at least 40 students who identified themselves to me as wanting intensive reading support - ever met their reading goals or became college graduates. The student whom I referred to above ended up incarcerated half-way through the semester on drug charges, and I never saw him again despite repeated attempts at outreach. And many other students whom I worked with ended up with similar fates. Still others dropped out of college after repeatedly failing different courses for which they were enrolled, and a few other students were forced out of college because financial aid stopped paying for their classes after repeated failures. Thus, more than pride or sadness, my overwhelming feeling is that of regret – regret for the hours I spent with each of my students breaking down letter sounds and blending them back together rather than connecting literacy

practices to meaningful life experiences.

I had bought into the idea that permeates the bulk of special education classrooms and much of the dyslexia research, the idea that young adult and adult readers who struggle to fluently read or comprehend texts need structured, multisensory reading programs that help students work on the encoding and decoding of phonemes in order to learn how to read better. I had embraced the Wilson Reading Program, a research-supported positivist approach to reading instruction that focuses on phonics development and fluency support in order to increase students' reading comprehension, and a program that had been employed by speech-language pathologists in schools where I had previously taught. In following this program, I, in essence, used a deficit-based framework in which I taught my students what they "didn't know" by trying to fill in their "language gaps" through skill and drill phonics and fluency exercises rather than identifying students' communicative strengths and using these assets as a means for helping them with reading comprehension. In fact, it was only until I enrolled in my doctoral coursework over three years ago that I began to reflect more on why my work with students who had identified themselves as in need of reading support was so unsuccessful, and I began to identify new strategies for improving students' literacy skills that did not involve phonemes or encoding and decoding practices, but instead focused on community engagement and critical literacy efforts.

I identify as a White, now middle-class, cisgender woman who wears many hats as a mother, wife, ex-wife, daughter, sister, writer, professor, researcher and administrator. I hold a critical ontological perspective on life, for my life, the lives of my loved ones, and the lives of

many of my students have been directly impacted by systemic injustices that have often led us to exist in precarious spaces and fight just to stay above water. As a child and young adult, I grew up in a low-income family with high school educated parents and an older sister struggling with mental health challenges who is now physically disabled as well. I watched my parents struggle financially throughout my life after my father was in a debilitating car accident that made him unable to work. My older sister, unfortunately, experienced a number of traumas at a young age coupled with a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder that led her to be suicidal throughout much of my youth, and in her early twenties she became addicted to heroin and ended up incarcerated and charged with a felony that made it difficult for her to find gainful employment or receive financial aid in order to attend college once sober. In her late twenties, my sister also developed a chronic neurological pain condition called Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome that has left her bed-ridden for the past ten plus years and dependent upon heavy narcotic pain killers, and my parents, who are not physically well themselves, are forced to take care of my now forty-two-year-old sister around the clock. And, despite receiving government assistance and the stability of a home that they now own, to this day, my parents and sister still live in a perpetual state of financial worry, for they know that they are only one medical expense away from not being able to meet their daily needs or put food on the table. Thus, throughout my life, I have experienced and continue to experience many personal and familial challenges connected to poverty, mental and physical health challenges, and substance abuse, and it was these experiences that first shaped my ontological perspective by sensitizing me to these many social inequities.

Because my childhood was filled with many emotionally trying times, it was through reading and writing that I often found my escape from the struggles at home. I have many memories of my parents yelling at me to come downstairs for dinner while I begged for five more minutes to finish a chapter of the latest novel I was reading. Reading came naturally to me, and for as far back as I can remember, I always had my nose buried in a book. Reading novels not only exposed me to many cultures, places, and time periods that I never otherwise would have learned about, but reading also exposed me to characters and individuals throughout history who had overcome extreme hardships and injustices and then became social justice advocates. When I was in the seventh grade, after reading *Kaffir Boy*, a powerful true story about a young man who escaped poverty in Apartheid South Africa and ended up coming to America on a tennis scholarship, I decided that I wanted to escape my familial hardships through schooling, and I began applying to prestigious boarding schools throughout the East Coast. I ended up getting accepted and attending an elitist boarding school, Groton School, for my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, and although new family hardships led me to leave and return home for high school in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, that one year away living with, learning with, and befriending some of the wealthiest children in the world, made me ever more aware of the inequities that exist in the educational system and in society as a whole. Consequently, when I was in college, I decided that I wanted to become an English teacher with the goal of helping other impoverished youths use reading and writing as a means of empowerment.

Despite having many friends and boyfriends of different races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions, I was raised by my parents to be “color-blind”, and it was not until my graduate studies

in Harvard's School of Education that I was exposed to critical race theory and learned how problematic a color-blind mentality is due to the fact that it "can potentially lead to the dangers of exploitation and misrepresentation of individuals and communities of color" by whitewashing everyone and, therefore, ignoring the realities of oppression and marginalization often experienced by people of color (Milner, 2007, p. 392). After reading bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress*, Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and much of Gloria Ladson-Billings and Tate's writings on White teachers educating students of color, I felt enlightened by the many racial inequities that I had never fully understood due to my own white privilege, and fighting for racial equality became a large component of my advocacy efforts. Thus, when I began teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade English in an "under-performing" racially and culturally diverse school in Massachusetts, I utilized much of my graduate school coursework to ensure that I was teaching culturally relevant curriculum, and I successfully advocated to have the English curriculum changed for the district, which had previously focused on the teaching of literature only selected from the white literary canon. I was proud of these accomplishments, and I LOVED teaching English!

However, in my second year of teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade English, I first encountered students who were reading far below grade-level, and I realized that as a secondary school English teacher, I had no idea how to teach a person how to read. My graduate coursework focused on pedagogical practices for teaching English literature and writing to fluent young adult readers and writers, and throughout my coursework I had only taken one course on early literacy experiences, which focused on the cognitive aspects of reading without ever exploring how to

teach people how to become readers. Thus, when confronted by a large number of students reading at first and second grade reading levels within my 8th grade classes, I felt overwhelmed and desperate to find strategies for improving their reading abilities. My school's speech-language pathologist used the multisensory phonics-driven Wilson Reading Program with some students, and although I left the district before I ever began using the program with my eighth graders, I was able to attend a training on the program through district funding, and I kept that knowledge with me when I transitioned into teaching college English classes a few years later.

Although I loved teaching 8th grade English in Massachusetts, my husband and I decided to relocate back to Philadelphia, and since my teaching license was unable to transfer in time for me to work within the city's school district, I took a position teaching at a well-respected charter school. Unfortunately, this was during the height of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, and so teachers in this school were required to teach almost exclusively to the test. I was told that I could no longer teach genre studies, reading and writing workshop, or engage students in project-based learning, and so by November of that school year, I had become so disenchanted by the curriculum I was forced to teach that I began looking for other means of teaching where I would be granted creative freedom. Consequently, when I was offered the opportunity to teach community college English full-time the following year, I accepted the position with joy, and I was excited to embark on this new endeavor. In this role, because of my background in K-12 English, I became the Developmental Writing Coordinator, and so in addition to teaching my English classes, I also coordinated the Developmental English curriculum, and thus most of my energy became focused on supporting the literacy needs of students who were placed in pre-

college-level classes based upon their low placement exam scores.

Because reading always came naturally to me and I was privileged to never experience any cognitive disabilities, I never imagined that, as a college professor, I would meet so many students who had difficulty with reading comprehension and who wanted support in learning how to sound out words. As someone whose teaching (and now research) is deeply grounded in critical theories, I felt paralyzed by my inability to empower my college students through reading and writing. How could I empower students through literature, I realized, if they felt unable to read the words on the pages in front of them? I began to read every book that I could find on dyslexia and reading disabilities, and all of the research that I read again emphasized the importance of utilizing a multisensory reading program, so I started working with students outside of class by teaching them decoding and encoding skills with the Wilson Reading Program materials that I still had from my days as a middle school teacher, and I even piloted courses for students who identified as “non-readers” at my college with the hope that I could help my students become confident readers.

Unfortunately, despite my critical ontological perspective when it came to race, SES, gender, and sexuality, I now recognize that I lacked this perspective when it came to literacy practices. I had been socialized and educated to believe that the English language has set “rules” and that if students mastered these “rules,” they would become competent readers and writers. And since my goal was to help my students become competent communicators so that they could fight against the systems of oppression that had bound them, I focused extensive energy on helping students master these “skills”. However, through my doctoral course readings

and extensive reflection, I now understand that language, just like race and wealth, is a social construct, and that by perpetuating the “rules” of the English language that were created by the dominant culture, I was perpetuating the power and privilege of those groups who benefit from the dominant discourse and I was, therefore, suggesting that my students’ own communicative practices were wrong and deficient (Delpit, 1995). This is not to say that students who struggle to read the written word should not be taught how to sound out words and become fluent readers; rather, as Lisa Delpit (1995) so eloquently articulated in her book, *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, I now understand that “skills are best taught through meaningful communication, best learned in meaningful contexts” and although students “need technical skills to open doors...they need to be able to think critically and creatively to participate in meaningful and potentially liberating work inside those doors” (p. 19).

Thus, the lens through which I want to support my students has now changed through my course of study, but the principles that drive my research are still the same: 1) as a literacy educator, an integral part of my job is to identify strategies for supporting my students’ reading and writing skills development as well as their academic confidence and 2) the overarching purpose of literacy education is to use literacy as a means of disrupting our problematic socialized beliefs and, ideally, identifying strategies for dismantling systems of oppression. My research interests then are in studying social-justice-oriented pedagogies that help students to deconstruct oppressive systems and then use these life experiences as a means for engaging in reading, writing, and multimodal communicative practices. Thus, I have turned to critical service learning in order to better understand how and if this critical framework can be used to engage

students in agentic literacy experiences.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Critical literacy and the social imagination.**

I entered the field of English education as an 8<sup>th</sup> grade inner-city English teacher over 15 years ago, and my goal then, much as it is today, was to use literacy as a means of empowerment, especially for students with lived experiences of oppression, marginalization, and/or trauma. Thus, my teaching and research interests have always been grounded in critical literacy theories even before I knew what they were, and when I read Freire (1970) during my master's studies, I connected with his assertion that educators must shift away from the "banking model" of education and instead engage students in liberatory pedagogies, and I, therefore, found a theoretical home in critical literacy.

Freire (1970), in his foundational text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first introduced critical pedagogy within an educational context by asserting that we must change the way we teach in order to support the liberation of people who have been dehumanized through oppressive forces, beliefs, and systems of oppression. Specifically, he suggested that in order to promote this liberation, two key pedagogical practices were necessary: a liberating pedagogy must include intense, critical reflection that helps the oppressed better understand the history and politics behind their oppression through dialogue which then leads to critical consciousness, and this reflection must then lead to action which pushes back against the systems that oppress. Moreover, he argued that the role of educators is to carry out these transformative practices *with* the oppressed rather than *for* the oppressed so that the struggle for freedom is owned at all times by those experiencing oppression and not those in power working towards the liberation of the

oppressed. Thus, in Freire's model of education, he pushed back against the "banking model" and skill-driven model of education that is still found in many community college English classrooms today, and he argued that transformative education requires educators and students to work together to co-investigate one's relationship with the world in order to develop critical consciousness that can lead to impactful social and political change. Thus, within a Freirean construct, and all definitions that came after, critical literacy education is inherently political in that education must be used *with* students to encourage engaging, active, critically reflective practices that lead students to work towards creating a more socially just world.

Close to two decades later, Freire and Macedo (1987) further complicated Freire's (1970) earlier explorations into critical literacy by more overtly emphasizing the sociocultural nature of language and literacy; specifically, they asserted that "a person is literate to the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political reconstruction", and that literacy, therefore, is not simply an ability to read "the word", but rather that reading "the word" is only important so that one can read and rewrite "the world" (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Similarly, although not explicitly tied to critical literacy theories, Maxine Greene (1995) also argued for a new critical approach to pedagogy in which she asserted that educators should use the arts, including literary texts, to engage students in work with the "social imagination", which she argued provides us with the "capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools" (p. 5). Maxine Greene's (1995) writings about the social imagination highlighted the importance of educators using art and literature to help students empathize with others and imagine new ways of being in the world. Thus, like Freire and Macedo (1987), Greene (1995) advocated for literacy instruction that helps students rewrite their worlds. This understanding of the purpose of literacy and art is particularly important to

critical literacy theories and to my own research, for inherent in all critical literacy definitions is now the understanding that the purpose of reading and writing is to critically reflect upon and, in turn, reconstruct the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Luke, 2012). Therefore, I argue in support of research and teaching that takes up these sociocultural understandings of literacy, and as a researcher practitioner, I advocate for using literacy instruction to engage students in the work of the social imagination so that they can identify new ways of both interpreting and engaging with the world.

### **Critical border pedagogy.**

Not only do I situate this research within critical literacy theories, but I am also particularly interested in how critical service learning can be enacted as a border pedagogy within composition classrooms. In Henry Giroux's article "Border Pedagogy and the Politics of Modernism/Postmodernism" (1991), he took up this notion of a border pedagogy, in which he argued that "a theory of border pedagogy can address the important question of how representations and practices that name, marginalize, and define difference as the devalued Other, are actively learned, interiorized, challenged or transformed" (p. 75). Specifically, to do so, Giroux (1991) suggested that educators must engage students in "systematic analyses of the ways in which the dominant culture creates borders saturated in terror, inequality, and forced exclusions" (p. 76). To this end, I align with Giroux's (1991) calls for a border pedagogy by arguing that critical service learning within the composition classroom must be coupled with critical analysis of the dominant discourses that marginalize Others and present them as people to be feared and/or deserving of oppression and/or exploitation so that these discourses can be challenged and deconstructed.

Moreover, whereas some critical scholars, such as Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) have argued that critical pedagogies require faculty to remove themselves from positions of authority and instead enter into critical inquiry as peers with their students, I also situate this research in alignment with Giroux's (1991) argument that critical pedagogies often require teachers to initially take some authority over the classroom in order to "help students find a language for critically examining the historically and socially constructed forms by which they live" (p. 77). Thus, within this model of engaging students in a border pedagogy and in contrast to some critical literacy scholars' positions on the role of educators within critical literacy classrooms, in this paper it is understood that the educator often takes the lead in helping students "find the language" to deconstruct systems and discourses of oppression, at least initially, but this is done only so that students can then "reterritorialize and rewrite the complex narratives that make up one's life" (Giroux, 1991, p. 77). In many ways then, the role of the educator within border pedagogy aligns with bell hooks' (1987) approach to critical literacy pedagogies. Specifically, hooks (1987) describes her practices as a professor as follows:

My classroom style is very confrontational. It is based on the assumption that many students will take courses from me who are afraid to assert themselves as critical thinkers, who are afraid to speak (especially students from oppressed and exploited groups). The revolutionary hope that I bring to the classroom is that it will become a space where they can come to voice...The goal is to enable all students, not just an assertive few, to feel empowered in a rigorous critical discussion. (p. 53)

Thus, using hooks' (1987), Giroux's (1991), and Freire and Macedo's (1987) frameworks, I argue in support of enacting critical literacy theories through a border pedagogy in which faculty engage students in critical dialogue and reflection that encourages students to become empowered, reflective members of the classroom community. Moreover, I assert that faculty can and often need to facilitate these conversations in ways that provide students with the

language and frameworks to engage in the deconstruction of problematic discourses and systems that lead to the othering and exploitation of marginalized and oppressed people.

### **Theories of intersectionality.**

Not only have I rooted this paper in critical literacy theories and the actualizing of these theories through a border pedagogy, but I also argue in support of intersectionality theories which call for all critical theorists to understand that we cannot “examine oppressions and marginalization rooted in gender without looking at class, race, ableism, and other conditional positionalities” as well (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 45). Thus, in taking up intersectionality theories, I seek to utilize narrative inquiry in order to explore how students’ intersectional identities inform their service experiences. Consequently, I take up feminist theorists’ calls for “a strong focus...on engaging with the histories, identities, and struggles faced by groups marginalized on the basis of difference of gender, language, culture and race, and sexual orientation” (Luke, 2012, p. 7-8).

Moreover, with this intersectional understanding of oppressions and marginalizations, my pedagogical underpinnings also emphasize the importance of culturally responsive teaching which “...empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-billings, 1994, p. 18). Thus, I take up critical feminist scholars’ calls for educators to be culturally responsive by developing curriculum and lessons that reflect the diversity of their students, drawing connections between literacy experiences and larger societal injustices, and enabling students “to see the ways that texts, contexts, and institutions inform, shape and circumscribe meaning-making, or how reading

is shaped by structural forces, constraints, and contingencies” (Damico, Campano, & Harste, 2009, p. 177).

### **Critical Cosmopolitanism.**

Within the academic community, cosmopolitanism has been identified as one means for better understanding how we can help students negotiate conversations across differences. Specifically, a “new interest in cosmopolitanism” has been generated “based upon a recognition that our world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent globally, and that most of our problems are global in nature requiring global solutions” (Rizvi, 2009, p. 253). However, cosmopolitanism is not solely focused on global problems and solutions; rather, cosmopolitan theorists are interested “in the interface of the local and the global” and “a cosmopolitan perspective on critical literacy focuses on global human rights and the ramifications of actions in one part of the world resonating throughout the globe” (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015, p. 48-49). Therefore, cosmopolitan theorists recognize that global events and experiences have local consequences just as local events have global consequences, and as literacy educators, practitioners must view and teach “literacy as a critical practice in a cosmopolitan world” (Bean & Dunkerly-Bean, 2015, p. 46). Moreover, cosmopolitan literacy, as defined by Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014) “foregrounds the rhetorical stances and ethical commitments involved in communicating across difference—the cognitive, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic meaning-making capacities and practices of authors and audiences as they take differently situated others into account.” Thus, cosmopolitan literacies are specifically interested in understanding how people communicate and make sense of one another across differences, both locally and

globally, and in order to understand these negotiations, some scholars have turned to theories of proper distance.

When Silverstone (2003), a prominent academic in the field of media and communications studies, first defined “proper distance”, he argued the following:

...distance is not just a material, a geographical or even a social category, but it is, by virtue of both and as a product of their interrelation, a moral category. The overcoming of distance requires more than technology and indeed more than the creation of a public sphere. It requires proximity. (p. 7)

Silverstone is correct that access to others through technology in a public sphere does not, alone, generate “proper distance” as we can see in how access to differing ideological views on the internet has not led to the development of “proper distance” (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014). Despite the difficulty in achieving “proper distance”, Hansen (2011) has argued that “today, as the world becomes smaller, and as human beings find it increasingly difficult to wall out external influences, teachers can advance an education that equips people not just to deal with these circumstances but to reconstruct their approach toward them”, and that in order to do so, we must begin by helping students engage in a back and forth negotiation across distance in which they “learn to balance reflective openness to the new with reflective loyalty to the known” (p. 1, 4). Moreover, Rizvi (2009) also argues in support of educators playing an active role in facilitating students’ engagement with Others across distances and differences:

The immediate issues we have to deal with are invariably local...our approach to teaching about global connectivity should begin with the local, but must move quickly to address issues of how our local communities are becoming socially transformed through their links with communities around the world and with what consequences. ( p. 263)

Therefore, cosmopolitanism advocates aim to help students learn how to negotiate communication with others across distances with the following understanding:

...negotiating proper distance... [is] a conflictual and ideological process comprised of many false starts, “failed” efforts, and frustrated interchanges” but that “those seeming missteps...[are] critical elements in affording openness to difference and reflexivity, as young people developed an increasing awareness of the validity of different cultural practices and values and in turn reconsidered their own values, practices, and beliefs. (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014)

Since critical service learning uniquely positions students to engage with others in a local context across difference while contextualizing these experiences within larger national and global contexts, I have positioned this study within critical cosmopolitan theories by using critical service learning to engage students in this negotiation of proper distance that leads to “an increasing awareness of the validity of different cultural practices and values” and, perhaps, empathy for those individuals with different “values, practices, and beliefs” (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014).

### **Critical service learning.**

Finally, my research advocates for engaging students in critical service learning pedagogies as opposed to more traditional service learning pedagogies. Critical service learning pedagogies argue that traditional service learning pedagogies have positioned themselves as apolitical, and that, in so doing, they often lack the criticality necessary to avoid perpetuating a charity model of service learning that has the potential to reify stereotypes and an ‘us-them’ dichotomy” in which “privileged” college students fail to understand the systemic inequities that often lead to the disenfranchisement and oppression of the community partners with whom they engage in service (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). Consequently, critical service learning acknowledges

that service learning is inherently political and takes up the goal of demystifying the larger structural and systemic inequities that often lead to the oppression of others in order to advocate for students to disrupt these systems through their service efforts (Mitchell, 2008; Furco, 2011; Clifford, 2017). In order to meet this goal then, critical service learning experiences, like critical literacy pedagogies, are developed *with* rather than *for* community partners, and students who engage in this work use both their service experiences and reflection opportunities throughout the course to consider how systemic inequities coupled with students' personal contributions to these inequities perpetuate oppressive forces (Mitchell, 2008; Butin, 2008; Butin, 2015, Van Gorder, 2007). Therefore, throughout this research, I argue in support of critical service learning theories and pedagogies in order to engage students in service work that aims to shed light on structural systems of oppressions and strategies for enacting social change to combat larger systemic inequities and their impact on individuals within the local, national, and global community.

## **Community College Composition, Critical Composition Courses and the Role of Service Learning: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Community College English Composition programs have, over the course of the past decade, come under both federal and state-level scrutiny because of the vast number of enrolled students who fail to successfully complete their required composition courses, with many students often repeating the course numerous times and/or giving up on college altogether after unsuccessfully passing their composition courses (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Scott, 2012). Consequently, it is important in the context of this study to understand both why community

college composition courses often serve as barriers to student success as well as how critical service learning might be a potential solution for developing more engaging, relevant, and empowering critical literacy experiences for community college composition students.

Therefore, this chapter begins by examining the role that community college English Compositions courses play as gatekeepers to student success. It then segues into an explanation of how critical literacy theories and pedagogies have failed to take root within the vast majority of community college composition programs, and it turns to composition theorists who have argued for a more critical approach to the teaching of composition courses in order to identify how this scholarship can be applied to the community college composition classroom. In doing so, this chapter then examines how service learning has been employed and problematized within composition courses in order to understand what service learning looks like in action and whether or not it has the potential to serve as a critical literacy pedagogy. Finally, this chapter ends by examining the need for more research within community college composition courses as well as justification for why college composition faculty who want to engage students in critical literacy pedagogies might want to engage students in critical service learning pedagogies.

## **2.2 Community College Composition Courses as Gatekeepers**

Community colleges, unlike four-year universities, were founded on the notion that college should be accessible for all people, irrespective of one's socio-economic background, race or past academic experiences (Shannon & Smith, 2006). Therefore, unlike their four-year counter-parts, community colleges are open access institutions in which anyone who applies and holds a high school diploma or GED is accepted to attend, and tuition rates are kept much lower than that of four-year colleges, which leads community colleges to enroll more socio-

economically and racially diverse students than other higher educational institutions (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Unfortunately, despite the fact that these colleges open their doors to all students who have high school diplomas or GEDs, community college composition courses often serve as gatekeepers to students' college success due to high failure rates and low attrition and retention rates. This section, therefore, identifies both why community college composition courses have found themselves positioned as gatekeeper courses as well as how trends in the positioning of community college as workforce development institutions have impacted community college English composition curriculum.

### **Why Gatekeepers?**

Although community colleges pride themselves on being diverse, open access institutions, the majority of students who attend these institutions fail to graduate or successfully transfer out of them, with less than 40 percent of community college students earning a certificate or a degree within six years of enrollment (Bailey et al. 2015). In fact, because of these low completion rates, over the past decade a majority of states have modified their funding formulas so that they fund community colleges based upon student-performance formulas as opposed to student enrollment numbers, and this shift in funding has left community colleges scrambling for solutions to increase their graduation rates (Fain, 2018).

As community colleges and education scholars seek solutions for improving student graduation rates, college-level English composition courses have also come under fire for serving as key “gatekeeper courses” that “function as obstacles to completion for many students” (Zeidenberg, Jenkins, & Scott, 2012). Specifically, “college composition is a near-universal requirement for a college degree”, and so all college students must, at some point in their

college-career, successfully complete a sequence of college composition courses in order to graduate (Hassel & Giordano, 2013). However, even though “across community colleges in different states, English composition courses account for the largest enrollment numbers”, they also have high rates of failure that are “significantly higher than that of most other courses... highlighting the course's gatekeeping role within the college” (Cox, 2009, p. 79). Thus, there is a renewed interest in identifying strategies for improving student success rates within English composition courses at community colleges in order to improve overall graduation rates.

College-level composition courses are required of all college students because they were designed to ensure that students are prepared “to meet the rigorous expectations of college-level reading, writing, and thinking” (Hassel & Giordano, 2013). Thus, these courses are seen as essential prerequisites in helping students learn how to meet the academic literacy expectations that they will face across disciplines while enrolled in college. Moreover, to demonstrate their success at meeting these outcomes, the vast majority of community college composition courses require students to produce academic essays using Standard American English (Shor, 2000; Sitz, 2016). Thus, although the goal of engaging students in “college-level reading, writing, and thinking” certainly sounds admirable, since the outcomes are measured through the use of “academic essays”, these courses essentially operate within a hegemonic framework that places Standard American English in a superior category to all other discourses (Delpit, 1995; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). And, in so doing, the focus on producing essays that utilize Standard American English serves to perpetuate the marginalization of students who have lacked access to Standard American English, which, in turn, perpetuates the social stratification of students based upon their racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, rather than providing a fair college education for all students as community college missions suggest, community college

English Departments are often perpetuating the same marginalizing and oppressive practices frequently found in the K-12 literacy sector that lead to the underachievement of African American, Latino, and low-income students through a “top-down back-to-basics campaign” (Shor, 2000, p. 106) that values privileged, dominant discourses over all other discourses.

In this paper then, I suggest that English faculty and scholars who seek to improve community college student composition outcomes need to reconstruct the purpose of community college composition classrooms with the goal of better supporting the disenfranchised and perpetually underperforming students who make up the majority of our student population (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Specifically, community college composition educators must reimage composition instruction within a socioculturally rooted critical literacy framework in which faculty shift away from a “banking model” (Freire, 1970) where they serve as experts who emphasize the learning of reading and writing as discrete skills to be mastered, and instead create spaces where literacy instruction is used to encourage students to engage in “an evolving repertoire of practices of analysis and interrogation which move between the micro features of texts and the macro conditions of institutions, focusing on how relations of power work through these practices” (Comber, 2013, p. 589). In doing so, scholars and practitioners then recognize that there is a spectrum of both formal and informal, as well as standard and non standard discourses that should be valued within the classroom, and that, as the NCTE’s Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Position Statement (2014) explains, “the teaching of excellence in writing means adding language to what already exists, not subtracting”.

Moreover, composition scholars must engage in scholarship not only at four-year institutions, but also at two-year institutions in order to identify the best strategies for supporting writing instruction within community college settings. And finally, English Departments must resist the push towards serving as “job readiness training spaces” whose sole purpose is to prepare students for writing within corporate America (Kroll, 2012). Rather, community college English faculty must engage students in empowering literacy opportunities that generate opportunities for critical and imaginative reflection as well as authentic and agentic writing experiences that value students’ lived experiences, discourses, and abilities to enact social change.

## **2.3 The Disconnect Between Critical Literacy Theory and Community College**

### **Composition Instruction**

Even though critical literacy has been embraced, studied, and reimagined by academics for decades, it has, in many ways, remained only a theory that “does not seem to take root” in the majority of literacy classrooms in America, especially within community college English composition courses (Paddison, 1995; Lee, 2011). Thus, this section identifies why English composition courses continue to focus on teaching English from a monolingual orientation and how an emphasis on job readiness is perpetuating the skill-driven instruction of English within community college composition courses.

### **English Composition as a Space for Skill-Driven Writing Instruction**

Rather than using English composition classrooms as spaces for engaging students in critical reflection and agentic activities, the majority of community college English composition courses throughout America still perpetuate out-dated understandings of language that see the goal of English composition instruction to be in teaching students how to “comprehend” texts and respond to texts through the composition of academic essays written according to the “rules” of Standardized English (Durst, 2006). In fact, many four-year transfer institutions continue to rely upon community college composition courses as a means for teaching “underprepared...basic writers” their “foundational skills” so that students who succeed can then successfully transfer and meet the rigorous writing demands expected of them at four-year colleges and universities (Tomlinson Rustick, 2007, p. 43). And so, although composition courses, as Wallace and Wallace (2000) explain, have primarily served to “do a myriad of things: teach proper format, teach appropriate language, teach research skills, and teach proper grammar and proofreading skills” (p. 88), community colleges primarily hone in on the teaching of “appropriate language” and “proper grammar and proofreading skills”, all of which attempt to entrench students in writing academic essays using Standardized English.

### **Community College Composition as Job Readiness Training**

Some scholars suggest that this focus on Standard American English within community college English composition programs stems not only from the need to provide “basic writers” with “foundational skills”, but also due to the needs of America’s neoliberal economy. For example, in Kroll’s (2012) article titled “The End of the Community College English Profession”, he argued that neoliberalism has taken over community colleges which are now

seen as “job (re)training centers whose primary mission is to train workers to assume their subservient place in corporate America” (p.121); therefore, he asserted that this new “job training” focus is turning community college English instruction into a “service” profession whose “sole purpose is giving students the practical skills, the mechanical processes (for example, where to put a comma), necessary to perform in the service to corporate America” (Kroll, 2012, p. 122). Moreover, he argues that the emphasis on using part-time faculty to teach skill-driven English classes will, ultimately, lead to the demise of the community college English Department (Kroll, 2012, pp. 122-124).

Sadly, although this may seem to be an overly-dramatic and draconian depiction of the future of community college English instruction, there are quite a few reasons to believe that Kroll’s (2012) predictions are becoming more and more likely; for example, we know that there are now more part-time community college faculty than full-time community college faculty, and the past decade has also seen an ever-increasing push from politicians and college administrators to move community college students onto “career pathways” and into “certificate programs” that align with local industry needs (Hassel & Giordano, 2013; Schnarr, 2018). Thus, it seems as though the push for community colleges to serve as “job training centers” rather than as traditional liberal arts “educational institutions” (Kroll, 2013, p. 121) may well be under way. And since liberal arts institutions are designed to provide “students with broad knowledge of the wider world (e.g., science, culture, and society) as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest” in order to help “students develop a sense of social responsibility as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills”, the potential loss of a liberal arts education for

community college students should be cause for alarm (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 1998).

This shifting role of community college English Departments as primarily vocational spaces is particularly concerning when we consider the fact that community colleges enroll significantly more students of color, undocumented students, single parents, and economically disenfranchised students than their four-year counterparts (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson & Hernandez, 2017). Consequently, if Kroll's (2012) assertions are correct, not only are community college English Departments engaging students in skill-driven literacy curriculum within their English classrooms which differs from the more holistic approach to literacy instruction that students who attend English classes at four-year liberal arts institutions receive, but, in turn, this lack of engagement in holistic, critical literacy practices within the community college English classroom is further socially stratifying already marginalized and oppressed populations. For by preparing community college students for employment and yet not engaging them in empowering literacy practices that can lead to agency, community college English Departments are suggesting that their students - the historically marginalized, academically struggling, and economically disenfranchised - are not worthy of the same curriculum used in four-year institutions, and are instead meant to be another cog in America's neoliberal wheels (Kroll, 2012).

### **The Deficit Orientation of Skill-driven English Instruction**

Overall then, community college English Departments' focus on skill-driven English instruction is highly problematic since it relies upon a deficit-framework that positions Standard

American English above all other discourses. Moreover, this deficit orientation is especially concerning considering the fact that the students who attend community colleges come from diverse backgrounds and are more economically disenfranchised than their peers (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson & Hernandez, 2017; Salas et. al., 2011). Rather than perpetuate the deficit narratives of community college students as basic writers in need of foundational writing support, this paper argues that literacy instruction within a critical literacy framework can be used as a tool for empowering historically marginalized and oppressed students by engaging students in critical reflection, self-expression, imaginative practices, and authentic literacy experiences that can lead to social change.

Since limited research has been conducted on embedding critical literacy pedagogies into community college English composition classrooms, the next section turns to the wealth of research that has been conducted on engaging college students at four-year institutions in critical literacy practices. For the past thirty years, composition theory has aligned itself closely with critical literacy theories (Villanueva, 1993; Gilyard, 2000; Hart, 2006), and so community college English faculty like myself who are interested in embedding critical literacy pedagogies into their English composition courses can start by looking to past scholarship at four-year institutions and identifying ways in which this research can be applied within the community college setting.

## **2.4 Moving Towards a More Critical Approach to Composition Instruction at Four-Year Institutions**

Although composition coursework at four-year institutions was, historically, focused on the remediation of student writing (Connors, 1997), as early as the 1970's, composition scholars began to question the role of teacher-as-examiner (Applebee, 1984) and the emphasis placed on transactional writing (Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975). Applebee (1984) noted, for example, that students were almost exclusively writing short informational papers to their teachers without ever being asked to write to different audiences, in a variety of genres, or with different purposes, and he saw this as problematic since students were rarely being given the opportunity to develop their ideas through writing. And so, by the late 1980's and 1990's, a shift occurred in the role of composition-rhetoric courses from their emphasis on academic, transactional essay writing to a new, critical focus on "writing pedagogy based on cultural studies" (Wilson, Herndl, & Simon, 1999). Therefore, this section of the chapter identifies how composition scholarship has shifted towards a more progressive and critical approach to writing instruction in order to better understand how community college composition programs might apply this scholarship to shifts in their own approach to composition instruction.

### **Power and Politics within College Composition Course**

For the first time within the field of composition, scholars during the late 1980's and 1990's began to highlight the need for a more inclusive approach to composition instruction that valued students' diverse backgrounds and discourses and recognized composition instruction as inherently political (Alexander & Jarratt, 2014). During this era, "power and political became

key words” for composition scholars who described composition instruction as “an inescapably political act” (Berlin, 1988, p. 51). In Linda Brodkey’s (1996) influential book, *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only*, she argued that composition instructors needed to “think more about how to represent writing and reading as discursive (ie. social and political) practices and less about them as a set of skills or abilities or competencies that ‘we’ have and ‘they’ want, to be taught by ‘us’ and be learned by ‘them’” (p. 5). Thus, like critical literacy scholars (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013; Comber, 2016), Brodkey (1996) argued for a sociocultural understanding of English and, therefore, an approach to instruction that validated students’ diverse discourses. She suggested doing so, in part, by bringing in culturally relevant texts, which led her to endure political backlash from college and university administrators who sought to preserve linguistic hegemony and who balked at curriculum that sought to empower students and place value on their unique discursive practices (Brodkey, 1996). Despite this backlash, Brodkey (1996) persisted in advocating for a critical and sociocultural understanding of language in the teaching of composition, and she developed numerous composition courses that focused on engaging students in more authentic, culturally relevant writing experiences (Brodkey, 1996).

As calls for new approaches to the instruction of college composition persisted throughout the 1990’s, not only did scholars argue in support of teaching culturally relevant texts, but they also began to advocate for writing that could produce social change. In Ellen Cushman’s influential 1996 article, “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change,” she served to generate a new conversation in the field of composition on how composition faculty could develop their courses to “engage with and write for the public benefit...particularly when it comes to student understanding of audience and the rhetorical situation” (Sundvall & Fredlund,

2017). Here she argued that composition theorists had spent too much time in their “ivory towers” which was causing them to “underestimate “students’ pre-existing critical consciousness” while “reproducing the hegemonic barriers separating the university from the community” (Cushman, 1996, p. 24). Thus, Cushman (1996) argued in support of activist-centered composition courses in which students and composition faculty engage in service learning writing experiences and public writing experiences that are used to promote social change.

Similarly, in Herzberg’s (1996) article “Community Service and Critical Teaching”, he asserted the following:

If we wish to claim that the composition course is truly about rhet-oric, about civic virtue, and about public as well as academic dis-course, we must learn how to conceptualize the connections between the academy and society in ways that our students, our administrators, and we ourselves find convincing. (p. 396).

Consequently, Herzberg (1996), like Cushman (1996), called for a dramatic shift in composition theory and instruction with a new focus on writing for social change and community impact and a new approach to pedagogy that valued students’ unique discourses and lived histories. As Alexander and Jarratt (2014) explained in their article, “Rhetorical Education and Student Activism”, “With these works and many others, the question for the field shifted from, *is* the classroom a political space? to, *how should* power and the political be analyzed and negotiated within the classroom?” (p. 526). Therefore, with composition scholars’ new understanding of the composition classroom as inherently political, composition scholars not only pushed back against monolingual orientations to English instruction, but they also called on composition instructors to engage students in more authentic and critical writing experiences including “writing *beyond*

the curriculum”, (Parks & Goldblatt, 2000) which called on faculty to engage students in agentic, community-based writing experiences.

This shift towards a sociocultural, authentic approach to composition instruction has persisted throughout the last two decades and has led to the development of more critical composition courses at four-year colleges and universities whose goals extend well beyond asking students to develop college-level essays written using Standard Written English (Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017). Composition scholars continue to recognize discourse as “an embodied force that has real consequences for real people” and as a tool for civic engagement, and so they often use this understanding to engage composition students in critical writing experiences that ask students to both analyze problematic discourses and engage in agentic writing experiences that can promote positive change (Wallace, 2009, W19). Christy Friend (2003) sums up this shift within composition theory in her article, “Imitations of Battle: Quintilian on the Classroom and the Public Sphere”:

The notion that composition courses should engage students in public discourse has become so widely accepted during the past few years that it is now virtually uncontroversial...Clearly the drive to get composition students and their writing out of the classroom and into more public arenas is - at least for the moment - firmly entrenched. (p. 1).

Thus, over the past three decades, composition theory has shifted towards a sociocultural understanding of writing instruction that aims to engage students in authentic writing experiences in which students’ own voices are valued and used to inform social change. And, with this emphasis on more authentic, agentic composition experiences, many composition scholars have turned to service learning as a pedagogical tool for engaging students in these agentic writing experiences (Keen & Hall, 2009; Hickey, 2016; Wright, Calabrese, & Henry, 2009).

## 2.5 Early Studies on Service Learning within English Composition Classrooms

By the late 1990's, composition scholars across the nation had begun to engage students in service learning experiences, and so a plethora of research was published that examined the benefits and challenges of engaging composition students in these service learning experiences. This section then explores the early literature that emerged on both the benefits and challenges that come from engaging students in service learning pedagogies within college composition courses.

### College Composition's Embracement of Service Learning Pedagogies

By the late 1990's, service learning pedagogies were being embraced by college composition faculty, and in 1997, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) in conjunction with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Composition*, which served as the first book in the country focused solely on linking composition scholarship to service learning pedagogies (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, & Waters, 1997). Within this text, a series of essays by composition scholars highlighted their successes and failures in implementing service learning within composition classes as well as theoretical perspectives on how to best engage students in service learning within the composition discipline.

Many of the essays focused on addressing practical concerns that were being observed through the implementation of service learning within composition classrooms. For example, in Nora Bacon's essay, "Community Service Writing: Problems, Challenges, Questions" (1997), she shared her experiences of engaging students in service learning composition classes through Stanford University's Community Service Writing program, and while highlighting her students'

successes and struggles, she raised some profound questions. For example, Bacon (1997) shared a story of watching a competent writing student struggle in service work that required her to write a paper for a community organization advocating for tenant rights (p. 47). In observing the student's difficulty in writing the tenant's rights paper, Bacon (1997) came to realize that this student was "engaged in the difficult business of crossing discourse communities" and was struggling to "create meaning with the concepts and language of an unfamiliar social world" (p. 47). Consequently, Bacon then asked, "Recognizing, even insisting, that texts are embedded in their social contexts, how can we introduce students to a community agency one week and expect them to write in its voice the next?" (p. 47).

Thus, in raising this question, Bacon (1997) brought to light the concern of engaging "outsider" students in "insider" writing experiences that require an understanding of specific discourses and expertise often familiar only to those working in that agency or existing within that community. To resolve the concerns of students as "outsiders" engaging in service learning writing experiences, Bacon (1997) asserted that there are two "practical solutions" to this problem, with one being the extension of these service experiences beyond the traditional semester such as where students observe and "provide direct service" during the first term and then serve as "volunteer writers" during the second term; this solution of providing students with more time at their service sites, Bacon (1997) argued, may then resolve this "outsider" problem since students would have more time to gain expertise about the community being served and its discourses (p. 47).

Bacon's (1997) second proposed solution focused less on having students immerse themselves in the community and more on how faculty design student service experiences. In the second solution, Bacon (1997) suggested that faculty must "choose writing tasks carefully" and

ensure that they do not require “a great deal of expert knowledge about genre or about the agency’s work” (p. 47). This second solution then highlighted Bacon’s realization that not all service activities align well with student expertise, and so careful placement and assignments are essential to ensuring successful service learning experiences for both the students and community partners. Overall though, although Bacon (1997) identified this “outsider” problem, which has persisted throughout service learning research, she also dismissed some of these concerns when she wrote that, “While the occasional failure reminds us that texts are indeed embedded in their contexts and that acculturation to a discourse community does indeed take time, the far more frequent successes suggest that both “embeddedness” and “aculturation” are a matter of degree” (p. 48). Bacon (1996) ended this portion of her essay then by reaffirming the overall wealth of successes that her students and community partners experienced through these service learning courses and dismissed these “failures” as being in the overall minority despite being worthy of mention (p. 48).

Another essay of note within *Writing the Community: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Composition*, is Bruce Herzberg’s (1997) essay, “Community Service and Critical Teaching”. Within this essay, Herzberg (1997) began by expressing his concern that service learning projects have the potential to destigmatize and demystify marginalized populations, such as the homeless or food insecure, but that in doing so, they often can leave students seeing these issues as personal rather than rooted in larger political and social injustices. For example, Herzberg (1997) shared the following concern about students who engage in service learning without connecting the service learning experiences to larger systemic injustices:

Even for those whose awakening is genuine, there is reason to doubt that the epiphany includes an understanding of the social forces that produce and sustain poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, and injustice. There is little evidence that students spontaneously gain

critical self-consciousness and awareness of the ways that their own lives have been shaped by the very same forces, that what they regard as "choices" are less than matters of individual will. (p. 59)

Thus, Herzberg (1997) was one of the first composition scholars engaging students in service learning work who problematized service learning as potentially (mis)leading students to believe that the marginalized populations with whom students work were existing in precarious spaces due to personal choices rather than larger systemic injustices. Interestingly though, within the essay, Herzberg (1997) was still a vested proponent of service learning within composition classes, but he argued that these service experiences must be structured by faculty to include extensive time engaging students in making sense of the systemic injustices that connect with the disenfranchised people with whom the students engage in service. To support these claims, Herzberg (1997) shared his own service learning project as an example of a service learning model that helped “middle-class” students become more critically conscious. In this model, Herzberg (1997) argued that “Writing about the actual experience of doing community service... does not seem to me to be the primary work to be done in a composition course” and that, instead, students should use the composition classroom space to study the social and political injustices and histories that have led to people’s individual struggles (p. 59). Herzberg (1997) then shared how he structured his own composition service learning class within a two-semester service learning sequence in which students spent a semester in his composition class first examining “the ways that literacy is gained or not gained in the United States” through course readings and writing assignments and then, at the end of the semester, spent roughly 10 hours engaged in “tutor training designed to sensitize them to the problems and attitudes of students who identified themselves as wanting reading support adults, as well as to provide them with some teaching materials and methods” (p. 60).

Consequently, in Herzberg's (1997) model, students did not engage directly with the community members, in this case adults living in a shelter struggling with a variety of literacy issues, until the students first completed a semester of work studying the systemic issues associated with struggling readers in America as well as completing a hands-on training on how to work with adults who identify as struggling readers. It was only once this work had been completed that students then began providing literacy tutoring at a local shelter in Boston, MA. Moreover, during this second semester, the students also enrolled in a sociology class that continued to have students examine systemic inequities from a sociological lens, and both the sociology professor and Herzberg attended the first shelter meeting with students before having students begin tutoring individuals outside of class without the faculty present (Herzberg, 1997, p. 60).

Despite this scaffolded approach to service learning, Herzberg (1997) emphasized that students did not suddenly become critically conscious, but rather that "the effect was slow and indirect" (p. 65). It was in students' final research papers at the end of their second semester that students showed "a growing sophistication about the social forces at work in the creation of illiteracy" (p. 65). Herzberg (1997) ended his essay then by arguing that this critical pedagogical approach to service learning was key for Bentley students who are often "Immersed in a culture of individualism, convinced of their merit in a meritocracy" and, therefore, "need to see that there is a social basis for most of the conditions they take to be matters of individual choice or individual ability" (p. 67). Service learning experiences that are scaffolded and focused on raising students' critical consciousness then, Herzberg (1997) argued, could be used to help students develop "a social imagination" that "makes it possible not only to question and analyze the world but also to imagine transforming it" (p. 67). Ultimately then, Herzberg (1997) took

Bacon's (1997) "outsider" argument much further by suggesting that university students, such as those at Bentley, who engage in service learning and are outsiders from privileged backgrounds must, therefore, engage in intensive critical reflection through course readings, writings, and trainings in order to awaken their social imaginations and help them understand the systemic injustices that perpetuate the social stratification of people in America.

As compositionists continued to engage students in service learning, more research emerged touting the benefits that this work had on students within the composition classroom setting, and a variety of models were explored through scholarship including one-semester service learning models and multi-semester service learning models like those proposed by Herzberg (1997). However, it was not until Thomas Dean's publication of *Writing Partnerships: Service Learning in Composition*, that a "comprehensive overview of service-learning in composition studies" was published which identified different models that composition faculty could employ in order to embed service learning within their classes. In this text, Dean (2000) showcased his fervent support for service learning within the field of composition, for he argued that service learning was the next logical step within the discipline in order to propel composition's "social turn" forward. Specifically, he asserted that embedding service learning into composition classrooms supported composition theory's social turn by "widening the audience for student writing to include those beyond the classroom", asking "students and teachers to situate their work in both disciplinary and wider nonacademic communities", having students "write within nonacademic discourse communities", engaging students in "cross cultural and class boundaries" through collaboration with community partners, and speaking "to the ethical, democratizing, and consciousness-raising potential of the writing classroom" by blending "critical intellectual habits" with "pragmatic civic action" (Dean, 2000, p. 10). Thus,

Dean (2000) passionately argued that service learning was the next logical step in moving composition theory forward, and to support these efforts, he then engaged his readers in an understanding of service learning's theoretical roots as well as case study examples highlighting how composition faculty could employ service learning pedagogies within their classes. Specifically, Dean (2000) identified three models for embedding service learning into composition courses: writing-for, writing-about, and writing-with the community, and the case studies he provided gave readers insight into what each of these models might look like in action. However, he also suggested that these models were not inherently disparate, but rather that faculty could “weave distinct but complementary strands of the three paradigms...” by addressing “distinct yet related literacy goals” (p. 147). Thus, in this book, Dean (2000) argued in support of service learning within composition classrooms, and unlike many of his predecessors, he provided three frameworks for engaging students in service learning specifically that composition faculty could weave between based upon the needs of their students, institutions, and their community partners.

## **2.6 The Ethics of Representation and Collaborative Inquiry of Service Learning**

While Dean (2000) advocated for the teaching of composition through service learning by highlighting its merits and providing faculty with a framework to employ these pedagogies in their classrooms, other composition scholars began to take a more critical approach to service learning. This section, therefore, explores the work of those composition scholars who problematized aspects of service learning in order to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of this pedagogical approach to composition instruction.

### **Whose Voices Are Heard and Whose Voices Are Missing or Misunderstood?**

Kevin Ball and Amy Goodburn (2000) took a critical approach to service learning in their article, "Composition Studies and Service Learning: Appealing to Communities?". Within this article, they raised concerns about the absence of community voices within service learning research in the field of composition:

...discourse of composition in general emphasizes how students benefit from service learning - usually in terms of how their belief systems change or the ways that their writing changes - but there is not much discussion of what community members learn from these encounters". (Ball & Goodburn, 2000, p. 82)

Ball and Goodburn (2000) highlighted how Herzberg's (1997) aforementioned essay, "Community Service and Critical Teaching", although concerned with raising student's critical consciousness about systemic injustices, was absent "of the community in this text" with the voices of the shelter residents "erased" entirely from Herzberg's analysis of the service learning experience and explanation of the benefits that stem from his proposed service learning model (p. 82). Thus, Ball and Goodburn (2000) worried that by ignoring community voices and often using the community as a space to transform students without reflecting on the impact of these interactions on community members, the community was, potentially, being exploited for university students' and faculty' gains.

Ball and Goodburn (2000) also were concerned with how student writing for service learning composition courses was reflecting the voices of the community partners, and Ball and Goodburn (2000) suggested that "the ethics of representation involved in students composing and sharing their community experiences - and thereby composing representations of community members who often have no say or voice in what these representations are or for what end they are used" were questionable (p. 83). In order to expose the problems that can occur for compositionists engaging students in service learning, Ball and Goodburn (2000) then shared

their experiences in teaching two service learning composition courses, and the issues that arose “about the role of reciprocity and dialogue within service learning projects” (p. 84). For example, Goodburn (2000) explained how three white female students in her composition class struggled to connect with the African American volunteers at a predominantly African American after-school tutoring program and how, despite numerous conversations and reflections on how racial tensions were at the root of many of the students’ perceived negative engagements with the other volunteers, they avoided depicting these racial tensions through their writing and even went so far as to compose a final project in which they provided feedback to the program on how they could improve the volunteer experience for tutors like themselves (pp. 84-87). Consequently, this experience left Goodburn (2000) reflecting upon “the issues of representation raised by her students” and how creating a “forum for discussing such possible conflicts or for speaking back to how they were being represented orally and textually by Amy's [Goodburn’s] students” could have helped complicate Goodburn’s students’ experiences while giving “regular volunteers a means for critiquing the tutoring program and revising it in light of what they consider the needs of the children to be” (p. 87).

Similarly, Ball’s (2000) service learning class in which his college students partnered with elementary school students to investigate their own community through interviews and visits to local community organizations left him aware of “the absence of any other community voices within that community writing and...how that absence limited the representation of the sites” that students wrote about through this community inquiry project (p. 89). Therefore, both Ball and Goodburn (2000) left these service learning experiences concerned that community partners were being used as “artifacts for students’ presentations” and that community partners’ experiences were often being misrepresented and/or ignored (p. 90). Ultimately then, Ball and

Goodburn (2000) ended their paper by calling for compositionists to “become more reflective about how current service learning discourse prioritizes student learning and the consequences of these priorities for how we imagine the possible work that such initiatives can accomplish” (p. 91). They also provided faculty engaging students in service learning with some practical potential solutions for addressing these concerns such as by “including community voices” in “multivoiced, collaborative” texts and by creating more space for dialogue “between all the participants in a service-learning experience” (p. 92). Overall then, Ball and Goodburn (2000) highlighted a concern, later shared by other service learning scholars, that service learning scholarship and class projects were often exploiting community partners and not focusing enough attention on their needs, voices, and the ethics of accurately representing their voices and experiences through student writing and academic scholarship.

Ball and Goodburn’s (2000) calls for engaging in a more reciprocal relationship with community partners through service learning was echoed by others in the field of composition, and in 2002, Ellen Cushman, in her article “Sustainable Service Learning Programs”, argued that if faculty want to create sustainable community partnerships, they need to shift away from their focus on “what the students learn, write, and encounter in community-service writing courses” and instead engage in more “collaborative inquiry - with the students and community partners” (p. 43). To do so, Cushman (2002) placed the onus on college faculty and suggested that meaningful partnerships require the presence of faculty at the community partner sites rather than sending students off to service sites on their own to complete their required service hours or service projects. To exemplify this, Cushman (2002) shared her own experience of engaging in research with her students and their community partner site, and she emphasized how her presence during students’ service hours allowed her to facilitate “relations with community

members by giving them a person whom they can turn when problems and concerns arise” (p. 58). And although Cushman’s (2002) argument was grounded in the need to generate sustainable relationships with community partners in order for service learning to thrive, by encouraging faculty to engage in inquiry with community partners, Cushman (2002) was also inadvertently addressing Ball and Goodburn’s (2000) concerns about the voices of community members going unheard by suggesting that “Research-based service learning sustains itself through inquiry that’s spurred through community concerns, that’s guided in large part by the partner’s needs” (Cushman, 2002, p. 61). Thus, although Cushman (2002) did not explicitly address Ball and Goodburn’s (2000) concerns that community partners’ voices were being unheard, exploited, and/or misrepresented through service learning, Cushman’s (2002) emphasis on collaboration with community partners based upon their self-identified needs and by providing a constant faculty presence at the community partner site provided a practical means for ensuring that service learning efforts were less exploitative by ensuring that faculty were ever-present at the site to support the desires of the community partner and mitigate concerns that could arise through students’ service learning efforts.

## **2.7 The Problematizing of Service Learning in Composition Research**

By the mid-2000’s, a wealth of service learning studies spanning the prior two decades within English composition courses highlighted the many benefits of service learning on students’ literacy practices including how service learning experiences helped students apply the knowledge they gained from their service experiences to the development of course writings, how it served to increase students’ motivation for writing, and how it engaged students in empowering analytical literacy experiences, all of which are key goals of college composition courses (Keen & Hall, 2009; Hickey, 2016; Wright, Calabrese, & Henry, 2009). And with all of

the positive research highlighting the many benefits of service learning within college composition courses, the number of service learning composition courses continued to grow through present day (Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017). However, with this proliferation of service learning courses and scholarship, some service learning research studies across disciplines as well as within the field of composition studies have further problematized the initial concerns expressed by Herzburg (1997) and Ball and Goodburn (2000) - that service learning can, if not rooted in critical pedagogies, reify existing stereotypes supported by student beliefs in America as a meritocracy and that service learning can also, therefore, lead to exploitative relationships with community partners whose voices may go unheard and/or be inaccurately represented. And so, this section explores how scholars within the field of composition studies (Green, 2003; Himley, 2004; Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017) began to shift from emphasizing their successes with service learning pedagogies to, instead, also identifying many of the struggles experienced by enacting service learning pedagogies within their classes.

### **The Nuancing of Service Learning Scholarship**

Anne Green (2003) is one such composition scholar who chose to complicate service learning pedagogies in her article, "Difficult Stories: Race, Class, and Whiteness". Up until this article, the vast majority of service learning scholarship suggested a binary between students - often depicted as white, middle or upper class privileged youths - and community partners - often depicted as Black and brown people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Green, 2003). However, even though the institution where Green (2003) teaches does, in many ways operate a service learning program that fits into this binary, Green (2003) recognized that "service-learning is experienced differently by those from different groups" and that service learning scholars should, therefore, "look closely at the gaps between our theories of service-learning and our

theories of subject-position(s), of race, class, gender, sexuality, and writing” (p. 276). Within this argument, Green (2003) suggested that service learning composition scholars need to tell “more explicit stories about race and class” so that they can engage in more “complex theorizing about the relationship between those who serve and those who are served” (p. 277).

To exemplify these points about difference and story-telling, not only did Green (2003) provide a personal account of her own stories as a white, working class volunteer engaging in service at predominantly African American after-school program for homeless children, but she also shared reflections from one of her African American students who engaged in service with predominantly African American community members, and she contrasted this student’s stories with the stories from her white, male students. For example, Green (2003) shared the story of one out of only two African American students enrolled in her composition service learning course who explained that “As a Black woman performing service I felt a personal connection to the homeless Black people that I encountered because they were my people. Their eyes were my eyes, their hair was my hair, and their skin was my skin” (p. 283). Green (2003) then contrasted this student’s service learning reflection with a different, white male student’s reflection who felt “useless” serving at a “treatment center for adjudicated boys because the students didn’t seem to need or rely on him” (p. 283). By drawing this contrast, Green (2003) attempted to highlight how “different subject positions that individual students bring to a course...help students to see that service is not the same for everyone” (p. 283). Thus, Green (2003) argued then that students do in fact experience service learning differently depending upon their positionalities, and that faculty must make room for story-telling about race, class and privilege in order to help students make sense of their unique experiences.

Moreover, Green (2003) also argued that a means for engaging students in these critical

reflections about how their own positionalities inform their service experiences is through storytelling. Specifically, she argued that, “Stories have helped create spaces where all of us can listen and hear one another... If we can listen for the stories both students and learners tell, we can create space in service-learning classes for imagining a different and more hopeful world” (p. 297). Consequently, not only did Green (2003) argue for more scholarship around how students’ positionalities inform their service experiences, but she also argued for composition faculty to engage students and themselves in the act of storytelling, especially around issues of race and social class, in order to help students make sense of their own positionalities and use these reflections to “ produce a lifelong commitment to social justice work in learners at the service site, students” and faculty (p. 297). Thus, Green’s (2003) scholarship was important for both complicating the binary of privileged white students and underprivileged Black and brown community members that proliferates in service learning research, and also for suggesting that storytelling about race, class, and privilege are essential components of service learning composition courses.

Margaret Himley, in her 2004 article, “Facing (Up To) the ‘Stranger’ in Community Service Learning”, also reflected upon her experiences of engaging students in service learning within her composition courses, and in so doing, she utilized feminist and ethnographic scholarship to reflect upon “the power asymmetries, social antagonisms, and historical determinants that are all too often concealed by discourses of volunteerism or civic literacy or active citizenship or experiential learning or rhetorical training-or, now, patriotism - and that are "managed" (or not) by methodology or curriculum” (p. 417). In this paper then, Himley (2004) suggested that service learning pedagogies, although often “well-intended”, frequently ignore the larger historical, political and social injustices that perpetuate power asymmetries, and thus they

often rely on “the figuring of the stranger or those who don't belong (yet) to mainstream American life because of race, class, life chances, immigration, or other reasons (p. 421). In this “stranger” metaphor, Himley relied on ethnographic interpretations of “the stranger” by arguing that just as in ethnographic research, the ethnographer is often “authorized to accumulate knowledge of strangers *as strangers*, in order to write about them for other ethnographers”, similarly, service learning students “are authorized to learn and write about the agency or nonprofit or community they are working with” for the benefit of their peers, faculty and themselves (p. 426). Thus, Himley (2004) was concerned with the exploitation of “the stranger” - in this case the community partner - for the student, the faculty, and the institution's own gains.

Moreover, Himley (2004) also raised a different ethical dilemma about service learning by writing about the “breaking and entering-and then leaving” that students engage in with community partners when they embark on service learning. As an example, Himley (2004) shared a student’s reflections on embarking on a service learning project with children in which she was preparing to spend 20 hours with them over the course of months and then, once the assignment was completed, would suddenly disappear from their lives, never to see them again (p. 425). Both the student and Himley (2004) shared concerns about this “breaking and entering - and then leaving”, and Himley referred again to feminist scholarship in suggesting that one potential solution such as that applied by feminist ethnographers is to make “the stranger” a “friend”, although even this, she admitted, can result in unequal power relations (p. 426).

Despite Himley’s (2004) concerns about the ethical dilemmas raised by engaging students in service learning, like many of the service learning scholars who came before her, Himley (2004) did not dismiss service learning as a pedagogy that should be abandoned, but rather she complicated service learning by suggesting that “by tracing specific encounters with

the stranger, we can excavate and explicate both the immediate and the broader relations of power that structure these encounters and identify opportunities for at least partially progressive practices or effects” (p. 423). Thus, Himley (2004) argued here that rather than abandon service learning pedagogies, faculty and students must recognize that both the “challenge and the potential of community service learning results from its potential to disrupt that (arguably) inevitable moment” of othering “the stranger” by way of critical reflections on the “social and historical conditions that produce that” narrative about “the other” (p. 434). Overall then, Himley (2004) still believed in the potential transformative power of service learning efforts within her literacy classes, but she also was concerned with their potential to “other” community partners and unfairly disrupt their lives. After reflecting on both the transformative potential of service learning and the harm it can cause to community partners, Himley (2004) closed her essay by calling on faculty to embrace the “noisy complexities of both proximity *and* distance as the primary modes that shape service learning” by making efforts to key students into these complexities and, in so doing, disrupt their “production of the stranger” (p. 433).

## **2.8 Service Learning within Composition Classrooms Today**

Within the field of composition today, a plethora of scholars continue to engage students in service learning pedagogies, and despite initial concerns by some scholars that service learning was just a “fad” (Halsted & Schine, 1994; Deans, 2000), service learning pedagogies within the field of composition (as well as across disciplines) have now stood the test of three decades of scholarship, and they continue to be identified as a powerful means for engaging composition students in real-world writing experiences that can lead to social change (Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017). However, service learning also continues to be problematized within the field of composition, leading to the development of new models and questions of whether or not

service learning should continue to be employed as a social justice pedagogy. This section, therefore, identifies the new problems that have emerged through service learning scholarship in the field of composition and how these problems are informing pedagogical practices.

### **The Limitations of Service Learning**

Service learning within composition courses continues to be problematized by faculty who struggle to ensure that community partners are not exploited, students fairly represent the voices of the community through their course assignments, and that students and their community partners are working in solidarity with one another to tackle systemic inequities (Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2015; Deeley, 2015). Moreover, new concerns have also developed about the apolitical nature of service learning as it has become institutionalized across campuses throughout the nation. For although service learning pedagogies were initially rooted in critical, and, therefore, often progressive political theoretical roots, as service learning courses expanded across college and university campuses nation-wide, they attempted to identify themselves as politically neutral in order to avoid conflict with college and university administration (Butin, 2006).

As Dan Butin (2006) shared in his article, “The Limits of Service Learning in Higher Education”, this guise of political neutrality could pose problems for service learning pedagogies if conservative faculty members decide to also begin engaging students in service learning experiences. Butin (2006) elaborated on this concern by stating that “Service-learning has a progressive and liberal agenda under the guise of a universalistic practice”, and by presenting itself as politically neutral, it is “ripe for conservative appropriation” (p. 485) or attack. For, as Butin (2006) pointed out, if service learning is “assumed to be ‘simply’ a universal, coherent,

and neutral pedagogical practice”, then conservatives can easily argue that the choice of community partners should be more politically balanced and that, for example, if undergraduates may engage in service learning at homeless shelters and prisons, than undergraduates can also engage in service by “helping to blockade abortion clinics and thus saving the lives of the unborn” (p. 487).

Moreover, Butin (2006) further asserted that if service learning faculty argue against this type of conservative, political activism, it would then be easy for politicians as well as state and federal funding sources to dismantle service learning programs by arguing that they are, in fact, political. Consequently, although Butin (2006) does not provide clear solutions for solving the “double-bind” that service learning has placed itself into by proclaiming to be politically neutral yet advancing social justice, predominantly liberal ideals, other service learning composition scholars have responded to these claims of neutrality by owning the political nature of their service learning pedagogies and becoming more overtly political through their service learning efforts.

### **Taking Personal and Political Risks Through Service Learning**

In Scott Sundvall and Katherine Fredlund’s (2017) article, “The Writing on the Wall: Activist Rhetorics, Public Writing, and Responsible Pedagogy” they shared their experiences of engaging students in activist service learning pedagogies within writing courses that were designed, intentionally, to engage students in political activism. In Sundvall’s (2017) 100-level writing class which he titled “Writing and The Rhetorical Tradition of Activism,” Sundvall engaged students in analysis of the rhetoric of activism, and the course culminated in a final project in which students were to “apply public, activist rhetoric/writing in a contemporary

manner, with several principles in mind: collaboration, public engagement, and use of new media”. One group of students focused on opposing the fur clothing industry through the development of a website and hashtag, which they used on social media to further spread their activist agenda. The students, when submitting their final project for grading, also shared photographs of themselves on their website “spray-painting the hashtag on public walls and buildings around campus” (Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017). Consequently, Sundvall (2017) found himself in a difficult situation; on the one hand he had taught students about civil disobedience and had never explicitly forbid them to engage in civil disobedience, and yet, on the other hand, he recognized that students engaging in civil disobedience that directly connected to his course could lead to administrative action including, had he been untenured, the potential for Sundvall to lose his job. Thus, Sundvall (2017) saw this case as raising numerous questions for him as an activist instructor including “What constitutes a “reasonable” form of activism?” and is it the instructor’s role to prohibit such activism if it poses potential risks to students and faculty?

In the same article Fredlund (2017) shared questions about the personal and political risks that can come with service learning efforts when she engaged students in a composition course titled “Student Activism in Theory and Practice” in which students also analyzed the rhetoric of activism and used this analysis to develop and participate in public writing experiences. Within this course, students were asked to “organize a campus-sanctioned Take Back The Night (TBTN) event which consisted of a resource fair, rally, and march”, and the class partnered with a local domestic violence coalition and shelter, which offered students the opportunity to learn more about domestic violence while also engaging in public writing for the organization as well as for the Take Back The Night event. Half of the students wrote personal speeches about their experiences with gendered violence, which they shared for TBTN, and one of these students

shared her experience of a sexual assault and her sorority's "less-than-supportive" response, which led her to leave the sorority and lose some of her sorority friends. When this student decided to publicly share her story at the campus's TBTN, she knew that she might face backlash from her old sorority members, and when she gave her speech, it was not surprising to her that "Multiple members of her old sorority came to the event and stormed out while talking loudly during". Although this student seemed unbothered by her peers' reactions to her speech, Fredlund (2017) was left questioning if she had risked this student's "emotional stability for the sake of activist writing". Similarly, Fredlund (2017) shared another student's experience of preparing her speech and then choosing, last minute, not to participate. In both of these instances, Fredlund (2017) reflected on her role as a faculty member in asking students to take personal and political risks through public writing and whether or not these risks are fair requests of students.

Despite both Sundvall's and Fredlund's (2017) concerns about the risks that both students and themselves were engaging in through these activist service learning experiences, overall they felt strongly that these efforts were worthwhile and that writing faculty must engage students in more overtly political public writing experiences in order to combat "this moment in history, when all forms of education in the United States are under attack" and, therefore, "it is no longer enough to teach students how (rather than what) to think". Instead, they argued, we must teach students "that words - *their words* - have power and can promote change", and if this means taking risks, so be it since "The risks of our own and our students' silence and inaction, the risks of our failure to help students become engaged and rhetorically-savvy participants in civic society, and the risks of a generation so bombarded with rhetoric that they feel incapable of producing their own far outweigh the risks activist courses present." Consequently, in many ways, Sundvall and Fredlund's (2017) paper read as a call to action for more service learning

composition faculty to stop engaging students in apolitical service experiences and to, instead, encourage students to take political and personal risks for the betterment of society.

Laurie Gries (2019), in her recent publication “Writing to Assemble Publics: Making Writing Activate, Making Writing Matter” took up Sundvall and Fredlund’s (2017) call to action for more overtly political writing courses by engaging her advanced writing students in “social activist campaigns” in which students had to “work in small teams throughout the entire semester to design their campaign and implement two or three tactics that will help them gain a hearing and elicit collective action” (p. 341). In completing this assignment, students were asked to “assemble their own organization from the ground up”, develop strategies and marketing materials for engaging the community in collective action, and showcase their efforts through the creation and performance of a “TEDx Talk for a public audience” (Gries, 2019, pp. 341-342). By asking students to “negotiate the day-to-day complexities of rhetorical responsibility necessary for orchestrating effective civic organization”, Gries (2019) asserted that she was giving students “chances to practice rhetorical responsibility” and “confront, rather than shy away from” the “unpredicted emergent dilemmas” and risks that come with this type of social justice work (p. 348). Thus, like Sundvall and Fedlung (2017), Gries (2019) argued that risk-taking is a necessary component of public, activist writing assignments, and that although these risks may deter some students and faculty from participating in these efforts, faculty must “put students in the hot seat” so that “they become the organizers and drivers of rhetorical assemblage in every stage of the public writing process” and learn the power that their voices can have in promoting change (p. 331).

Interestingly, in her article, Gries (2019) made a point of emphasizing how her activist writing pedagogies differed from traditional service learning pedagogies, which she argued

emerged “during rather politically calm times before the Iraq war” and, therefore, “do not go far enough in helping students cultivate and negotiate the rhetorical responsibility involved in instigating and mobilizing collective action in our current sociopolitical moment” (p. 331). Thus, Gries saw her course as differing from traditional service learning composition courses in that she did not partner with a community organization or generate the service opportunities for her students, but rather she asked her students to identify their own activist agendas and then provided them with the rhetorical tools they needed to bring these agendas to completion (p. 331). Moreover, Gries (2019) further contrasted service learning composition courses with her own course by asserting that “If we think of service learning projects as writing *with* publics, we might call this pedagogical approach writing *to assemble* publics” (p. 331). And, Gries (2019) suggested that in these charged political times, helping students learn how to “assemble publics” to promote an activist agenda is especially important so that they can “enact activist rhetoric” that will “mobilize alliances, assemble bodies, and incite participation” (p. 350). Ultimately, Gries (2019) still argued in support of service learning pedagogies that help students team up with community partners to learn the collaborative arts of rhetoric”, but she also pushed faculty to engage advanced writing students in more self-generated activist efforts, especially “as a capstone experience”, so that they could build on the knowledge learned through earlier service learning course experiences and advance it by taking “even more responsibility by implementing a community activist project of their own design” (p. 351).

## **2.9 A Call For More Scholarship and a Movement Toward Critical Service Learning**

This chapter has highlighted how composition theorists continue to engage students in service learning experiences while, at the same time, complicating earlier service learning research by acknowledging service learning’s weaknesses, potential pitfalls, and, in so doing,

identifying new ways of engaging students in activist writing experiences. Thus, despite ongoing concerns about service learning's potential to exploit and misrepresent community partners, create inaccurate binaries between students and community partners, reify power differentials while ignoring systemic inequities, and engage students and faculty in emotional and professional risks, this chapter also demonstrates that the literature, at large (Herzberg, 2000; Green, 2003; Himley, 2004; Deeley, 2015; Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017; Gries, 2019), continues to value service learning for its ability to engage students in interactions across distance and difference, promote student agency, generate authentic writing experiences that can lead to social change, and serve as "one of the few places where we encounter one another in ways that might disrupt" our understanding of both ourselves and Others (Himley, 2004). It seems likely then that service learning will continue to proliferate within composition classrooms, and, therefore, it is essential for future scholarship to more thoroughly examine some of the concerns that past scholars have raised in order to identify new strategies for making sense of both the students' and the community partners' experiences while engaging in service learning. Thus, this section closes the chapter by highlighting the need for more research on critical service learning within composition courses and, especially, within the two-year college setting as well as the need for bringing in the voices of community partner participants.

### **Why Do We Need More Service Learning Research?**

Despite Green's (2003) call for a deeper understanding of the "different subject positions that individual students bring to a course" (p. 283), little research has been done to progress this argument and better understand how each student's positionality impacts his or her service experience. Moreover, the bulk of service learning research continues to be situated on four-year university campuses, and it assumes that the students participating in service learning on these

campuses are more privileged than the community partners with whom they work (Butin, 2007; Mitchell, 2008). However, we are now living in a time in which the disparity between wealth and poverty is also at an all-time-high (Norton, 2014), and new research suggests that many college students at both two-year and four-year institutions are food insecure and struggling with financial instability (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2018). Moreover, the research on community college composition students engaging in service learning is sparse, which is particularly problematic since community colleges now enroll close to half of all undergraduates in America - the vast majority of whom come from the local community in which their college is situated and who struggle with the same socio-economic challenges faced by many of their service learning community partners (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017). Consequently, it is essential that service learning composition scholars better understand the different ways that students' positionality impacts their service experiences and how, if at all, service learning can be used to empower marginalized student populations.

Not only do we need more scholarship focused on community colleges and the individual experiences of students engaging in service learning, but more efforts also need to be made to understand how these service activities impact community partners and what can be done to ensure that these partnerships work in solidarity to fight against systemic injustices. Ball and Goodburn's (2000) concerns that community partners' voices are often misrepresented and/or ignored throughout the service learning process are as valid today as they were close to two decades ago, and more research needs to be conducted in order to better understand how community partners feel about service learning as well as what strategies can be employed to make sure that service learning efforts are community-driven rather than student or faculty-led. Thus, by sharing my model of engaging collaboratively with a service partner in the

development, execution, and reflection of a service learning partnership, I hope to offer insight into one approach for developing a collaborative and inclusive partnership model, and by including a community member as a participant, I hope to use his story to further complicate our understanding of how service-learning is experienced by community member participants..

Finally, it is clear that although many service learning scholars and organizations that support service learning efforts prefer to exist within an apolitical space in order to avoid political controversy (Buca, 2006; Butin, 2006), composition theorists are recognizing that in this era of “fake news” and political extremism, composition faculty have a duty to engage students in activist writing exercises that often require political and personal risks (Sundvall & Fredlung, 2017; Gries, 2019). Critical service learning, although not yet embraced by many composition scholars, can provide us with a framework for progressing more overtly social justice-oriented goals, for as Mitchell (2007) explained in her argument in support of critical service learning, “The distinction between service-learning and critical service-learning can be summarized in its attention to social change, its questioning of the distribution of power in society, and its focus on developing authentic relationships between higher education institutions and the community served” ( p. 101). Thus, in a practical sense, composition faculty wishing to engage students in critical service learning efforts emphasize “social justice outcomes over more traditional citizenship goals” (Mitchell, 2007, pp. 101-102). This focus on social justice outcomes is exactly what scholars like Green (2003), Himley (2004), Sundvall & Fredlund (2017), and Gries (2019) are attempting to engage students in, and so critical service learning scholarship can provide composition scholars with a framework for progressing service learning efforts into a more overtly political and potentially transformative space.

It is with these goals in mind then, that this paper attempts to help community college

English composition faculty understand both how critical service learning might be applied within the college composition classroom as a means of bridging critical literacy and composition instruction as well as how students and community participants see these experiences as informing their understandings of themselves, their community partners, and society at large. In the next chapter, I will justify why narrative inquiry is an ideal methodology for engaging in research to support these goals.

## **Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative methodology “based firmly in the premise that, as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story” (Trahar, 2009). Moreover, not only does narrative inquiry place value on the stories shared by research participants, but it also attends to the contexts of these stories by recognizing that all stories constructed from life experiences are spatially, socially, culturally, and politically situated, and that they cannot, therefore, be understood separately from the contexts in which they exist (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000). Consequently, in this chapter I propose that narrative inquiry is an ideal methodological framework for this study since it provides a means for illuminating students’ complex identities and how those identities and lived experiences inform their engagement with and reflection on their critical service learning experiences.

In this chapter I also justify my rationale for utilizing narrative inquiry design as well as the rationale for the selection of the study’s three participants. I also explain the data collection process, how I engaged in the analysis of my data, and strategies employed for validating the study’s findings, and I end the chapter by acknowledging the study’s limitations.

### 3.2 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a relatively new qualitative methodology that is unique from other methodologies because it is an aesthetic inquiry, one “whose purpose is to produce aesthetic experience as a mode of knowledge through captured meanings of the lived experience of participants and their stories” (Kim, 2016, p. 71). Therefore, narrative research works to blur the line between art and science by using traditional qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews and artifacts that are theorized, but, unlike more traditional scientific writing, the analysis of this data is composed of accessible, compelling stories that can be appreciated by both academics and non-academics (Kim, 2016, p. 88).

Narrative inquiry, therefore, provides qualitative researchers with a unique means for exploring and sharing individual’s lived experiences by compiling narratives into aesthetically engaging and theoretically grounded and interpreted stories. Consequently, since one of the primary goals of this study is to complicate our understanding of community college students and community partner members engaging in critical service learning, narrative inquiry provides the perfect means for bringing the voices of participants to the forefront of this study by sharing their stories about their childhoods, their work engaging in critical service learning, and their reflections upon completion of our coursework in order to better understand how their unique lived histories and positionalities inform their interactions with Others and understandings of themselves, their peers, and the larger society. Moreover, because narrative inquiry is intentionally accessible to both academic and non-academic audiences, this methodology also aligns with my desire to bridge theory and practice by generating research that both scholars and practitioners can access and utilize (Kim, 2016). Thus, with this goal in mind, I am engaging in

narrative analysis of the collected data with the goal of identifying participant stories that can then be reconstructed into narrative form in order to answer the study's overarching research questions:

1. What do the narratives of two community college English composition students and a juvenile detention center resident convey about their identities and lived experiences prior to engaging in critical service learning within an English Composition class?
2. How do participants' identities and lived histories inform their experiences of critical service learning within an English Composition course?

The central focus of each of these research questions is on the stories shared by participants about their lived experiences both before I met them and during our coursework together, and so these stories are not simply educational narratives, but rather they are stories that occurred throughout participants' lives in order to provide a more complete picture of who each participant is and how their engagement in our service learning work was informed by their individual, unique lived experiences. Consequently, since the primary goals of narrative inquiry are to both shed light on how individuals see themselves as well as to help researchers to "understand experience" (Bell, 2002, p. 209), narrative inquiry provides a clear methodological means for addressing the study's research goals.

### **3.3 Central Community College as a Research Site**

Central Community College serves as the research site for this study as it is the college where I am employed as Associate Professor of English and as one of the two college's Faculty Service Learning Coordinators. The college is a community college located roughly 30 minutes south of Manhattan in Central New Jersey. Central Community College is situated on a suburban, commuter campus, and students arrive by car or bus in order to attend classes.

Demographically, according to the most recent 2017 college census, of the 11,397 students enrolled at my college, 33% identified as Hispanic, 29% as white, 15% as Asian, 12% as black, 3% as two or more races, 2% as non-resident alien, and 6% as other/unreported. Additionally, 45% of full-time students receive financial aid and 24% of full-time students report annual household incomes below \$30,000 per year. Therefore, the majority of the college's attendees are students of color, and enrolled students' socioeconomic backgrounds vary greatly. Moreover, the college has one main campus and two smaller urban centers, with each urban center located in predominantly Hispanic/Latino neighborhoods in which tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants currently reside. And so, although the college does not monitor the number of undocumented students in attendance, anecdotally, I have found over the last five years that each class of 20 to 25 students that I teach usually has at least two to three self-disclosed DACA recipients and/or undocumented students enrolled in the class, many of whom have relatives who are undocumented and some of whom have relatives who have been deported. Thus, not only do students' socio-economic backgrounds vary greatly, but so do their citizenship statuses and the spaces of precarity in which some students without citizenship reside. Thus, Central Community College serves as an ideal research site for this study since it offers a diverse population of community college students with whom to engage in research.

Despite my college's diverse student body, my students' hometowns and their corresponding public schools represent much less diverse demographics, and so students often spend their K-12 years in classrooms with peers whose family incomes, nationalities, races, citizenship statuses, and cultures mimic their own. In fact, New Jersey has been identified as one of the top three most segregated states in the nation where although "the proportion of our population that is black and Hispanic has far surpassed one-third and will soon reach one-

half...this growing sector still endures lives of poverty and isolation that most of us cannot begin to understand or appreciate” (Tractenberg, Orfield, and Flaxman, 2013, p. 4). In the state of New Jersey, “more than one in four black students and one in eight Latino students attend apartheid schools where they basically have no contact or interaction with white students” and “The other segment is still predominantly white and suburban where educational success and college attendance are the norms” (Tractenberg, Orfield, and Flaxman, 2013, p. 10). Therefore, towns are not only segregated by race and ethnicity, but also by class and access to a quality education, with median income for towns in my college’s county ranging from \$107,275 in one predominantly white, suburban town to \$40,280 in another predominantly Hispanic/Latino city less than ten miles away (Davis, 2016). Consequently, although New Jersey and my college’s county within New Jersey are both racially and socioeconomically diverse, the communities within the state and county are deeply segregated (Tractenberg, Orfield, and Flaxman, 2013; Toppo, 2016). New Jersey’s localized segregation means that many K-12 students rarely engage in social interactions with peers who are racially, culturally, or economically different from themselves, and so they often fail to understand the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of people whose cultures and social practices differ from their own.

Sadly, the segregation found within communities in New Jersey is far from unique: nationwide, students in the public K-12 setting are finding themselves less and less exposed to peers who differ racially and economically from one another (Toppo, 2016). As a result, one could assert that children in America are becoming more fearful of others not only due to overexposure of partisan and ideologically divisive information online, but also due to a lack of exposure to diversity in their classrooms and communities (Toppo, 2016; Lelkes et al., 2017). In fact, often times, my community college students are first exposed to students with different

racial and socioeconomic backgrounds when they interact with peers in their college classes on campus. Thus, the community college classroom offers my students a unique opportunity to engage in communicative practices with other members of the local community across ideological, cultural, racial and socioeconomic differences (College Board Research, 2016). Moreover, through these discussions coupled with their critical service learning work, students also have the opportunity to harness their unique lived experiences and intersectional identities as a means for drawing connections between themselves, the community members with whom they engage in service, and the systemic injustices that we attempt to understand and dismantle. Consequently, Central Community College students' stories can provide unique insights into their communicative practices with one another and their community partners as they engage in critical service learning.

### **3.4 Critical Service Learning within English Composition at Central Community College**

As a community college English professor and as an 8th grade English teacher before that, I always sought to identify empowering pedagogies that could engage my students in activism, and so I took up service learning pedagogies over ten years ago with the goal of engaging students in a border pedagogy that could help them reflect upon systemic injustices and, ideally, engage in agentic, empowering activities that challenge and potentially disrupt these inequities. The community partners whom my students have engaged in service with have varied over time, with some classes working on community-based research, others engaging in direct service with non-profit organizations that service local community needs, and still other classes generating their own advocacy efforts with the goal of solving specific, localized social problems. However, more recently, I have focused student efforts on two main priority areas

based upon both my own and my students' expressed concerns about the treatment and criminalizing of undocumented immigrants and Black and brown youths, the problematic national discourse and policies of criminalizing undocumented immigrants and Black and brown youths, and because of the unique partnerships I've been able to forge with individuals working to support incarcerated undocumented immigrants and incarcerated juveniles within the local community.

Therefore, students who participated in this study engaged in service learning at one of two sites: 1) partnering with a local church that provides support for detained undocumented immigrants housed within a privately operated immigration detention facility or 2) partnering with a social worker employed by the Department of Justice (DOJ) to provide educational opportunities to youths awaiting sentencing while housed in a juvenile detention center. In both cases, students in these classes completed a mixture of reflective and academic writing assignments and public writing assignments that were shared with their classmates and community partners and that attempted to engage them in critical service learning designed through the lens of a border pedagogy.

### **3.5 Critical Service Learning within a Spring, 2018 English Composition I**

The course description for Introduction to Composition I at my college during the Spring, 2018 semester, according to the college catalogue, was as follows:

Through a variety of writing projects requiring competence in clear, correct, and effective English, students will use inferential and critical skills in the process of composing documented essays. Extensive reading materials serve as structural models and as the bases for the writing of essays involving response, analysis, and synthesis.

Consequently, the goal of these courses as designed by the English Department is to teach students how to analyze and respond to college-level expository texts by writing persuasive and synthesis essays using “clear, correct, and effective English” and supported by documented evidence from course readings. However, as someone who, as previously mentioned, recognizes that language is socially constructed and situated and that, therefore, “correct English” does not exist, I felt strongly that I wanted to use this space not to engage students in the writing of a series of disconnected and inauthentic essay writing experiences, but to, instead, engage students in much more empowering, authentic, and imaginative writing experiences. And although service learning had not yet taken off at my college, I turned to critical service learning as a means for engaging students in authentic and agentic writing experiences with the goal of encouraging students to reimagine new ways of being and reconstructing our social world.

Despite my desire to create a critical service learning experience for my students and our community partners, when students enrolled in this class, they were unaware that it was a service learning course since, at the time when it was offered, the college had not yet created a service learning designation for introductory courses. Consequently, I was told by the college’s administration that I was unable to “mandate” that students participate in service learning experiences since they did not register knowingly for a service learning course, and so I developed service learning experiences for students to participate in outside of class hours that they could opt out of if they so chose.

Since I knew that students registering for the class were often in their first or second semester of college and, like the majority of community college students, often juggling numerous responsibilities, I wanted to make the out-of-class service learning activities as accommodating as possible to students’ interests and schedules. Thus, students enrolled in my

English Composition I classes during the Spring 2018 semester were required to engage in a minimum of 15 hours of out-of-class service *or* five different site visits (depending on the partner's requirements) at one of four different sites over the course of a 15-week semester in lieu of completing one of the course's required essay assignments: (1) Meeting with undocumented detainees at an ICE-supported private prison in order to hear their stories and provide them with resources that could help to expedite their cases; (2) Preparing and serving dinner to 30 men at a Salvation Army Winter Homeless Shelter; (3) Providing food, hygiene kits, transportation, entertainment, advocacy support and hygiene kits at a train station for homeless families and individuals; (4) and developing and running workshops for low-income, predominantly undocumented middle and high school students on how to apply to college and what to expect at college. Additionally, during the Spring, 2018 semester, I also included an optional service learning opportunity in which students and I spent the night at a vegan farm sanctuary where we interacted with formerly abused and neglected farm animals while cleaning their living quarters. And, if none of these service options met students' scheduling needs and personal interests, they also were given the option to write a traditional research paper in lieu of service. However, in this Spring, 2018 English Composition class, all students chose to participate in service learning.

Based upon the service learning placement options and my desire to engage students in culturally responsive, critically rooted pedagogies, I structured course texts and activities around specific issues of social justice in America including the construction of race and its impact on racism; homelessness and food insecurity; immigration policies, refugees, and undocumented immigrants; educational and occupational inequalities including the exploitation of migrant and undocumented workers as well as inmates and international workers; and the exploitation and

abuse of farm animals. In keeping with the required course outcomes of the class, students were asked to use their service experiences and the course texts to develop three argumentative essays and a final reflective, multimodal presentation, which was shared publicly with the rest of the students in the class. Students also had the opportunity to share their writing, presentations, and reflections at an end-of-semester college-wide service learning celebratory event. Additionally, throughout the semester, students engaged in frequent reflective dialogue about their service experiences in connection to the course texts through in-class discussions and online discussion board assignments. Thus, in this course, students engaged in direct service with clients through partnerships with local non-profit and community organizations, and they then used these experiences to inform the writing assignments and presentations they completed for the class and for these public writing opportunities.

**Partnering with a Local Church in Support of Undocumented Immigrants Housed at an Immigration Detention Center.**

Students who chose the immigration detention center for their service work, which includes Alex, the Introduction to Composition I participant in this study, met at a local church in the evening, and they then traveled together in a church van that was driven by a local university seminary student intern whose research efforts focused on immigration policy and practice. During the drive up, students (and I, when present) normally engaged in conversation with one another about a variety of topics, but once we arrived at the detention center, the mood usually changed. The students and I were required to leave all of our belongings except photo IDs in the van and/or in lockers in the building, which is a windowless warehouse converted into a prison. We then waited in a waiting room for anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour, and while waiting,

we were surrounded by the families and friends of the detainees who hoped to secure visits with their loved ones and/or learn of a loved one's status. Often times families could be seen crying as they learned of relatives being deported. Once the students' and my numbers were called, we walked through a metal detector and then sat at a table awaiting the detainee whom we had been scheduled to meet with through our partnership with the church.

The detainees with whom students and I visited had no family or friends in the United States and were desperate for outside communication and friendship. When students and I met with the detainees, the detainees arrived in their orange or blue jumpsuits and sat at a table, where they engaged in detailed conversation with two to three of us for roughly an hour and/or until a guard told them (often arbitrarily) their visiting time was up. Once all students and I were done with our visits, we headed back to the van for the 30-minute ride back to the church. The mood in the van changed significantly on the return ride, and conversations often shifted to the injustices of the immigration system. Some students cried and others held back tears. Students then went home to complete reflection assignments that fed into our coursework, and they continued to visit the site and their assigned detainee for a minimum of four more times throughout the semester.

### **3.6 Critical Service Learning within a Spring, 2019 English Composition II**

Unlike the course outcomes designed by the English Department for Composition I which focused on engaging students in a variety of essay-writing assignments grounded in students' analysis of college-level readings, the course outcomes for Composition II focus more on the rhetoric of persuasion and students' engagement in the research process. Therefore,

students in this course were expected to generate a critical, persuasive research paper based upon their analysis of a minimum of eight to ten relevant research articles and/or texts by the end of the semester, with a variety of smaller, lower-stakes process-driven writing assignments built into the course prior to the completion of the final research paper.

By the time that I offered this Spring, 2018 Introduction to Composition class, I had already established a partnership with a local juvenile detention center in which two previous Developmental English classes of mine had engaged in service learning work with residents at the facility during class hours. I found that offering service learning experiences during class time provided an opportunity for us to engage in much more critical reflection and agentic writing experiences than we could in my English 121 classes, for although students engaging in service learning within English 121 classes expressed positivity about those experiences, I questioned just how critical those service experiences truly were since I was not always present for them and students were engaging in writing *about* their service experiences as opposed to writing *for and with* the service partners.

Consequently, I began to question the model of service learning that I had designed for my English 121 classes, and I desired to create a much more immersive and reciprocal service learning experience for students and community participants. Thus, as my partnership with the local juvenile detention center strengthened, I developed a service learning-designated Composition II course which specified, in the course description, that students participating in the course would regularly visit a juvenile detention center and engage in research and writing with detention center residents. Because I designed this course specifically in partnership with a juvenile detention center, the course description I included with the course encouraged students who were criminal justice, psychology, sociology, social work, or education majors to enroll,

although there was no formal requirement for students to have one of these majors in order to register for the class, and some students outside of these majors - such as nursing and business students - also enrolled in the class. Nonetheless, unlike my Composition I classes, students registering for this Composition II class knew in advance that they were registering for a service learning course in which they would be engaging in service at a juvenile detention center. Furthermore, because the juvenile detention center requires all students to pass a criminal background check in order to enter the facility, I reached out to students in advance of the semester to fully explain the expectations of the class and the paperwork requirements that had to be completed in order to participate in the course and its corresponding service opportunity.

Moreover, unlike my Composition I classes, because this course was designed around one specific service site, the service experiences for this class were embedded within our class time and were not completed outside of class hours. Therefore, students and I held class in the juvenile detention center biweekly, and during those classes, both the detention center residents and college students worked together on a collaborative inquiry project that resulted in their writing of individual research papers and then a collective, group presentation on their findings. At the end of the semester, we had a celebratory brunch at the juvenile detention center where each student - detention center residents and college students - received a book containing everyone's final research papers and reflective letters about the experience, and they then shared their presentations to staff at the juvenile detention center and their colleagues in the class.

### **Partnering with the Juvenile Detention Center.**

For many years I had attempted to partner with local prisons and juvenile detention centers because of both a personal and professional interest in working to combat the

dehumanization of incarcerated people, but my attempts proved fruitless with prison and detention center facilities making it clear that they did not think the environment was safe for college students. However, three years ago, after reaching out to my college's administration about potential opportunities for us to offer college classes within local prisons, I was informed that a social worker at a local juvenile detention center, Samantha, had reached out to the College with the goal of seeking educational opportunities for some of the detention center residents at the facility. Thus, Samantha and I connected soon after, and she explained that she had a group of seven boys who were likely to be held at the facility for an extended period of time prior to sentencing, and they had already earned their high school diplomas through the juvenile detention center's school, so they had nothing to do all day. However, Samantha also explained that the facility's administration was hesitant to allow college volunteers into the facility, and so initially, we had my students within a Developmental English of mine design two workshops - one on college after prison and another on code switching - topics selected by Samantha, which my students then presented to the boys in the facility on one occasion. These workshops were well-received by the boys and the facility's administrators, and so we were then given permission, the following semester, to have small groups of students visit the facility more frequently as long as I was present.

During that second semester of service learning at the juvenile detention center, I had the residents in the detention center select a novel that was of interest to them, and then my college students in a Developmental English class and I came in periodically to analyze and write about the novel. After another successful semester, Samantha and I were then given permission to develop this Composition II class model, in which all 15 students and I could visit the facility at once rather than in small groups, which, therefore, allowed us to be able to design the entire

course around service at the juvenile detention center.

Thus, during the Spring, 2019 semester, 15 English Composition II students and I engaged in biweekly classes (seven 90 minute classes in total) attended by seven detention center residents, Samantha, and prison guard staff. Samantha and I initially collaborated on the design of the class, including both the logistics and the curriculum, and I met with the residents at the detention center prior to the start of the class to get their input and see if they would enjoy participating in this research-focused class. Each of the youths agreed to participate in the class, and all who participated were volunteers who were initially selected by Samantha and approved by the warden because they had completed their high school diplomas and were deemed safe by Samantha and the warden to work with college students in this program.

Demographically, five out of the seven detention center participants identified as Black or Hispanic/Latino, and two identified as White, with all of them identifying as cisgendered males between the ages of 16 and 21. The detention center participants did not receive college credit for participation, and so they participated solely on a volunteer basis in order to provide themselves with something intellectually stimulating to do during the day. All but one of the residents who participated had been charged with violent crimes, and Samantha filled me in on each youth's charges and the details of their cases prior to the beginning of the semester. Through these conversations I learned that two of the youths - one charged with attempted murder and the other with the molestation and rape of a minor - had ICE detainers placed on them and would be removed from the country after they completed their sentences. Another youth whom I worked with in previous semesters was charged with murdering four of his family members using an assault rifle, and although he admitted to the murders, he was fighting the charges due to having been diagnosed with autism and a brain tumor. Another two of the youths

were charged with attempted murder, and two others were being charged with murder, one of whom is a participant in this study, with both were facing 30 years to life in prison. All of the youths were being tried as adults after being waived up to adult court due to the severity of their alleged crimes, and so they were facing the possibility of no less than ten years in prison with some having been detained in the juvenile detention center for over three years while awaiting sentencing.

At the start of the semester I did not tell my college students about the specific charges that the detention center residents faced and throughout the semester, I never revealed the residents' last names in order to protect their identities. However, I did make students aware of the fact that many of the residents were being charged as adults for violent offenses. Moreover, before visiting the detention center, students in the class spent the first three classes learning more about both America's and New Jersey's criminal justice and juvenile justice system, including much of the systemic racism that continues to plague New Jersey's sentencing of Black and brown youths, and we also engaged in philosophical debates about the ethical dilemmas of incarcerating and releasing convicted violent offenders as well as whether or not rehabilitation was possible. Once students learned more about the criminal justice system and explored the many ethical dilemmas associated with the criminalizing of youths, we then began our visits at the facility, in which I initially facilitated the classes by having us analyze texts that focused on a variety of social problems, and then used these texts and our discussions about them to help the detention center residents identify research topics that were of interest to them. I also taught the research process and essay writing process within the detention center to all of the student participants, and Samantha frequently co-facilitated class discussions by encouraging the detention center residents to make connections between their own life experiences and potential

research topics. Although access to technology was limited, Samantha was able to secure a television for us to use during a few different class sessions in which I shared some Ted Talks about various social justice issues as well as portions of Netflix's film *13th*, which we used to facilitate larger conversations about social problems in America.

Once the detention center residents finalized their selection of research topics that were of interest to them, my students then picked which of the topics they also wanted to focus their research efforts on, and students then formed research groups with each of the seven residents. Some groups consisted of one detention center resident and two college student partners, and others had two detention center residents paired with up to five college student partners. Overall, students - both those who were incarcerated and those in college - selected their own groups based upon their interest areas with the goal of co-investigating their research topic, writing individual research papers on specific issues of interest within their larger topic, and then co-presenting their findings at the end of the semester. Topics selected by the residents included criminal justice reform and the adult sentencing of youths, addressing climate change, the criminalization of undocumented immigrants, addressing both global and national poverty and its links to crime, and the incarceration of those with mental illnesses and/or drug addictions. The students in my class, therefore, co-learned and engaged in research with the detained youths on their group topics, and I facilitated this process by teaching both the detention center residents and college students how to engage in research and write academic persuasive research papers.

Moreover, because the detention center residents with whom we engaged in research did not have access to the internet, my students were also in charge of finding articles and books for their partners based upon their research interests, and my students then worked with their partners - both detention center residents and college students - to use these articles to write and

revise their individual persuasive essays and develop collaborate group presentations. During the classes when students and I did not meet at the juvenile detention center, we focused more explicitly on deconstructing structural and systemic injustices as they related to the criminal justice system in America as well as on reflecting on how classes were going and co-designing each sequential class at the facility, and the texts that we read and responded to in class focused on both the systemic inequities inherent in our criminal justice system as well as models of reform.

### **3.7 Research Participant Selection**

In Clandinin's (2007) *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry*, Clandinin explains that "narrative research often starts with experience-based exploration and analysis *alongside* critical appraisal of its emerging ideas through other recent and relevant literature". Thus, since narrative inquiry often begins with "experience-based exploration", in selecting participants for this study, I began by identifying my students who were participating in the experience of critical service learning with either of two community partners: the immigration detention center or the juvenile detention center. Moreover, since narrative research is a collaborative process that requires the "active involvement of participants" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72), of those students who participated in critical service learning at either of the two detention centers, I looked for research participants who expressed an interest in engaging in this research process with me.

Thus, in both my Spring, 2018, English Composition I course of 24 students and my Spring, 2019, Composition II class of 15 students, I explained my research study goals at the start of the semester to all students enrolled in each of the two classes, and I asked for student volunteers who were interested in serving as engaged research participants with me. From that

request, I received nine participants within English Composition I and four participants within English Composition II.

I began my research with thirteen participants with the goal of filtering out students who did not meet the study's criteria. Therefore, as each of the semesters progressed and I began to get to know my students better, I started to sort through and filter the cases. I knew that I wanted the participants to accurately represent the cultural and economic diversity of the college, and I also wanted to focus on participants who were vocal participants both in class and at their service sites. Additionally, I was interested in identifying participants whose stories highlight the precarious spaces in which many of my students exist in order to provide counterstories that push back on the narrative of privileged college students that permeates service learning research. Consequently, as I sorted through the participants, I identified two students - one from English Composition I and one from English Composition II - who met my criteria in that each student was a vocal member of the class, each student was an active participant in their service experiences, and each student entered our classroom after having spent much of their lives existing in precarious spaces and working to overcome a multitude of hardships. Moreover, each of the two selected college student participants provided an accurate representation of the diverse spaces in which community college students often reside, and so they were also selected because their stories provide insight into how each person's unique lived experiences and identities inform their experiences as they engage in critical service learning.

Throughout the past few years, I also sought to include a participant from the juvenile detention center in order to ensure that the voices of residents were included in this study. Initially, I was unable to do so since the residents were all underage and considered to be a vulnerable population according to IRB protocol. However, since that time, one of the resident

participants whom I had hoped to include in this study, Nazir, is now an adult, and I was recently given permission to interview him and include Nazir as a participant. Thus, I am thrilled to also include Nazir's perspective on our service-learning work together from his lens as a detained resident participating in our coursework together.

### **3.8 Research Participant within Composition I**

#### **Alex.**

Alex, a 20-year-old self-described cisgendered non-practicing Catholic male, Mexican-American student, enrolled in English Composition I during the Spring, 2018 semester, and he was selected for this study because he was once a resident of the juvenile detention center with whom I partner with for Composition II classes, and his father was deported after being arrested as an undocumented immigrant and held in the same immigration detention center with whom students in the class can partner. Thus, Alex was unusual in that he had strong personal ties to both of the detention centers with whom my students engage in service, and he also was very open in disclosing the many traumas and obstacles that he faced throughout his childhood and was continuing to face as a young adult.

Through class writing assignments and interviews, I learned that Alex, despite being born in America, was a native Spanish speaker who enrolled in ESL classes during elementary school in order to become fluent in English. Alex's father was an undocumented Mexican American immigrant who was deported when Alex was 13-years-old, and Alex's mother died when he was 15-years-old. Thus, Alex found himself in and out of group homes, a foster home, and the local juvenile detention center, in between which he was frequently living on the streets. Alex ended up dropping out of high school throughout this time period, but when Alex turned 18, he left his

foster home, moved back to the city where he grew up and where one of our college's urban centers is located, and he attended adult basic education classes there in order to earn his GED. Alex was proud of his accomplishment of earning his GED, and he was thrilled to now be a college student with the goal of majoring in criminal justice and becoming a police officer.

Within the larger classroom, Alex often was reserved, but he spoke up frequently within small groups, and he expressed a strong interest in partnering with the immigration detention center. Once I learned that Alex's father had been detained and deported from the same facility that students engaging in service learning with detained immigrants would be visiting, I checked in with Alex to make sure that visiting the facility would not be too emotionally challenging for him, but Alex reassured me that he wanted to go and visit the detainees there. Thus, Alex chose the immigration detention center as his service site, and he regularly visited with the detained immigrants at the facility. Additionally, Alex also chose to attend the farm sanctuary trip, where twelve other students and I spent two days on an overnight trip learning about factory farming and cleaning the farm animals' living quarters.

### **3.9 Research Participant within Composition II**

#### **Audrey**

Audrey, a self-identified Christian cisgendered white American female from a low-income family, was a student enrolled in English Composition II during the Spring, 2019 semester. Thus, Audrey, like her fellow 14 other classmates, enrolled in this course knowing that she would participate in service learning with detention center residents at a juvenile detention center. Audrey stood out to me early on in the semester because I learned that she suffers from

the same chronic pain condition as my sister, Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS), as well as a rare genetic disease, Ehlers- Danlos Syndrome (EDS), which had left her wheel-chair bound six months prior to starting our class. Moreover, because of these chronic pain conditions, Audrey was prescribed opiates as a teenager, which she ended up abusing throughout her late teens and early 20's and which further spiraled her into states of depression. Since Audrey struggled with numerous health challenges throughout her life prior to receiving her medical diagnoses, she felt that her academic skills had suffered greatly because of how frequently she missed classes. In fact, later in the semester, I found out that prior to meeting Audrey, she had been suffering from severe depression and contemplating dropping out of college, and it was learning about the opportunity to enroll in this class that led her to decide to continue her studies.

During class Audrey was always focused, and she took her service work seriously. She frequently engaged in class discussions, and through our interviews, I also learned that both she and her sister were victims of sexual assaults that had led to the arrests and conviction of the assaulter. Thus, although Audrey was excited to attend our classes in the juvenile detention center, she also expressed hesitancy about working with detention center residents, and during our initial visits to the juvenile detention center, she was reserved and cautious in her interactions with the boys there. However, as the semester progressed, Audrey developed close relationships with some of the detention center residents, and she became one of the class's most vocal advocates for criminal justice and juvenile justice reform efforts and advocacy on behalf of the detention center residents with whom we partnered. More recently, she has become president of a new Juvenile Justice Club that students and I are in the process of starting, and she is looking forward to continuing working with the youths at the juvenile detention center through this new extracurricular effort.

**Nazir**

Nazir, a self-described cisgendered now 21-year-old African American Muslim male detention center resident, was born in an impoverished city in New Jersey that is well-known for being a violent, gang-ridden neighborhood surrounded by some of the state's most affluent, suburban neighborhoods. Nazir grew up with a bipolar and, at times, abusive mother as well as a father who was in and out of prison. However, he also had a close bond with his grandparents, who provided for him financially and whom he lived with for the first nine years of his life. When Nazir became a teenager, he joined a local gang that his cousin participated in, and this led him to gain access to guns and engage in numerous fights, three shoot-outs, and end up with a gun charge. Then, when he was 17, he found his life threatened by another resident of the city from a different gang, and during an altercation, he shot and killed this resident. Thus, due to the severity of the crime, the court waived Nazir's case up from juvenile court to adult court, and so he is being tried as an adult and is currently looking at anywhere between 30 to 60 years behind bars.

I initially met Nazir when he was 17-years-old and had been a resident of the juvenile detention center for close to eight months. In our first meeting, I had visited the juvenile detention center to inform the residents about the opportunity to participate in our first service-learning offering in which my students in a Developmental English class would offer workshops on a variety of topics. I suggested different topics to the residents and asked for their feedback, and Nazir was one of the most vocal members of the group of seven residents, sharing his interests and expressing what topics he was most interested in learning about. He struck me as thoughtful, professional, and engaged, and throughout the now two and a half years that we have worked together, I have watched him continue to grow academically and become more interested

in the pursuit of a college degree. At this point, Nazir has participated in service-learning projects with my students and me for four semesters, and he is currently participating in a new bookclub opportunity that my students and I are facilitating at the detention center. While other participants throughout the past two and a half years have been sentenced and transferred to juvenile and adult prisons, Nazir has remained detained at the detention center awaiting sentencing, and so he is now the longest standing participant in our service learning partnership.

### **3.10 Data Collection**

Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to work “with people’s consciously told stories recognizing that these rest on deeper stories of which people are often unaware” (Bell, 2002, p. 209). Therefore, data collection for narrative inquiry can vary, but it must focus on the gathering of stories “such as through interviews that may be the primary form of data collection but also through observations, documents, pictures, and other sources of qualitative data” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 69). Thus, data collection for this study began with the collection of student letters in which students shared written information with me about their life experiences and goals for our class at the start of the semester in response to a letter about myself that I shared with each of my students. Instructions for these letters were minimal, and a variety of prompts were offered for students who struggle with writing and/or identifying themes to focus on in the letter. Then, throughout the semester students were asked to engage in online discussion board conversations with peers as well as the completion of private, reflective journals that were submitted at the end of the semester. Additionally, each college student participant also participated in a minimum of two video-recorded 45 minute to 60 minute interviews. Throughout this data collection process, I generated my own teacher-observation reflections and ethnographic field notes, and for

Audrey, who continued to participate in this study after our class together ended, I also utilized additional written artifacts shared between us including emails and letters to incarcerated individuals at the detention centers. Since different amounts of data were collected for each participant, the charts and descriptions below provide more specific details about the data that was collected for each individual participant.

### Alex

Unfortunately, Alex did not complete our course together nor was I able to locate him after the semester ended. Therefore, unlike the other two participants, only one semester of data was collected from Alex, and that data consisted of two video-recorded interviews, Alex's letter to me at the start of the semester, an essay Alex wrote on his experiences with prejudice and systemic inequities experienced by immigrants, an essay on immigration reform, two sets of field notes that I generated - one on our trip to a farm sanctuary and one after our immigration detention center visit - three teacher observation reflection notes from throughout the semester, and one 60-minute audio recorded taping of a whole-class reflection on everyone's service experiences:

	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Spring</b>
<b>2017-2018</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Two video-recorded interviews (one 45 minutes in length and one 60 minutes in length taken at the start and middle of the semester)</li> <li>● Letter to professor</li> <li>● One prejudice essay</li> <li>● One essay on immigration</li> <li>● Two sets of field notes focused on Alex throughout the semester - one</li> </ul>

		<p>at the farm sanctuary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Three teacher observation reflection notes from throughout the semester</li> <li>● One 60 minute audio recorded whole-class reflection</li> </ul>
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### **Audrey**

Audrey has been an actively engaged research participant for two years now who was excited to have our work together extend beyond the end of our class. Thus, during our Spring, 2019 semester together while Audrey was enrolled in English Composition II, data collection consisted of Audrey's letter to me as well as some initial back and forth correspondence about the content of the letter, two video-recorded interviews - one at the start of the semester and another at the end of the semester, three reflective discussion board posts, Audrey's final reflection journal, Audrey's final presentation at an end-of-semester service learning event, eight weekly field notes conducted by me immediately following our detention center visits, and four teacher-observation reflective notes following our interviews and two different class meetings. Additionally, during this past Fall, 2019, semester and this current Spring, 2020 semester, Audrey has continued to participate in this project, and data includes another video-recorded interview, multiple emails between us throughout the Fall, 2019 semester in response to our co-creation of a juvenile justice club for which Audrey is now president, and online posts in Canvas about the Juvenile Justice Club. We have also begun meeting again biweekly at the juvenile detention center for a book club through our new Juvenile Justice Reform Club, and so I have additional data including lesson plans co-created by Samantha, Audrey, and the vice-president of

the club, both mine and Audrey's reflective notes after book club meetings, and ethnographic field notes from these book club meetings:

	Fall	Spring
<b>2018-2019</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Letter to professor at start of class plus back and forth online correspondence about the content of the letter</li> <li>● Two video-recorded interviews (one 40 minutes in length and one 50 minutes in length) - another scheduled for next semester</li> <li>● Three discussion board posts</li> <li>● My weekly field notes from the detention center</li> <li>● Four teacher observation reflections</li> <li>● Audrey's final presentation at public service event</li> <li>● Four emails sent by Audrey to me</li> </ul>
<b>2019-2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● One video-recorded interview</li> <li>● Emails</li> <li>● Online posts in Canvas about the Juvenile Justice Club</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emails</li> <li>● Online posts in Canvas about the Juvenile Justice Club</li> <li>● Lesson plans for book club at JDC</li> <li>● Ethnographic field notes</li> <li>● Reflective memos</li> </ul>

### Nazir

From the onset of this research project, I knew that I wanted to include the stories of community participants. However, because I worked with detained youths and incarcerated

immigrants, I struggled to receive permission both through IRB and through the detention centers to include the stories of my participants. Nonetheless, I continued to request access to participants' stories, and as I developed a closer relationship with staff at the juvenile detention center, and once Nazir became a legal adult and was no longer a juvenile, I was granted permission to include Nazir in this study. Data collection for Nazir, therefore, was different from that of the rest of my participants. Since Nazir participated in four semesters of coursework with me, I had four semesters of field notes that included interactions and statements made by Nazir during class along with my reflective memos. Additionally, I had the papers that Nazir wrote for each of our classes including his chapter ending to the book *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers that we read during a Developmental English class together, two research essays he wrote for two different English Composition classes, two poster boards used for group presentations of his group's research, and his final reflection letters at the end of each semester. Perhaps most importantly though, once I received permission to include Nazir in this study, I was given the opportunity to conduct a 90-minute interview with Nazir and a 45-minute follow-up interview as well as a separate meeting to engage in member checking and revisions of his narrative per Nazir's feedback. I was given a private room to meet with Nazir for these meetings, with a guard stationed directly outside of the room and visible through the glass windows. The guard was unable to hear our conversations behind the closed door, and so we were given complete privacy. I was also permitted to bring an audio recording device into the detention center to record our conversations:

	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Spring</b>
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<b>2017-2018</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Field Notes (2)</li> <li>● Reflective memos from workshops (2)</li> </ul>
<b>2018-2019</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bi-weekly field notes (8 in total)</li> <li>● Bi-weekly reflective memos (8 in total)</li> <li>● Nazir's final chapter ending to <i>Monster</i></li> <li>● Nazir's drawing for the cover of our class book</li> <li>● Nazir's reflective letter to the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bi-weekly field notes (8 in total)</li> <li>● Bi-weekly reflective memos (8 in total)</li> <li>● Nazir's final research paper</li> <li>● Nazir's final group poster presentation</li> <li>● Nazir's reflective letter to the class</li> </ul>
<b>2019-2020</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bi-weekly field notes (8 in total)</li> <li>● Bi-weekly reflective memos (8 in total)</li> <li>● Nazir's final research paper</li> <li>● Nazir's final group poster presentation</li> <li>● Nazir's reflective letter to the class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 90 minute interview</li> <li>● 45 minute follow-up interview</li> <li>● Reflective memos (4)</li> </ul>

### 3.11 Narrative Data Analysis Process

Since one of the goals of narrative data analysis is to help “people to think about, and understand, their personal or another individual’s thinking, actions, and reactions” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 329) by sharing people’s lived experiences through the retelling of their stories, narrative data analysis requires the restorying of participants’ shared lived experiences into narratives that are logically organized, coherent, and compelling:

The holistic-content analysis of field texts (e.g., transcripts, documents, and observational field notes) includes more than description and thematic development as found in many

qualitative studies. It involves a complex set of analysis steps based on the central feature of “restorying” a story from the original raw data. The process of restorying includes reading the transcript, analyzing this story to understand the lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and then retelling the story. (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 330)

Consequently, a key component of the narrative analysis process is to identify how best to retell, or restory, one’s data so that it remains true to participants’ lived experiences and voices while also moving in a logical order and clearly articulating the messages within participants’ stories (Kim, 2016). For example, my participants, when sharing their lived experiences with me during our interviews together, often jumped across time periods and events, both within the stories they told and across stories told. At times, participants shared stories that were less relevant to this study’s research goals than other stories that they shared, and oftentimes the same stories were shared in multiple interviews, with different details provided within each retelling of the same story. Thus, restorying, for the purposes of this study, required me to analyze participant interviews and written artifacts for narrative content and overarching themes both within and across shared stories, and for me to then reorganize and, at times, rearticulate that coded content so that the stories shared moved in a logical order and fully elucidated participants’ lived experiences and voices. In doing so, restorying required me to ensure that the stories were reorganized and retold in chronological order according to when the events occurred within participants’ lives as opposed to the order in which the events were shared with me throughout our interviews. Moreover, the final restoried data was co-selected by participants and me, whenever possible, so that the stories that were most relevant to this study’s research questions were emphasized, and the less relevant stories were deemphasized. Ultimately then, the findings of this narrative analysis study, unlike other traditional qualitative studies, are not presented as raw data, but rather as restoried data based upon both participants’ and my analysis of the raw data.

To begin my analysis process, after transcribing each participant's interviews in their entirety, I then reread the transcripts repeatedly while listening to their recordings simultaneously. In doing so, I developed a familiarity with the data that allowed me to begin to identify "the main characters, place, and time of events that took place as recorded in the narratives" (Nasheeda, Abdullah, Krauss, & Ahmed, 2019, p. 2), and after identifying key events throughout participants' childhood and teenage years that informed their service learning experiences, it became clear to me that in order to fully address my research questions and do justice to my students' experiences and identities, I needed to share their educational service learning stories within the context of their overall life stories. Specifically, as I coded sections of the transcripts in which students reflected on their educational experiences within our service learning course, I noted that each participant made direct connections between those reflections and childhood struggles that they had experienced: Audrey, for example, found her interactions with youths at the juvenile detention center, initially, to be directly connected to the trauma she experienced by being raped as a teenager. Alex also saw his interactions with detainees as being directly informed by his own experiences as an incarcerated teenager. And Nazir frequently drew connections between our coursework and his past identity as someone who struggled to engage with others in academic settings because of his years of being a disengaged student in middle and high school. Consequently, participants' educational narratives about our college class were directly linked to their past stories of struggle throughout their childhoods, and so it became apparent that in order to fully answer my research questions, I needed to share stories from participants' childhoods through their work with me in our college composition classes.

Since I knew that my end goal was to share participants' stories in a manner that both shed light on how their lived experiences and identities informed their service learning

experiences as well as what they took away from these experiences, I turned to Labov's (1972) macrostructural analysis process as a starting point for analysis, since it "helps us answer the question of what the story is about" (Kim, 2016, p. 202). The Labovian model requires the researcher to analyze the role of clauses within a retelling of events in order to identify the primary elements of the narrative including the abstract (summary of the story), orientation (narrative's setting and key actants), complication (the plot), evaluation (the narrator's understanding of these events and goal in telling them), result (the resolution), and coda where relevant (the transition from past back to present) (Kim, 2016, p. 202). The goal in engaging in this process is to "extract a core story...by identifying the six elements" from the data (Kim, 2016, p. 202).

In order to begin this process, I needed to first identify the core stories that I would focus on based upon my data. To do so, I decided to take each participant's interview transcripts and reorganize them, initially, into two sets: relevant stories from their childhoods and relevant stories from their college years. I first printed out copies of each transcript, and I bracketed off each story told within the transcript and labeled it as either a childhood story or a college-years story. Since stories were often referenced and elaborated upon at various points throughout each interview, I also bracketed and labeled statements that should go together into the same story. Then, I went back to my digital copies, and I moved the bracketed statements together so that each story's data was now grouped together, and so that each story was clearly identified and reorganized into chronological order. Using MAXQDA, I then coded each or the reorganized stories based upon my research questions. My goal was to identify which stories directly aligned with my research goals and which ones were less relevant and could be eliminated. Thus, I coded each story as the following:

- a) Childhood stories of complex lived experiences
- b) Childhood stories that informed service learning experiences
- c) College-years stories of complex lived experiences
- d) College-years stories that informed service learning experiences

In doing so, I eliminated those stories that did not highlight the complexity of my students’ lives or inform their experiences in our service learning work together. This resulted in the following table, identifying the key stories shared from participants’ lives in chronological order that I wanted to analyze in more depth using Labov’s macrostructural analysis process:

	Alex	Audrey	Nazir
Stories from Childhood	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Struggles with bullying as an ESL student</li> <li>2. Father taken into ICE custody and deported</li> <li>3. Racism within new high school</li> <li>4. Mother dying</li> <li>5. Being homeless and stealing the laptop</li> <li>6. Challenges while detained and in group homes</li> <li>7. Choosing to drop out of school and hide it</li> <li>8. Dreams of a future police officer</li> <li>9. Earning GED</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dad abusing mom</li> <li>2. Mom and Dad’s divorce</li> <li>3. Developing chronic pain conditions</li> <li>4. Kicking mom out of house</li> <li>5. Rape</li> <li>6. Sister’s rape</li> <li>7. Mental breakdown and inpatient treatment</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Growing up in poverty but with loving grandparents and animals</li> <li>2. Moving out with mom, stepdad, and siblings and having rocky relationships with family</li> <li>3. Fighting with crack-addicted relatives</li> <li>4. Joining the gang and having gun fights</li> <li>4. Physical fight with mom leading to running away</li> <li>5. Returning home and fight with victim of shooting</li> <li>6. Being detained and feeling alone while grandparents die and family abandons him</li> </ol>

Stories from College Years	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Visiting the immigration detention center</li> <li>2. Financial worries about sustainability of college</li> <li>3. Fear of going back to past habits</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Failing grades as biology major</li> <li>2. Diagnosis of health conditions</li> <li>3. Visiting the JDC as a sexual assault victim.</li> <li>4. Getting to know the residents</li> <li>5. Speaking publicly at college-wide event</li> <li>6. Changing major and career goals</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Monster class and questioning identity</li> <li>2. ENG Comp II and making relationships</li> <li>3. Fear of ending class and losing connections with others</li> <li>4. Anxiety about the future</li> </ol>
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After generating this chart of stories that I planned to analyze, I then turned to Labov (1972) to begin analyzing the structural elements of each story so that I could identify its overarching purpose and the best means for retelling the story within my findings. Therefore, I went back to my reorganized transcripts within MAXQDA that were now divided into the aforementioned stories, and I coded the clauses within the transcripts for Labov's (1972) narrative structural elements. Below is an excerpt of my coding of clauses for structural elements within Alex's story of withdrawing both physically and emotionally from school:

1. Oh, um, well I mean, back then, when I was, umm, 14, yeah, I mean younger (orientation)
2. I was never really into school. I always didn't liked it (evaluation)
3. because, I always had, how do I say, a weird way of pronouncing words (complication).
4. Cause back then I used to take ESL (orientation).
5. And when I used to take that, kids always used to make fun of me cause like, "oh, you talk funny and oh, this and that" (complication)
6. and I'm like oh, you know, I used to get, you know, a little kid, it gets you sad (evaluation)
7. And then I started instead, you know, instead of telling people, you know, telling them what's going on, like I would just keep it in (evaluation)
8. and eventually it just turned into anger and everything (evaluation)
9. and instead I would just not go to school (complication)
10. or I would rather just do something else (complication)
11. , you know or just hang out with other people (complication).

- 12. But not like good people, like you know probably people that, you know, do bad stuff like drugs, or whatever (evaluation).
- 13. I used to go hang out with them instead and go do this and that (complication),
- 14. and yeah, school just wasn't my thing (evaluation)
- 15. and that's how I was doing bad (result).

By coding the data for its structural elements, I was able to identify the key events in each story that progressed the plot forward as well as each participant's feelings about those events and the message each participant wanted to convey by sharing these events in the manner that they did. For example, the aforementioned data provided by Alex within an interview, after being cross-checked with his letter to me in which he shared more details about these events, helped me to understand that Alex saw his experience of dropping out of school as directly connected to the bullying he experienced for being an ESL student. The major complication shared in Alex's story was the bullying and shame he felt for being an ESL student, and he saw the result of this complication as his "doing bad" in school and hanging out with people who "do bad stuff". Thus, after coding the transcript of the story for Labov's (1972) structural elements, I was able to start to develop a narrative arc for Alex's story of dropping out of school:

Alex: Childhood Story of Struggling as an ESL Student that Leads to Dropping Out

Abstract	Orientation	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
Alex was picked on for not speaking English fluently and for having a Mexican accent.	Small predominantly Latinx city	Alex began school not knowing any English. He was forced to enroll	Alex felt saddened by being bullied and feeling	Alex received failing grades and	Now he has had to take some pre-

This led him to feel hurt and angry, and so he became disengaged from school and turned towards socializing with kids who were also disengaged.	school and neighborhood Alex Kids who bully him Kids whom Alex befriends who use drugs and don't go to school	in ESL classes and was made fun of by peers because of his accent. Alex disliked school because of being bullied, and, over time, he stopped attending altogether. Instead, he spent time using drugs with neighborhood kids who also disliked school.	like an outcast. Alex's sadness turned to anger as he got older. This anger made him want to stay away from school altogether and spend time with peers who treated him as an equal.	ended up dropping out of school.	college level courses in order to learn what he missed from dropping out of school.
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Consequently, by coding each clause within each participant's story for Labov's (1972) narrative structural elements and then turning those coded clauses into charts like the one above, I identified the messages that participants wanted me to take away from the stories that they shared, and I also began to examine the causal links between events and the final result of those events, which was an important step in helping me identify a story pattern (Labov, 1972).

In Reissman's book, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (2008), she explains that "structural approaches require examination of syntactic and prosodic features of talk" since structural analysis is interested not only in the events that participants share but also in the "syntactic and prosodic features of talk" that can often be missed "when transparency is assumed" by the researcher (p. 4). By coding each story told by participants for structural

elements, I engaged in analysis of both the events and themes as they were shared by the participants as well as participants' less transparent goals for sharing these stories. For example, in the aforementioned excerpt from Alex's interview, I noted that when Alex talked about his disengagement from school, he provided clear descriptive details about how his peers made him feel badly about himself for being an ESL student, but he used vague language when discussing the "bad" activities that he engaged in with his peers through phrasing such as "do bad stuff like drugs, or whatever" and "go do this and that". My goal in analyzing participants' choice of language was not to question the integrity or "truth" of the stories told, but rather to ensure that I had a clear understanding of participants' intended messages in sharing their stories. In Alex's case, I determined that his vague discussion about the "bad" activities that he engaged in highlighted that he told this story with the goal of explaining why he became a disengaged student and not with the goal of providing details about his "bad" experiences with friends. Thus, as can be seen in the "evaluation" section of the chart above, I focused my analysis on Alex's feelings from being bullied as opposed to Alex's feelings about the kids with whom he used drugs. Structural analysis then helped me to look beyond the surface of the stories that participants shared in order to try and understand what participants hoped to communicate by telling these stories.

In making the distinction between "complication" and "evaluation", I also started to reflect more on how participants told their stories by considering both what went told and untold as well as how participants situated themselves within these experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) explain that individual stories do not exist in isolation, but rather within socially situated contexts, and so by identifying how each participant situated themselves and situated their stories within broader contexts, I was able to better understand both the larger contexts of their stories as

well as their evaluation of the events that were occurring and whether they saw themselves as passive recipients of these events or as active, agentic actants. For example, in the transcript below, Alex shared his experience of reframing his identity based upon thinking about who he can be rather than who he was:

“And that’s when, um, becoming a law enforcement really triggered in my mind because I was like, oh, like I’m not a bad person at all. Like I’ve done bad things in my life, but like if I see somebody that needs help, like I will help them even if they don’t deserve it, like I will still do it. And then, I started thinking about that because helping out people has always been something for me. Cause obviously nobody’s ever really helped me out like that and most of the time I’m alone. So it makes me feel better, ya know, making somebody else’s day.”

I coded this section of the transcript not just as a major turning point “complication” in which Alex began to see new possibilities for himself and entered a space of imaginative potential, but also as a section of his story where he asserted agency over his identity by reframing his identity from someone who did “bad things” to someone who is “helpful”. Similarly, I also looked at participants’ uses of subjective and objective pronouns when coding for their evaluation of events such as when Audrey used the passive, objective phrasing, “he ended up raping me” to describe her sexual assault instead of using a subjective pronoun by stating “I was raped”. By analyzing participants’ use of language to position themselves within the events shared, I was able to code for how participants’ understood themselves and their stories as “filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity”, which helped me to engage with my research goal of better understanding participants’ intersectional identities and the role their identities played in their engagement with our coursework (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 24). Thus, analysis of each story’s evaluation, in particular, focused on participants’ language as they situated themselves within each story. The aforementioned story in which Alex decided he

wanted to become a police officer, for example, was not only coded to understand the events that unfolded, but also how Alex situated himself within these events:

Alex: A Turning Point

Abstract	Orientation	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
Alex had finally earned his GED, but he realized that he had no clue what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He had always viewed himself as a trouble maker who made a series of bad choices, but he now began to reframe this thinking by seeing his positive attributes such as his desire to help others. This, coupled with his thrill-seeking side made him start to think about the possibility of becoming a police officer.	Living in an apartment alone within a small predominantly Latinx city  Alex	Alex earned his GED, but he did not know what to do next with his life. He had never thought about potential careers since most of his life was spent focused on surviving each day, but now he began to consider a future for himself. He thought about his desire to help others, how much he loves crime shows, and his desire to have a thrilling career, and so he decided that he wanted to become a police officer.	Alex always assumed he was a bad person, but now he is pushing back on that assumption. Alex is seeing his positive attributes, and that makes him feel hopeful about his future. Alex believes in his ability to help others, which provides a new motivation for him to go to college and become a police officer.	Alex enrolls in community college as a criminal justice major.	Alex is now in college pursuing his goal to become a police officer.

Once I identified each story's structural elements based upon participants' interviews, I then turned to my other field texts, including student written artifacts, field notes, and reflective

memos, to fill in gaps and cross-check key plot movements across documents. At the same time, I also eliminated those plot points that were disconnected from the rest of the narrative or appeared irrelevant to the study's larger research goals, and I separated them into their own document so that I could come back to them later if needed.

At this point, I felt that I had a solid grasp on the structural elements of each story, but I was still uncertain about how these stories connected to one another and whether or not they should be shared independently or as chapters within each participant's larger narrative. Consequently, I decided that, in order to identify a common thread across stories within each participant's lives, I needed to identify the overall structural elements found across each participant's stories. The coding of these stories as a larger collective resulted in the development of two tables per participant, one noting the overall structural elements of their childhood stories and one noting the overall structural elements of their college stories (see *Appendix II*).

The creation of these larger charts that synthesized the structural elements across stories helped me to think about how I might represent these stories within my findings. I decided to craft rough drafts of each participant's narratives, with each draft moving in chronological order from early childhood stories to current college stories. In doing so, I focused on keeping participants' exact language in tact whenever possible, but I also rearticulated some phrasing within their stories in order to include rich descriptive language and details "including expressive, evocative language" so that I could "compose a vivid story while remaining faithful to the theme of the interview" (Kim, 2016. p. 216). I had a clear vision for the structure of each narrative - I knew they would each move chronologically across each participant's life from childhood through adulthood as college students, and I was going to focus the narratives on the stories that highlighted the spaces of precarity that participants were existing in throughout their

lives as well as how they made their way into college and engaged with our critical service learning work in spite of the struggles they continued to endure as young adults.

As I crafted these narratives, I also identified spaces in the narratives where a sequence was missing or illogically developed, and I marked those sections as a space for member checking and the gathering of additional details or clarification from participants. Below is an excerpt from the first draft of the narrative that I crafted from Audrey's retelling of her early childhood experiences along with the sections that I notated as being unclear or needing additional information:

My mom was living with her parents at the age of 22 when she became pregnant with my older sister. My dad decided to move into my grandparents' house with my mom, and so my grandparents, mom, dad, and sister all lived together in that house until I was born. My mom hated my dad, but she accidentally became pregnant with me a few years after my sister was born, so my parents tried to stay together to make it work. Honestly, it was a terrible life. Once I was born, my parents bought a house for the four of us to live in, but my dad always lived downstairs *(in the basement?)* and then my mom, sister, and I lived in the main part of the house *(unclear...top floors?)*. My mom and dad fought constantly, and my dad often became physically abusive towards my mom, so I witnessed a lot of domestic violence between my parents as a child *(is there a more specific story here she wants to share?)*. Then, when my sister was 8-years-old, she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and so my mom quit working and became a stay-at-home mom to take care of my sister and me. My parents continued to fight all of the time, and so finally, they decided to get divorced when I was ten-years-old, and my father moved out of the house and into *(unknown - location, type of space?)*. My parents had a messy divorce that ended up leaving both of them impoverished and so we struggled *(how?)*

Once these first rough drafts were complete, I set up separate meetings with Audrey and with Nazir in order to gain additional clarification as well as to fact check the narratives for accuracy. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) explain that when engaging in the restorying of data, it is essential for the researcher to collaborate "with the participant by checking the story and negotiating the meaning of the database" as well as by actively involving "the participant in the

inquiry as it unfolds” (p. 332). Thus, for both Audrey and Nazir, I took both the tables that I had coded for the structural elements of their stories along with the rough drafts of their narratives to our meeting, and we co-analyzed their individual narratives together in one-on-one meetings.

In these meetings, we began by identifying and rectifying any inaccuracies, we clarified and added details to moments in which I had been unable to elaborate based upon limited information from the field texts, and we discussed and negotiated the meaning I was making from their stories.

It was also through these member checking meetings that participants divulged new information - for example, during our initial interviews Nazir had never shared with me his gang affiliation or his many relatives’ addictions to crack - it was only through our member checking meetings that these new stories emerged, which painted a more detailed and complete picture of Nazir’s storied life. Similarly, up until our first member checking meeting, Audrey had never shared her experiences of being addicted to opioids with me nor her mother’s alcoholism and mental health struggles, and it was only through our analysis of the rough draft of her narrative that these new stories emerged and that she decided to confide in me about her struggles with addiction. As a result, not only were these member checking sessions pivotal for ensuring co-created, descriptive representations of participants’ stories, but they also provided new data about participants’ lives that helped to further nuance their lived experiences and required me to code for new stories. Thus, analysis became an iterative process as new data was coded for structural elements and then added to the narrative drafts by participants, which also led me to start identifying additional stories that had been missing from my original analysis. For example, for the first time in this process, I learned that Audrey struggled with addiction, and so I coded a new story of addiction before adding it to the larger narrative:

## Audrey: Almost Drowning and the Mental Break-Down

Abstract	Orientation	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
<p>After Audrey's rape and her sister's rape, Audrey began abusing her prescribed opioids and also began purchasing additional prescription pills from her friend. Her addiction spiraled out of control and led her to almost drown in her bathtub. Her sister and her relationship fell apart, and one day Audrey thought she no longer had any pills, had a mental breakdown, and after being threatened by her sister, decided to call her father and tell her parents about her addiction and rape.</p>	<p>Living in an apartment with sister and mother in a predominantly low-income suburban town.</p> <p>Audrey</p> <p>Audrey's sister</p> <p>Audrey's friend</p> <p>Audrey's mom</p> <p>Audrey's dad</p>	<p>Audrey started taking pills to numb the physical and emotional pain. She took more and more each day until she was up to 60 pills per day. At one point she fell asleep in the bath while high and almost drowned. Her mother had to break the door down. Her mother began trying to control her pills, but Audrey snuck more anyway and bought additional pills from her friend. Audrey's sister and her fought constantly about her drug use. Christmas morning, Audrey woke without pills, panicked and yelled and threw things throughout the house. She finally found</p>	<p>Audrey knew that the pills were dangerous, but she desperately longed to escape from her physical pain and emotional trauma. The pills helped her forget everything bad that had happened and was happening to her. She felt that they changed her personality though, by making her unable to control her temper. She feels guilt over how she treated her sister at that time. She couldn't take the lying, hiding, and guilt, and finally decided to tell</p>	<p>Audrey entered an in-patient treatment center to receive help for her addiction.</p>	<p>Audrey is working hard to stay clean and not abuse her prescription pills.</p>

		<p>pills, but her sister threatened to call her father and tell him about Audrey's addiction. Audrey, instead, called her dad with her mother next to her, and Audrey told her parents about her drug use and the rape.</p>	<p>everything to her family.</p>		
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Within these member checking meetings, not only did I learn new stories, but Audrey, Nazir, and I also discussed the arc of each of their stories - what we saw as each overall narrative's trajectory and turning point. Both participants felt that their lives were often uphill battles, and throughout their childhoods and teenage years they struggled to make positive connections with others and found themselves spiraling out of control. However, both Audrey and Nazir also identified key moments when they felt successful and were able to see a way out from the precarious spaces in which they found themselves residing, and they wanted to ensure that those moments were also represented within the stories. These were not, we agreed, to be narratives that simply evoke pity or paint participants in a deficient light; rather, we wanted to provide honest, detailed accounts of their struggles, while also highlighting their strengths and their desire to fight for better lives in spite of the challenges they continued to face. Moreover, each participant wanted the narratives to emphasize the role that each of them saw our college class as playing in helping them move beyond their past struggles and into new spaces of hope and agency. We also identified the turning points in each of their narratives, which, for them,

occurred right after what we coded to be their “breaking points” - for Audrey, having another relapse and about to fail out of college - and for Nazir - the moment when he took another human’s life:

#### Narrative Arcs

	Audrey	Nazir
Breaking Point	Another relapse in front of friends while also failing out of college with a 1.0 GPA	Taking a person’s life and entering the juvenile detention center being charged with murder
Turning Point	Changing major to psychology and enrolling in our Comp II class.	Earning a high school diploma and participating in college classes

Consequently, we began to restructure their narratives around the arc of these themes while maintaining the chronology in which their life events occurred. To do so, I again went back to the original data and coded it for moments of struggle and moments of resilience. From this additional round of coding coupled with the structural analysis and member checking sessions, I finalized the selection of stories to be shared in each narrative. Specifically, I framed the narratives around the arc of struggle and resilience by starting each narrative with nuanced accounts of participants’ childhood struggles with poverty and family instability, and then shifted them into how each participant tried to cope, often unsuccessfully, with traumatic life experiences and the structural inequities that kept them in spaces of precarity. I focused the turning point of each narrative as occurring right after each participant’s darkest moments - the moments when they struggled to see a way out from their spaces of precarity as late teens and young adults, and then I moved into their stories about college and our critical service learning work with the goal of highlighting how they saw this work as helping them work through their

past struggles and reimagine new ways of being. Once these new, complete drafts of each participant's narrative was complete, I brought the revised drafts back to each participant to reread. We again revised the drafts for clarity and accuracy, and once final revisions were made, I made the negotiated changes to the drafts, and I presented Audrey and Nazir with final drafts of their narratives for approval, which they provided. This resulted in drafts of each of their narratives that moved chronologically telling the following stories:

Audrey's Narrative	Nazir's Narrative
Father abusing mother while they all lived together culminating in a divorce	Growing up in poverty with loving grandparents and pets
Stomach pain and IBS diagnosis but no additional diagnosis and lack of belief in her pain + mom's alcoholism and kicking her out of the apartment	Struggling with mom, cousins, and uncles and difficulty making healthy relationships with peers in school
Chronic pain conditions coupled with rape and addiction lead to spiraling down	Big fight with uncle and arguments with mom leaving him frustrated and isolated
Intensive out-patient facility plus enrolling in community college	Decision to join the gang, gun charges, and running away
Final diagnosis but continued suffering and relapses plus failing college	Fight with murder victim leading to murder
Changing major and enrolling in English class	In detention center awaiting sentencing and enrolled in first college class
Feeling like a "survivor" and not a victim with a new purpose – fighting for juvenile justice reform	Continued participation in college classes and hopes for unknown future

Because I was unable to communicate with Alex throughout the process of analyzing and restorying his data, I was unable to engage in member checking or the reconstruction of his story with him, and so I completed the aforementioned steps that I completed with Audrey and Nazir on my own using MAXQDA. Just as I had done with Nazir and Audrey's transcriptions, I

engaged in the structural analysis of Alex’s stories (as identified in the tables above), and I also coded his transcriptions for periods of struggle (highlighted below in purple) and resilience (highlighted below in orange) in order to determine if I could retell his story using a similar arc.

Below is an excerpt from one of those coded transcriptions:

At that time, since I had nowhere safe to sleep (*struggle*), I would just sleep on them porches. I would look for houses that were on quiet streets, houses where I imagined it would be unlikely for someone to pass by and try and harm me, you know do something to me while I was sleeping. And when I found a house that seemed safe, I would sit up on the porch, lean my head against the house, and go to sleep. And that’s how I slept every night for close to three months (*resilience*) until I was picked up by the police.

After identifying numerous moments of struggle and resilience, I crafted a draft of Alex’s narrative that followed a similar arc to that of Nazir and Audrey, and I identified Alex’s breaking point as occurring when he ran away at the age of 18 and realized, as he stated in an interview, the following:

“I literally sat down and was like, damn, I have nothing right now. I don’t even have a high school diploma, no job, and I’m broke. And that’s when I started realizing that maybe I should start changing how I am and what I’m doing.”

This led to a narrative arc chart just as I had done with Audrey and Nazir:

#### Alex’s Narrative Arc

Breaking Point	All alone on the streets at age 18 with no real plans, no money, no license, and no diploma.
Turning Point	Enrolling back in high school and earning a GED

Once I identified the turning point for Alex’s story, I crafted his narrative, constantly moving back and forth between data sets and reorganized transcripts. However, in doing so, I came to see Alex’s narrative as following a slightly different arc than that of Audrey and Nazir. Specifically, whereas Audrey and Nazir saw our critical service learning work as, in many ways, changing their views of themselves and others and as helping them find hope within spaces of precarity, Alex experienced his turning point after finding himself homeless without a clear pathway to a successful future, which led him to decide to go back to school and earn a GED. Therefore, in writing up Alex’s narrative, I moved the arc of his story to focus on this turning point and decision to get a GED, and our college work was then an extension of this shift as opposed to where this shift occurred.

After I completed a rough draft of Alex’s narrative, I repeatedly reread, revised, and triangulated it with both the interview transcripts and the many written artifacts that Alex had shared with me. Therefore, the final narrative for Alex underwent numerous revisions, just as those for Audrey and Nazir did, and they resulted in me identifying the following stories to be told:

Alex’s Narrative
Alex struggling in school because of bullying plus father being picked up by ICE and deported
Moving to a new town and experiencing racism and death of mom
Running away and being homeless for months until theft of laptop and being detained by police
Life in and out of the detention center and group homes including dropping out of high school and always keeping guard up to avoid getting attacked.
Going to foster family and trying out college but immediately dropping out.
Running away back to hometown and earning GED and driver’s license
Enrolling in college and visiting immigration detention center

Struggling financially and worrying about staying focused and out of trouble
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Once I had finalized the drafts of each participant's narrative, it was time to decide how to best organize the drafts to be shared as findings. I had written the final documents up as first-person accounts - told by each participant - of their life stories, and although I felt confident that each narrative provided powerful stories about each participant's struggles throughout life as well as the ways in which our service learning work together informed shifts in how they made sense of those struggles and new possibilities for their futures, something about the retellings still felt incomplete to me, and I began to think, for the first time, about themes that were presenting themselves across participant narratives.

Although I had not planned to engage in additional analysis with the "final drafts" of these narratives, I decided that before sharing the findings as independent narratives, I wanted to engage with the participants' stories in a new way by looking for patterns across the constructed narratives that might speak to my research questions. Thus, I looked back at the segmented smaller stories that made up each participant's narrative, and I looked for themes across the segmented narratives by re-coding the selected stories within the larger narratives for patterns across participants' lived experiences and how they were situating themselves within those events.

Up until this point, I had kept the narratives of participants separate from one another, I had mapped them out using Labov's (1972) structural analysis process, and I had not attempted to identify common themes across them. However, in the development of each narrative, it was clear that although each participant's life events were unique, the evaluation of these events shared some commonalities. I noted, for example, that all three participants expressed feeling

that their childhoods were fraught with challenges, that their relationships with their parents were tumultuous and/or involved loss, and that each participant felt disconnected from school and healthy peer groups. Moreover, I also noted that each participant experienced a similar turning point in their lives - all three participants hit what they described to be low-points in their lives before enrolling in our college class and as late teens/young adults. And each participant expressed engaging their social imaginations during college and our service learning work by identifying new ways of being and interacting with others. Therefore, I saw clear patterns across narratives, and in keeping with Kim's (2016) advice to create "a space where aims can be worked out, allowing room for less-familiar possibilities and playing with new ideas" (p. 195), I created a new document in which I began taking the coded, sliced up stories from participants' restoried narratives and interspersing them with other stories that shared similar themes in order to see if the patterns I had begun to identify were, in fact, clearly present across participants' restoried narratives:

Code	Alex's Narrative	Audrey's Narrative	Nazir's Narrative
<b>Childhood Stories of Struggle</b>	Alex struggling in school because of bullying plus father being picked up by ICE and deported	Father abusing mother while they all lived together culminating in a divorce	Growing up in poverty with loving grandparents and pets
	Moving to a new town and experiencing racism and death of mom	Stomach pain and IBS diagnosis but no additional diagnosis and lack of belief in her pain + mom's alcoholism and kicking her out of the apartment	Struggling with mom, cousins, and uncles and difficulty making healthy relationships with peers in school
	Running away and being homeless for months until theft of	Chronic pain conditions coupled with rape and	Big fight with uncle and arguments with

<b>Teenage Stories of Struggle</b>	laptop and being detained by police	addiction lead to spiraling down	mom leaving him frustrated and isolated
	Life in and out of the detention center and group homes including dropping out of high school and always keeping guard up to avoid getting attacked.	Intensive out-patient facility plus enrolling in community college	Decision to join the gang, gun charges, and running away
	Going to foster family and trying out college but immediately dropping out.	Final diagnosis but continued suffering and relapses plus failing college	Fight with murder victim leading to murder
<b>College Stories of Resilience</b>	Running away back to hometown and earning GED and driver's license	Changing major and enrolling in English class	In detention center awaiting sentencing and enrolled in first college class
	Enrolling in college and visiting immigration detention center	Feeling like a "survivor" and not a victim with a new purpose – fighting for juvenile justice reform	Continued participation in college classes and hopes for unknown future
	Struggling financially and worrying about staying focused and out of trouble		

I recognized that these initial codes were far from nuanced, but they gave me a starting point for identifying patterns across participants' stories. I decided that if I wanted to move away from overly general codes, I needed to take each individual story and identify patterns that it shared with other participants' stories. This stage in my analysis process felt a bit like putting together a jigsaw puzzle - I was searching for how each participant's stories within their individual narratives might fit together with the other participants' stories, and whether or not

patterns across participants' storied lives spoke directly to my research questions. Since I had developed the arc of each narrative around turning points in participants' lives after they hit their "breaking points", my initial, overly general codes highlighted participants' struggles and stories' that spoke to participants' resilience, just as I had done originally within the original interview transcripts (as identified in the chart above). I noted that most of the early stories that participants shared with me about their childhoods, although containing moments of hope and resilience, primarily focused on coping with a series of traumas and challenging familial relationships. Periods of engaging in imaginative practices were interspersed throughout those stories of struggle, but moments of hope and reflection became much more pronounced in participants' late teenage years as they first began to consider, in real terms, what their futures as adults might hold for them.

As I noted that each participant's narrative was constructed around a similar arc and that participants engaged in similar struggles, in a broad sense, during the same time periods within each of their lives, I started cutting up participants' narratives again and rearranging them into sections with similar themes: initially, I grouped stories of struggle together and stories of resilience together, but I realized that these codes were not nuanced enough in drawing clear connections between participants' storied lives. I decided to expand my codes to focus on participants' evaluations of the events in their lives as opposed to the events themselves, and so I nuanced the codes to focus on the helplessness participants felt throughout their early childhoods, the stories that showed how they tried to take control over their lives - often in unintentionally harmful ways, stories of them spiraling down into their breaking points, and stories of resilience through new imaginaries. These new codes helped me separate participants' narratives into the four chapters that are presented within this document as the study's findings :

1. Challenging Home Lives, 2. Trying to Get By, 3. Spiraling Down, and 4. New Imaginaries in the Face of Precarity.

	<b>Challenging Home Lives</b>	<b>Trying to Get By</b>	<b>Spiraling Down</b>	<b>New Imaginaries in the Face of Precarity</b>
<b>Alex</b>	No Puedo Ver Mas	You Gotta Be in Somebody's Home	I Have Nothing Right Now	The Struggle for a Good Life
<b>Audrey</b>	Enough Is Enough	Numbing the Pain	An Uphill Battle	I Found a Passion
<b>Nazir</b>	What Poverty Looks Like	Does Anybody Else Go Through This?	In Too Deep	Even Though I'm Down, I'm Not Out

Ultimately then, although my process for analyzing and restorying my data began with Labov's (1972) structural analysis, I also engaged in thematic analysis across stories to identify collective themes across participants' storied lives. By dividing participants' narratives into these four chapters that are organized around these collective themes, my hope is that this presentation of findings not only speaks back to the false narrative of college students as predominantly White, privileged individuals who are "breaking and entering" into foreign spaces when they engage in service learning, but that it also emphasizes just how thin the line between the lives of those behind bars and those outside of them can be.

### **3.12 Strategies for Validating Findings**

Narrative inquiry is "fluid inquiry, not a set of procedures or linear steps to be followed", and yet despite this, in order for this work to be understood as qualitative inquiry and not simply as fictionalized storytelling, it is essential for the researcher to ensure that the study is valid

(Clandinin, 2013, p. 33). Moreover, because this work requires “the researcher to collect extensive information about the participant and needs to have a clear understanding of the context of the individual’s life” in order to accurately capture and convey participants’ stories, collaboration with participants is an important aspect of validating the analysis (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Thus, in both the selection of participants and throughout the initial data analysis process, participants were given the opportunity to engage in member checking and to offer alternative perspectives to those rendered through my analysis.

Although Alex was not able to validate the final narrative shared here, I was able to triangulate his data by cross-checking his interviews with written artifacts including his online discussion board posts, his letter to me at the start of the semester, our email correspondence throughout the semester, and an essay he wrote about his experiences with prejudice. Additionally, all patterns and themes identified in all participants’ interviews and through field notes were cross-checked through a comparison of student artifacts and researcher-memos. Finally, because MAXQDA allowed me to transcribe data within each video-recorded interview as well as to generate reflective memos and codes that aligned to specific video clips, I also was able to cross-check my codes with original video and audio-recorded interviews in addition to the transcriptions, and so I ensured that the themes identified were present across all data sets.

### **3.12 Ethical Issues**

Narrative inquiry requires the researcher to collaboratively work with participants to “re-story” their accounts of events and experiences into a clear narrative, and so an ethical dilemma inherent in this line of inquiry is the role that the researcher’s own positionality and goals play in informing the restorying of narratives as well as in the owning the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because I was unable to engage in member checking with Alex, this notion

of story ownership became more acutely disconcerting since, by restorying Alex's life without his participation, I was taking complete ownership over his story rather than engaging in the collaborative co-authorship that I experienced with Nazir and Audrey. Consequently, as I engaged in numerous co-authored revisions of Audrey and Nazir's stories and learned more about each of them through our member checking meetings, I began to question whether or not it was ethical for me to share Alex's story without his collaboration throughout the analysis process. I questioned, and I still question, if this retelling is the version that Alex would want me to share, and I have been particularly concerned with ensuring that, despite his experiencing of numerous traumas, I do not paint a story of Alex that evokes pity or is suggestive of any deficits; for despite Alex's challenging lived experiences and his inability to finish our coursework together, Alex is one of the strongest students whom I have had the pleasure of working with, and, as Nazir shared with me during one of our interviews, just because he is currently down, it does not make him out.

In thinking through whether or not I should include Alex's story, I reminded myself that these stories are "dependent on the context of the teller and the listener; and are not intended to represent 'truth'" (Hunter, 2010). Thus, I have decided to include Alex's narrative in this study with full disclosure that it represents only my interpretation of his lived experiences and identities without any consultation from Alex as to the validity of this final interpretation. And although the analysis process for Alex is not what I had hoped it would be nor can I guarantee that it is what Alex would want me to share, I have decided that it is more unethical to eliminate his story from this study than it is to share my retelling of it. Students like Alex too often have their voices erased or depicted from a deficit framework, both of which fail to give space or depth of understanding for those college students like Alex who are existing in precarious spaces

and find themselves unable to continue with their studies. And so, despite recognizing that Alex's inclusion in this study raises ethical dilemmas about the authenticity and ownership of his narrative, I have decided that the ethical choice here is to share Alex's story with complete transparency about his story's limitations due to a lack of co-authorship with Alex.

Another ethical dilemma of this study is that, by sharing the events that led up to Nazir's taking of another person's life, I provide only Nazir's perspective on the events that led up to the crime, and this one-sided retelling perspective can be construed as painting the victim in an unfair or misrepresented light. It is for this reason that IRB protocol often suggests that studies involving incarcerated people do not discuss the crimes that occurred prior to participants' incarceration, and so I was left with a difficult decision about whether or not to include Nazir's stories leading up to the murder he committed. In speaking with colleagues, the juvenile detention center social worker, and Nazir, despite the ethical consequences of sharing Nazir's understanding of those events, I have decided to include his retelling of the events leading up to the murder since they are relevant to how Nazir sees himself and interacts with others, which aligns directly to this study's research questions and goals. In sharing these events as restoried accounts provided by Nazir, I acknowledge that this retelling does not take into account the victim's or the victim's family's perspective, and that these accounts are not represented here as "truth" but rather as Nazir's situated understanding of those events.

### **3.13 Limitations of the Study**

A major limitation to this study is the lack of co-authorship with Alex, for I have no doubt that working through the analysis of Alex's story with him would have generated new details and more depth to his story than I am able to provide here. Additionally, another limitation to this study is that the arc of my participants' stories that we have chosen to focus on

emphasizes their hardships and how, for two out of three participants, they saw critical service learning as helping them through those hardships. However, in telling that narrative, other stories are never shared - such as Audrey's early experiences around death, Nazir's experiences traveling to other countries that led him to dream of being an expeditionist, and Alex's desire to go back to the juvenile detention center to work with incarcerated youths. Thus, the stories represented here are limited in that they do not include all of the details shared by participants about their lives, but they instead focus on those details that connect directly to the arc of the narratives provided - those of struggle and resilience.

## **Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Narrative inquiry requires “an artistic meaning-making approach” to the representation of data, which Dr. Jeong-Hee Kim (2016) defines as “aesthetic play” (p. 84). I am drawn to this methodology not only because it provides a lens for making sense of participants' lived experiences and identities, but also because it provides me with the flexibility to reconstruct participants' stories in a manner that invites “...readers into conversation with the incidents, feelings, contingencies, contradictions, memories, and desires that our research stories depict” (Bochner, 2012, p. 158). Consequently, I have turned to creative nonfiction, a narrative research genre, for “mediating stories into being” by using “an imaginative approach to reporting that requires the skills of a storyteller and the research ability of a fact-finding reporter in order to write about facts in ways that bring the reader to an empathic understanding” (Kim, 2016, p. 140).

The stories depicted in this chapter then, “maintain fidelity to and honor the told stor[ies]” of participants through “the use of contextualized and vernacular language”, and these stories frequently contain embedded verbatim quotes from participants within them (Kim, 2016, p. 111). However, I have chosen to intentionally not differentiate between direct quotes and reconstructed language, for as Talese (1970), one of the first creative nonfiction journalists explains, creative nonfiction writing “should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere accumulation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form.” Consequently, in choosing not to differentiate direct quotes from reconstructed language in the retelling of participants’ narratives, I am encouraging readers to avoid focusing on “the rigid organizational style” of traditional qualitative findings so that they can, instead, engage their “narrative imaginations” by focusing on “what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have (Nussbaum, 1998, p. 11).

In keeping with this goal then, I provide the results of the narrative analysis process here as a series of first-person narratives told from the perspective of each of the study’s three participants. Each narrative has been divided into one of four chapters, and the stories within each chapter have been titled with the participant’s name along with a participant quote or overarching theme found within the narrative throughout the analysis process. My hope is that in presenting participants’ narratives in this format, readers can engage with participants’ stories with “empathy, passion, and compassion” that helps them to understand “not only the inner development but also the complexity and conflicts of human experience,” that are present throughout my participants’ storied lives (Kim, 2016, p. 128).

## 4.2 Part I: Challenging Home Lives

### Alex: No Puedo Ver Más

My mom and my dad both immigrated to America from Mexico before I was born, and so they raised us in a predominantly Spanish-speaking small city in Central New Jersey. As a child I grew up speaking Spanish in my house, watching TV in Spanish, and rarely hearing English. Even though I'm sure my older brother and sister must have learned English in school since they started before me, at home they only spoke in Spanish too, and so when I started elementary school, the school put me into ESL classes.

The city I'm from is mainly made up of residents from Mexico, Dominican Republic, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico, and most of the kids in my school were bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English. When the kids in school heard the way I pronounced English words with my Mexican accent, they made fun of me and said things like, "Oh you talk funny" which, as a little kid, made me feel insecure. My first few years of elementary school left me feeling badly about myself since I couldn't communicate in English well or without a thick Mexican accent, and over the years, as I continued to get picked on, instead of telling people about what was happening, I kept those feelings inside of me until they turned into feelings of anger. That anger intensified as I became a teenager, and rather than let it explode into fights in school, I started cutting classes, and then, eventually, I avoided school altogether and chose, instead, to hang out with other kids from the neighborhood who also skipped school.

During that time, when I was 13-years-old, ICE agents came to my house and arrested my dad. I never knew that my father was undocumented, and I watched completely confused and enraged as the agents took him away. Up until that point, both of my parents had been involved

in my siblings' and my life. They worked a lot in order to try and pay the bills, so they weren't around as much as some of my friends' parents were, but they still loved me and were always there for me when I needed them. But suddenly my dad was gone, removed completely from my life, and I didn't even know why he was taken from me. And once he was removed from our home, that was it. We never talked again on the phone or nothing. I later found out that he stayed in the detention center for two years, the one we visit for this class, but I never got to speak with him or visit him while he was detained there. I'm guessing my mom didn't want me to be involved with him at that point, maybe because of his charges, but I really don't know for sure if that is why we didn't visit him or speak to him. Looking back at it now, I wonder if my mom was also undocumented and that was why she was afraid to take us to visit him or communicate with him. Now that she's gone though, I guess I'll never know.

Since we lost all communication with my dad after he was arrested, I had no clue about what happened to him after that day other than being told by my mom that he was sent back to Mexico. Oddly enough though, years later, I learned more about my dad's experience from a friend of mine who was also detained at the same time and in the same facility as my dad. Through conversations about my friend's experience, we figured out that he knew my dad, and he told me that my dad was there for two years before being deported, which was a shock to me. Had I known where my dad was being held or for how long, I would have definitely tried to visit him during that time, but now I don't know where he is in Mexico, so there is no way for me to reach out to him. I've gone seven years now without speaking to my dad.

Once my dad left, I started feeling more depressed and hanging out with some kids that were known to be trouble, kids that hated school and did drugs. I rarely went to school, and I started smoking weed with my friends. But then, for my freshman year of high school, my mom

moved us out of the city and into this small, predominantly White town about 15-minutes away. And on the first day of school, I can still remember how this group of White students came up to me saying, “Hola. Como estas?” and I just looked up at them and said, “What?”

They responded, “Oh, you speak English!” in shock, like they couldn’t imagine that a Mexican-American kid could speak English. And that was just the start of the racism I experienced there.

It was an all-White town, and they did not like people like me or really anyone that wasn’t like them. I can remember another time when I started working part-time for this taxi company, and I became friends with a taxi driver from Pakistan. He drove me home one day, and people who were stopped at the light next to us rolled down their windows and yelled at us, “Go back to your country! We don’t want you here!” It was crazy! I mean I was born here, so what country did they want me to go back to?

At the same time that I was feeling depressed, experiencing racism, and not doing well in school, my mom, who suffered from diabetes since I was about 10-years-old, started to have more and more health problems. There were times when her blood pressure would spike and then suddenly she’d go blind and couldn’t see. I remember her telling me one time, “No puedo ver más!” - I can’t see no more!

I kept asking her, “¿Qué quiere decir? ¿Qué quiere decir?” - “What do you mean?”

She replied, “Todo que veo es realmente borroso!” - “All I see is really blurry,” and then it got to the point where she couldn’t even walk. Just walking would get her tired, so she couldn’t work anymore, and she was just home all day. She went to the hospital when it would get really bad, but we didn’t have health insurance, so at the point that she tried to get help, the diabetes

was so bad that she just passed away in the hospital. She passed away when I was 15, and I still remember the funeral because it was three days after my birthday.

### **Audrey: Enough Is Enough**

My mom grew up in a wealthy suburban community where she never wanted for anything, and when she was 22-years-old and still living with her parents, she became pregnant with my older sister. My dad decided to move into my grandparents' house with my mom, and so my grandparents, mom, dad, and sister all lived together in that house until I was born. Pretty soon into the relationship, my mom hated my dad, but she accidentally became pregnant with me a few years after my sister was born, so my parents tried to stay together and make it work.

Honestly, it was a terrible life. Once I was born, my parents bought a house for the four of us to live in, but my dad always lived downstairs in the basement and then my mom, sister, and I lived in the main and upstairs floors of the house. When my sister was 8-years-old she was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and so my mom quit working and became a stay-at-home mom to take care of my sister and me. My mom and dad fought constantly, and my dad often became physically abusive towards my mom. My sister tried to shield me from the abuse by pushing me into a different room when my parents would start to fight, but despite not witnessing it directly, I knew that my dad was harming my mom.

In an attempt to avoid the abuse, my mom stayed away from my dad as much as possible, but she couldn't avoid going into the basement to do the laundry from time to time, and that was when my dad would become the most aggressive since he knew he had her to himself. My dad would throw my mom onto the ground and punch her, and he was always smart about where he hit her so that the bruises and marks from the abuse could easily be hidden. In addition to being physically abusive, my dad was also emotionally abusive - he was possessive of my mom and

didn't want her to leave the house or have any friends. I can still recall how he would walk by her and spit in her face almost daily, and so I grew up knowing that my dad was hurting my mom and that my parents hated one another.

My parents finally decided to get divorced when I was ten-years-old, and so my father initially moved out of the house into a friend's house, and then he moved from place to place until eventually settling in with his parents. My sister, mom, and I stayed in our house, but my parents' divorce became a spiteful battle over custody of my sister and me, with my dad fighting for full custody just to spite my mom. The divorce took a major toll on my mom's mental health and left us struggling financially, and once it was finalized, the custody arrangement that was made had us living full-time with my mom and then having supervised visits with my dad every Sunday at a diner for about an hour. My mom had to sell our home, and so we moved into a two-bedroom apartment and set the living room up as a private bedroom for me so that my mom, sister, and I could each have our own private space within the new house.

Soon after my parents' divorce when I was in the sixth grade and 11-years-old, I started to experience severe stomach pains and bowel issues, and at first my family and doctors weren't sure what was wrong with me. They tested me for every type of stomach problem out there, and finally one test came back positive for salmonella poisoning. Unfortunately though, because my salmonella poisoning went untreated for a while before being diagnosed, I ended up developing Irritable Bowel Syndrome, which left me continuing to struggle with stomach pains even after I no longer had salmonella poisoning. Because of these pains, by 7th grade I had to go on home instruction, so I no longer attended school and teachers would visit me at my home in the afternoon to try and keep me on track. It was difficult because even though the teachers were nice, it was clear that they felt badly for me, so they didn't push me as hard as they would have if

I were a regular student in school, and so I learned a lot less than my peers did at that time. I also started to see lots of different doctors and specialists, but each doctor told me, “Oh, you’re fine because there’s nothing showing up in your blood tests” or they just flat out didn’t believe me and thought the symptoms I was experiencing were made up. It was horrible not getting any answers, but I tried to live my life as normally as possible.

When I entered 8th grade, I started having terrible leg pains on top of my stomach problems, and my knee caps kept popping out of their sockets. I went to numerous specialists for this new condition, but, again, none of them believed me, and they all suggested that I was faking the pain since they couldn’t find anything physically wrong with me. It was terrible to not be believed, but I am thankful that my mother, sister, and my general practitioner continued to fight for me and look for doctors who could help identify what was wrong with me.

In addition to struggling with my physical pain, life at home with my mom also became unbearable. After my parents’ divorce was finalized, my mom never got a job, and she depended on my nana to pay the bills for us, which my nana did. My nana gave us enough money to make sure we had a roof over our heads and food in the fridge, but as my grandpa became ill, my nana’s money had to go towards his medical expenses, and so there were times when we were barely getting by financially and had to struggle to make every penny last. At the same time, my mom used her newfound freedom from my dad to start partying at night, and when I was 13-years-old, she moved her alcoholic boyfriend into our apartment after only one week of dating each other. He also did not have a job, so they both stayed home all day and spent most of their time drinking and fighting with one another.

On the morning of my sister’s junior prom, my mom never arrived home, and we learned that my mom had been arrested for driving while under the influence of alcohol, but even this

didn't stop her from continuing to party. My nana paid a lawyer to bail my mom out, and the charge was dropped, so even though my mom and her boyfriend finally split up, my mom continued to lie in bed all day and party at night, and it got to the point where my sister and I would come home from school to find the house filthy with no food in the fridge, no clean dishes, and our bills going unpaid.

When I was 15-years-old, my sister, who was 17 at the time, moved her older boyfriend into our home to help pay the bills, and once he started helping out financially, we decided that enough was enough. We packed up my mom's stuff and told her she had to get out of the apartment and that she wouldn't be allowed back in until she started either contributing financially or, at the very least, contributing by helping keep the apartment clean. My mom left and moved in with my nana for a few months, and slowly, over time, she stopped partying and drinking, and she apologized to us for her behavior. After my nana vouched for my mom by saying that she truly had stopped drinking, we decided to let her back into the apartment, and, at least initially, my mom did her part to keep the house clean.

### **Nazir: What Poverty Looks Like**

I grew up on a little two-way street on an impoverished block in the city with a few abandoned houses on it and where babies walk around barefoot every day in their Pampers. It's hard to describe how broken down it is - it is pretty much what poverty looks like. As a child I was one of those babies walking the streets, covered in dirt, playing with animals and climbing trees. I wasn't aware that I was one of the dirty kids, and I didn't care about having nice clothes or how I looked. In school we had uniforms, so nobody noticed that I didn't have nice, clean clothes, and it wasn't until the sixth grade when we had dress-down days that kids started making fun of me, and I realized how dirty I was and how horrible my clothes were.

From a young age I was hyperactive, and my mom and grandmom noticed that I could never sit still or pay attention for long stretches of time. My mom was frustrated with my inability to focus, so she and my grandma took me to the hospital where I was diagnosed with ADHD and, soon after, put on medication. I took the medication every day until the age of 13, and it helped me to focus in school even though it also made me drowsy and move more slowly than I was used to moving. I'm not sure if it was because of the medication or just my personality, but in school I never felt comfortable talking to new people or making new friends, so I tended to be quiet unless I was around kids I knew from my block or around my cousins, and I tried to keep to myself.

Throughout those years up until the age of ten, I lived in my grandparents' house with my grandmom and grandpop, my mom, my aunts and uncles, and my cousins. My grandparents are actually my mother's grandparents and my great-grandparents, but for me they were like my real parents, and I called them grandma and grandpa. They moved to the city from Florida over fifty years ago, and when they first moved there, the city didn't have the drug or violence problems that it has today. Over the years though, the city fell apart and became drug and gang-ridden, and my grandparents' children - my real grandparents - became addicted to crack. My uncles and one of aunts also became addicted to crack, and so my grandparents took in everyone in the family who needed a place to stay, and that included their children, grandchildren, and me, their great-grandchild. And since I was the baby, to them I was the golden child, and they loved to take care of me.

When I was little, my grandmom bought me a puppy, and having my puppy really opened my eyes to thinking about animals and appreciating all the love they give and how smart they are. Lots of people think that animals are mindless creatures, but after having many pets, I

know that animals of all species have intellectual abilities that make them special. So from the time I was little, I loved spending time with and rescuing animals, and I could often be found crawling under people's cars in the rain to grab stray cats and bring them in the house to stay dry from the storms. To this day just talking about animals puts a smile on my face, and they are a real getaway from the stressors in my life.

My grandpop understood my love of animals, and he would take me to the zoo or the pet store when he could. Soon after getting my dog, my grandpop bought me a rabbit, and over time I done had pretty much every species out there including dogs, cats, rabbits, a snake, fish, frogs, and lizards. I remember when I wanted to get a crocodile, my grandpop was like, "Yeah, we can't have that", so instead he took me to the zoo and bought me a green iguana.

My grandmom also was there for me in different ways, such as taking care of me when I was sick, making me meals, and buying me anything I needed when my mom couldn't afford to. After sixth grade when I decided I wanted to look nicer, my grandparents helped me buy more expensive clothes to stop being picked on because of the way I dressed. I also got my first haircut at the age of 14, and I started to put a lot more effort into looking good. Whereas my cousins and friends got involved on the streets selling drugs to make money, I never had to get involved in any of that because my grandparents bought me whatever I needed. I guess you could say that my grandparents are really the ones who raised me.

Even though I had a close relationship with my grandparents, my relationship with the rest of my family was a bit rocky. For the first nine years of my life, I was my mom's only child, and since my mom is bipolar, one minute she'd be loving me and then the next minute she'd be telling me to get away from her and that she hates me. My Dad was in and out of jail throughout my childhood, but when he was out, he tried the best he could to be there for me. My uncles also

lived in the house with us, and they would come home drunk and high a lot and get into fights with my aunts, which could get violent. My real grandma - my mom's mother - is a crackhead, and so are a bunch of my uncles and aunts who lived in the house with us. So, yeah, I loved living with my grandparents, but I also witnessed a lot of drug use and domestic violence while living there and struggled to get along with my mom and my cousins, who always made me feel like I didn't fit in because I wasn't advanced in the streets like they were.

When I was ten, my mom married my step-dad and before we knew it, I had four other siblings - first my sister, then my brother, then another brother, and then a cousin of mine that my mom adopted. At first I didn't like my stepdad because I felt like he was stealing my mom from my dad, but as I got older, I appreciated him more. He never tried to be a father-figure to me or replace my dad, but he did try to be a role model for me, and we got along. Soon after they got married, my grandparents bought my mom a house across the street, so we moved into that house. My mom was always worried about the little ones, so once we moved I felt like I was never getting her attention. I ended up taking on a lot of responsibilities with my siblings, like changing diapers and taking them to school and back. At the time, it felt like my main job was getting peed on, and I hated it, but thinking of it now makes me miss it. Anyway, even though I loved being with my siblings, since my mom and I weren't getting along much, I tried to stay with my dad when he was out of jail or with my grandparents whenever I could. Sometimes my dad would pick me up to stay with him, and my mom would tell me I could go. But then when I'd come home, my mom would say stuff like, "Oh, you have fun with that man?", and the way she'd say it, it was clear that she hated me going to my dad's and was mad at me for enjoying myself there.

As I got older, not only did I find myself struggling at home with my mom and fighting with my cousins, who, by that point had become gang-affiliated, but I also found that school wasn't any easier than home. Because my cousins were in a gang and had beef with lots of other kids from different sections of the city, I was associated with them, and I started getting into more and more fights with kids in school. By the age of 13, I decided to stop taking my ADHD medication, and so I also stopped paying attention in classes and barely completed any of the required assignments. I showed up to school physically, but I stopped being mentally present. I was close to failing out, so my mom had me put into a special program for kids struggling with behavioral issues one summer where the teachers tried to help me catch up academically and learn how to control my behavior. The staff and teachers there showed that they really cared about me; I would show up with little marks on my body from the fights I was getting into at home and on the streets, and they would ask about what happened to me and make sure I wasn't hurt and was okay. It was a good program, and I appreciated that the teachers cared about me, but it only lasted for the summer, and when I returned to school I continued to struggle.

#### **4.3 Part II: Trying to Get By**

##### **Alex: You Gotta Be in Somebody's Home**

When my mom passed away, my brother was 18-years-old and my sister was 20-years-old, so they could stay anywhere they wanted, but since I was 15, I wasn't allowed to live on my own. I also was failing high school again and was going to have to repeat a grade, and so I decided that I didn't want foster care and I didn't want high school; I wanted to be back in my old city, where I used to live before everything had gotten so crazy. So when I was 15, after my mom died, I ran away. I went back to my old city, and I lived there, homeless, for about three months. Being homeless was hard, but at least I had my freedom. There were lots of days where

I didn't have anything to eat. Sometimes I asked people for money, and sometimes I stole to get by. Even trying to find a safe place to sleep was a challenge because I wanted to avoid getting picked up by the police and sent to foster care. So since I had nowhere safe to sleep, I just slept on porches. I looked for houses that were on quiet streets, houses where I imagined it would be unlikely for someone to pass by and try and harm me, you know do something to me while I was sleeping. And when I found a house that seemed safe, I would sit up on the porch, lean my head against the house, and go to sleep. And that's how I slept every night for close to three months.

While I was homeless, I still had some friends in the city who I would occasionally hang with. So this one day, I hadn't eaten nothing, and I was really broke, and so I went to my friend's house hoping to get some food. I don't remember why he and his family all left the house for a bit, but they did, and so I went into his parents' room and saw that they had this laptop sitting there, and I took it. I ran out of the house with it while they were all gone, and I went to a pawn shop where I sold it for \$300.00. I know it was wrong to do, but at the time I felt really happy like, "Oh I got money on me now, so I can finally go eat", and so I went to eat and even paid my phone bill.

But then, as I was walking down the street, I seen a lot of cops, and I guess they had a description of me because the second they saw me they stopped me. They said, "You was the one who stole this laptop," and I was like, "Nah, what you talkin' about? I don't even got a laptop." They kept insisting that I had taken the laptop, but since I no longer had it on me, they didn't have any proof. With no evidence to link me to the laptop, they knew they couldn't charge me for stealing, so instead they said they could take me into the station because I was underage and on the streets. They said, "You gotta be in somebody's house. You can't be out on the streets, so either you find a place to go right now, or we're taking you in." So I tried to think of

someone I knew nearby, and the first person I thought of was this girl that I didn't know that well, but I remembered that her parents had always been really nice to me. The police took me to her house, and the parents said I could stay there. But then, as soon as the police left, the parents started asking me questions about why the police brought me over and what was going on, and so I left their house and went back on the streets. I slept outside that night, but the next day the same cops saw me outside, and so they picked me up and sent me to the juvenile detention center.

My friend's family tried to charge me for stealing the laptop while I was in the detention center, but since they didn't have any evidence, the charges were dismissed. At first I didn't mind being locked up there because, the way I saw it, at least I had food to eat, a bed to sleep in - I mean it was better than being outside. A lot of people at the detention center hated the food there, but I liked the food because they gave us a lot. Every day they would give us breakfast, a little snack, lunch, another little snack, dinner, and then another little snack before bed. I remember feeling so full at the end of the day, and I had never felt that way before, so the food made me so happy!

The part I hated about the detention center was having to keep my guard up. There are people in those places that just want to bug you, and if you let yourself get pushed around by them then you become a target. So I always had to have my guard up - I had to be prepared to get jumped all the time because if I was prepared, I knew I wouldn't get my ass whooped. But living that way was hard, and since we were all caged up together and I always had to prove that I was tough, I had to get into a lot of fights. The same was true about the group home I stayed in - after they couldn't charge me for stealing, they placed me in a group home. The kids in the group home were just as tough as the kids in the detention center, so I also had to be tough there, which

meant I had to stand my ground and fight kids to show that they couldn't mess with me. And whenever I would fight in the group home, I'd then land back in the juvenile detention center.

Another problem with both the juvenile detention center and the group home was the school work. It was like little kids' work, and I hated it. So once I was 16, I decided to drop out of school altogether. Once I stopped attending school, I was bored a lot and started getting into more fights with other kids there, and so the group home kicked me out and sent me to a stricter group home for kids who fight a lot. In this new group home, kids who didn't go to school were forced to stay in the house all day, with the exception of one 30-minute period in which we could be outside, but even then, we were supervised. I hated being caged up in that house, so I decided to start taking GED classes in an adult learning center nearby just so that I could get out of there.

Once I signed up for classes, the group home staff dropped me off at the center for classes and then picked me up once the classes were over. I attended classes for a few weeks, but I really missed having freedom. I felt like, "Man, I'm tired of being in school. Like I'm in school and then I go back to my program. I never get to just walk around and be free. And I was like, yo, I'm tired of this!", and so after a week or so of classes, I decided I would rather walk around the town than go to class. So the group home van would drop me off for classes, and once it left, I just walked around outside until the time when the van was scheduled to pick me back up. That went on for a few months, and it felt great to have that time to walk around and be free. But then the group home staff found out I had been cutting classes, and they were so mad at me that they sent me back to the juvenile detention center.

### **Audrey: Numbing the Pain**

Although I didn't have to have home instruction while in high school, my grades were rocky because I continued to struggle with my stomach and joint pain, and in my junior year of

high school, I also developed chronic MRSA in my eye, which led me to be hospitalized on 16 different occasions. At one point, the infection was so severe that it took over my entire eye to the point where it was completely swollen shut, my skin turned purple, and if the infection hadn't been treated, I was told that I could have ended up brain dead from the spreading of the infection into my brain. During these hospital stays, I had to be quarantined, and I hated being separated from everybody else. I remember feeling a lot of pity for myself until one day when I saw a young boy walking around and overheard the nurse say that the boy had been in the hospital for years and that he was basically going to live there forever. Hearing that suddenly changed my perspective because I realized that even though I was quarantined and had health problems, at least, at the end of the day, I was going to get to go home. I guess it made me realize that despite everything I was going through, I was still lucky to not have a health challenge so severe that it would cause me to be hospitalized indefinitely.

When I wasn't in the hospital, I tried my best to attend school as much as possible, and I made a few close friends. One of the people I became friends with was a boy, Keith, who was a student in my Spanish class with me and who was also going through a difficult time in life. His dad was an avid cocaine user who regularly brought back prostitutes to his house, and his mom had moved to Florida with some rich 80-year-old man where she and her husband lived in an enormous ocean-front property. Keith was constantly tossed back and forth between both of his parents, and he had a lot of anger directed towards them. One day Keith and I made plans to study Spanish together at his house, but once over there, he ended up raping me. Afterwards, I didn't know what to do. My mom was still an emotional mess, and I didn't feel comfortable talking to her about what had happened to me, so I only told one person - my best friend. After I told him, he begged me to go to the police, but I just said no.

Soon after the rape, I started to fall into a depression and my physical health continued to deteriorate. Then, the following year, one of my closest guy friends and my older sister attended a house party together where everyone was drinking beer, and my friend was also on steroids and in a crazy drug and alcohol-induced roid rage. At the party, he ended up raping my sister. My sister, unlike me, decided to go to the police to press charges, but it turned out that the house where the rape occurred was owned by a police officer. The police officers my sister spoke with at the station wanted to protect the owner of the home, their fellow officer, so they threatened my sister by telling her that if she pressed charges, they would press charges on her since she was 18-years-old and the oldest person at a party where drugs and alcohol were present. My sister was scared, and so she left the station and never pressed charges.

Everything got worse from there because rumors quickly spread throughout our high school that my sister had lied about being raped. I ended up confiding in my sister by telling her what had happened to me in hopes that it would help her cope with her own rape, but the kids at school were cruel to her, and her rapist started following her through the hallways every day. The torment became so awful that she ended up leaving school to be homeschooled for a while. I stayed at the high school and did my best to defend my sister, but it wasn't easy. Because of my chronic MRSA infections and chronic leg pain, I had been prescribed opioids, and I can recall taking them and thinking, "Oh, wow! These make me feel good!" because not only did they help with my physical pain, but they also numbed my emotional pain. I think my physical health issues coupled with both my sister's and my sexual assault led me to start struggling mentally as well, and soon I started abusing my prescriptions and taking multiple pills a day to help me numb the pain.

At the same time, my mom became concerned that I was suffering from depression, so she brought me to the doctor and asked if they could put me on an antidepressant. I didn't want to take the medication that my doctor prescribed, but my mom forced me to take it, and I ended up spiraling down into a really dark place. I began to take more and more opioids and also started buying Xanax bars off of my best friend, who had become a drug dealer. Since I was abusing my prescriptions, I would run out of my pills early, and so I started crushing and snorting the pills to make them last longer. My addiction to the pills got worse and worse, and at one point I got up to taking fifteen 10-milligram Percocets at a time and over sixty pills a day.

The drugs coupled with the antidepressant made me act like an entirely different, terrible person - I had insane highs and lows, would start screaming for no reason, and would shift between being a strung out zombie to being a screaming emotional wreck. My sister's and my relationship fell apart because of my addiction, and at one point I almost drowned in the bathtub because I had taken too many pills before going into the bath, so I ended up passing out in the bathtub with the water still running. My mom realized something was wrong when she saw water on the floor and I wasn't responding to her, so she had to break down the bathroom door, and luckily she was able to get me out of the tub before my face was entirely submerged in the water.

After my near-drowning, my mom knew that I was abusing my medication, so she started monitoring my pills and keeping them hidden under her pillowcase. She didn't tell anyone about my addiction because she was worried that if the doctors knew, they would stop treating me and that I wouldn't get the medical help I needed. Even though my mom was monitoring my pills, I knew where she was hiding them, so I snuck pills from her when she wasn't around, and I continued to buy Xanax bars and additional opioids off of my friend.

On Christmas morning of my junior year of high school, I woke up thinking that I was out of pills, and so I had an enormous mental breakdown throughout the house. Soon after, I found some pills in the house, but my sister, who knew I had been abusing drugs, had enough with my addiction, and so she went to my mom screaming that I was high and that she was going to call my dad and tell him about how I had been abusing pills. I didn't want my sister to be the one to tell my dad, so I picked up the phone and called him myself while my mom stood by my side. During the phone call, I ended up telling my dad everything about my addiction to the pills, and I also told him about being raped.

### **Nazir: Does Anybody Else Go Through This?**

When I was 14-years-old, I started to spend as much time as possible at my grandparents' house. My grandmom was diagnosed with lung cancer and put on a breathing machine, and so I tried to help out around the house and take care of her and my grandpop. My uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandma still lived there too, and there were some hard moments with them because of their crack addictions. Being around adults who are crackheads made me, as a kid, have to be the adult. There were times where I had to lend my grandma money, and I can remember giving her \$50 and having to tell her, "You better not buy no crack with that." I can't put into words how awful it felt to have to talk to my mom's mother that way, to treat her like a little kid, but I had no choice. On another occasion, when I was 14, I ended up getting into a fight with my uncle because he decided to start smoking crack in the hallway right near my grandmom who was sitting on the couch with her breathing machine on. My cousin and I told him to stop smoking around her and to go into his room to smoke, but he was high and angry, so he irrationally said, "Don't tell me what to do." My cousin then tried to push him up the stairs to his room, and my uncle swung to punch him, but he ended up punching me instead. Once I get hit, I can't always

stop myself from reacting, and so after that me and my cousin ended up jumping my uncle, and we whooped his ass. I felt horribly that day, and I can still remember thinking after the beating how much I didn't want to be a part of my family. I thought, "Does anybody else go through this with their family?" because it all felt so overwhelming, and I questioned why my life had to be this way.

Because I was spending so much time at my grandparents' house, sometimes I would go weeks without seeing my mom, and so my mom would get upset and say, "since you're always over there, why don't you just live there?" I would have loved to live there, but the house was full, and so when my dad got out of jail, I decided to go stay with him to avoid the constant fighting between my mom and me. I actually was doing well living with my father and staying out of trouble, but my mom decided that she didn't like me living there and wanted me back. My mom always wanted to control me, and instead of letting me pick myself up and start doing well, once she saw I was having a good time with my dad, she came and got me. But once I moved back in with her, everything just kept getting worse between us. When I was 15, my dad got locked up again, and at the same time my grandparents started to get sick more often and were slowing down. I wanted to be there for my grandparents, so I spent a lot of time with them and tried to take care of them. I also started spending more time with my cousins, especially the one closest in age to me, who was heavily involved in a neighborhood gang. Because I grew up watching my relatives on crack, I told him I'd never get involved in selling drugs, but he didn't give up on trying to get me involved on the streets. His favorite quote to say to me was, "We all was born with nothin', but it's up to you if you gonna remain broke." After a while, I started listening to him, and I saw him as a sort of mentor. Since I didn't want to sell drugs, I decided to get involved in a different way. Everyone has a different position in the gang, and the beginner

position is fighting for the 'hood whenever there is a rumble where nobody wanted guns involved. So I started as a beginner in the position of fighter, but then soon after I moved up to my cousin's level, and that involved guns. The gang gave me a gun, and it's strange to say it, but it made me feel good to have it, like I finally had a little bit of power in my life. For the first time, I felt secure and safe because I knew I had that protection. At the same time, I was only 15, so I didn't understand the magnitude of what I was getting myself into.

I started bringing my gun with me everywhere I went since it gave me that feeling of security, and I ended up involved in three different gang shoot-outs, with one shoot out resulting in me getting a gun charge for a gun found in a nearby garbage can. Luckily though, my cousin's friend took the charge, so my case was dismissed. Then, that same year when I was 15-years-old, I got another gun charge for bringing two guns with me to school. My high school was in a dangerous neighborhood, and fights broke out there all the time, so I brought my guns with me to school for protection. However, that day, my girlfriend and I got into a fight in school, and during the fight a security guard nearby heard her bring up the two guns that I had on me. I was charged for having the guns, and that charge resulted in a suspended sentence which basically meant that if I got in trouble again I'd face a minimum of 18 months in jail, but if I stayed clear of any problems with the law, the charge would expire in two years when I was 17-years-old.

During that same time, my relationship with my mom started to fall apart. My mom didn't get along with my grandmom, so they would get into fights a lot, and I would always take my grandmom's side, which upset my mom. Then things started to escalate between my mom and I, and they got physical. During one fight, my mom hit me from behind, and my gut response was to defend myself, so I turned around and swung at her without realizing what I was doing. My mom went crazy after I hit her, and so she started swinging at me, and then she grabbed a

burning hot pot off the stove and started hitting me with it. I didn't want to hurt her, so I just tried to hold off her attacks and blocked her with my arms, but after being burned a couple of times by the pot, I couldn't handle it anymore, and so I decided to run away.

I ran to the west side of the city where my oldest cousin's girlfriend was kind enough to give me a room to stay in. She didn't require me to pay rent, but I didn't feel comfortable staying for free, so I started washing cars, cleaning backyards, and working with my uncle, who had an under the table job as a maintenance man, to make extra cash so I could pay her \$125 a month for the room. I ended up dating her daughter and becoming best friends with her son too, so life felt good there, and I no longer had to deal with all the stress that being with my mom and around my cousins brought me.

At first I continued going to school despite having run away from home, but one day I saw my mom pull up to the school looking for me, so I stopped attending school altogether. I still would walk over to my grandparents' house to check in on them and help around the house, but I avoided my mom, and I also stayed away from my cousin and the gang. My girlfriend gave me an ultimatum, telling me she couldn't be with someone who was getting into that type of trouble, so I listened to her and chilled with her away from it all. But after about three months of living on the west side of the city, my grandpop came by and told me that he needed to bring me to the police because I had a truancy charge that had resulted in the police putting out a warrant for my arrest. Because of the existing gun charge I had, I knew that I had to take the truancy charge seriously, and so my grandpop dropped me off at the police station, and the cops told me that the warrant wasn't serious but that I had to go back to my mom's house and attend school again in order to stay out of trouble with the law.

After I left the police station, I went back home, and I just tried to avoid my mom as much as possible. I still went to my grandparents' house a lot to do little chores like the dishes and sweeping since nobody would want to be in that dirty house the way it was, and I'd spend time with my siblings when I could. I would bring my siblings to school and back and hang out with them at times, but then I'd be out.

#### **4.4 Part III: Spiraling Down**

##### **Alex: I Have Nothing Right Now**

I was locked up again in the juvenile detention center, this time for close to a year, but then a few months before my 18th birthday the Department of Human Services found a foster family to take me in. Both they and I knew that I'd only be living with them for a few months since I was so close to turning 18, but they didn't want me sitting around all day doing nothing, so they registered me for classes here, at our college. I didn't even have a high school diploma, so I'm not sure how they got me registered, but, mind you, I knew I was about to be 18 and had no interest in taking college classes, so soon after getting dropped off at the college and entering the classroom, I just walked right out. I can still remember the professor talking to the class and me just getting up in the middle of him talking and walking right out the door.

I got in trouble once I came back to the house, but I didn't care. What were they gonna do; make me go to school? I told them that I don't like school, and I'm gonna leave once I turn 18 anyway, so after that, they were like, "All right, do whatever you like." So I just bid my time at that house, and then as soon as I turned 18, I packed my bags, left the foster family and came back to my home city, where I grew up.

I had spent years dreaming of freedom, of no longer being treated like a caged animal who had no control over where he went or what he did. But, suddenly, I had that freedom, and

for the first time I realized that freedom means nothing if you don't got a plan. I didn't have a place to sleep, nonetheless a plan for what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I had spent so much time just trying to survive, that I hadn't even thought about what I'd do with my life if I actually made it out of the system.

Once I arrived in the city, I didn't even have a plan set up for where I would stay, so I reached out to a friend who said I could stay at his house for a little while. I brought my bags over to his house, sat down on the couch, and then it suddenly hit me: I literally sat down and thought, damn, I have nothing right now. I was 18-years-old, I had no driver's license, no high school diploma, no job, no money, and no future. I realized that I had made it this far, but I had no plan now that I was finally on my own.

### **Audrey: An Uphill Battle**

After that phone call, my parents weren't sure what to do with me, so they decided to put me into an intensive six-hour-per-day out-patient program. It turned out that I was allergic to the antidepressant medication that I had been prescribed, so the doctors took me off of the medication, and the program monitored my other medicines until I was stable emotionally. There were aspects of the program that I hated, like when we had to finger paint, which made me feel like I was being treated like a little child. But, overall, it was a good program because I stopped abusing my pills, learned how to talk about my feelings, and opened up about some of my past struggles, and so it helped pull me out of my depression and become more emotionally stable.

Because of all of my absences, I struggled throughout high school, but I did manage to graduate, and soon after, I enrolled here at Central Community College. Initially I registered as a biology major and started taking classes, but my physical health continued to deteriorate, and on top of my stomach problems, my joint problems became more and more severe. By the time I

turned 19-years-old, the joint problems in my knees became so crippling that I could no longer walk at all, and I became wheelchair bound. I continued to try and seek medical help, but each doctor I saw could not find anything wrong with me nor could they give me a diagnosis. One doctor at a top local research hospital even told me I was crazy and that all he could do was offer me pain medication to ease my discomfort. Thankfully though, on a visit to the ER, a nurse practitioner heard my symptoms and believed me when I described what I was going through, and so she recommended that I see a friend of hers, a rheumatologist, and she even gave me his personal cell phone number. I was able to schedule an appointment with the rheumatologist the following morning, and when he met with me, he immediately noticed my double-jointedness and said, “Oh, you have Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome”, and he sent me to the ER to get admitted and get officially diagnosed by a geneticist.

I can’t even begin to describe how good it felt to have someone believe me and acknowledge that the symptoms I was experiencing were real, and I learned that my Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which is a genetic connective tissue disorder that makes joint pain and dislocations really common, was the reason that I couldn’t walk. I also learned that in addition to Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, I also have Chronic Regional Pain Disorder, a neurological condition that causes me to have severe nerve pain down my inner thighs and into my legs.

My chronic MRSA condition, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, and Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome are not curable, and the pain from them along with frequent doctors’ visits and hospital stays persisted as I continued with my college career. Because the only support doctors can provide for me is pain management, and because my doctors are unaware of my past struggle with pills, the doctors continued to prescribe opioids to me, and although my mom manages my prescription, during my first few years of college I still struggled with my addiction issues on top

of trying to manage my physical pain, and so I would relapse at times by continuing to abuse my prescribed pills and even buying more pills off of my friend. Whenever I would try to succeed in my college classes, my health coupled with my addiction would make me fail. I began to miss lots of classes, just like I had in middle and high school, and I started to feel unmotivated. Before I knew it, I was 21-years-old and despite having spent three years in college, my GPA was a 1.0 and I was far from earning the 60 credits needed to graduate with an associate's degree. I began to lose all ambition for college, and my depression started to creep back into my life.

Then, a few weeks before our class started, I decided to take three Xanax bars before going out to a bar with some friends, and that night, I was a drugged out mess, and one of my friends had to hold me up the entire night since I could barely keep my eyes open. My friends didn't know about my drug problems, and so the next morning they showed me pictures of myself from the night before, and I felt mortified. I had always used drugs in solitude, so having my friends see me strung out on drugs in public like that was embarrassing. It made me realize just how out of control my life had become.

### **Nazir: In Too Deep**

Once I moved back home, I saw that my life was going downhill fast, so I decided to make plans to move down South to live with my aunt in North Carolina. My aunt lives in a middle class, safe neighborhood that I used to visit in the summers, and I knew that if I moved there, I might be able to get a fresh start in life. I wasn't allowed to move until after my gun charge expired, so I decided to try and bide my time for a few more months at my mom's until the spring when my gun charge would be dismissed and I could go have a new life with my aunt.

Being back home though meant that I was also back around my cousin, and I ended up caught back up with him and the gang because I didn't know how to avoid the peer pressure. In

the 'hood where I'm from, there's a lot of peer pressure going on and even if you want to stay away from it, once you're associated with people in a gang, there's no way to stay away from fighting. The way it is is that my cousins would do something, and because everyone is related or close friends, I was then automatically associated with their activities, so I kept having to get into fights for being in the wrong neighborhood or because of something my cousins did. Like my cousin might fight someone, for instance, and even though I had nothing to do with the fight, the person my cousin fought would then want to fight me. So I kept getting into fights, and one of the fights resulted in me fighting this guy's cousin after the cousin started trying to fight me. Well after I fought this guy's cousin, the guy was upset and repeatedly threatened to shoot and kill me. The crazy thing about it was that his cousin and I actually started talking in school, and we became chill, but it didn't stop this guy from coming at me.

At first I didn't take his threats seriously because he was from a gang that wasn't known for shooting. I tried to talk sense into him and told him that my crew doesn't even beef with his crew, so he should stop coming at me and let it go. But he kept coming at me on social media, and then one day when I was with my little brother, he pulled up on me in a car and flashed a gun at me, and so I grabbed my little brother and ran away. Then the guy sent me a video of him with his gun and said that I was lucky I ran away because he was gonna put two bullets in my six-year-old brother and two bullets in me.

Once he came at me and my brother with a gun, I knew it had gotten out of control, and so I told my mom about it, but her words were to just go to school and stay in the house. She didn't understand how deep it was, and when I complained to her, well, she had her other kids so she just told me to ignore it, think for myself, and be responsible. I also talked to my grandparents about the situation, and they wanted me to call the cops, but I knew I couldn't do

that because then things could have gotten even worse. What a lot of people don't understand who tell you to go for help is that I watched people go for help from the cops, and those people not only didn't get any help, but they ended up killed. I knew if I went to the cops, not only would I be called a rat and a snitch, but then everyone would be off to get me, even my closest friends. The way they see it is if I'm willing to go to the cops for help, then I also may be willing to rat them out, so going to the cops is an automatic death sentence.

Since I couldn't go to the cops and the problem just didn't go away like my mom thought it would, I didn't know what to do. Before I knew it, everything had escalated to the point where I got my gun and approached the guy late one night to try and threaten him so he'd leave me alone, and even though I didn't want it to happen, I ended up shooting the guy, which resulted in him dying. I can't say too much more about it since the case is still ongoing.

#### **4.5 Part IV: New Imaginaries in the Face of Precarity**

##### **Alex: The Struggle for a Good Life**

After feeling overwhelmed by my lack of a plan for my future, I knew that if I wanted to change my life around, I needed to start by changing my behavior. I couldn't just smoke weed, steal, and hang with kids who like to get into trouble anymore. I had to make some changes

I decided to sign up for GED classes located right near where I was staying through our college's Adult Learning Center, and I started doing better in school. I still didn't go to class all the time, and I still hung out with kids that weren't great for me, but, eventually, I passed the classes and, at the age of 19, I earned my GED and became the first person in my family to finish high school. My brother and sister never finished school, nor did my parents, so earning that GED felt good; it felt like a new beginning for me and my family.

For the first time in my life, once I had that GED, I started to really think about my future, to think about what I might do with my life now that I had a GED. At the time I was watching a lot of cop shows like *Law and Order*, *Cops*, and *Live PD*, and that's when being a law enforcement officer came into my mind. I'd be seeing the cops on TV chase people and tell them, "YO. STOP. FREEZE!" and I'd be thinking to myself, "I want to do that! That would be fun for me!" You know, that adrenaline, that adrenaline has always been inside of me, and I like being dangerous. So being a police officer, it would give me the opportunity to feel that adrenaline rush, but to do it in a good way, a way that helps people.

When I started thinking more about becoming a police officer, I also thought it would be a good job for me because I like helping people. I used to think I was a bad person, but I started to realize that I am not bad - I am actually a good person. I know I've done bad things in my life, but I am a lot more than that. Like if I see somebody who needs help, even if I don't think they deserve it, I always try to help them. Nobody helped me out when I needed it, and most of the time I'm alone these days, so if I see somebody who needs help, it makes me feel good to do that for them and even just to connect with another person. Say somebody comes up to me for a dollar. I may only have one dollar in my pocket, but I'll still give that dollar away. Because I know that I can always find a way to eat and get myself another dollar, but that person might not be able to or might need that money more than I do right now. So, yeah, it makes me feel good to make other people happy, and once I realized that about myself, I thought, "You know what? I think I'd be a really good cop!"

Once I decided that I wanted to be a police officer, I also decided that I would go to college to take criminal justice classes. I didn't have a car or driver's license at the time, and in New Jersey, it is hard to get anywhere without a car, so I started working at a landscaping

company to earn some money, and I studied for and passed my driver's license test. My brother, who lives about 20 minutes away, also helped me with some money so that I could buy a car and start taking college classes, and so, at the age of 20, I became the first person in my family to enroll in college.

Now I'm in my first semester here, and I'm taking three classes. I'm taking this English class, an Algebra class, and Student Success. In Algebra I'm not doing so well because I have a C, and I still have a lot of work to do to improve there. It's an okay class - the students are cool and the teacher is nice - I'm just not a math person, so it's hard for me. And the Student Success course I'm in, well, honestly, I never really pay attention to that class because I don't even know what it is about or what I'm supposed to be learning there. So English, to be honest, our English class is the only class that I like. I like writing about my stories in life, so that's fun for me. If I can write about myself, which we've been doing, I can write a lot, and that feels good.

Visiting the immigration detention center is also really cool because I was always curious about what an adult detention center was like after my father went to one and since I was in one for juveniles. I thought it might be a lot like my experience in the juvenile detention center, but it isn't at all. Like the women I met there told me that they don't go to sleep until 11 PM and that if they aren't causing any trouble, they can stay up until 2 AM if they want. That really surprised me because at my detention center, we had to go to bed at 9 AM. There ain't no 2 o'clock in the morning there!

I was also surprised by all of the different countries that people are from who are detained there. I assumed everyone there would speak Spanish, and I thought I'd be able to help translate for my classmates who can't speak Spanish fluently, but it turned out that there are people there from so many different countries. The woman whom I've gotten to know the best there is from

Nigeria. I didn't know anything about Nigeria, but she described it to me, and it sounds like a beautiful country, and it was clear that she misses it a lot. So it has been interesting to learn about other places and to realize it's not just people like my dad and me who are getting locked up.

The visits at the detention center are also sad though because the people there are completely disconnected from their families just like my dad was from me. The woman from Nigeria has three kids - two girls and one boy - and she can't talk with them or even write them letters. And when I first visited her I was like, "Do you get visitors often?" and she said, "No. You guys are the first visitors I've had in three months." When she said that I was like, "Oh no! I'm gonna come see you all the time! I got you!" and that made her happy. And when it was time to leave the last time I was there, she gave me a hug, and I just felt this vibe from her - like just how sad she is being alone and away from her kids, so that made me feel sad. But knowing she is sad also motivated me - it made me care about what we are doing and want to keep visiting her to try and cheer her up.

During these visits I think a lot about how I felt when I was in the juvenile detention center and what I would have wanted if somebody were to visit me. When I was locked up, I had no visitors, and that was all I ever wanted. You know, I wanted somebody to visit me or even just write me a letter, but I never got that. Just having somebody tell me jokes to make me laugh and cheer me up or even somebody to tell me something about their lives would have been nice. Being locked up is so isolating, so all I ever wanted was somebody to talk to and chill with me. So that's the kind of thing that I want to do when I visit them. I want them to know that there are some people out there in the world that truly want to help them, cause I never had that, and I think that would've made all the difference for me. If somebody, anybody, had visited me and sat down with me and said, "yo, stop being stupid. If you don't be stupid, you won't get locked

up and you could have a better life,” I think that would have helped me. Or even just having a friend to show they cared about me would have made a difference. So that’s what I’m trying to be for them. Like just by visiting, I know I’m making their days better because I know it would have done that for me.

So overall it feels good to be in college and to be helping other people at the detention center, but I still have a lot of worries. Right now I have my own apartment that is paid for through the Department of Human Services, but once I turn 21-years-old, I lose that, and that’s just a few months away. I have financial aid to pay for my classes, but how will I be able to continue with college if I have to work to pay bills and keep a roof over my head? My brother and I are thinking about trying to move in together, but to make that happen, I still have to save up money, which is going to be hard. I know how to landscape, but that type of work takes up a whole day, so it won’t leave any time for school. So, yeah, I’m worried about how I can sustain college long-term.

I also feel, sometimes, like my mindset still isn’t right. Sometimes I feel like my past is haunting me because I’ll have that temptation - that temptation to go do stupid things with my friends that could get me in trouble. My friends will call me up and be like, “Let’s go smoke!” or even get into other trouble, and now I’ll be like, “Nah, I gotta stay home. I’m doing my homework”, but they’ll be like, “Come on, yo. Just chill”. So far I’ve been able to be like, “Nah, I can’t do it, yo”, but it’s hard because I live all alone and now I also don’t have anybody to talk to no more. Nobody in my life is going to college other than me, so they don’t understand why I don’t want to do the things I used to do, and sometimes it is hard to say no. So I guess that’s my other worry - just being able to stay out of trouble even if it means being bored and alone a lot.

Overall though, I feel proud of where I am right now. I know what I want out of life, and I don't care anymore about being somebody in the street or trying to act cool since I know I can be more in life. What I really want is to work hard so that I can have a good life - you know, a life where I can make a good living, help other people, and just never have to worry about anything. That's what I'm working towards right now - having a good, worry-free life.

### **Audrey: I Found a Passion**

My drug relapse and the embarrassment I felt in being seen that way by my friends was a huge wake-up call. I had the realization that I was spiraling out of control again and that my drug dealer friend wasn't good for me since he kept drawing me back into relapsing, and so I decided to cut him out of my life completely and try to only use my opioids as prescribed. I also realized that if I wanted to find motivation for college, I had to pick a major that I felt passionately about.

One of the reasons I became a biology major was because I have always been interested in how the human brain works, and after continuing to struggle in my biology classes, I decided to switch majors and register instead as a psychology major. I always loved watching crime shows and trying to understand the minds of criminals, and so I thought it would be interesting to become a criminal profiler and that I might have more passion for college if I switched my major with that career goal in mind. At the same time, as I was looking to register for an English Composition II class, I saw your class, which stated that the writing would focus around themes of criminal justice and that students would get to work with detained youths, and I thought, "Oh wow! How interesting! They get to go to prison and work with real inmates! I have to do this!" So I registered for the last spot available in the class, and I was so excited to get that spot and for the opportunity to get to go into a prison and meet the kids there.

Throughout my K-12 years, English was always my worst subject because I felt like a weak writer. I always knew how to read well, but writing was hard for me, and so I struggled in English classes because I always wrote simply and never knew how to expand on my ideas. But our English class felt differently because when we had our first few classes together before visiting the juvenile detention center, I was interested in everything we were learning about the criminal justice system and, especially, the impact of solitary confinement on the brain. I decided to write my first essay on the inhumanity of solitary confinement, and although it still felt difficult writing an essay, I was passionate about the topic, which made me want to do well on the paper.

At the same time, in the days leading up to our first juvenile detention center visit, I felt extremely nervous. As a sexual assault survivor, I didn't want to feel like a victim or let the rape I experienced stop me from participating in this opportunity, but at the same time, I also wanted to be careful and didn't want to put myself into a position where I could experience another trauma. My mom was also terrified about me participating in the class, and she insisted that I call her as soon as our visits were over to let her know that I was okay. My mom comes from a cop family, and, especially after what both my sister and I went through, has no compassion for people who commit crimes, so she didn't understand why I wanted to visit a juvenile detention center. And, in some ways, even though I saw the opportunity to visit a prison thrilling, I also agreed with her belief that people who commit crimes are dangerous criminals who need to be locked up, often indefinitely. So during our first visit to the detention center, I couldn't help but wonder what each of the kids were in there for, and I never took my eyes off of the boys or the guard the entire time we were together. I also wanted to keep my body hidden, so during those first visits I always wore a giant hoodie and no makeup. I didn't want to put myself into a

position where the boys might be interested in me sexually. I also was nervous at first about how the boys in the class might behave. I was concerned that they might be intimidating, rude, or even total jerks. But once I actually met them, it was clear that they wanted to learn and that our work together mattered to them. They took our classes seriously, and I started to feel a lot more comfortable in the facility and working with the boys there.

Throughout the semester, as I started to get to know the boys in the class better while also researching more information about the juvenile justice system for my second research paper and group presentation, my mind started to change about the whole criminal justice system. A few years ago, if you had asked me if I would want to be around anybody who had been incarcerated, I definitely would have said no way. But as the class progressed, I started to understand that there are so many issues with the juvenile justice system and society, overall, that lead children to make bad choices and end up incarcerated. Even though I'm only a few years older than the boys in the facility, I see them as kids just like how I was a few years ago; I know that when I was a teenager, I had a different mentality than I do now, and that mentality led me to make some reckless and stupid choices. I think that a lot of the kids we work with in the facility were also operating with that same teenage mentality before they committed the crimes that they committed, and if they are given a second chance, I don't think they will make the same mistakes again. That's not to say that serial killers or rapists shouldn't serve time, but it is to say that I think that most people, especially children and teenagers who commit crimes, do deserve a second chance as well as an opportunity to participate in programs like the one we participated in so that they can start to think about the world differently and reflect on how they can make different, better choices in this world.

One of the biggest take-aways I had from this experience was realizing how good it feels to help someone who wants support and to advocate for people who can't advocate for themselves. Prior to this class, I never participated in any kind of community service before, and if anything, my health issues made me focus a lot on trying to help myself rather than on helping others. But once this class started, I found my passion. I woke up every Monday excited and ready to go, and even when I was having bad flare ups and health problems, I almost always found a way to make it to our classes together. When I had to be hospitalized and miss class, I made sure not to fall behind on my work, and I emailed all the research articles for my detention center partners so that they wouldn't fall behind because of my absence. I knew that the work we were doing at the detention center mattered a lot to my partners, and so I didn't want to let them down. I even chose to represent our class by speaking publicly at the college-wide end-of-semester service learning celebration, which was a strange decision for me since I'm not a presenter and I hate going up in front of people. But I chose to speak anyway because I felt that it was something I had to do, that juvenile justice reform needs to be talked about. I even invited my parents to attend, and although they don't agree with my perspective on the need for juvenile justice reform, they attended the event and were proud of me for speaking up. They even told other people at the table where they were sitting how much they've seen me change since starting this class, and how much more motivated and passionate I now am because of it. So even if they don't love my desire to advocate for the kids in the facility, they are happy to see that I'm no longer as depressed and that I found my motivation for doing well in college.

During our last class together, I felt great presenting with my group members and celebrating our work together, and I loved seeing all of the boys enjoy the food we brought in instead of the normal jail food they have to eat. It was fun to see everyone smiling, laughing, and

just spending quality time together, and it was clear that we really all had become friends. But it also felt sad, really sad. I loved waking up on Monday mornings knowing I was going to the jail, but on our last day, I felt sad knowing that I had no idea when I was going to see them again or how I could stay in contact with them.

My final research paper argued in support of juvenile justice reform, and it felt good to contribute that paper into our class book. But I also wanted to let the boys know how much this experience meant to me, so rather than share a reflection letter about my experience, I decided to write my reflection as a letter directly to the boys in our class, which was also included in our final class book. In the letter<sup>1</sup>, I wanted them to know how much I enjoyed our work together, and the impact that it had on me, so that they understood that I wasn't going to stop caring or advocating for them once the class ended.

After our last session at the prison, when everyone from the class came back to the college to reflect on our work together, I realized just how comfortable I felt with my classmates. It was a unique class experience because everyone in it became close like a family, and I never had a class where I felt I could speak freely about how I felt without being judged. I'm not sure if our class felt that way because of your teaching methods or because it was a service learning class, but I think the fact that we got to express our opinions and write about topics that mattered to us and were being shared with the whole class was a big part of why it felt so different from other lecture-style classes. So during our last class together it felt safe to tell everyone that I had been raped and how, even after experiencing that, I now believe that everyone deserves a chance at redemption. I didn't feel scared to say it or that I would be judged by my classmates, and I

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey's letter to the class is located in Appendix V

think part of that is because this whole experience changed the way I think about what happened to my sister and me.

I feel stronger now and no longer ashamed about what happened. I am only a victim if I let myself be a victim, and instead, I want to be a survivor. There's nothing I can do about what happened to me, but I don't have to let it control me, and I can let it be something that I learn from and grow from rather than having it be something that holds me back. And I think, even if as a social worker I end up working with kids who were sex offenders and rapists, I will still try and help them if I can. I'm sure I'll have to put up an emotional boundary when working them, and inside I might feel a little leery of them, but I won't treat them like they aren't people deserving of happiness or deserving of opportunities for improving their lives. I don't know their stories, and a lot of the boys we met had traumatic lives themselves, so it is hard to know what causes people to commit the crimes they do without getting to know them as individuals and hearing their stories.

Because this whole experience has given me a real purpose, the hardest part has been knowing that it is ending. I honestly feel that in many ways, this class saved my life. I haven't relapsed since the class started, and I think that's because I finally feel like I have something bigger than myself and my pain to focus on, something to feel passionate about. So knowing that the class has to end is hard. I know I'll be able to write letters to everyone there, but I hate the idea of having to wait years before being able to go back into a detention center again and work with the residents. I'm going to miss this class a lot, and I can't imagine a day going by where I won't think about the kids inside the detention center and hope that their lives are getting better. In the meantime, I will stay in touch by writing letters, and I will do what I can to spread awareness about the problems with the system and the need for some major reforms.

**Nazir: Even Though I'm Down Right Now, I'm Not Out**

I ran away after the shooting, but I was arrested soon after and charged with murder. I arrived at the juvenile detention center almost three years ago, and I can still remember the fear I felt as I was being transported here. Before arriving, people were making up rumors about how awful it would be when I got here, so at first, I had a bad attitude and got into a lot of fights. Over time though, my mentality began to change. I attended classes in the detention center's high school, and the teachers worked with me to catch up on everything that I had missed from my years of being disengaged in school. I had always been a good reader, but there was so much I didn't know, and the teachers here not only taught me the concepts I did not understand, but they also made it interesting for me. I know that had I stayed at home, I most likely never would have graduated from high school, but after being here for a little over a year, I was able to earn my diploma. It felt good to be able to share that news with my grandmom, to let her know that even though I was in here, I was still working on myself and was able to graduate.

Reflecting on it now, it feels strange to say this, but, overall, being here has been a positive experience. I've made a lot of friends along the way, and I've learned that if I don't make trouble, trouble won't find me. I get along with everyone here, and even though there are days where I just want to be alone, for the most part, at some point in the day I'll end up playing video games with someone in the unit or watching my favorite cartoon shows with some of the guys who also enjoy them.

One of my friends, Jay, has become a big brother to me. He helps me make decisions, and he calms me down whenever my anger starts to take hold of me. Jay and I also have a healthy competition with one another. We are in the honors unit, which is where you stay if you stay out of trouble for a certain period of time, and so we get to play Madden football, watch TV

shows together, and play football or baseball in the gym together for a good two hours. Gym has to be my favorite part of the day, because all of us in honors are good at sports, and playing the games gets us moving and our minds off of being behind four walls in jail all the time. I gotta focus on scoring, being a good passer, and, well, it really helps me keep my mind focused on positivity.

Really the hardest parts about being here are court and everything else that is going on outside of here back home. Going back and forth to court over the years has been hard because I often feel like the judge is being unfair and that my story is being misrepresented. Despite that though, I try to listen to the judge, keep my head in the right place, and make sure that I don't bring my anger and frustration back to the detention center after court. The worst feeling is watching other people leave court and get to go home knowing that I'm stuck here, but to deal with that, I try to just block those thoughts out and think to myself, well at least I'm coming back here, and it's better here than in a lot of other places.

Other than court, the hardest parts of my day are hearing about what's going on back home and feeling helpless because of my inability to do anything to help the people I love. In here I have no real worries, but out there bad things keep happening, and I just keep thinking about how they might be different if I was home. Like since I've been locked up, I wasn't able to help my grandparents like I used to, like cleaning the house for them and spending time with them. So once I was gone, they were being neglected. My grandpop ended up passing away from throat cancer while I was in here last March, and then my grandma passed away the following December from lung cancer. My grandmom and grandpop used to write to me every day, and now that they're gone I haven't been getting as many letters. Now I just be writing letters to them, sending them to their house, and trying to get my cousins to put the letters on their graves.

I feel like even though they aren't here anymore, maybe they can see that I'm still trying for them. But it's hard because if I wasn't in here, I feel as though I could have made a difference by helping my grandparents more, or at least spending their last hours on earth with them, so they wouldn't be alone. And since I've been in here, nobody wants to tell me what's going on out there, so I gotta find out through other people here. My connection to my family has disintegrated.

Even when it comes to visits and phone calls, everything has changed. When I first arrived, I used to talk to my mom and my siblings on the phone, but then my mom cut herself off from me, so now I can't communicate with any of them. And when it comes to visits, at first my mom was visiting me every weekend, every single weekend. But then the visits started to slow down. After a year of me being here, it went from every weekend to every six months, and then to none at all. We never had a disagreement; it was just like she faded out of my life, and I haven't bothered to ask her about it because I know she has the other kids. At least when I am allowed special visits, she does her best to have my uncle bring my brothers or sister up to see me, which I appreciate.

But it's hard for them too; like since I got here, one of my brothers started getting made fun of in school with kids teasing him and saying things like your brother is a killer. So my one brother doesn't want to be around me anymore. And since getting locked up, people just look at me differently. When I get on the phone with some family members, they distance themselves from me, and it's clear that they be thinking like, "oh he really is a killer, so we don't wanna be involved with him". Sometimes they won't even pick up the phone at all, and so sometimes I do be feelin' as though I'm not even me, that I'm some kind of monster. But I do still talk to my

father, his ex-wife, and his new wife, and they are my support from back home. My ex-girlfriend and I also write letters to one another, so that helps sometimes as well.

When I first got here, there weren't many programs available for us other than high school, but then that started to change. As I was getting close to graduating high school here about two years ago, Ms. Samantha approached me and a few of the kids in the honors unit about participating in a college class. I actually remember the day she came into the unit and told us about the opportunity, and I immediately was like, "Yeah", because I always try and participate in any programs that are offered to me. When I agreed, two of the other guys who were like brothers to me also agreed to participate, and so there was a group of six of us, initially, who participated in the first class.

So for the first class, we picked the book *Monster* by Walter D. Myers to read, and it really resonated with me. I related to how the main character felt when he first entered the jail, feeling scared all the time and like he had to fight, because that was how I felt when I got here. I also related to the theme of feeling like a monster. I mean there's one side of me that is proud of myself for graduating from high school, changing my mentality, and getting involved in these college classes. Like I can show my brothers and sisters that there is a different world out there, and that even though I'm down right now, I'm not out. I'm not just sitting here rotting and wasting away. But on the other hand, it's confusing, because even though I feel like I'm improving my behavior and having a different mindset, I also feel badly that I had to get locked up and do what I did for me to change, and I know the impact it has had on everyone. So I could relate to the way the main character felt in the book in feeling confused about who I am and how I perceive myself and am perceived by others.

After that class ended, I felt good about it and wanted to participate again in the other courses you were bringing to the jail. But for the second college class, when you told us that it was going to be made up of students who want to be lawyers, police officers, and stuff like that, I felt nervous because I thought they weren't going to like me because of my charge. But being in the class changed my perspective. The students were kind to us, and I realized they weren't like lawyers and judges are. Instead, they were smart, but they also didn't seem to judge us, and they put a lot of energy into helping us pick topics we wanted to write about and helped us write strong papers. They had a lot of patience with us. And because we had to do final group presentations and share our writing together in a class book, and I knew their grades were on the line, it made me want to do really well for them. I learned about teamwork because, in the past, I've never really been a team player, and I tend to like being alone; but this class and the presentations showed me that I can actually work well with people, and they can work well with me. So working in groups made me start to think more about other people and not just myself, and I realized that's what I haven't been doing enough of.

I think, overall, one of the best aspects of the college classes is that the students don't judge us at all, or at least not that we know of. I mean at first it felt a little weird being around regular, positive teens my age because I hadn't been around that before, so I felt a little distanced from them. But as the class progressed, I got to know everyone better. They really paid attention to us, and they helped us revise our essays and improve our research. It felt great to not only know that I was on a college level, but to also know that I could have people my own age to help me out and to just be around. It was also positive because I think we helped them too; they got to finally see that we aren't all as bad as the media and society makes us out to be. Some of us are good people who just caught up on a bad pathway.

Another aspect of the classes I enjoyed was how professional they were. I liked being in a professional environment where we could get into discussions without arguing. I enjoyed watching the TED talks and learning about all different societal issues, seeing different people's perspectives, and learning about new topics. I realize now that I can still keep learning beyond high school, and instead of just playing a game of football, the classes actually had me sitting there writing and using my brain. I started thinking about a lot of different stuff, like about the environment and what is happening to different animals on our planet right now. And when you gave me each essay assignment, I learned how to write differently. Like in high school I learned to write "first of all, second of all, third of all", but once you taught me there was actually a different way to write, it made sense to me and so, the essays, the essays were great. I even sent home the essays I wrote for our class, and my mom put the college certificate that I sent home in a frame. So I'm proud of the work we're doing here.

I think the toughest part of this whole experience is having to have it end. I hated to leave at the end of each class. Like when we'd be watching a TED video, I hated when it would end because I knew class was ending soon, and I'd have to wait for everyone to come back, sometimes for weeks, before we would start up again. It would upset me because I'd feel like I want to get back to class, I wanna learn something, and the classes were an escape from the unit, so I'd just hate when y'all would leave. To try to bide the time, instead of writing my essay in one night, I would try and break it up and work on it the whole time you guys were gone. Instead of doing it one day and then, boom, it's done, I would work on it tin pieces and keep coming back to it, revising it, and improving it. That way I had something to focus on until our next class together.

When class would end for good, I felt sad. I felt that we got to know all these kids and build bonds with them, and it would feel like the class just flew right by and then it was over. So it hurt to get to know everybody and then have to worry about if we'd ever see them again. But I think that by y'all letting us stay in contact with them through writing letters and through this club, that can help a bit at least.

Now that I know I'm getting sentenced in a few weeks, I don't know where they're going to place me, and I'm nervous about leaving because I made a lot of bonds with people here. But I'm also anxious to go, to try a new place after being here for almost three years. I think my biggest concern about leaving is how I'm going to keep in contact with everyone. Over the years I've made friends with a lot of people here, and some of them I write to regularly even after they leave here, so I'm worried about being able to continue connecting with everyone. I don't want to just leave and forget about everyone or have them forget about me.

So I guess my biggest hope at this point is to just get through this situation the best way I can. While I'm locked up, I'm hoping I can continue with college. I've heard some of the prisons offer college classes, so that's what I'd like to do. I want to keep becoming a better person, and to do that I'm gonna use all the lessons our classes taught me, work on keeping in contact with everyone, and just try to keep busy until it's all over. I think that's really all I can do. And if I have to do the full 30 years, I just hope that when I'm done, I'll know how to come home and reconnect with society. It's hard to imagine past the next few years, so at this point, I'm just trying to take it one day at a time.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

My goal in completing this study was to answer my research questions by 1) understanding what the narratives of participants conveyed about their identities and lived

experiences prior to engaging in critical service learning within an English Composition class and 2) how participants' identities and lived histories informed their experiences of critical service learning within an English Composition course. The findings from this study demonstrate that although each participant grew up in different neighborhoods within the state of New Jersey and came from different cultures, races, and religions, their lived experiences shine a spotlight on the spaces of precarity in which each of them were existing prior to our work together as well as throughout it. Moreover, despite the hardships that they endured, each participant turned to college and our composition coursework as a means of engaging their social imaginations by envisioning new ways of interacting with Others and new imaginaries for their past and future selves. Thus, the findings suggest that participants' unique lived experiences, especially those experiences which left them existing in spaces of precarity, directly informed their experiences engaging in critical service learning within our English Composition classes.

While Audrey and Nazir were successful in their studies, with Audrey earning an A in the course and Nazir not only completing the class but continuing to participate in new partnership opportunities with the college students, Alex did not find the same success in college. About two and a half months into the semester, although Alex had an A in our class, he sent me two different emails within one week stating that "something came up" which made him unable to attend a week of classes, and after the second email, I never heard back from him again. I checked with his other professors in Student Success and Algebra, and he stopped attending those classes as well.

I have reached out to Alex on numerous occasions over the past two years both through email and through the phone number the college had on file for him, but to no avail. The number provided was out of service, and Alex stopped responding to his college email account. I also

searched for Alex online and had connections of mine within the criminal justice system check to see if he was incarcerated anywhere or could be located within the system, and they, too, were unable to find him. Thus, at this point, I have no idea where Alex is, why he dropped out of college, and if he is still working towards becoming a police officer.

Alex's story is not unique - at my community college as well as at community colleges across the nation, students are forced to drop-out for a variety of non-cognitive factors every semester - be it lack of transportation, financial constraints, an inability to balance school and work, or a lack of stable housing - and so Alex is one of hundreds of students whom I have met over the last ten years whose goal of completing college gets derailed by life circumstances (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). In fact, according to my college's Department of Institutional Research (2019), although over 70% of full-time students upon enrollment stated that they intended to graduate from our college and/or transfer to a four-year institution, only 16% of students successfully transfer out of our college and only 22% of students successfully graduate. Consequently, almost half of all students who intend to transfer or graduate from our college fail to do so, and once they are no longer registered students, it is difficult to learn exactly why they dropped out and what, therefore, the college could have done differently to better support each student in achieving their academic goals.

In the case of Alex, despite his passion for criminal justice, desire to graduate college, engagement in service learning, and history of overcoming numerous obstacles in order to be a college student, he was still existing in a space of precarity. Alex knew that within the next six months, he could end up homeless again and struggling with food insecurity since his monthly stipends from the Department of Human Services were about to run out. Alex also felt isolated and bored living alone in his apartment, and although he tried to distance himself from past

friends whom he saw as negative influences, he still craved companionship and struggled with the “temptation to go do stupid things” that could result in him getting into trouble with the law or derailing him from his studies. Alex valued his service learning experiences and shared that he enjoyed the writing assignments in our class that allowed him to share his own lived experiences, but he did not enjoy his other classes and was struggling to be successful within them. For all of the aforementioned reasons, and without being able to talk with Alex directly, it is impossible to know the exact reason for why Alex dropped out of college. However, what is clear to me in analyzing Alex’s experiences is that social justice-oriented empowering pedagogies such as our critical service learning work, although not to be dismissed as lacking liberatory potential, cannot alone remove the barriers to success that so many community college students like Alex find themselves facing. Ultimately then, more work needs to be done to ensure that students existing in precarious spaces who want to be successful in college are afforded every opportunity possible to help them achieve their goals, and this work includes engaging them in empowering pedagogies as well as extending supports well beyond the classroom by connecting students with additional resources that can ensure that their basic needs are being met so that they can continue to pursue their college goals.

In the next chapter I will close this dissertation by sharing how the results of this study have informed my own teaching. I will also reflect upon this study’s implications for future scholarship and for practitioners who engage community college students in critical service learning pedagogies within literacy spaces.

## **Conclusion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to share my larger reflections from the results of this study in connection to my research questions as well as their implications for future research and for community college practitioners interested in engaging students in critical service learning, especially within the field of composition. Moreover, the results of this study also have led me to reflect on the implications of creating community-engaged literacy opportunities for students that only span one semester in length, and so I share these concerns in this chapter as well a new framework that I am currently implementing with my community college students and juvenile detention center residents that spans beyond the semester.

### **5.2 Nuancing the Binary of Us and Them**

My first research question asked, “What do the narratives of two community college English composition students and a juvenile detention center resident convey about their identities and lived experiences prior to engaging in critical service learning within an English Composition class?” Despite the pervading narrative within service learning literature of college students as homogenous, primarily White, middle and upper class privileged students (Green, 2003; Himley, 2004; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2015; Bocci, 2015), the results of this study add to the growing body of research on community college students that highlight the spaces of precarity in which many community college students reside (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez & Cady, 2018). Each of the study’s participants engaged in varying degrees of illegal activity prior to their participation in our college work together, and it is not difficult to imagine that both Alex and Audrey could have easily traded places with Nazir behind bars if any of their life paths had moved in slightly different directions. The students in

this study were not privileged students, breaking and entering foreign spaces. Their intersectional identities and lived histories of trauma directly informed their engagement with community partners and the lessons that they took away from these experiences. Ultimately then, these narratives speak directly to my first research question by demonstrating that students' lived experiences prior to engaging in our service learning work, both community college students and detention center resident, were often rife with struggle and that my students lived experiences and identities are much more nuanced than the service learning literature within higher education suggests.

The consequences of nuancing our understanding of college students who are engaged in service learning pedagogies are far-reaching. Historically, service learning pedagogies have been grounded in the notion that students engaging in "service" are existing in privileged spaces which afford them the ability to "serve" those in need of support (Pompa, 2002; Boyle- Baise, 2007; Mitchell, 2008), and although critical service learning has problematized the charity model of service learning by arguing that students should, while engaging in this work, "see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51), even this framework positions students as existing in empowered spaces which afford them the opportunity to engage in service (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51).

In Mitchell's (2008) article "Traditional Vs. Critical Service Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models", she asserts the following:

An aspect of the service-learning experience that practitioners cannot escape or diminish is that students engaged in service-learning will undoubtedly have greater societal privilege than those whom they encounter at their service placements", and that, therefore, "The very real power differentials in service-learning relationships must be exposed in order to be critically analyzed and possibly changed. (p. 56-57)

Although Alex and Audrey are existing with more freedom and, therefore, more privilege than the detainees with whom they work simply because they are not currently incarcerated, both community college students within this study existed in spaces of precarity that push back on this binary of privileged college students and disenfranchised community partners. Yes, Audrey positioned herself as a victim of crime as opposed to a criminal, but, at the same time, she also positioned herself as an addict engaged in the use of illegal substances, something which she recognized to also be true for many of the incarcerated youths with whom we worked. And although Alex was beginning to reinvent himself as a “college student” instead of a “detained youth”, he clearly connected with detainees with a level of empathy that only those people with histories of incarceration can fully appreciate. Consequently, unlike past research which argues that “In most service-learning situations, relationships are clearly based on difference: I’m homeless; you’re not”, the community college students in this study, although engaging with Others across incarcerated spaces and recognizing the physical bars that divided them, did not see themselves as existing in this binary and, in many ways, related to the disempowered spaces in which their partners existed (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002, p. 237). Ultimately then, if community college students who engage in this work are, themselves, existing in disempowered spaces, which this study along with a wealth of new research suggests (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez & Cady, 2018), then more research needs to be conducted in order to understand how practitioners can leverage critical service learning pedagogies in order to empower both student participants and community partners.

### **5.3 Critical Service Learning as a Border Pedagogy for Critical Literacy Spaces**

My second research question asked, “How do participants’ identities and lived histories inform their experiences of critical service learning within an English Composition course?” and

the findings from this study suggest that students' unique identities and lived experiences of trauma and resilience directly informed their interactions with Others at their service learning sites. In many ways then, critical service learning provided participants with a unique space for engaging in border crossings in which they reflected upon their lived histories in connection with their service experiences and, in doing so, crossed borders by imagining new ways of being.

Hayes and Cuban (1997) first suggested that service learning opportunities could provide a space for students where they are engaging in border crossings:

Crossing borders of knowledge, and entering into "borderlands," where existing patterns of thought, relationship, and identity are called into question and juxtaposed with alternative ways of knowing and being, provides the opportunity for creative and oppositional reconstructions of self, knowledge, and culture... (Hayes & Cuban, 1997, p. 75)

The results of this study suggest that not only do students who engage in critical service learning pedagogies have the potential to enter border crossings in which they consider "alternative ways of knowing and being", but community partner participants, like their college student peers, also can engage in border crossings through their participation in service learning work. Within this study, Alex, Audrey, and Nazir's reflections on their work with Others often led them to hold up a mirror to their past lives and future lives, frequently reflecting upon how their lives might have been different or could be different based upon the work they were doing with their partners. These border crossings were not just for student participants, but for each participant who engaged with Others across difference and distance.

Each participant entered borderlands that provided them "the opportunity for creative and oppositional reconstructions of self, knowledge, and culture... (Hayes & Cuban, 1997, p. 75).

Alex, for example, used his service learning experiences to reflect upon how his life would have been different had he received visitors as well as how his visits were positively impacting the

detainees with whom he met. Audrey also used her service learning work to enter a borderland in which she began to see the incarcerated youths as reflections of herself when she was younger and not as dehumanized criminals, and she also used this service work to reposition herself from ‘victim’ to ‘survivor’ and from a disimpassioned, failing college student to an impassioned, mission-driven student with an agentic purpose of advocating for juvenile justice reform. Nazir, too, entered a borderland in which he repositioned himself as a person capable of engaging in group work with Others, as a person able to complete college-level work, as a person who didn’t have to give up on his future just because he was locked away, and as a person who could think beyond himself and find new ways of connecting with Others. Consequently, the findings from this study support Hayes and Cuban’s (1997) assertion that service learning can lead students to enter borderlands, and it takes that argument one step further by suggesting that community partner participants, too, can enter borderlands through this work. Ultimately then, more scholarship needs to be conducted to understand the community partner experience and the role of critical service learning as an empowering border pedagogy not just for student participants, but for all.

#### **5.4 Critical Service Learning as a Critical Cosmopolitan Practice**

Haiven and Khasnabish, in their text “The Radical Imagination” (2014), utilize the term “radical imagination” to highlight the critical imaginative efforts that are necessary if we are to reimagine “how we might use today’s new communication technologies and new situations to cooperate *otherwise*, in ways that go beyond capitalism and chart near futures” (p. 25). Thus, they suggest that we need to reimagine new ways of being that can lead us to communicate differently or “otherwise” than we do now. This idea of cooperating “otherwise” is linked, in

many ways, to the goals of cosmopolitan theorists. Cosmopolitan literacy, as defined by Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014) “foregrounds the rhetorical stances and ethical commitments involved in communicating across difference—the cognitive, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic meaning-making capacities and practices of authors and audiences as they take differently situated others into account.” Thus, cosmopolitan literacies are specifically interested in understanding how people communicate and make sense of one another across differences, both locally and globally. Moreover, the goal of critical cosmopolitanism is not simply to study communicative practices across distances, but to also encourage students to “cooperate otherwise” by helping students engage in a back and forth negotiation across distance in which they “learn to balance reflective openness to the new with reflective loyalty to the known” (Hansen, 2011, p. 1, 4). The goals of critical cosmopolitanism then are also grounded in notions of the radical imagination; just as we cannot create new futures without first imagining them, we also cannot communicate across either physical or metaphorical distances without first imagining ways to communicate and “cooperate otherwise”.

In developing service learning experiences for my students and detainees, I spent much time thinking through how to create a safe and respectful classroom culture as well as what assignments and texts to engage students with in order to help them deconstruct systems of oppression and begin to engage their social imaginations in envisioning new possibilities for themselves and Others. And although this coursework helped participants to understand how systemic inequities informed their own positionality as well as the need for social change advocacy efforts, I have come to understand that much of the liberatory and transformational potential of students’ critical service learning work within our composition classes was not in the

class's critical engagement with texts, but it was instead in participants' frequent engagement across physical and intersectional distances with one another which helped them to engage in "new situations to cooperate *otherwise*," with one another, which in turn, helped them utilize our literacy work to imagine new ways of being (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 25).

When participants talked about their experiences in the class with me, they focused, primarily, on their interactions with Others, be it Alex's interactions with detained immigrants, Audrey's interactions with the residents, or Nazir's interactions with the college students. It seemed that a key element of engaging students in a border pedagogy with liberatory potential was in offering participants the opportunity to engage in literacy practices to build relationships with Others. These engagements with Others through conversation, letter and essay writing, and critical reading activities, generated "an increasing awareness of the validity of different cultural practices and values" (Hull and Stornaiuolo, 2014) which in turn helped participants to envision new ways of engaging with and for Others. For example, as Alex learned his participants' stories at the immigration detention center while also learning about the larger immigration system through course texts and dialogue, he began to see himself as someone who could help Others as he had once longed to be helped, which also helped him reposition himself from detainee to agentic college student. Nazir also saw his interactions with the college students as not only helping him connect with healthy people outside of the carceral system, but also as opening up the possibility that he could continue to grow within prison and engage professionally, academically, and personally in new, healthy ways with Others. And, finally, Audrey shared how interacting with the residents made her reframe who "criminals" are, which helped her to see herself in them and feel compelled to utilize literacy practices - including presentations, social

media postings, and research - to step outside of her own struggles by advocating for incarcerated youths who are existing in more precarious spaces than she.

Consequently, I have come to understand that the power of critical service learning experiences that lead participants to enter into borderlands has less to do with the “service” aspect of this work than it does the engagement across distance with Others that occurs through these service experiences. I would argue then that the key to creating emancipatory critical service learning experiences for both students and community partners within literacy classrooms is not simply through the creation of agentic service experiences, but rather through the forging of authentic relationships with Others across distances that engages participants’ radical imaginations so that they can begin to be and see *otherwise*.

### **5.5 The Impact of Breaking, Entering, and Leaving**

In creating partnerships with immigration detention center residents, I recognized that the residents with whom we built relationships could suddenly disappear from the facilities due to their sentencing, and that, therefore, we had to be flexible by working with whichever residents were detained at the times when we visited the facilities. Students understood the realities of this work, and although they often expressed sadness when residents could no longer be reached, especially those detained within the immigration detention center who were, at times, suddenly deported, they were open to meeting with whichever residents were present during visitation hours. Ultimately then, although participants like Alex built relationships with detainees whom they regularly visited, the relationships were built with the understanding that detainees could leave at any moment and be unreachable. Additionally, since students only met with immigration detention center residents outside of class hours, they spent no more than five to six hours, in total, with a single detainee over the course of the semester.

The relationships that are developed between participants at the juvenile detention center are much stronger than those that were developed at the immigration center, for at this facility, participants spent an hour and a half each week, over fifteen weeks, working with one another. The relationships forged between participants were important to them, and I can still recall feeling like my heart had dropped into my chest when Nazir shared with me how much he hated when each of our classes would end and how hurt he felt when it was over, wondering if he would ever see the college students whom he built relationships with again. I was reminded of Himley's (2004) concerns about the "breaking and entering - and then leaving" that is often inherent in service learning work and Mitchell's (2008) argument that "Authentic relationships depend on a commitment to one another that extends beyond the last day of class" (p. 62). I realized the harmful unintended consequences of having college students and juvenile detention center residents forge bonds with one another only to have those relationships abruptly end when the semester came to a close, and I recognized that I had not heeded Bickford and Reynolds (2002) warning "that one assignment, one semester, is not enough" (p. 234).

The findings of this study highlight the value Nazir found in working with college students and how our class served not only as a space for him to develop healthy relationships with peers who were on a college track, but also to help him reflect on new ways of engaging with Others based upon his interactions with the college students. To suddenly end these relationships between college students and detention center residents because the semester ended was unfair, and it was causing Nazir, someone who already had lost relationships with so many relatives and friends, to again feel that the people whom he had gotten close to throughout the semester were being ripped away from him. Similarly, Audrey shared her feelings of sadness at the thought of the semester ending and her relationships with the residents ending with it, and I

came to understand that she, too, found purpose through this work with the detention center residents, and that by removing her from this space, I was taking her away from the one activity that she found to be most meaningful in her life.

### **5.6 Breaking, Entering, and Remaining**

Once I came to understand the power of the relationships that participants had created with one another and how these relationships were helping students remain resilient in the face of precarity, I recognized that a one-semester service learning model in which relationships were forged and then severed was harmful to both students and detention center residents. Consequently, for the purposes of this partnership between students and juvenile detention center residents, I have developed a new model of community engaged learning which ensures that relationships are not broken with the close of the semester.

After realizing the need for creating long-term opportunities for participants to engage in collaborative literacy experiences with one another, I worked with Samantha and my college to create a Juvenile Justice Reform club that members - both former students from my composition classes and new students on campus - could use to engage in state-wide advocacy efforts for juvenile justice reform as well as to continue visits to the juvenile detention center by way of a book club. Once we received approval for the club by the juvenile detention center's administrators, I reached out to my former college students by way of email to see if any of them were interested in serving in the club. Audrey was the first of many students to reply to my email, and so we met throughout the semester to develop this new club and recruit student members. Audrey is now co-club president with another former student from her class, and this semester 15 club members and I are meeting biweekly at the juvenile detention center on a volunteer basis to engage in a book club together with 8 juvenile detention center residents,

including Nazir. By creating this club, college students and juvenile detention center residents are able to continue their partnerships year round without having to experience the arbitrary and painful severing of relationships that the end of the semester was causing.

In addition to the creation of this club, the passion that Nazir expressed for continuing his studies led Samantha and I to reflect on what we can do to ensure that residents, like Nazir, still have the opportunity to engage in college coursework once they are sentenced and sent to other facilities throughout the state. Currently, there are no college programs available to participants who are sentenced to the state's juvenile prisons, and we worry about the implications of severing ties and access to a college education once participants are sentenced. Nazir, for example, is now 21, and even if he is not sentenced soon, it is likely that he will be moved to a different facility simply because he is considered too old to remain in the juvenile detention center. We worry then that once Nazir leaves the facility, he will no longer be able to pursue a college education nor will he be able to remain connected with the college students whom he's gotten to know so well.

In order to ensure that participants, like Nazir, are not abandoned once they are sentenced or relocated, the club is now in the process of setting up a meeting with the state's Juvenile Justice Commission to learn more about opportunities for getting involved in state-level advocacy and reform initiatives. Additionally, Samantha and I have been having meetings with College administration and Juvenile Justice Commission staff in order to see how we might expand this program into the state's medium-security juvenile prison, which is where many of the detention center residents, such as Nazir, are likely to serve their sentences once sentenced and which do not, currently, offer any opportunities for the incarcerated youths there to engage in collaborative work with college students or even to take college classes. We are hoping that

this model of having college students and incarcerated youths collaborating together in a college class is something that can grow over time, and so in addition to expanding this model, we are also looking into potential opportunities for creating degree pathways for juveniles detained within the state's detention centers and medium-security facilities.

Not only then have the results of this study impacted Samantha's and my decision to expand this program and create space for participants to continue to collaborate beyond the end of the semester, but the findings from this study also suggest that more research needs to be conducted to better understand how community partner participants and students respond to the ending of service partnerships. And if more research suggests that the ending of these partnerships is harmful, new models, such as the extension of service learning courses through additional volunteer opportunities, need to be designed and studied to determine how participants can continue to engage in their partnerships beyond the semester's end.

Finally, after reflecting upon the results of this study, I also have come to realize the importance of building partnerships with organizations that allow for relationship-building between participants and immersive engagement with Others. I have come to the conclusion that Alex's service experience, although meaningful for him, was not as powerful as it could have been had he, like Audrey and Nazir, been able to meet for at least an hour each week with the same residents throughout the entire semester and with me and his classmates present. I wonder if Alex would have stayed in college had he developed the same sense of community with his peers that Audrey developed with hers by having service learning take place within our class at the detention center each week and with the same residents and classmates. Unfortunately, since Alex's service was not embedded within our class time, he was only meeting with detainees in the evenings during visiting hours, and these visits were with small groups of ever-rotating peers

and ever-rotating residents. Although I will never know whether or not a more intimate and immersive critical service learning model would have been enough to motivate Alex to stay in college, I do know that this is a better model for service, and so I now plan to only offer service learning opportunities within my classes that allow for us to collaborate with community partners on literacy work during our class time and that ensure we have consistent partners with whom to build relationships.

### **5.7 Where Do We Go From Here?**

Maxine Greene (1995) argued that “People trying to be more fully human must not only engage in critical thinking but must be able to imagine something coming of their hopes; their silence must be overcome by their search” (p. 25). The results of this study not only highlight the spaces of precarity in which community college students often reside, but they also speak to Greene’s argument that community college literacy instructors must create imaginative literacy experiences for students which encourage their silence to be “overcome by their search” and belief in new possibilities for themselves and Others. The results of this study suggest that critical service learning, when designed in collaboration with community partners and with the goal of helping participants develop authentic relationships across distances, has the potential to bridge critical literacy and imaginative literacy theories with practice. However, it is also clear that much more research needs to be conducted to better understand which types of partnerships and service learning models best facilitate connections across differences that can lead to empowering and transformative literacy experiences for students.

The truth is that all of the best research-supported service learning and composition theories in the world mean nothing if they are not implemented and studied within practitioners’ classrooms, and because institutions and policy-makers often benefit from perpetuating dominant

discourses and apolitical service efforts, it is only through practitioners' willingness to take personal and political risks by devoting their teaching to liberatory pedagogies that we can truly create positive change.

As composition faculty, we make choices every day in how we construct our curriculum, the languages and literacy practices that we choose to value and devalue, the topics that we choose to teach, and the modes of engagement and critical dialogue that we encourage. If "the goal is to create citizens of the world...with a moral and ethical imperative to engage in and sustain equitable and just relations" (Hansen & Hawkins, 2014, p. 97) with others, we, as composition educators and scholars, must encourage opportunities for students to engage in the development of authentic relationships with Others that are ensconced in a culture of trust and empathy and emphasize the ability to use writing across social, cultural and political contexts so that students can be empowered agents of change. Moreover, we must be willing to listen to the voices and desires of community partners, allowing them to take the lead and facilitate their own efforts for positive change rather than coming down from ivory towers and espousing solutions to problems we don't understand. And, finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must stop portraying both our students and community partners as existing in a binary - the white and privileged - or the people of color who are oppressed - and we must instead identify each person's and each community's individual positionalities, including the unique strengths they bring to these efforts - in order to avoid perpetuating disempowering narratives about community partners and uninformed understandings of our students. My hope then is that by nuancing our understanding of community college students and community partners as well as understanding how their unique lived experiences inform their understandings of themselves and Others, this study can move that conversation and research forward by encouraging Composition scholars

and practitioners to identify how critical service learning might be used as a pedagogical tool of empowerment that leads disempowered students to engage in new imaginaries.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Audrey's Final Reflection Letter to the JDC Residents

To those who chose to participate in this class,

I would like to say thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to get to know you.

When I saw that there was an English class who visited the center, I knew I had to take this class.

I actually took the last spot, and I was rushing to sign up for it because I thought it would be an amazing opportunity and that I could learn and give back to the community at the same time.

The first visit, I was nervous, and I didn't know what to expect. I was afraid the stereotype was going to be true, but I was completely wrong. We only really interacted with our groups, but just by visiting overtime, I got to see your personalities come out. The first few times you were quiet, yet as you warmed up there was no difference between us. I never look forward to school, yet every Monday morning this semester I was excited to wake up and visit the center.

I was lost before this class, I wasn't doing well in school because I just didn't care, but because of this class I want to become a social worker and reform the prison system because some of the rules are unfair. I give you guys a lot of credit for signing up for this class by your own choice.

On Tuesday the 30th I represented my class and was able to speak about what I've learned in this class, and how working with my partner was. Many people had questions about you and were really interested in this service learning class. It was great to see people interested in this subject

because I feel as if it is not spoken about enough.

I will always be grateful for having the opportunity to participate in a course like this.

To inform others about what you are going through, I even speak out about the system on social media, and there are many other people who I've found would also like to change the unfair policies that impact your lives.

I wish you all the best, and I will continue on working to become a social worker so I can properly advocate for you and others who are caught up in this system. Once again I would like to thank you for allowing this class to happen, for without your participation, this class never would have happened. Not only was I able help you learn about your research topics, but you guys taught me a lot, and you changed my views on the prison system.

Sincerely,

Audrey

## Appendix II: Tables Identifying Labov's (1972) Structural Elements Across Participants'

### Stories

#### Alex - Childhood up until our college class

Actants	Setting	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
<p>Primary: Alex</p> <p>Secondary: parents, brother, teachers, foster family</p>	<p>Primary: NJ college town with large Latino/a and undocument ed immigrant population - stable but low-income Spanish- speaking family until father's deportation</p>	<p>Growing up as an ESL student led to bullying and a dislike of school; father's deportation coupled with mother's death left Alex living on the streets; poverty led to stealing in order to survive, which caused police to pick him up and place him in the detention center. Went back and forth between group homes, foster families, and the detention center and dropped out of high school. Ran away from foster family once 18-years-old to return to home-town.</p>	<p>Depressed throughout much of childhood because of bullying and felt that he turned to the streets because he felt insecure in school, father's deportation left him confused and more depressed; mother's death led him to feel alone; once locked up felt caged and hated feeling on guard; decision to turn life around made him feel proud of being first to get driver's license, GED, and start college</p>	<p>Returned to GED classes, earned driver's license and GED, and enrolled in college classes</p>	<p>Leads to present day work together</p>

## Alex - Our Composition I Class/College

Actants	Setting	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
<p>Primary: Alex</p> <p>Secondary: professor, peers, detention center residents, brother, EOF staff</p>	<p>Suburban communit y college campus; immigrati on detention center - privately run prison converted from warehous e into prison</p>	<p>Alex focused on college classes and earning good grades - worked on papers and schoolwork most of day and evening; Alex chose to visit the immigration detention center and actively engaged in trying to support and cheer up detainees; Alex was concerned about long term finances and despite me bringing him to EOF, did not get college support. Alex decided to attend farm sanctuary trip, worked harder than everyone there, and was set to receive an award. Alex emailed me to let me know about the car accident and missing class. Alex emailed again about missing class and then stopped all communication.</p>	<p>Feels bored and alone a lot despite being in school; worried about how he'll be able to provide for himself once aged out of foster payments; still proud of being first in family to earn GED and be in college; hopeful about becoming a police officer</p>	<p>Dropped out of college mid-semester</p>	<p>My attempts at outreach failed and his whereabouts are unknown</p>

## Nazir - Childhood up until JDC

Actants	Setting	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
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<p>Primary: Nazir,</p> <p>Secondary: Mother, Grandparents, Cousins, Father, Stepfather, teachers, landlord and family, murder victim</p>	<p>NJ impoverished and violence- ridden small city</p> <p>Secondary: grandparents' home, mom's home, dad's home, landlord's home, city streets; jail</p>	<p>Nazir grew up playing outside, rescuing animals and spending lots of time with pets that grandparents got him; Often argued with mother who was jealous of father and grandma's relationship with him and provided conflicting messages of love and hate; Nazir began experiencing escalating violence in community and with mother; Nazir was outcasted as cousins pulled into streetlife; Nazir lives with dad briefly but then forced to return home; Nazir's violent fight with mom at age 15 leads him to run away from home; Nazir comes back home due to truancy warrant and is reintroduced to violent community; he fights with others while taking care of grandparents and siblings; Nazir's life is threatened after a fight; Nazir feels threatened, gets gun and murders man threatening him</p>	<p>Feeling positive about grandparents but otherwise feeling scared and disconnected from family and friends; wanting to explore the world and be free from violent city- life</p>	<p>Culminated in murder and placement at JDC</p>	<p>N/A</p>
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## Nazir - JDC and College Class

Actants	Setting	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
<p>Primary: Nazir</p> <p>Secondary Professor, Peers, Classmate s, Judge, siblings, grandpare nts</p>	<p>NJ Juvenile detention center</p>	<p>Nazir struggles to feel safe in JDC and starts out fighting everyone; he begins to recognize that this mentality is unhealthy, focuses in school, and earns diploma; concurrently, he is facing a long sentence and lack of funds for strong representation which makes court process slow-moving and painful; he starts the college class and learns grandpa died; continues college classes for almost three years and builds relationships with students; loses connection with mother and most of family and learns grandma dies; connects with JDC staff and peers; about to take a plea deal of 30 years; awaits sentencing</p>	<p>Feeling conflicted and confused - positive about shifting mentality, saddened by what led to this space and place for him, and both scared and hopeful for the future</p>	<p>Awaiting sentencing and continuing to pursue educational opportunities</p>	<p>Taking it day by day and holding onto hope</p>

## Audrey - Childhood

Actants	Setting	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
<p>Primary: Audrey,</p> <p>Secondary : Mother and father, sister, Keith, sisters rapist, police</p>	<p>NJ working class suburban neighborhood - low-income, divorced family; hospitals and doctors' offices</p>	<p>Parents fighting and sister with brain tumor leading to mom no longer working, less money, and parents' divorce; Audrey develops salmonella poisoning and IBS; Audrey develops joint problems and chronic pain with no diagnosis; Audrey falls behind in school due to health problems; Audrey is raped; Audrey's sister is raped and not believed; Audrey falls into severe depression and attends out-patient treatment for care; Audrey develops chronic MRSA in eye along with debilitating pain that goes undiagnosed and questioned for legitimacy by doctors; Audrey graduates high school</p>	<p>Feeling saddened by toxic home environment and unhealthy relationship with parents. Feeling depressed because of sexual assaults and chronic pain conditions; feeling hopeless with lack of diagnosis</p>	<p>Attending college but feeling unmotivated</p>	<p>N/A</p>

## Audrey - JDC/College Class

Actants	Setting	Complication	Evaluation	Result	Coda
<p>Primary: Audrey</p> <p>Secondary : Professors , Peers, Samantha, Parents, JDC residents</p>	<p>College English class - suburban NJ environment; NJ Juvenile detention center</p>	<p>Audrey is a struggling English student with overall 1.0 GPA; Audrey's continued health problems make attendance difficult but she always completes required assignments and supports group members; Audrey writes two powerful essays and develops successful presentation with peers; Audrey changes major and career goals; Audrey presents experience at college-wide event; during last class Audrey shares rape experience with peers</p>	<p>Excited but scared about JDC visits; feeling a growing sense of connection and purpose; desire to become advocate and feeling stronger about self and past history of victimization; change in feelings about Others</p>	<p>President of club and pursuing degree as social worker for juvenile justice population</p>	<p>Lookin g forwar d to degree and continu ed advoca cy work</p>