

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: **THREE AMERICAN ARTISTS AT MIDLIFE:
NEGOTIATING THE SPACE BETWEEN
AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL STATUS**

Michael John Hummel, Doctor of Philosophy, 2007

Directed by: **Professor John L. Caughey
Department of American Studies**

This study examines the life histories of three creative artists who are negotiating the space between amateur and professional status. Using John L. Caughey's "cultural traditions model" in conjunction with other recent life history theory and ethnographic participant-observation techniques, I have created a cultural biography for each of my three informants that details how their artistic identity is influenced by the many cultural traditions they interact with, including national, ethnic, professional, educational, aesthetic, and spiritual traditions. Each informant took entrepreneurial steps to support their artistic identity shortly before the inception of this longitudinal study which follows the ups and downs of the realization of their creative vision over a period of several years. Additionally, in keeping with current ethnographic and life history practice, I discuss my own background as an artist and how that influenced the study, and I reflect on trends in life history and new ethnographic writing and how they impinge upon research on artists.

I argue that there is a tension between external and internal identity for artists, of which my informants were well aware. As I discuss this tension, I critique the work of Stebbins and Becker on artists, arguing that Stebbins' otherwise useful definitions of "amateurs" and "professionals" are ultimately too rigid, as my own informants often defy his categorizations both subjectively and objectively. I then suggest that Becker's "art worlds" approach is important in understanding the infrastructure needed for creative artists to flourish, but that it too neglects the significance of subjectivity and does not recognize that key individuals serve as "hubs" of activity.

I conclude that the individuals in my study made use of more flexible, related cultural traditions to maintain their internal artistic identities while establishing external ones. Having reevaluated their lives as they entered mid-life, they later experienced a "legacy reassessment" following the realization of their original vision. Finally, I conclude that despite outside pressures that challenged and modified the subjective experience of their artistic identity, each of my informants embraced art as a "transcendent" frame which can integrate all other cultural traditions.

THREE AMERICAN ARTISTS AT MIDLIFE: NEGOTIATING THE SPACE
BETWEEN AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL STATUS

by

Michael John Hummel

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Advisory Committee:

Professor John L. Caughey, Chair
Professor Myron O. Lounsbury
Professor Patrice McDermott
Professor Sheri L. Parks
Professor Judith L. Paterson

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2007

DEDICATION

To my wonderful family:

For Susan, who always sees the big picture

And Natalie, who has taught me the meaning of legacy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like the people I write about in this dissertation, I have arrived at this point after a long and sometimes meandering journey. And like them, significant life changes occurred when I reached early middle age. Each of us scrambled to cobble together the resources to take major steps toward a new vision. One of the greatest resources each of us drew upon was the emotional strength and wisdom of family, friends, and colleagues.

I am fortunate to have a spouse who was willing to let me take my turn at pursuing a vision; the support of my wife in more than ways than I can count was critical to the launching of this project at the age of forty and its completion at age fifty. Without Susan Levy, I sometimes feel I would still be pushing paper around a desk in California. Her own personal discipline in her profession has shown me how to follow through in mine. And as my closest friend, her sharing in my personal and intellectual growth has given meaning to my completion of the doctoral degree.

As a student at the University of Maryland, I was lucky enough to have worked with professors who gave me time and space to grow personally and intellectually. I would like to thank Dr. John L. Caughey, professor and advisor, who introduced me to the field of life history (especially his “cultural traditions” model), and encouraged me to explore its personal, scholarly, and artistic boundaries, always with an eye to making a contribution to the field. His razor-sharp editing skills are combined with a wealth of experience in the discipline, and an interest in shaping the future of it in which he invited me to participate. I am very fortunate to have had him as my dissertation advisor.

I would like to thank Dr. Myron Lounsbury, who taught me the language of my new discipline and then patiently encouraged me to speak my mind through it. I am glad

that he was present at the beginning of my American Studies journey, and even gladder he is here at the end of my time as a student.

Dr. Judith Paterson's specialization in the genre of memoir also informs the writing of this dissertation; the memoir I began in her class transformed me as a writer. She, too, opened up intellectual and personal space for me. These three professors are my mentors, and my research, writing, and teaching are a reflection of them—and, in a way, are part of their legacy.

Dr. Patrice McDermott, has served supervised me as a teacher at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Here, as a committee member, she has offered me a different kind of mentoring—sharing me with her own experience as a graduate student while also offering valuable input on the construction of the dissertation. She is both colleague and mentor.

Dr. Sheri Parks, though she came late to my dissertation committee, has exercised a reassuring and positive guidance on the completion of this project.

I would also like to thank the late Skip Muehleisen, who believed in my potential even when I doubted it. His feedback and validation were invaluable to me as I “bloomed late;” they are missed to this day.

I believe I have taken the restless mind I inherited from my father Marvin in directions that I think would both surprise and stimulate him; I am glad that he is able to see me reach the finish line, and very sorry that my mother LoRean is not.

Finally, I would like to thank my informants, Carl Banner, Maritza Rivera, and Regina Jamison, each of whom gave me not just their time, but their thoughts, feelings, hopes and disappointments. Their personal and artistic visions, their struggle and

triumph, moved me both intellectually and personally. Each had a compelling story to tell and a generosity of spirit that I hope I have matched. I have benefited from each of them as both scholar and artist. I wish each of them continued success.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Opening: A Poem In Epigraphs

The practice of art...require[s] constant dedication and devotion...It is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of creative talent. —From the *1965 Arts and Humanities Act*¹

All musicians, classical or otherwise enter with the waiters. When I played concert music at Cosmos Club, I couldn't go in the front door. They won't let the musicians in the front door, so it doesn't matter whether you're classical, folk, rock or anything, you're servants. That's the way it's always been.
—*Carl Banner*

In 1960, the Labor Department's Occupational Outlook Handbook cautioned against a career in the arts, 'The difficulty of earning a living...is one of the facts young people should bear in mind in considering an artistic career...It is important for them to consider the possible advantages of making their art a hobby rather than a field of work.'² —*American Canvas*, NEA 1997

The artistic world is that world that allows for idiosyncrasies, that those idiosyncrasies aren't something bad. It's called talent. It's called sensitivity.
—*Maritza Rivera*

"No artist has a preemptive claim on the tax dollars of the American people; time for them, as President Reagan used to say, 'to go out and test the magic of the marketplace.'" —*Senator Jesse Helms (R-SC)*³

Su arte es el alfabeto de su alma y las llaves del universo. (Art is the alphabet of the soul and the keys to the universe.) —From Regina Jamison's play *Searching For a Signal*

The Benefits of Arts Participation, The Paradox of American Arts Support

There is a considerable body of evidence and opinion to suggest that art should play an important role in American society. Hands-on arts participation has been demonstrated to enable brain development in pre-schoolers⁴; music instruction for

elementary school students has been shown to improve spatial reasoning⁵; school districts nationwide, often in reaction to the mandates of the *No Child Left Behind* act, move to ensure that our children and adolescents make connections across the curriculum through “arts integration” techniques that create depth of learning.⁶ Artists report cognitive and physical benefits from participating in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has come to call the “flow” experience while playing or creating (a sense of heightened attention, of physical exhilaration, a “holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement”).⁷ Personal creativity expressed in arts participation has also been shown to have a therapeutic effect on those who have suffered emotional trauma and to improve overall physical health.⁸ Music participation on a regular basis has been demonstrated to contribute to self-perceptions of well-being and healthy aging among the elderly⁹ and changes in the western experience of work are leading to greater leisure time and a need for more fulfilling things to do with that time.¹⁰ The arts are regularly used as a tool to develop community and socialize Americans to accept diversity.¹¹ And hands-on participants in arts activity regularly report experiences of personal fulfillment at all levels of expertise¹². Furthermore, prior exposure to the arts leads to greater satisfaction with each arts experience: arts knowledge promotes participation, and arts education is the best early conduit for that knowledge.¹³

Clearly, there is plenty of evidence that the arts have value to American lives across the life course and that funding arts education for young people and arts programs for adults is a worthy use of public money. But American attitudes toward the arts present a paradox: arts participation surveys regularly show support for the arts, particularly in terms of school curriculum, but when it comes to actually funding the arts

with tax dollars, Americans have moved away from a cultural commitment to the arts—their support has repeatedly been seen to be “soft,” their attitudes benign but their actions often neglectful at best. “This ‘soft’ support for arts and the lingering tradition of anti-intellectualism that undergirds it make the success of the anti-art rhetoric of the [recent] culture wars less surprising.”¹⁴

Sociologist Juliet B. Schor has speculated that Americans’ preoccupation with upward mobility fueled by a shift in their material reference point away from their neighbors (and, therefore, their socio-economic peers) and towards the upper middle and upper classes (which Schor believes comes from absorbing material values from television and its advertisers) has made Americans less interested in investing in the public sphere and more concerned with maintaining or advancing their social standing through signs of prosperity, especially consumption.¹⁵ Terry Schwadron and Paul Richter, in their study of California’s tax revolt in the late 1970s note that the middle class, despite its overwhelming support for rolling back taxes, expressed great discontent with the lack of services that resulted from that tax cut, particularly with the lack of “extras” like arts and music in the schools.¹⁶ Economic pressures on potential consumers draw them away from participating in the arts either as a live audience or hands-on participants.¹⁷

With work hours up, leisure time down, two income families, long commutes, et cetera, it’s no wonder that a recent study of the baby boomer cohort revealed that they were more than happy to be distracted by one of the arts’ leading competitors for attention—the electronic media. With a dwindling and distracted audience, and a hostile political environment, it’s also not surprising that the arts in America are struggling, and arts organizations feel they must treat themselves as product, creating a “brand,”

marketing “comfort” art and playing up “superstars.”¹⁸ This difficult situation didn’t happen overnight, and is not just a one-shot repudiation of perceived government and artistic excesses of the 1960s and 1970s. America’s problematic relationship to the creative arts has deep roots.

Perceptions of the Creative Arts in American Cultural and Political History

A history of suspicion of the creative arts in America can be traced all the way back to the “enlightened rationalism” of founding fathers John Adams and James Madison. “These men associated art with luxury.”¹⁹ Indeed, after a tour of the European continent, Adams came to associate the arts with the aristocratic and ecclesiastic opulence of Europe. This legacy of “Protestant simplicity” led to a “strong suspicion of anything that doesn’t seem practical and useful.”²⁰

Early American thinkers often saw art as a corrupting force that could loose passions that would undermine the republic—reason was threatened by the volatile passions of art. Adams’ contemporary, moral philosopher Richard Price believed that “if the people deviate from simplicity of manners into luxury, the love of shew and extravagance, the government must become corrupt and tyrannical.”²¹ Thus art threatened freedom and democracy.

The first national political campaign to emphasize this theme was the 1828 presidential campaign between Adams’ more cosmopolitan son, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. Jackson drew a clear contrast between his own pragmatism and the younger Adams’ supposed worldliness. “‘Common sense,’ that is, a lack of interest in the arts and intellect, was connected to the freedoms of the common man, [and] that

correlation has been with us ever since.”²² The arts came to be associated with luxury, decadence, and elitism; it is not surprising, then, that American cultural institutions were slow to grow and that the first federal and state arts agencies did not appear until the 1960s.²³

Baby boomers, heavily influenced by a trend toward self-expression in the 1950s and 1960s,²⁴ embraced the arts as an avenue of self-actualization. This break away from traditional American pragmatism had its effect with a boom in arts funding from the late 1960s through the 1970s, as the first Boomers started to come of age. Ironically, many artists came to take this free-wheeling funding for granted, and were not prepared for the organized conservative backlash that the election of Ronald Reagan ushered in during the 1980s.²⁵

“The culture wars of the late 1980s and ‘90s changed the context in which the art world operates, particularly in its relationship to government. A vocal, organized, and motivated body politic, rooted in fundamentalist religious beliefs, hauled art from the margins of society, where it thrived, to the center stage, where it appeared bizarre and even ludicrous.”²⁶ In an echo of John Adams’ Protestant pragmatism, art was attacked for everything from “elitism to declining moral standards.” Critics used key works to make the case against arts funding in general.²⁷

And suddenly the art boom was over. Politicians, who have long been dismissive of the arts, turned them into a political football. The NEA’s support for diversity and marginalized voices was “seen as using tax money to support depravity and blasphemy.”²⁸ Republican Senator Jesse Helms gave America’s artistic community a “sink-or-swim” ultimatum: “No artist has a preemptive claim on the tax dollars of the American people;

time for them, as President Reagan used to say, ‘to go out and test the magic of the marketplace.’”²⁹ “As government funding dwindled, only one real solution was being proffered by the public sector to nonprofit arts organizations: adopt the practices of the entrepreneurial world, and pull your own freight.”³⁰

The Reagan administration’s deliberate politicization of art led to a shrinking funding picture and a reconfiguration of the relationship between the arts, government, and private or corporate donors.³¹ Following the lead of government, corporate donors backed off from large-scale commitments to the arts.³² Under the Clinton administration, attempts to eliminate the NEA entirely in 1997 were beaten back, but following in Reagan’s footsteps, the administration of President George W. Bush has continued to defund and politically stigmatize the arts. Today, American government arts funding per capita is but a fraction of the commitment made by European governments on behalf of their citizens.³³ Although private funders make up some of this difference in the U.S., having private funders do it all suggests a “cultural policy” of non-support for the arts, despite the fact that the “President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, which has called for a national reflection on American creativity, stated that a ‘healthy cultural life is vital to a democratic society.’”³⁴

Americanist and political scientist George Yudice asserts that “unlike European or Latin American countries, the U.S. does not have a cultural policy, and suggests that “budget cuts and the likely elimination of the NEA are meant to head off the possibility of an official cultural policy which focuses on democratization.”³⁵ Similarly, arts and politics historian Lewis Hyde underscores that “...among all the industrialized nations, the United States has been the most resistant to institutions of public patronage.”³⁶ Without a healthy

public support for the arts, “private money has long been the mainstay of support for arts in America.”³⁷ The result of such a patronage structure is not seen as wholly positive by Hyde: “If all our patronage must begin with those who have money to spare, it will probably not be democratic.”³⁸

Finally, Hyde puts into perspective the meaning for the arts in America of the recent tax revolt:

...No civilization can grow and thrive without self-taxing. Put differently, groups tax themselves in order to empower themselves. That being the case, an attack on taxes is often an attack on collective action, especially those collective actions that cannot arise from market forces alone. In this country taxes paid into the public purse promote the collective of the public, as opposed to the collective of the corporations, and as opposed to the non-collective of individualism. Arousing tax hostility allows the last two of these to trump the first, and all those things that the market cannot support nor individual action create are consequently weakened.³⁹

Hence, Hyde, Yudice, and others believe that whereas European and Latin American nations make government support for the arts a cornerstone of their cultural mission, American cultural policy (or the lack thereof) favors corporate entities whose marketplace philosophies attempt to dominate the creative arts in America, and seek to monopolize resources, political access, and cultural meaning. There is little left over for smaller, less commercial artists and art worlds, and non-profits arts organizations are challenged just to survive.

Arts Participation Surveys

There have been a variety of arts participation surveys sponsored by the NEA over the past two decades. These have attempted to identify key challenges for arts organizations in this new arts funding climate. Issues such as resource shortages,

audience demographics, marketing strategies, developing a “brand,” and organizational visibility are among the challenges for twenty-first century American arts organizations.⁴⁰ In general, the focus has been on audience members and their level of participation, with a heavy emphasis on socio-economic status, and some consideration of age, race, and gender.

A weakness of the surveys is their lack of attention to those who participate in the arts by making it—the so-called “hands-on” group. Because the goal of the surveys was to help arts organizations identify existing and potential audience and learn how to maintain the one while reaching the other, they showed little interest in the smaller percentage of people that participate as creators, primarily amateurs, not just witnesses. This is a key gap, since Robert A. Stebbins has demonstrated through his “Professional-Amateur-Public System” that amateurs are often an important segment of the audience and even serve as supporting players in some instances.⁴¹ Amateur artists’ simultaneous involvement as creators and audience underscores Louis Bergonzi’s and Julia Smith’s conclusion that arts education and training increase arts participation.⁴²

Critics of the arts participation surveys also feel the arts surveys lack qualitative data and have advocated that an interviewing component be added to the traditional survey strategy. Arts surveys have tended toward superficial readings of level of arts involvement. Richard Peterson, et al. have called for “conducting qualitative interviews” to “provide the exact reasons why people do or do not participate in particular art forms.”⁴³ The use of life history research or cultural biography can be a useful complement to quantitative methods, and may be particularly useful in the study of artists.

Some Notions about Art and Artists, Spirituality and Identity

Philosopher Mircea Eliade ties arts and the pursuit of the sacred together; in a secular world, he believed the artist played the key role of revealing “the deepest meaning of [our] plastic universe.”⁴⁴ The three informants in this study share his vision of the spiritual function of arts, and generally embrace a holistic, unifying understanding of the arts. Hence, they elevate the status of the art and artists, and, of course, themselves.

Other theorists have not seen art in quite the same way. Kelly has simply seen arts as another activity that offers identity and self-definition, not as a unique sphere of activity with special value assigned to it.⁴⁵ Mishler has been more concerned with the practice of art and its effect on the artist themselves, describing artists as resisting the dehumanizing impact of industrialization and mass production. From that starting point he embraces “the Marxist concept of alienation via C. Wright Mills’ analysis of the loss of craftsmanship.” Hence, those involved in the creative arts are resisting modern industrialist capitalism through oppositional activity that involves creativity, integrity, and originality. To Mishler, then, art has emancipatory potential for the practitioner.⁴⁶

Finally, Becker whose “art world” concept is explored and critiqued throughout this text critiques notions of art and artists as unique, autonomous, and invaluable as myths peculiar to western culture. Unlike Eliade and others who see art, delivering both artist and audience into the unknown, as imparting crucial experiences and information essential to the intellectual and spiritual health of society, Becker describes such effects of art as produced by expectations learned by both maker and receiver: “Only because artist and audience share knowledge of and experience with the conventions invoked does the art work produce an emotional effect.”⁴⁷ Therefore, both the uses of art and the

experience of making art are culturally constructed, and are not inherently heightened or spiritual. In fact, to Becker, *art* and *artist* are “honorific titles” controlled by certain members of society to confer advantage and superior status—hence, claims by artists to authenticity and unique talent are the result of attempts to create hierarchy that have been agreed upon, often without conscious reflection, in the western world since as early as the Renaissance.⁴⁸ Becker admits that artists are “specialized” cultural workers, but their work and identity are dependent upon a collective of artists, critics, and audience, and a set of understood conventions regarding meaning, production, and distribution.⁴⁹

Each of the artists in this study made spiritual claims for art and their experience of being an artist; as Minnick notes, such “transcendent” claims stabilize identity by elevating the activity, in this case, art.⁵⁰ Each of my informants had actually accessed Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” experience in the process of performing or creating their art; however, this “holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement,”⁵¹ while common to artists, is not unique to them:

The flow experience was described in almost identical terms regardless of the activity that produced it. Athletes, artists, religious mystics, scientists, and ordinary working people described their most rewarding experiences with very similar words: And the description did not vary much by culture, gender, or age; old and young, rich and poor, men and women, Americans and Japanese seem to experience their enjoyment the same way...⁵²

Hence, artistic activity, which shares the characteristics of other activities that deliver the flow experience,⁵³ is but one documented way of accessing what one informant describes as an “ecstatic” experience. His is reached through playing chamber music, another’s through reading poetry, and another’s through the process of writing. Others reach it through religious meditation, still others through sports.

The very notion of what is spirituality may be in play here. None of my informants uses conventional religious explanatory systems in their telling of their life stories; one, as noted above, sees playing the piano as “ecstatic,” and I discuss his readings of Eliade and theories of shamanism in the next chapter. The third chapter considers another informant’s embrace of new age and Twelve-Step thought and her perception of how those beliefs enhanced her writing career. While my final informant is not as fluent in a specific spiritual explanatory system, she, too, embraces art as a means of healing and uses a term like “soul work” when discussing her personal experience in the poetry world. Clearly, my informants tend to believe that art is a spiritual conduit which benefits both self and society.

Goodall has defined the concept of spirituality thus:

Spirituality refers primarily to a ‘sense of unity in multiplicity’—or fundamental, awesome connectedness—that may be experienced numinously (as an encounter with a holy “Other”) and/or mystically (as an encounter or harmony with outward... or inward... forms of wisdom),...or simply through an overwhelming consciousness of unifying processes, activities, and energies in and around you.⁵⁴

Goodall’s definition reflects what Minnick sees as a trend away from religion’s earlier “integrative function,” where a “common set of values and beliefs connect[ed] with an ultimate, transcendent authority, unites all people and creates social harmony.” While Goodall embraces spirituality as an attempt to find mystical unity, Minnick and others view it through its cultural function—providing resources “needed to make sense of the normative ambiguity” caused by changes in “standards for personal success, behavioral norms and guidelines, clearly delineated social roles, and what it means to be a person of worth and value.”⁵⁵ Minnick, Kemp, and Lewis and Melton all see the American

shift away from “traditional” socially-based religions toward transcendent spirituality focused on an inner experience as having its roots in the cultural upheaval experienced by dominant groups in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁵⁶ As society secularized and splintered, “its legitimacy became more precarious”...and the state no longer provided stability...individuals were forced “to find meaning fulfillment, and a sense of purpose” on their own, often by seeking out alternative spiritual practices like the Twelve Steps, evangelical Christianity, and eastern practices like yoga and Buddhism.⁵⁷ My informants reflect this trend in the way they talk about their lives and art—to them, art is a transcendent frame which has helped confer and stabilize identity.

Throughout this study, my informants will make claims for the unique value of art and artists in interview transcripts, quoted poems and plays, and in the form of vignettes which depict them in action, doing their art and relating to their respective audiences. Though I myself also tend to believe in the special power of the experience of making and witnessing art, and have had elevated experiences that I would label “spiritual” as both artist and audience, my goal will be to show how *my informants* view their art and its effects on them and their audience, and how their experience of being an artist relates to their place in American culture, rather than to summarily declare art superior to any other way of experiencing the “ecstatic” realm that my informants describe.

Two Earlier Models for Studying Artists

This study is an in-depth cultural exploration of the meanings of art within the lives of three contemporary American artists negotiating the space between amateur and professional status. In conducting this study I have sought to build on the work of

previous scholars who have taken a social and cultural approach to art in America and/or who have focused their attention on individual artists.

My study builds on the work of sociologists Robert A Stebbins and Howard S. Becker, who have contributed key concepts to the study of artists. Stebbins' fifteen year project on the amateur-professional continuum has both utility and limitations, as does Becker's influential work, *Art Worlds*.⁵⁸ I will now explain each of their key concepts, what I see as the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and their relationship to this study.

Stebbins, like Becker, an accomplished musician in his own right (having spent two years as a professional classical musician and many since as an amateur), set out in the 1970s to develop a defense of both “serious leisure” and its practitioner, the amateur. Initially stymied in his search to find a workable definition of amateurs, Stebbins realized that “that no one had actually conceived of them...as adults in a unique, marginal position within contemporary North American society.”⁵⁹ He would later come to see the amateur's existence as “one of the most complicated and neglected facets of modern leisure.”⁶⁰ Stebbins realized that amateurs had many of the characteristics of professionals—they had training (usually from professionals) and specialized knowledge, they often felt a “calling,” they invested personal and financial resources in their “avocations,” they often persevered against various obstacles, and they experienced the ups and downs of a “career” in their chosen amateur field but there were also key differences—level of commitment, earnings, amount of time spent practicing and performing. The many similarities coupled with key differences led Stebbins to refer to the stages of the amateur and professional experience as a “parallel gradation.”⁶¹

Stebbins did a series of eight studies on amateurs in the arts and other fields—the “qualitative” component of his fifteen year project to define the amateur. The subjects of his studies have included amateur comedians, barbershop quartet singers, classical musicians, ballplayers, and astronomers.⁶² While he did do qualitative research, including interviews and participant observation, Stebbins’ goal was to use that research to create a system of definitions, so he did not focus overmuch on the subjective experience of the artists and amateurs he studied.

Among Stebbins’ most important contributions is his “P-A-P” or “Professional-Amateur-Public” system, wherein the more serious amateurs act as a sort of liaison between the professional and the public. Amateurs thus help, through affordable local amateur performances, to educate new audiences and maintain established ones, sustaining interest in certain aesthetic issues and specific canon through their specialized devotion to them, and also filling gaps in personnel at professional performances when needed.⁶³ Thus, Stebbins set out to detail the complicated relations between amateur and professionals within creative and other fields.

His project offers a way to evaluate how much or how little an amateur measures up against established professional standards. The “career path” notion in particular was constructed to rehabilitate the amateur’s reputation—he felt the amateur was too often seen as inadequate, a dabbler or dilettante.⁶⁴ He notes that professionalization of certain disciplines has actually built on the work of amateurs. While illustrating how an amateur’s experience paralleled that of the professional, he also generated a list of qualifications that differentiate the two, among them that professionals must “earn fifty percent of their livelihood from the activity.”⁶⁵ Additionally, he believed that professionals

share an identity with colleagues and feel part of an in-group and spend more time preparing than amateurs. Meanwhile, he asserted that the experience of the amateur is always “pleasant” (an assertion which I should think qualitative research would at least complicate), and that amateurs accept the hierarchy as defined by the professionals.⁶⁶ Despite the usefulness of these definitions, they seem to overlook complex social, economic and political influences that limit opportunity and to also rule out the subjective experience of artists who might define themselves as professionals, even though they may fail to meet one or another of the measurements on Stebbins’ checklist.

My informants complicate and challenge Stebbins’ definitions. They are all experienced artists who had attempted to move from amateur to professional status at some point near the beginning of the study. One of the subjects in my study runs his own performance series, hires professional musicians who play also with the National Symphony Orchestra, commissions new works from contemporary composers, and plays at a very high level technically and expressively (published reviews confirm this), yet makes no money at his work. Stebbins’ criteria would label this musician an amateur and, more specifically, a *devotee*.⁶⁷ My informant fully claims mastery of his craft, though he would be ruled out as a professional by Stebbins.

Another informant has published four books, numerous articles, essays, and poems, had multiple plays performed and been an in-demand public speaker. She made her living as a writer/speaker for six years, but chose to go back to a nine-to-five job during an economic crunch. Meanwhile, she continues to pursue book deals and has an article out that created a national buzz. Her subjective experience is that she is a professional writer. But Stebbins’ criteria would rule her an amateur because she is not

currently making fifty percent of her livelihood from writing—professional one day, amateur the next. There would seem to be a space in-between or along the borders of the amateur/professional dichotomy Stebbins defines, one this study intends to explore. How the subjective *internal* experience of being an artist interacts with so-called objective *external* measures for my three informants will be part of an interrogation of these particular definitions.

In creating his system of definitions, Stebbins deliberately avoided considering the experience of those who are the subject of my study—the in-betweeners who are negotiating the space between professional and amateur. “I wanted to look at established amateur[s]... so that, initially, at least, the difficulties of becoming established could be avoided.”⁶⁸ While it is understandable that those on the margins would overly complicate his purpose of defining the amateur versus the professional, I would suggest that it is precisely these individuals working in the gray areas of artistic identity and career who can often tell us more about the power structures in our society and how they support or limit opportunity for artistic expression. Their negotiations between internal experience and external forces can highlight how each works to make or break an artist’s identity. While Stebbins has given us a useful a catalogue of definitions to work with, those of us interested in critiquing cultural attitudes toward the arts and discovering the meaning that art gives to the life of the artist, must also tackle questions related to socio-economic status, race/ethnicity, gender, governmental policy, the meaning of art itself, and personal subjectivity and identity.

Sociologist Howard S. Becker’s *Art Worlds* offers a model for analyzing art by analyzing the social networks needed to create it. Becker, a jazz pianist in various

Chicago taverns during the fifties and sixties, came to resent the star system that elevated certain players and left others on the margins. To him, too many resources were devoted to these players, and he questioned why the term “artist” was applied to the stars, but not the bit players.⁶⁹ His “art world” concept is an attempt to query this division into the elite and the also-rans by giving recognition to each individual involved in the production and consumption of a work of art.

An “art world,” then, is “the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for.” Becker further declares he is “more concerned with patterns of cooperation among the people who make the works than with the works themselves or with those conventionally defined as their creators.”⁷⁰ Becker turns the hierarchy evinced in Stebbins’ Professional-Amateur-Public system on its end, and declares each person at each step of production and consumption equally important.

Such a conceptualization has many useful applications. It identifies and critiques power relationships within art worlds, gives us an understanding of how challenges to aesthetic practices are both encouraged and dismissed within the authoritarian confines of an art world, and demonstrates how and why an art world can decline.⁷¹ Since he is concerned with debunking elitist claims to artistic identity at the expense of the rank-and-file, the consumer, and the producers of the raw materials used in making art, his critique reaches much farther and deeper with greater implications for public policy than Stebbins’ system of definitions.

However, Becker’s theory reduces each participant to a mere cog in a complex machine. On a practical level, if we were to follow his concept all the way through to its

logical conclusion, one musician playing one song on one instrument from one folio of sheet music would constitute a complete study. We would have to start with the wood used to create the paper for the sheet music, follow it to the mill where it is pulped and made into paper, then off to wherever the ink used to print the score was created, etc., etc. While this method clearly demonstrates that no work of art is produced independently, but rather is a production of a complex social process, it is as overly focused on the “micro” as the “star system,” which he claims dominates art, is upon the “macro.”

In his eagerness to strip away the veneer of hierarchy, Becker omits the life and meaning of art. He is determined to treat art like any other product, and to treat all the workers involved in any production equally. Focusing on the division of labor, Becker is so little interested in the phenomenological, that he says, “it is even useful to carry the *dehumanization* of artistic personnel one step further and think of them only as resources.”⁷² I believe that suggesting that all art participants and activities are equally valuable is too simplistic and overlooks the human element—the meanings associated with art. Becker’s model, then, is a tool for considering the complex networks involved in producing art, but not for understanding the subjective experience of artists. This study is interested in giving the artist a voice, rather than simply viewing her or him as a worker on a cultural production line.

If we consider Becker and Stebbins from a cultural studies point of view, we can see that they are preoccupied with certain cultural traditions, cultural frames, or coherence systems⁷³ which specifically influence the production and consumption of art, rather than traditions of identity and meaning. Stebbins is concerned with defining the professional tradition connected to the occupation of artist; Becker is concerned with the

academic, economic and media traditions which allow certain artists and their works to be given exaggerated importance. Each downplays personal subjectivity (Becker even more so than Stebbins), and overlooks ethnic, racial, and gender traditions that influence the production of art and the meanings associated with it. While these studies usefully illuminate certain cultural traditions, they ignore others. Hence, we can use these approaches, but we must supplement them with other tools.

Trends in the Biographies of Artists

Becker decries what he sees as the inadequacies of the sociology of art with its emphasis on art as the way in which “the essential character of the society expresses itself, especially in great works of genius. The dominant tradition takes the artist and art work, rather than the network of cooperation, as central to the analysis of art as a social phenomenon.”⁷⁴ Until recently, this assertion was largely true.

Academic biographical work about artists, especially those in the so-called “high culture” forms of the fine arts, literature, and classical and contemporary music, has tended to emphasize the “superstars,” wildly successful artists like Mozart, Wordsworth, Stravinsky, etc. The emphasis has been on attempting to understand “genius,” as opposed to the meaning of art to the artist and how that fit into the larger social and cultural context of a life. Indeed, in the 1980s and 1990s Andrew Steptoe, Doris Wallace and Howard Gruber, and Howard Gardner wrote books or compiled anthologies about the above artists who achieved notoriety through their “genius” in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁷⁵ Studying artists who achieved a certain amount of celebrity and notoriety can reveal important information about the infrastructure of specific artistic and media

traditions, giving us insight into why certain creative works dominate the cultural marketplace at a given time, and delivering some insight (through primary documents like letters, diaries, and, in the case of some twentieth century artists, recordings and filmed interviews) into the personal and creative processes of the artists themselves. However, studying individual artists who struggle to maintain their creative identity in an inhospitable artistic world may be even more culturally revealing.

More often than not, when discussing creative people, “psychobiographical” techniques have been employed. As has been noted, academic biography has suffered from a “tendency to shift from cultural to psychological modes of interpretation.”⁷⁶ This tendency has been so pronounced that psychologist William Schultz has produced a “Handbook of Psychobiography.”⁷⁷ The majority of studies combined an emphasis on celebrity and genius as seen through a developmental psychology framework. While such explanations have much currency in American culture, they often ignore complex cultural conditions which have as much or more to do with an artist’s life history as the traditional developmental psychological, Freudian, or Jungian explanations. Psychological explanatory systems, especially when applied retroactively, often remove a sense of agency from a biography.

One study that attempts to move away from the more traditional “psychobiography” approach is psychotherapist Maxine Junge’s *Creative Realities*. Junge states that she “wanted to know how artists themselves experience creativity,” and tried to avoid personality development theories of creativity. However, she viewed all her data through the lens of four Jungian archetypes. I believe that Junge’s aim to “know how the artists themselves experience creativity” is the right one but her insistence on the

four “alternative realities” limits access to the subjectivity of the artists themselves. This approach ignores numerous cultural influences like nationality, ethnicity, and gender and so is likely to skew Junge’s data in directions far from her subjects’ lived realities.⁷⁸

In the 1980s, Becker’s aforementioned seminal work, *Art Worlds*, ushered in a new approach that had some brief vogue with ethnographers. As noted earlier, Becker’s model usefully challenges artistic hierarchies, but has the side-effect of reducing artists to “resources.”⁷⁹ Ethnomusicologists H. Stith Bennett, Robert Faulkner, and Bruce MacLeod have all employed this model to some extent.⁸⁰ While Becker’s approach effectively produces a picture of the *parts* that make up an art world, it misses *why* members choose to participate and how other cultural traditions influence that choice, and these studies possess many of the strengths and weaknesses of Becker’s approach.

Bennett’s interesting study *On Becoming A Rock Musician* makes excellent use of transcripts in places, but lacks self-reflection. Even as the study describes how the researcher went from band to band as part of his participant observation, it neglects to explore the obvious ethical question of how disruptive this aspect of his research must have been for his informants—his moving from band to band must have created problems. And how did it feel to him to play with a group for one or two months, then leave? This would have been a fairly telling aspect of his research to detail, and could easily have been tied to member’s meanings about group formation, break-ups, and re-grouping in a way that would have added greatly to the piece and our understanding of that world.

Faulkner also uses the “art worlds” approach in his studies *Hollywood Studio Musicians* and *Music On Demand*,⁸¹ but creates a fuller picture of the musician’s world.

Using the Becker approach, he outlines the interlocking worlds of art, commerce, and personal reality. He takes on issues of interest to this study, such as creative satisfaction and does this by detailing creative resistance and frustration, even while discussing the ways in which the idea of creative fulfillment is culturally constructed. He notes considerable variability among his sample, but also notes that almost to a musician, each is involved in outside, less remunerative non-studio work. He moves from learning this to a conclusion about their conflicting commercial and creative identities and backs this up with verbatim transcripts. Faulkner also integrates quantitative data about musical training, pay, and types of gigs in a way that serves the overall purpose of his study. As an ethnography, I would evaluate this as a fairly successful study which lays out a creative world for us and manages to record individual variation and personal meaning, although he doesn't detail how his own experience as a musician and researcher influenced his study.

In contrast, one "art world" study that does make some headway vis-a-vis self-reflexiveness is a later one by MacLeod, *Club Date Musicians*. MacLeod is upfront from the first about his own experience as a musician for hire who first encountered the much more professionalized world of the club date musician when he and his college friends decided to find themselves a booking agent for work in and around Manhattan.⁸² He details his encounter with the language of the club date world (noting a few "richpoints" on the way)⁸³ and is forthcoming about how his ignorance of the kind of music played, business arrangements, and hierarchies involved among personnel affected his initial selections of informants and performances. His ability to give us an account of his

learning curve is valuable. Clearly, incorporating aspects of ethnographic research techniques into the sociology of art benefits this study.

He also interviews informants from all over the personnel continuum, and this results in an interesting case study of labor and management relations. Individual accounts are frequent and give color and context to the study. Still more self-reflexive detail about his own personal amateur “club dates” would have given us another “insider’s” perspective on that world, and also would have clarified for us any biases MacLeod could have had in favor of one or another level of personnel. The self-reflexiveness of the first forty or so pages is missing from the book’s concluding sections. Overall, I think this study adds some subjective depth to the Becker model employed by both Bennett and Faulkner.

New ethnographic research, then, represents a rescue from the too-dry “art worlds” approach. With its emphasis on member’s meanings, expressed as often as possible in their own words, new ethnographic research has made great strides in restoring agency to the stories members of certain groups tell about themselves. Works like Eliot Mishler’s *Craftartists Narratives of Identity*, Jessica Bloom’s *For the Joy of It*, and Robert Gardner’s *Welcome Home* all combine ethnographic interview work, participant-observation, and culturally-based discussion of issues of identity and community to explain the experience of a group of creative artists.⁸⁴

Bloom’s study includes nearly two dozen artists, as does Gardner’s. While their ethnographic achievement in describing both scene and community is valuable, individual meanings seem to become blurred in the creation of an “average” informant: Caughey has critiqued this weakness:

In constructing a description of the culture of the group, ethnographers typically meld differences and alternatives among individuals to construct a generalization that represents how members of this group typically think and act, even though there are inevitably considerable differences among the individuals who make up the group. Despite its importance this approach is a kind of statistical fiction that overlooks variation and generalization. It obscures the multiculturalism of most societies, communities, institutions, and families.⁸⁵

In *Storylines: Craftartists' Narratives of Identity*, Mishler attempts to combine the “art worlds” approach with a combination of self-reflexiveness and discussion of narrative theory. Like MacLeod, Mishler is forthcoming about his own creative interests, and goes into some detail about his personal views on the tension he perceives between art and commerce.⁸⁶ This self-reflexiveness informs the text throughout, to good effect. We feel that something is at stake for Mishler, and we also see how his romantic and utopian notions about art are tempered in lived reality by the practicing craftartists he interviews.

Mishler’s argument that life histories that insist on coherence are at odds with the discontinuities and disruptions of lived reality echoes Bateson’s metaphor of “improvisation” as constant and variability as norm (though she attempts to redefine continuity in a qualitative sense).⁸⁷ His transcripts tend to bear this out, though there are sections which need more of the artists’ voice (there are whole chapters of narrative theory without quotation). It would also seem that he doesn’t fully adopt his subjects’ language: not one of them describes herself or himself as a craftsperson. All declare themselves artists (something he mentions), but Mishler privileges society’s identity of them over their own, and it is not clear why he chose to create a hybrid category that incorporates only a portion of their language (*craftartists*). His examination of issues of

art, commerce, and identity makes a useful contribution to the field, but I would like to learn more about what this means to these artists in terms of their own identity.

Bloom (1998) adds another ethnographic study with admirable participant-observation and self-reflexive vignettes to the literature on artists, but her cohort is so large (over twenty artists were interviewed for the 250 page document) that she can not delve deeply into any one informant's personal experience, and her developmental psychology model forces her informants to fit into pre-conceived patterns: formative childhood experiences, adolescent rebellion and exploration, early adulthood, middle age, and old age.⁸⁸ It is worth noting that not every subject is represented in every developmental stage, since the goal is to show only examples that fit that stage. Through her focus on stages, Bloom does raise some important issues such as the effects of arts education on the budding artist, the tension her informants experience between art and commerce, the jealousies that emerge when one artist succeeds while others do not, and the use of artistic activity as a social glue, but no one informant's life story comes across in a meaningful way. The life stories of these informants, then, are being used to demonstrate "average" experiences for the different stages. Ethnography sometimes looks for averages, while life history looks for intersections— one life story, told in-depth, often enables the researcher to make connections across multiple cultural traditions.

Robert Gardner's "Welcome Home" is an ethnographic study of The New West Bluegrass Festival, and does a thorough job of describing a complex physical and social scene. He also incorporates interviews with various attendees at the festival and writes in small portions of his own experience at such gatherings over the years. But his focus is on the yearning for community and he uses his informants' reflections as examples of

his themes about modern alienation and how community is “performed” at these music jamborees.⁸⁹ It is a solid ethnography, though I would like more of the informants’ voices. Ethnographic research is *one* tool for describing complex scenes like this; life history treatment of a few informants could serve as a complement, adding personal connections for readers.

Artists and the Life History Project

There is clearly a need for more life histories which tell the story of the artist from the artist’s point of view. Esther Eunsil Kho’s “Korean Border-Crossing Artists” examines the art and lives of three Korean-born contemporary artists living in the United States.⁹⁰ Through detailed in-person interviews and critical aesthetic theory she ties together the artists’ personal lives as immigrant artists negotiating a new Korean-American identity (which she also traces back to western influence in Korea) and their own creative work. Her cross-cultural study of these three lives adds to our understanding of how individuals negotiate multiple cultural traditions personally and through artistic expression, and in so doing illuminates issues in American, Korean, and global culture. Her own experience as a Korean-born artist living in America self-reflexively adds to the text to complete the self-ethnographic requirement. Such an in-depth approach to the lives of artists, with its openness to the artist’s voice and his or her experience of multiple cultural traditions is promising.

I believe that a successful life history creates a full picture of an artist’s world from *that artist’s point of view*. It recognizes and incorporates that artist’s language about herself into its accounts, and supports its picture of that world with verbatim

transcripts. Even while locating the person culturally, through both scholarly research and personal testimony, the effective life history or ethnography looks for members' explanations of their identity and choices in a way that avoids imposing external constructs as much as possible. Life history research incorporates ethnographic techniques like participant-observation which require the researcher to attempt to live in the informant's world for a time, as a means of getting a sense of the informant's point of view.⁹¹ Writing techniques are also borrowed from other genres like non-fiction and new journalism to create vignettes which describe scenes the informant moves through: "Scenes, like quotes, engage the reader in a way that a generalizing voice can never do, and they help us feel the person's presence as an individual."⁹² A self-reflexive component which explores the assumptions of the researcher and how fieldwork modified those assumptions should also be present.⁹³ The *psychobiography* and then the *art worlds* approaches have dominated the field without much attention to individual subjectivity or the self-reflexiveness of the researcher. Clearly, there is a need for study of artists' lives which incorporate the meanings of the informant and the background of the researcher.

"Person-centered" ethnography, or life history, then, is an attempt to rectify the general shortcomings of academic biography, while rejecting the notion that the sole value of an individual life history is in the way it illustrates generalities about a group. "...It is also valuable to explore how cultures work at the individual level and how people manage their cultural conditioning." We can "learn as much or more about cultures and individuals from...people who are unusual, atypical, rebellious, or deviant."⁹⁴ When we see how individuals negotiate with cultural rigidity that they encounter, the larger

cultural traditions with which they are interacting are seen in sharp relief; the individual's struggles to fit the self into the group can do much to highlight the group's rules and structures.

Thus life history has become a valuable tool for giving voice to marginalized groups; women's studies has been one area in the academy to seize upon life history as a way of breaking through the limitations of much of traditional ethnography. Watson and Watson-Franke have noted that "ethnography, with its emphasis on social patterns, may inherit built-in biases and miss women's meanings, or define them in terms of male models."⁹⁵ Life history, with its emphasis on individual experience and identity and the choices therein, has become a key tool for giving women a voice.⁹⁶ Sociologists Michal McCall and Judith Wittner echo this sentiment and refer to the effect of life history work as an attempt to "rewrite history from the bottom up, that is, to write history that includes the daily lives of ordinary people and the experiences of oppressed groups." To them, life history can help "expose the system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others."⁹⁷

Since life history "depends less on concepts grounded in the experiences of socially dominant groups and classes," it can thus "deepen the critique of existing knowledge" and help us "incorporate more actors into our models and generate more inclusive concepts for understanding the actual complexities of social institutions and the processes of social change." Life history's person-centered, ethnographic approach is an essential tool for "groups ignored, collectivities just beginning to speak."

Studying Artists

As noted above, the cultural impact of art in America is dismissed by conservative politicians who often attack it outright as elitist and even unpatriotic. Taxpayer support is soft, the funding picture is grim, and what money there is usually goes toward established organizations and their “stars.” Creative artists, across the spectrum of genres, have been challenged to win over the marketplace (and hence, such commercialism has led to a privatization of art) or go back to their day jobs. The majority of artists, then, clearly, are working on the margins of society, economically and professionally.⁹⁸ This study intends to give voice to the experience of the artist struggling on the margins of identity, profession, and financial stability.

Building on the cultural approach to life history and ethnography used by anthropologist Michael Agar, sociologist Charlotte Linde, and Americanist and anthropologist John L. Caughey,⁹⁹ I will create culturally-based biographies of three local (Washington, D.C. metro area) artists negotiating the boundary of professional and amateur status. Cultural frames, coherence systems, and cultural traditions include broad categories like nationality, social class, race/ethnicity, education, occupation, religion, art and music, and media.¹⁰⁰ As noted earlier, I believe that studying an individual as he or she relates to a cultural tradition can bring that cultural tradition into sharper focus than can studying the individual as if that individual is fully immersed *within* that cultural tradition. Aspects of the cultural tradition which the individual rejects or negotiates can clarify the nature of that tradition in some ways better than can aspects she or he unquestioningly accepts. These three individuals who are negotiating the space between the amateur and the professional, can, therefore, serve to illuminate both statuses as they

borrow from one or the other, and struggle to fit into one while abandoning or holding onto aspects of the other.

Each of these three artists has responded to the peculiar situation of being an artist in a culture that is ambivalent at best about the importance of art by taking a major entrepreneurial step. One, a classical pianist, began his own chamber music performance series as a way of affording himself a place to play regularly; another left her professional career with the D.C. School System to attempt to make a living full-time as a freelance writer; and the third, dissatisfied with certain aspects of the local poetry scene and hoping to help other poets “build their résumés,” opened up her own weekly poetry salon. Both the pianist and the poet subsidized their own venues, to the tune of several thousand dollars for a period of years. The freelance writer planned and saved, prayed and compromised, as she spent the better part of a decade using her wits and business sense to make a living.

Through extensive qualitative interviewing and ethnographic participant-observation this study will consider how each of my informants has viewed her or his artistic identity throughout the life course, how the cultural traditions they interacted with have reinforced or undermined that identity, what moved them to take steps to promote their art and declare their creative identity, what things made it harder or easier for them to maintain that artistic identity, and how, finally, after a period of years, they have come to see their entrepreneurial actions in terms of their artistic experience and overall life story. And finally, since, as a musician, writer, and former comedian, I brought to the study my own issues about artistic identity, I have concluded that I should add myself to the mix when appropriate through the self-reflexive focus that ethnography and life

history require.¹⁰¹ Hence, my own creative works and thoughts on art are mixed in with the creative works and musings of my informants. I feel a study of creative artists requires a creative response—how else could I approximate the creative experience for the reader?

This study will also inquire into issues of continuity in the life histories these individuals construct for themselves. Linde has stated that “in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly revised life story.” Further, she states that individuals will retell and revise their life stories, particularly as regards professional choice, to make it seem that their “choice is well-motivated, richly determined, and woven far back in time”¹⁰² The concepts of narrative “scripts,” “paradigmatic narratives” or “synchrony” all touch on the notion of cultural ideals and the ways in which individuals learn them as stories or scripts against which they measure their own lives. Collin, Sikes and Aspinwall, and Sloan have also employed similar concepts to understand the individual experience of career trajectories.¹⁰³

Meanwhile anthropologists like Mary Catherine Bateson and sociologists like Ann Marie Minnick have suggested that discontinuity is the touchstone of postmodern experience,¹⁰⁴ that identity is therefore the “new liminality,”¹⁰⁵ and in reaction to this assumption have offered new explanatory models. While some would argue that identity continuity is impossible in the postmodern era, Bateson and Dan McAdams suggest that continuity can exist despite and within discontinuity and that integration can still be discerned in the midst of multiplicity¹⁰⁶—indeed, Bateson has taken steps to redefine continuity in terms of life skills, removing it from the realms of place, role, and career.¹⁰⁷

One goal of this study is to examine the kinds of explanatory systems my informants use in recounting their lives, and to consider how they explain the discontinuities that inevitably crop up. Given the length of this study, it will be interesting to observe how my informants explain the life changes they experienced over the course of the study—will they reassess and revise, will they integrate and find continuity, or will they embrace discontinuity in some way as a form of opportunity?

An unusual aspect of this study is that the interviews and observations of my subjects took place over a period of several years. Contacts with one informant extended over an eight year period; for the other two, five and six years, respectively. Because of the longitudinal dimension of the study, I have been able to observe the ups and downs of their lives—multiple cycles have been observed, and we have discussed each as my informants have come through to the other side of each life passage. Through all this, they have been generous enough to tell me of not just their successes but also of their struggles and occasional failures. The stories they tell of themselves, having been through artistic and life cycles of vision, reality, and reassessment, are poignant and illuminating.

On My Path to Graduate School—Self as Academic

By 1981, at age 24, I had a Master's degree in English, but I was merely following in my Anglophile father's footsteps (a "scholarship boy"¹⁰⁸ plucked from the Pittsburgh steel ghetto, he was an Episcopalian minister and later an English professor); it felt rote, as if I were just memorizing canon without a reason. I could crank out a paper without much trouble, but I had not yet found my intellectual niche, nor even fully formed

the questions I wanted to ask. So I turned down an opportunity to get a Ph.D. at the University of Arkansas (offered by William Faulkner's nephew Claude, whose claim to fame was having written a book on grammar), and decided to get some life experience. I moved to California, and reveled in its openness to new ideas and cultural diversity, so different from the stuffy east coast college town I hailed from. For the next fifteen years I did a variety of jobs (mostly administrative work) and pursued my creative goals—standup comedy, folk music, fiction, and poetry. I got some life experience that I would bring with me when I returned to graduate school as an adult.

Meanwhile, I watched my neighborhood, San Francisco's fabled Haight-Ashbury, slowly gentrify. I saw how artistic types like me brought cultural value to rundown areas. What I thought was "intrinsic" value was later to be turned into cold hard cash as my beloved Haight yuppified with a vengeance. Young and unfettered, I had done no financial planning, and was shut out of the growing boom. Most of my artist neighbors were squeezed out during one or the other of San Francisco's real estate booms (the yuppies of the eighties were replaced by the dot.comers of the mid to late nineties). The only legacy of the diversity and excitement we had brought to the neighborhood was in an eclectic mix of ethnic restaurants and coffeehouses. We could enjoy the lifestyle if we had pocket money, but we couldn't own a piece of it. We were the "gourmet poor," we joked.

The experience of watching artists used to launch a real estate boom later being cast aside formed a question for me—what do we value in America? I had believed that art was a special thing that elevated the spirit and integrated experience. Meanwhile, the house next door to me, bought for under \$200,000 in the mid-eighties, was on the market

for over a million (it sold for \$1.2m, 200 square foot back yard and all). Housing prices were making impossible the existence of what made the city so attractive. There clearly was a disconnect in our culture. Whether it was on my end or not, I wasn't fully certain. Graduate school (and lower housing prices on the east coast) beckoned. Cultural studies would give me the language with which to discuss and analyze questions that had long been percolating in my brain as I watched San Francisco price out the lower classes and a big swath of the middle class. The San Francisco that had been the scene of my early adult years, that had taught me so much about life, art, and diversity, was gone:

*Remember when it was you and me?
We played the park and it was all for free
We started a dance we thought would change the world
Naïve boys and girls*

*Now San Francisco, my bags are packed
I'm heading out, don't know when I'm coming back
I'd like to stay here, but I don't know how
I can't make the rent,
I can't afford you now*

*Maybe all the winners buy the rights
Put a price tag on your San Francisco sights
But they can't buy your nights
Be mine tonight*

From “San Francisco,” lyrics and music by Mike Hummel¹⁰⁹

Those of us who work in the academy are struggling to understand, to reconcile opposites, find bridges between seeming disconnects. We speak of liberty and happiness in our culture, yet so much of our cultural and economic policy is authoritarian and even cruel. We believe in opportunity for everyone, but create policies that lock out the weak and reinforce the privileges of the powerful. Academics endeavor to find language to

explain these disconnects to the world in a way that will complete the circuit and illustrate the illogic and paradox of so many strongly-held but unexamined beliefs. We do this best when we put a human face on these paradoxes, use the currency of human experience to buy the attention of a world often too busy for self-reflection. This is no doubt why first ethnography and later life history appealed to me—it integrates both the intellectual and the personal.

Self as Artist—Two Vignettes

Vignette #1

Tuesday Night at the Holy City Zoo—Amateur Comedians, Superstars, and Fog

It is Summer 1982, and I am the next comic at the Holy City Zoo's Tuesday night open mike. This little hole-in-the-wall is in San Francisco's cool, foggy inner Richmond District, which is sometimes referred to as a second generation Chinatown, but it has its mix of artsy hipsters, middle-aged former bohemians, and college students. The crowd is a mix of tourists, hip young couples, and comics with a smattering of friends (most comics seem to be loners). I wait a few feet from the stage to go on (there's almost no room anywhere in this narrow little club), exchanging one liners with the bartenders and other comics. A lot of the young comics signed up for tonight's open mike live in the city; at the age of 25, a year out of graduate school with my Masters in English, I've just moved to San Francisco, where I sublet an illegal garage unit four blocks away.

We're a talkative bunch, but we're all "on," in the hyper mode of turning every interaction into comedy, so we're not really having conversations; most of us carry notebooks or memo pads to write down any potential "bits" that come our way. The

small talk of everyday life eludes us. There are women in the San Francisco comedy scene, but the twenty or so gathering tonight to “tame” a wild audience are all male. Few of us are physically tough, but we treat words as a weapon. Comedy, for many of us, is a “macho” sport.

Just as my name is about to be announced, royalty arrives—in the form of Robin Williams, comedy superstar. Williams started out at the *Zoo*, marrying the previous bartender before he took off for L.A. and was cast in the TV mega-hit, *Mork and Mindy*, the program basically a vehicle for his Jonathan Winters-influenced stream-of-consciousness. Because the Zoo has no back door, Williams has to slip past virtually everyone in the audience on his way to the closet-sized back room where we sometimes wait or cool down after a good or, just as often, bad set.

Everyone knows he’s here. His open mike drop-ins, where he hones new material, are legend. He still has roots in the city—he would eventually buy an expensive house in the fanciest of San Francisco neighborhoods, Sea Cliff. His topiary dinosaur hedge and modern art garage door would offend many of his old money neighbors.

The audience is primed for Williams’ well-honed “off-the-cuff” brilliance. And I’m in the way. Me and my five minutes. I take the dimly-lit stage. I sense trouble. The Zoo serves liquor, so heckling is a hallowed tradition; WASP-y, bespectacled, and awkwardly lanky, I make a decent target. But it’s only eleven thirty, so no one’s too drunk, not on a Tuesday night.

I launch into my usual routine, aware that there’s a dead zone around me. It’s as if my material is going out into a black hole. The audience is polite, but impatient. The main event is next, and they know it. My fellow comedians provide a couple of chuckles

for me on cue. I read my Robert Frost parody, “Parking By The Curb on a Foggy Evening.” My “miles to go before I park” line gets a look of recognition from a couple of real San Franciscans, but it’s almost as if they don’t want to encourage me by laughing because I might stay up there a second longer. I retire to polite applause and great relief.

A couple of comics pat me on the back—“you hung in there.” An established third-tier (meaning he never headlines, but he emcees regularly) comic honing his own act tells me my material is good, I just need work on the delivery. Then we all look at the next (and last) guy on tonight’s open mike list. Poor Sid. I had to precede Robin Williams but he has to *follow* him. Ouch.

Tonight’s emcee, Jeremy S. Kramer, walks right past me without acknowledging my service under fire and he, Williams, and Michael Pritchard, the giant ex-cop comedian (he’s six-eight) confer. They burst on stage and thrill the crowd (and we amateurs, if we would but admit it) with nearly an hour of apparently improvised material, much of it a Shakespeare parody with a Three Mile Island, nuclear-melt down theme (I say apparently improvised, because I would see Williams “apparently” improvise the exact same material, nearly word for word, two weeks later on the *Tonight Show*.) Williams leaves to wild applause; over half the crowd goes with him.

By the time “poor Sid” comes on, there are about four people, including his cousin, in the audience, excluding comics. As fellow comedians who feel the unfairness of a superstar stealing his stage time (and keeping him up an extra hour—like me, Sid has an office day job), we hang around to commiserate, then move on out into the bitterly cool San Francisco night to head for the bus stop or start the lonely walk home.

Vignette #2

Thursday nights at the Owl and Monkey Café

It's the winter of 1988 in San Francisco, which, as San Franciscans well know, is strangely like the summer. As usual, I haven't eaten a thing before performing. I don't play as well with food in me. I need all my energy for staying centered and accessing some deep part of me that comes out when I play the songs I've written.

I sneak into the bathroom and stand still and breathe. My stage fright when singing and playing music is much worse than when I did comedy, but the material I'm performing is much more satisfying and personal. I've dragged my new guitar, worth more than I can afford (\$1200 new) into the bathroom with me—this is, after all a big city.

In San Francisco's inner Sunset District, a five minute streetcar ride from the old Haight-Ashbury hippie district where I live, and directly across the park from the inner Richmond where the Holy City Zoo still packs them in nightly, the crowd is neighborhoody, intellectual, offbeat. A couple of bearded guys play chess (somebody has covered up the "no chess after six" sign); a young woman writes in her journal; a couple on a date talk low across a table. Back in the front room, I nod to the musicians I already know. Steve takes note of my new guitar—I tentatively let him borrow it for an exploratory strum. He's a pro, though, and his material is always smooth and well-honed. He's complimented me on my songs, but I can tell he thinks my delivery a little shaky. He's right—my hands tend to shake a little whenever I play my own songs. Only more and more practice on each song helps that; it's slowly improving, I suppose.

There are ten of us tonight. The “winner,” based on an unscientific applause reading, gets a bottle of wine. I don’t drink, but winning would be nice. I’m fourth to go on. I usually go in the top half because I need to “get it over with” and go back to being a person as opposed to a nervous wreck. My stage fright doesn’t seem to be disappearing the way some suggested it would.

Still, my plans are to quit my day job of seven years, and commit to pursuing music. I’ve started working on a demo recording in a burned-out Haight-Ashbury Music Center employee’s home studio. The new guitar is part of the plan—big plans need a big sound.

People are eating, people are drinking, streetcars are rolling by. A guy is reading in the front bay window—are we musicians disturbing him? Tonight’s homemade soup is black bean. I wish I could eat some. I drink some more water, concentrate as much as I can on the performers before me. The train whistle of the espresso machine drowns out the last line of Jane’s final tune. Finally, it’s my time to go on. Three songs, Ron, the pony-tailed host tells me.

I’ve dropped a song that I always break a string on. I have a set list lightly taped to the back of the guitar, and an index card with first lines of one song I always seem to forget. I could do my “greatest hits,” but I want to do one of my new songs. This night, it works. The audience has stopped talking. They’re staring at me. Something is happening. I’m in some place I don’t quite understand. I’m squeezing my soul out like a sponge. My voice cracks, but I ride that feeling, staying just on top of the emotion that wrote the song. I don’t lose the wave, then I surf back to earth. One woman is just transfixed—the applause is nice, the silence was better.

My set over, I hang around, despite my inclination to flee, and my need to get up early for work. At least it'll be Friday. I can crash tomorrow. I know I'll be "high" tonight, unable to sleep, and a wreck in the morning. I can see why people take drugs to calm down, though I don't. I hang around some more, waiting to see who won. As usual, one of the last few performers gets the biggest rise from the audience. And, as often before, it's Steve, the pro. I'm second. Oh well, I don't drink, anyway.

I get a couple of nods from the audience, a backslap from one patron (they don't serve liquor, but he sure seems drunk) who whistled a somewhat awkward harmony on one of my songs. I'm not sure how to handle being a performer *after* the performance. But I am sure that I need to get the streetcar I see pulling up two blocks away; I race to the next stop, guitar in-hand, barely catching it as I fumble for my bus *FastPass*.

Personal Motivation and Point of View

As noted above, I believe that a study of creative artists requires a creative response. Hence, I've prefaced my remarks on this area of the introduction to the study with two creative vignettes aimed at situating myself artistically. The vignettes contain a lot of what has frustrated me as an artist and what has led me, twenty-plus years later, to this study. In the comedy vignette, when Robin Williams bursts in and takes over the club, we see clearly the entitlements of professionals and the plight of the amateur in terms of internal and external identity, and in terms of audience expectations. We see the disconnect between the hyper world of comedy and real life. And, yes I did have a day job to report to at 8 a.m.

Some of my fellow comics made it; one wound up writing for *Saturday Night Live* and later worked on the hit NBC sitcom *Will and Grace*. I saw one or two of my fellow open mikers on the *Tonight Show* over the years. A couple wound up as witty, though often crude, “drive time” radio personalities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Host and emcee Jeremy S. Kramer moved to L.A. and was a television character actor for awhile. Gentle giant Michael Pritchard had a failed sitcom during TV’s comedy boom in the late eighties and early nineties, then went back to working with the police force’s youth outreach programs. A few moved up a level to emcee or even local headliner, but most of us faded away, some sooner than others. I went back to administrative work for another fifteen years, and finally back to graduate school for a Ph.D. in American Studies.

In the music vignette, we see a few other themes—the occasionally transcendent experience of performance, the tug-of-war over pleasing one’s audience or oneself, the awkwardness before and after, the disrespect artists live with day in and day out (people reading and talking, playing chess, espresso machines blowing loud and clear over your most intimate expressions), and the sheer unpredictability and caprice of audience recognition for unestablished artists. We also see the day to day life, once again—as Paul Simon once wrote, “Tomorrow’s going to be another working day, and I’m trying to get some rest.”¹¹⁰

I chose to do this study because I have long had a curiosity about those who have had the perseverance (I once thought it luck) to make the move from amateur to professional status. I had made many aborted attempts in many different art forms—comedy, music, fiction (I completed a mystery novel), memoir, but had never been able to move to the next level. I loved comedy riffing, writing, and composing music, but had

grave ambivalence about performing and marketing. But still I made music demos, did a year of comedy open mikes, played and occasionally headlined at cafés, wrote a book, published poems. Somehow I found my goal of artistic success incompatible with my wish to be a happy human being. I eventually surrendered to a somewhat more available career path in the academy, hoping I could fulfill myself through another cultural tradition—perhaps a former stand-up comic could tame a wild classroom.

But my artistic aspirations continued to dog me, and I found myself moving back and forth between amateur and professional aspirations, making music demos, contacting writing agents, playing just for myself, playing for friends, wanting people to see what I can do, wanting to keep my art to myself, joining both low-key poetry groups and support groups for artists with big dreams. I showed up at jam sessions, open mikes, got the occasional gig, got paid, played for free, got published, got rejected. And life moved on—I finished my coursework, passed my comps, got my proposal approved. I got a pretty good adjunct job and my wife and I had a baby. Artistic dreams remained in mind, but other life benchmarks upstaged them. Busy with my wife and daughter, now a toddler, the dissertation, and my teaching gig, I thought perhaps I was letting my creative goals go.

But today, writing this section, I feel all the conflicts I struggled with arising once again—the tension between being an artist and marketing that art (and often, oneself); the competition between artists who simultaneously believe that art has unifying, spiritual effects; the desire to have a “normal” life and the seemingly opposed world of the creative person; the meaning of one’s artistic identity but the need to integrate that identity into one’s other worlds in a livable manner; the internal satisfaction of the artist versus the external validation of the audience and society.

I have wanted to make a career as an artist, but have also found art to serve an important function in my personal life. When my mother passed away the day after I delivered the first chapter of this dissertation to my advisor, it was to my guitar that I went. Within two weeks, I had a song. I would play that song every day for two months at the end of the day as a means of coping and letting go:

*Who had the blossoms that come in the spring
Who held the thunder that the summer can bring
Who had the autumn, who had the fall
Who left in winter, who can't I call?*

“Who’s Got the Moon?” Words and Music by Mike Hummel¹¹¹

My lifelong pursuit of creativity and my ambivalence about an artistic career, while a source of great personal stress over the years, have made me well-suited to embark on this particular journey. As a long-time amateur (I’ve played guitar for over thirty years) who has entertained notions of professionalism, but never followed through the way my informants have, I’m both an insider and an outsider, so I bring expertise along with questions about what it takes to make the transition. I have been thinking about these things—the meaning and uses of art, the conflicts of being an artist in a commercial society, the tradeoffs of amateur independence and professional obligation, the spiritual dimension of being a creator and performer, the benefits and burdens of carrying artistic identity through the life course—my entire adult life.

My subjects, too, have all struggled to embrace their artistic identity for reasons sometimes career-related, sometimes aesthetic, sometimes economic, and sometimes personal. I chose them because each of them had taken a step I was unwilling or unable to take—all of them invested financially in their artistic careers. I thought that I might

learn from them something about what it means to be a creative artist in American culture as we begin the new millennium, and what it takes to persevere. My own realizations as a result of this study are one part of this particular journey, which in many ways is a culmination of two long running threads of my life—the academic and the artistic.

While my subjects are all baby boomers like me, they were all at least two years older (the age range as of this writing is from 58 to 50 years of age, myself being the youngest); I am white, male, middle class (raised lower middle class), graduate-school educated, raised Protestant in a religious family (my father was a writer, professor, and minister). My subjects and I are all middle class, but diverge culturally in terms of race/ethnicity, profession, family traditions, gender experiences, artistic training, education, and personal history. As I worked to understand those areas of divergence and more importantly their meaning to my informants' artistic identity, my own cultural background became much clearer to me. My cultural studies background, in particular, proved an interesting barrier to communication from time to time, as shall be duly reported.

The Significance of this Study

This study makes contributions to our knowledge by adding depth and raising issues across a number of areas including the cultural study of artists with an emphasis on the subjective experience of individual artists, the study of amateurs, identity negotiation through multiple cultural traditions, and via the actual execution of the text itself, as a life history document drawing upon other writing genres.

This study aims for depth rather than breadth in representing the points of view of three artists as completely as possible through his or her own thoughts, words, and

works. Individual life history research can contribute useful case studies that can identify potential key areas for additional research. Indeed, several areas of interest have arisen during the course of this study.

As noted earlier, analysts of the NEA's "arts participation" studies have called for qualitative interviews to add subjective and contextual depth to the survey data.¹¹² Case studies like this can fill in part of the picture and serve as a useful adjunct to the existing participation data. Those whom the arts participation surveys are aimed at helping through the gathering of demographic data—funders, and arts organizations—may benefit from this study which moves far beyond the traditional box-checking level to depict the complex maze these three artists must navigate as entrepreneurs and as individuals with complex lives involving multiple responsibilities and cultural realities. Other aspiring artists may also use these case studies as stories that show both the satisfactions of being a creative artist in America and the struggle to make it work as a profession.

In addition, by analyzing the life and work of artists negotiating the borders of amateur and professional status, this study can serve to illuminate both "career" modes, deepening our understanding of the tension between artistic vision and identity, commercial pressures, and government and social support of the arts.

Stebbins' definitions of amateur and professional status offer us a framework based upon precisely defined external measurements.¹¹³ This study complicates Stebbins' definitions through inquiries into the tension between external and internal identity. Additionally, observations of actual life situations that place the individual artist in the professional camp, when Stebbins' labels would still call her an amateur, or in an in-

between place that seems neither amateur or professional modify and interrogate those still-useful definitions.

The utility of Becker's "art worlds" model is in its outlining of the complex networks that make an art world possible, and its depiction of change within art worlds.¹¹⁴ This study confirms that aspect of its value, but highlights its omission of the subjective experience of the artist. Additionally, I note the tendency of the art worlds model to equalize all participants, and point out that each art world revolves around certain key individuals (whom I call "hubs").

Becker and Stebbins' theories, so important in developing a new sociology of art are seen as key tools for understanding certain aspects of the artistic, professional, and amateur experience, but tools less focused on meaning than on process. Through cutting edge cultural biography we can add that meaning back into our picture of the arts in America—and find out why people do art, how they negotiate internal and external identity through art simultaneously with other cultural traditions, and how they experience this as part of their overall life story. To be fully human we must embrace meaning; life history research enables us to fill out the foundation that the approaches of Stebbins and Becker have laid..

This study also aims to contribute to the cultural study of artists by identifying how individuals in a multicultural, postmodern society negotiate a multiplicity of cultural influences and how those cultural traditions interact with, complicate, and/or modify artistic identity (and vice-versa). How do different cultural traditions support or restrict artistic identity and opportunity? How does artistic identity impact other cultural identifications? This study also builds on the work of Agar, Linde, and Caughey which

demonstrates how individuals interpret experience through multiple cultural frames.

Using Caughey's specific terminology about cultural traditions and identity negotiation, it can have implications for the use of that model and others like it.¹¹⁵

Yet another part of the significance of this particular study is its contribution as an experiment in a genre of writing which is itself undergoing change. As a life history study, this dissertation integrates new theories of ethnographic and biographical writing into the text itself. The self-reflexive components of this study, something I was initially wary of, and the attempts to integrate creative techniques from other genres (particularly non-fiction and novel writing), as well as to integrate creative materials by my informants and me, also contribute to the ongoing discussion about where life history writing is headed. Many leading life history and ethnography theorists have cautioned about the dangers of a self-reflexive presence of the biographer-ethnographer in life histories about others, even as they have insisted upon its necessity.¹¹⁶ The self-reflexive sections and personal vignettes contained herein still seem a bit risky and experimental to me because there is still much negotiation about the appropriate limits of such writing, even as its validity is being recognized, but I felt obliged to attempt them.

Finally, another contribution of this study involves analysis of the ways in which these three individuals construct their life stories. With interviews and participant-observation spread over periods ranging from four to eight years, this study has followed these three artists through numerous personal and creative changes. Analysis of the manner in which the life stories they tell about themselves remain the same or change can provide insight into cycles of storytelling employed by individuals over the life course.

Notes

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² Ault, 33.

³ Lewis Hyde, "The Children of John Adams: A Historical View of the Fight Over Arts Funding," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University, 1999), 253.

⁴ Joyce Eastlund Gromko and Allison Smith Poorman, "The Effect of Music Training on Preschoolers' Spatial-Temporal Task Performance," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 46.2, 173-181.

⁵ Eugenia Costa-Giomi, "The Effects of Three Years of Piano Instruction on Children's Cognitive Development," *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 47.3, 1999, 198-212.

⁶ Merryl Goldberg, *Integrating the Arts: An Approach to Teaching and Learning in Multicultural and Multilingual Settings* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2006) 5.

⁷ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 36, 44-46.

⁸ Louise DiSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) 18-19.

⁹ Ada Paskind Kahn, "Healthy Aging: A Study of Self-perceptions of Well-being." Diss. The Union Institute, 1997, 1-10.

¹⁰ Robert A. Stebbins, *Amateurs: On the Margin Between Work and Leisure* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.) 1979, 7.

¹¹ Louis Bergonzi and Julia Smith, *Effects of Arts Education on Participation in the Arts: National Endowment for the Arts Research Division Report #36* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 1996) 11; Kevin F. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnnet, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2001) 44; Robert Owen Gardner, "'Welcome Home': Performing Place, Community, and Identity in the New West Bluegrass Music Revival," diss., U of Colorado at Boulder, 2004.

¹² Robert A. Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* (McGill-Queen's University Press. Montreal: 1992) 99; McCarthy and Jinnnet, 44.

¹³ Bergonzi and Smith, 4, 7.

¹⁴ Philip Yenawine, "Introduction: But What Has Changed?" in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University, 1999) 11.

¹⁵ Juliet Schor, "The New Politics of Consumption: Why Americans Want So Much More Than They Need," in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc. 2003) 183-195.

¹⁶ Terry Schwadron and Paul Richter, *California and the American Tax Revolt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984,) 32-40.

¹⁷ Richard A. Peterson, Darrin E. Sherkat, Judith Higgins-Balfe, and Rolf Meyersohn, *Age and Arts Participation: National Endowment for the Arts Research Division Report #34* (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 1996) 69.

¹⁸ Sheldon Morgenstern, *No Vivaldi in the Garage: a Requiem for Classical Music in North America* (Boston : Northeastern University Press, 2001) 147; Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music In America : A History Of Its Rise And Fall* (New York : W.W. Norton, 2005) 484-485.

¹⁹ Hyde, 254.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 255.

²² Ibid., 257-258.

²³ Ibid., 254; Yenawine, 11.

²⁴ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 115-120.

²⁵ Yenawine, 9.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²⁹ Hyde, 253.

³⁰ Yenawine, 16.

³¹ Martha Rosler, “*Theses on Defunding*,” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University, 1999), 279.

³² George Yudice, “*The Privatization of Culture*.” in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University, 1999) 287.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 288.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hyde, 259.

³⁷ Yenawine, 12.

³⁸ Hyde, 273.

- ³⁹ Ibid., 269.
- ⁴⁰ McCarthy and Jinnet, 100.
- ⁴¹ Robert A. Stebbins, *The Organizational Basis of Leisure Participation: A Motivational Exploration* (State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 2002) 129.
- ⁴² Bergonzi, Smith, 4, 7.
- ⁴³ McCarthy and Jinnet, xi; Peterson, et al. 117.
- ⁴⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986) 83.
- ⁴⁵ John R. Kelly, *Leisure Identities and Interactions* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983) 107.
- ⁴⁶ Elliot G. Mishler, *Storylines: Craftartists' Narratives of Identity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) xiii-7.
- ⁴⁷ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 30.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 15, 37.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 28, 39.
- ⁵⁰ Ann Marie Minnick, *Twelve Step Programs: A Contemporary American Quest for Meaning and Spiritual Renewal* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997) 123.
- ⁵¹ Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond*, 36, 44-46.
- ⁵² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity* (New York: Harper Perennial 1996) 110-111.
- ⁵³ The flow experience usually “involves ...difficult activities that stretched the person’s capacity and involved an element of novelty and discovery;” *ibid.*, 110-111.
- ⁵⁴ Doreen S. Geddes, “A Spiritual Tapestry: Descriptions of the Recovery Experience of Adult Children of Alcoholics,” in *Communication in Recovery: Perspectives on Twelve-Step Groups*, ed. Lynette S. Eastland, Sandra L. Herndon, & Jeanine R. Barr (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1999), 245-262.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 120, 3.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 1-6; James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds., *Perspectives on the New Age*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) ix-xii; Darren Kemp, *New Age: A Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 110-111.
- ⁵⁷ Minnick, 120-121.
- ⁵⁸ Stebbins’ 1992 book *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure* sums up the majority of his arguments; Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
- ⁵⁹ Robert A. Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals, and Serious Leisure*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), xi.

⁶⁰ Ibid., xii.

⁶¹ Ibid., 23-37, 48.

⁶² Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*, xiii.

⁶³ Stebbins, *Organizational Basis*, 129.

⁶⁴ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*, 42-43.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5, 23-27.

⁶⁷ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*, 46-48.

⁶⁸ Ibid., xiv.

⁶⁹ Becker, ix-x.

⁷⁰ Becker, ix-x.

⁷¹ Ibid., 300-350.

⁷² Ibid., 77-81 (italics mine).

⁷³ These overlapping terms have been employed by Caughey, Agar, and Linde, respectively, in John L. Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 14; Michael Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* (New York: Quill, 1994) 130; Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 163-191.

⁷⁴ Becker, xi.

⁷⁵ Doris Wallace and Howard E Gruber, eds., *Creative People at Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Andrew Steptoe, ed., *Genius and the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Howard Gardner, *Creating Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

⁷⁶ L. Watson and M.B. Watson-Franke, *Interpreting Life Histories*. (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers University Press, 1985) 10; cf. Caughey, *Negotiating*, 9.

⁷⁷ William Todd Schultz, ed., *Handbook of Psychobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press) 2005.

⁷⁸ Maxine Borowsky Junge, *Creative Realities*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998) 19-20.

⁷⁹ Becker, 77.

⁸⁰ H. Stith Bennett, *On Becoming a Rock Musician*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Robert R. Faulkner, *Hollywood Studio Musicians*. (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971); Bruce A. MacLeod, *Club Date Musicians* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

⁸¹ Robert R. Faulkner, *Music On Demand* (London: Transaction Books, 1983).

⁸² MacLeod, 15-16.

⁸³ Agar, 100-107 defines a “richpoint” as “a problematic bit of language...puttied thickly into far reaching-networks of association and many situations of use.” A richpoint generally occurs when one individual cannot initially make sense of a frame of reference that seems to be “common sense” to another.

⁸⁴ Mishler; Jessica R. Bloom, “For the Joy of It: A Study of Non-Vocational Artistic Activity,” diss., City University of New York, 1998; Gardner, Robert Owen.

⁸⁵ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 7-8.

⁸⁶ Mishler, 1-9.

⁸⁷ Mary Catherine Bateson, *Willing to Learn* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2004) 9, 16.

⁸⁸ Bloom, 27-56.

⁸⁹ Gardner, Robert Owen, 1-8.

⁹⁰ Esther Eunsil Kho, “Korean Border-Crossing Artists in the New York Art World: An Examination of the Artistic, Personal, and Social Identities of Do-Ho Suh, Kimsooja, and Ik-Joong Kang,” diss., Florida State University, 2006.

⁹¹ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 23, 37; Agar, 92-93.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 88-89; Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) 16-28; H.L. Goodall, Jr. *Writing the New Ethnography*. (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2000) 147-149.

⁹⁴ Caughey, *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁹⁵ Watson, L. and Watson-Franke, M.B. *Interpreting Life Histories*. New Brunswick, N.J. : 170.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Michal M. McCall and Judith Wittner, “The Good News About Life History,” in *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, ed. Howard S. Becker and Michal M. McCall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 46-58.

⁹⁸ Morgenstern, 147; Horowitz, 483.

⁹⁹ Agar; Linde, *Life*; Caughey, *Negotiating*.

¹⁰⁰ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 14.

¹⁰¹ Behar, 16-28; Ardra Cole and Gary Knowles. *Lives in Context* (New York: Alta Mira Press, 2001) 42-43; Caughey, 2006, 88-89.

¹⁰² Linde, *Life*, 3, 6.

¹⁰³Robert W. Schrauf, “¡Costalero Quiero Ser! Autobiographical Memory and the Oral Life Story of a Holy Week Brother in Spain,” *Ethos* 25.4, (Fall 1997): 428-453; Charlotte Linde, “The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story: How History Becomes Memory and Identity,” *Ethos* 28.4 (Fall 2001): 608-632; Bloom, Frederick R. “Searching for Meaning in Everyday Life: Gay Men Negotiating Selves in the HIV Spectrum,” *Ethos* 25.4 (Fall 1997): 454-479; Pat Sikes and Kath Aspinwall, “Time to Reflect,” in *Constructing Career Through Narrative and Context: An Interpretive Perspective*, ed. Richard A. Young and Audrey Collin (Praeger Publishers. Westport, CT: 1992) 177-188.

¹⁰⁴ Bateson, *Willing*, 66-76.

¹⁰⁵ Ann Marie Minnick, *Twelve Step Programs: A Contemporary American Quest for Meaning and Spiritual Renewal* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997) 125.

¹⁰⁶ Dan McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Anna Lieblich, *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006) 5.

¹⁰⁷ Bateson, *Willing*, 71-72.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Hoggart. *The Uses of Literacy*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998) 224-234.

¹⁰⁹ Mike Hummel, “San Francisco.” *Mike Hummel*, Privately issued recording, 2001.

¹¹⁰ Paul Simon, “American Tune.” *There Goes Rhymin’ Simon*, 1973.

¹¹¹ Mike Hummel, “Who’s Got the Moon?” Unrecorded song, 2006.

¹¹² Bergonzi and Smith; McCarthy and Jinnnet; Peterson, et al.

¹¹³ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*.

¹¹⁴ Becker, *Art Worlds*.

¹¹⁵ Caughey, *Negotiating*; Agar, 1994; Linde, *Life*.

¹¹⁶ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 88-89; Behar, 1996, 16-28; Goodall, 147-149.

CHAPTER TWO: CARL BANNER—RETURN OF A PRODIGY

Vignette

Saturday Night at Washington Musica Viva

It's Saturday night, and my wife and I take 495, the Washington Beltway, from our home in College Park to the far more tony Montgomery County suburb of Kensington, Maryland. As you get off the Beltway and continue on to Connecticut Avenue, you are surrounded by handsome homes, many of them built before World War II. Most are meticulously landscaped, and seem somehow carefully removed from the street. There are few if any pedestrians. It's a quiet, well-to-do area. Suddenly, we turn left off of Connecticut, passing a small shopping area. Another turn, right this time, and we find ourselves in Kensington's hidden underbelly, an old industrial area. We cross the train tracks with a jarring bump. Warehouses pop up on both sides of us—wholesalers, antique stores, pipe suppliers—it's a motley mix.

Finally, we reach the very last building on our right, a building up on a blacktopped hill, with parking spaces awkwardly spaced on the steep grade. This old warehouse is being used as an artist's studio. And tonight, Carl Banner, the husband of one of the artists who rents this space, will be using the space for his concert series. He is a classical pianist who has created his own performance series in an attempt to reinvigorate both his career and chamber music in general. Tickets, ten dollars a few years ago, are now up to \$20. They take reservations, but there are still a few walk-ups.

One of the high old, battered doors of the warehouse is open, and comfortably dressed (sweaters, jeans), mostly graying couples stand outside in the cool but not cold,

mid-March air talking in low tones. Almost no one is smoking. Only a few use a cell phone. Just inside the door at a portable table sits the pianist's wife Marilyn, her space (since the initiation of the series, he pays part of the rent) and her identity temporarily displaced, as she offers clerical support by selling tickets, checking off reservations, selling CDs, passing out programs, setting up a modest snack table (nuts are free, wine is two bucks).

The train roars by (the tracks we crossed a couple blocks back wind back around till they come within 25 feet of the building), just slightly muffled by early spring growth on the trees and bushes that serve as a buffer. Another train will probably compete with Carl's piano and his trio at some point during the evening.

What the space lacks in formality—it is hardly a symphony hall—it makes up, perhaps, in spontaneity. Marilyn's art hangs from the wall—masks, mixed media, more straightforward paintings. At some point during the night she'll discuss her own artistic process, then direct the audience's attention to her work, and let them know "If you're interested in a piece, talk to me at the break or after the performance." Some of her work is stunning in its mixture of Holocaust imagery and family iconography. Despite her obvious talent and willingness to announce that the pieces are for sale, few pieces move tonight.

The focus is on Carl and his music, but part of the "mission" of WMV is to bring all the arts together under one roof. This mission is more or less successful, depending on the night. Tonight, in addition to the music situated on an artistic background, a poet will perform with a jazz bassist backing her up. Tonight there is definitely an air of a bohemian chamber music café.

Meanwhile, there is little separation between artist and audience. Carl sets up extra chairs (the walkup crowd is creating an overflow—perhaps the early spring is drawing them out, or maybe one audience member, as has happened in the past, has recruited another half dozen listeners on her own), greets recognized guests, checks the heating system (another sign of the warehouse—a rectangular heating device hangs perpendicularly from the ceiling, and makes an unbearable racket, so it’s turned off during performance). Finally, the quickly cooling evening drives the audience inside and to their seats.

Carl spots an unexpected attendee, and shakes hands with him, while he looks over his shoulder at the arrival of his cellist, who snakes her way through the scrum of thoughtful-looking bohemians (many of them colleagues from Carl’s daytime career in science) to the back room which triples as dressing room, rehearsal space, and bathroom. Even as she opens her case, audience members are squeezing by to use the non-handicapped accessible loo. Clearly, it’s a less-structured atmosphere than some classically trained, working musicians are used to.

His trio all present, Carl finishes positioning the piano, checks with the other musicians about their positioning, sets up the big manila sheets he’s glued the evening’s musical scores on to, nods to one more latecoming audience member, then confers with Marilyn. The house is full, latecomers will wait at the back to be seated. Another volunteer is staffing the door, people are settling into their uncushioned folding chairs, a few of which have engraved stickers on them (as a fundraiser, Washington Musica Viva has asked patrons to sponsor the seats at \$25 a pop). One or two of the audience have

Styrofoam cups of water, but most are either waiting for the program to begin, or are chatting across rows to friends and family.

Tonight, Carl and his trio will open with Brahms' "Trio in G, Op. 36," followed by a reading by the poet laureate of Maryland. After an intermission, another, lesser known poet will read, and then the trio will return to frame the evening with Chopin's "Trio in G minor, Op. 8."

The performers are seated and ready. Carl, Jewish, Caucasian, and five feet six inches tall, full dark hair shot through with gray, stands in front of his piano bench, and addresses the audience, giving us background on the upcoming Brahms piece. He explains how this version was modified from the original sextet, and gives us a little information on what musical ideas Brahms was working with at the time. Many in the audience nod knowingly, but as many or more seem to be learning something new (myself included). Carl's personalizing of each piece in this way conveys something of his aesthetic philosophy. He is all enthusiasm, much the way Leonard Bernstein was forty years prior in his "Young People's Concerts" on CBS. He shares offbeat details about how the piece was performed, how composers changed their pieces depending on who showed up to play that week, notes interesting rhythmic and melodic changes the audience should watch out for. His energy is up and his personality good-humored. He offers no punchlines, but still gets a few laughs from the now-eager crowd.

He nods to the audience, then shifts himself from host and emcee to artist. He puts his glasses back on and launches into the "Trio." He is an intense player, often looking at his fellow musicians. One senses that perhaps he is "jamming" with them; at the very least there is a different sense than one gets with an orchestra and its conductor,

where the individual musicians learn their part almost independently of one another. Here, there is eye contact, excitement, and almost a sense of conversation between instruments and players.

As I was to learn from observation of more than a half dozen performances by Carl, at some point in every piece, almost inevitably, he will stand suddenly straight up for a few moments, then just as quickly subside back to the bench. “I don’t know why it happens, but it happens at almost the exact place each time,” he will tell me later. While this sort of rock-and-roll behavior is simply not customary in the classical world, somehow the informality of the setting serves to normalize it. It was only later that I was to learn that while many of the musicians Carl would come to play with on a regular basis were unfazed by his spontaneity and responsiveness (he occasionally can be heard muttering to himself as he plays), some were less enthusiastic and less comfortable with the setting and the “communal” playing feeling. They *wanted* a conductor.

The piece goes well—in fact, if it’s possible to say such a thing about chamber music (Carl often uses this term to describe the classical music he plays), it “swings.” Carl continues to integrate a pinch or two of the energy of other musical genres he’s been influenced by—Bob Dylan is a favorite, he once dabbled in rock, and he recently has become intrigued with jazz and salsa—into the performances—apparently, to traditionalists, this most often is apparent in the way he uses the piano’s foot pedals, but also in the spontaneous movements and sounds he sometimes lets out, during what he calls his “shamanistic frenzy.” He has continually been reminded by certain members of the musical establishment that he isn’t doing things “the right way.”

Near the end of the piece, an unexpected bit of percussion. The train has chosen just this moment to illustrate its superior power. The thin walls of the warehouse shake. The sound reverberates in the eighteen foot high rooms. The musicians persevere as the train's jangling rumble subsides. The piece comes to a stately halt. Smiling brightly, eyes shimmering through his glasses, Carl takes a bow with his cohort, then another. "Thank God for the train," he says humorously.

The rest of the program, the two poets and the Chopin piece go well, and the train does not return for its encore tonight. The audience is stimulated, satisfied. This is not a rock concert at Madison Square Garden, but nor is it the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center. The goal, in terms of atmosphere was to create a sort of "chamber music café" where people could drop in and hear music pretty much any time of day. Realities of time and money have dictated that once a month is a reasonable frequency for this concept. People chat and mingle. Carl, fresh from the fulfillment of a month's rehearsals, somehow must "come down" from the ecstasy of playing music and meet and greet. One after another audience members, many of whom he knows either outside this setting or from repeat attendance, offer praise and, sometimes uninvited criticism (the informality of the setting serves to breakdown the barriers between audience and performer in more than one way).

The Prodigy Years

"I was, perhaps, at the height of my career at the age of 14 ."
—Carl, speaking about his musical career in January, 2001.

Carl's story is a very complex one, a story of a man with two careers, one the "best unimportant job" available, one a true vocation that he is "willing to kill and die for." His is also the story of a piano prodigy coming up at a time that the classical music world he expected to enter was shrinking. By the time he would be ready to take a professional position, few would be available.

Starting with "free instrumental programs" at age six, Carl was taking lessons with an aunt by age 7. Like other young people labeled as prodigies, Carl demonstrated his ability in an obvious way, one that could be measured by adults¹—he won a prestigious competition, which led to his soloing with the St. Louis symphony at age fourteen. Like many other "prodigies," he was "fiercely independent, strongly self-determined and inwardly directed," characteristics that enabled him to pursue a specific discipline with great commitment at a young age.² He was willing to log long hours in practice and willing to give up other activities (sports, for example). Fortunately for him, this independence would guide him through some difficult times artistically and emotionally as he struggled with his music during his thirties and forties.

Stebbins has described the steps of careers associated with creativity and "serious leisure."³ There is a stage of initial interest, which in Carl's case was spurred on by his parents' belief that musical training was an essential component of education; this stage is followed by a "development" stage, in which formal training ensues. In Carl's case, he progressed from taking free instruction through his school, to being trained by an aunt who offered lessons on her piano. Thereafter, Carl moved quickly into the "getting established" stage, by giving recitals, and in particular through winning the St. Louis competition.

Stebbins' fourth career stage for the arts involves "maintenance," a period during which the individual performer regularly offers his or her work through performance, publication, or display, is well-received, and maintains a network of opportunities that allow him or her to continue. We will discuss later how this stage proved to be the most difficult for Carl, in part due to the shrinking creative world which he was poised to enter.

Goldsmith has discussed the key factors in the development of a musical prodigy:

Prodigies' achievements represent a confluence of a number of factors at a particular time: individual talent and commitment to study, a domain of endeavor that is highly structured and organized, parents' and teachers' commitment to promote the development of perceived talent, family resources to do so, and cultural milieu that values performance in the prodigy's domain of expertise.⁴

She notes that as a young student musician progresses, there comes a time when a teacher may demand "a complete commitment to the discipline and loyalty to the teacher's regimen for advanced training."⁵ For Carl, this happened when he was 14. His teacher demanded that Carl make a commitment to a musical career.

Carl Banner (CB): My teacher insisted that I make a commitment to be a professional musician at 14 or he wouldn't teach me anymore. And, so, when I did make that commitment to him, he put certain constraints on my life. He said I could not do sports and that basically I had to practice all the time when I wasn't in school.

Mike Hummel (MH): How many hours a day were you practicing?

CB: I was practicing 5 and 6 hours a day. I was really putting in a lot of time.

Goldsmith and Stebbins both note how important family support can be in acquiring opportunities for a young, developing musician by directing resources, time, and encouragement toward the study of music.⁶ "In all cases, the families of prodigies make adjustments, reorganization, and sacrifices to accommodate the pursuit of

prodigious talent.”⁷ Carl’s parents had already adjusted financially, moving Carl from a family member (aunt) as teacher to more and more accomplished (and expensive) teachers as his talent grew, and finally, after the family had moved from St. Louis to the Washington, D.C. area, allowing a fourteen year-old boy to first remain behind in St. Louis to study with his teacher, and then a year later, after he, too had moved to D.C., further allowing and funding bi-weekly 22 hour train trips to St. Louis for lessons with a particular teacher. The literature on child prodigies is full of such unusual arrangements created to give the children access to instruction not available locally.⁸

The result is often more than pleasurable expression—there may be great pressures on young musicians. The life of a child prodigy, one which has often been directed by “fanatical” parents or teachers, is not always an easy or enjoyable one.⁹ Goldsmith notes that “failed prodigies,” those who “star” at a young age but flame out, “are quite common.”¹⁰ “The circumstances that make it likely that a child will be a prodigy may not be ideal for that child to develop into an adult who makes the best use of his or her capabilities.”¹¹

In Carl’s case, parental support had always been reasonable and accessible, but his talent was growing, his discipline, too. He had received recognition, and seemed to have entered into the world of competitions and performance which would lead him forward to a career in classical music. But one of Stebbins’ key factors for a successful career trajectory was soon to be missing—opportunity to perform. The classical music world was collapsing, and one of Carl’s teachers was concerned that it would not be a good life for him.

CB: When I went to St. Louis, my teacher was a relatively successful pianist. She was married to the concert master at the St. Louis Symphony and she soloed every year multiple times with the orchestra. She was very good. Well, at some point, she told my parents that this career was not a good one and that they should discourage me from pursuing it and that it was just a terrible life.

MH: And, why did she say that?

CB: Well, she never said that to me and, so, it came as a shock to me, and I was lost really when they told me that. I think that the field was changing during all those years. And, at that time, being a professional musician or professional pianist, yeah, it was a very hard career and it got worse over the last twenty years, so she was right. But what she didn't realize, and she should have, was that I was a true musician and to prevent me from going to music school was crippling me in important ways. Although, who knows, as they say on the one hand it was a blessing to be outside the system for twenty years. I was not involved in the music world because the music world just got more and more...really bad. The music world was dying.

The classical music world was dying and it really has died. As a living kind of world of cultural activity it's dead and that process was very bad for people who were involved in it. And, so, in a way I was lucky that I was not really impacted. I was kind of in exile for 20 years so that when I came back to it, I hadn't lost my soul and all the people that I knew who had stayed were in bad shape.

MH: So, when you say it was dying, what period of time would you say it was its most flourishing and what was that like?

CB: I think in the thirties and the forties classical music was played as a living ritual with real... it meant something to the people who did it and for the people who listened to it. It really meant something. By the fifties, it was... there was still good music being done, but it had gotten...it was, well, some of the traditions had petrified and there was an attitude towards the training and the execution that at least... it was not healthy. And, then the most important thing that happened is that it lost its audience.

MH: And this was because of rock and roll and R'n'B and...

CB: Yeah, exactly. So, that happened and then it got more and more ingrown and that was the end of it.

MH: I get the feeling that there was still some sort of training structure for classical music in the sixties, but they were sending people out into this world that had been shrinking.

CB: Yeah, that's right. They kept churning out young musicians and by the time I was...well there was no room for people to make careers at a certain point. See, when I was a kid, it was considered...orchestras were considered as a career only for failures. It was like you...everybody wanted to be a soloist or to play

for a string quartet, but an *orchestra*.... Now, if an orchestra position becomes available, 300 people show up for the audition. It's like winning the lottery.

MH: You apply for job after job and never get one.

CB: Yeah, exactly. It's like getting tenure at an Ivy League school to get a job in a symphony orchestra. So, that's a huge change.

MH: And, even back in the fifties, a lot of the networks had their own orchestras.

CB: Yeah, that's right. NBC, RCA...

MH: And that's all been replaced by recording.

CB: That's right. Recording also killed off classical music. In the thirties people still didn't understand what recording meant to them. It meant that they could no longer make mistakes.

In America, homegrown classical music talent was thriving through the late 1940s, in part because war in Europe and its Iron Curtain aftermath had made it difficult or impossible for many European performers to travel to the United States on a regular basis.¹² This void was filled by American-born and trained musicians. But with improvements in recordings and the distribution thereof, the spread and subsequent popularity of television, and the ability of the movie studios and the television and radio networks to use advancements in recording technology to “plug in” music (a reason that so many movie soundtracks sound the same today) on demand, the need for large orchestras disappeared.¹³ Horowitz and Morgenstern have both noted that the musical establishment then turned to marketing certain popular “comfort” composers and specific musical “chestnuts” in order to keep the audience coming.¹⁴ This short-sighted approach led to an abandonment of music as a “living,” thriving thing, and turned it to mere mass entertainment. Save for Leonard Bernstein's semi-successful campaign to reinvigorate the music and educate a new audience in the 1950s and 1960s,¹⁵ the world of classical music has continued to shrink.

And there was a young Carl, poised to enter that world, at exactly the wrong time. It is noteworthy that by the time that his teacher delivered that prophetic warning, Carl had already bound up so much of his identity with being a musician, that it was essentially too late. Though he would struggle to find his place in the musical world (and to find a place for music in his life) for the next thirty years, his need to be a musician and seek a way to claim and express that identity would remain.

Relevant concepts to consider here include Robert W. Schrauf's idea of "scripts,"¹⁶ Frederic Bloom's idea of "synchrony,"¹⁷ and Linde's "paradigmatic narrative."¹⁸ Each of these describes expectations imposed upon a life or career based upon the customary ages and stages experienced by those who have succeeded in a particular field or life path—expectations which are often internalized by the individual who has every hope of following the "script" closely, and reaping the rewards that such a chronology affords—identity, livelihood, recognition. For ten years—ages six to sixteen—Carl had done everything expected of him. He had become increasingly more accomplished, he had increased his practice time to professional levels, he had given public recitals, won competitions (which had allowed him to get some early professional experience with an actual orchestra), and, finally, been awarded a music scholarship which would enable him to continue his music instruction over the objections of his parents. Unfortunately, the world whose script he was so carefully following, whose timing he was so in sync with, no longer had enough room for all the Carls out there—when it was time for them to make a living in the profession, there simply would not be enough opportunity for all of them. A collision of reality and expectations lay just ahead.

The Prodigy Meets With Crisis—A Disruption in the Narrative

Now we come to the first of a series of disruptions in Carl's previously expected linear progress as a musician. Carl's parents, who had pushed him into piano as a form of discipline and enrichment, did not support his plans to pursue it professionally. They fully expected him to become a doctor or a scientist. His teacher was pushing him for an all-or-nothing commitment to music while his family simultaneously refused to support that goal.

MH: Your parents encouraged you to pursue music, and they paid for a lot of training. What did they expect would happen?

CB: Okay, this was a complicated thing. My parents did not want me to become a musician. So, there was a real push and pull. Since my parents didn't want me to be a musician, they said that I couldn't go to music school.

But at sixteen Carl won a music scholarship and headed to New York.

CB: So, I was studying in New York but it was not going well. I was 16, so I went to New York and I had a little apartment on 83rd Street and a little piano and I just practiced and learned the lessons. That's all I did for a year, but it was not going well.

What was not going well included the fact that one of his New York teachers was a tyrant, another a well-meaning composer who had little understanding of musicians themselves, as well as Carl's own devastating awareness that he was being prepared for a musical world that no longer existed, and the realization that something inside him as a musician was changing, leading him to question everything he had learned. At sixteen, alone in New York, Carl chose to pursue his first unscripted moment as a musician. It was 1965, and Carl was swept up in a tide of personal freedom, popular culture, notably folk and rock music, and mind-expanding drugs. He discovered Bob Dylan, whose voice conveyed new musical possibilities and purposes, especially the need for authenticity

in performance: “He’s working from the deepest place we can draw on.” He also experimented with playing rock and roll in the early seventies.

Although he had been in many ways on his own since age fourteen, Carl had always had the authority of a teacher or his father, and the discipline of classical music with its very rigid canonical and technical ideas. Suddenly, at age 16, alone in New York City, frustrated by his instruction, doubtful of his professional future, and caught up in an era where everything was being questioned and new possibilities were taken almost for granted, he decided to break away from his restrictions. Without being specific as to whether the problems were personal, musical, or both, Carl did refer to experiencing a “crisis:”

CB: I was re-examining; see, I had no future for the first time, so I was re-examining what I had been taught and starting over with those principles to learn how to play the piano. I was questioning what I had been taught. I think the bottom line for me was I couldn’t afford *not* to be authentic on the concert stage, because any lapse of authenticity made it impossible for me to do this kind of connection. And so...uh...my education was forcing me away from authenticity... so it was a kind of a crisis, some conflict was set up which was resolved over a period of years.

That period of years would take him from adolescence well into adulthood. Here, there is a disruption in the narrative of Carl’s musical career—and a step back from early attempts at what Stebbins calls the “maintenance” stage of a career. While Stebbins doesn’t provide for steps “backward,” he does refer to career “contingencies” in which “an unintended event, process, or situation...occurs by chance; that is, it lies beyond the control of the people pursuing the career. Career contingencies emanate from changes in leisure or work environments or personal circumstance or both.”¹⁹ In Carl’s case, it would seem that the confluence of several factors, including the independence of being on his

own in New York, encountering a very difficult learning environment, and meeting up with the open-mindedness of the 1960s had precipitated a crisis of authenticity for him, one that left him in conflict with the world he had planned his life course around. To defy the aesthetic of the classical music establishment meant he would also surrender his place in the world that hierarchy largely controlled. Interestingly, Carl was to break away from the accepted ways of doing things again two decades later in another rigid discipline—science.

Even though he longed for a place in the musical world he'd left behind (hereafter, I will regularly refer to Becker's term for creative worlds—"art world"²⁰), his questioning of it in many ways made his return to that art world as it was originally configured impossible. Decades later, when he was able to create a modified version of that art world which included other like-minded musicians, and incorporated other art forms, particularly poetry and visual arts, he finally found an artistic home.

CB: And, so, when the year ended, I quit the lessons and got a job, which was the first taste of freedom I ever had. I got a job as a stock boy in the Sixth Avenue department store and had a ball. I don't know what would have happened had I been left alone, but it was 1965 and so the Vietnam War was on and I was reminded that I was about to turn eighteen, and so I was draftable. So, I had...it was a complete shock to me... I hadn't thought about going to school, though. My parents insisted that I go to school and they wanted me to go to an Ivy League school. So, I ended up at Yale.

The verb-phrase "ended up" is an interesting choice, one that conveys a lack of interest and commitment. For one who had been so driven and so sure of his identity, and at one point so certain of his career future, this was a time of self-doubt, confusion, and unstable identity. Over the next ten years, Carl would attend six different universities before he finally settled on a major, getting a degree in zoology. It was as if it took him

that long to abandon the career and life narrative of the classical musician and pick up on another, more conventional (and significantly, more acceptable to his father) path—science. Faced with a choice between these narratives at age sixteen, he had chosen to be a musician. When things didn't work out as planned as a musician, he wandered from school to school, music department to music department, trying to fit himself into a world he felt was no longer vital and which no longer held a place for him.

However, his identity as a musician had been and still is one constant in Carl's life. During a very painful three-year period in his mid-twenties when he gave up music, it was clear that he still felt he was a musician who was *giving up* music, not that he was no longer a musician. Finally, he entered psychotherapy.

MH: Now you say you went into therapy—was that because you weren't playing music?

CB: No, on the contrary, I went into therapy for personal reasons while I still thought I was trying to be a concert pianist, and my therapist said after a year or so, "What would it feel like to quit music?" And at the time, I thought, you know, that would be a relief. And so, I did it.

MH: And how long were you out?

CB: I quit when I was 26 and so I didn't do any music for maybe three years.

MH: Do you think in retrospect that the hiatus was a good thing?

CB: You could look at it from the historical situation—like, what were my options? From that, I learned some things. I learned one, that I really was a musician.

MH: You said before that you were a true musician.

CB: One of the major things I learned by quitting music that it wasn't mine to do. That I didn't really have that option. I think it's a very fundamental inner drive.

Still, at that point in Carl's life, he stepped back from music. Unable to play the way he had been taught and still feel authentic, and thwarted at every turn in terms of career options, he left the music world behind, although he never stopped identifying

himself as a musician. “I studied science. I became a scientist. That had its usefulness personally, as well as giving me a way of earning a living. But when I came back to music, it was a little bit different.”

His hiatus lasted three years. Carl’s feeling of being rejected by the art world he had belonged to from childhood coupled with a need to eventually find a new set of musical values and a place to express them, created in him an interesting combination of longing to return to that lost world and outsider status. As a former “star,” someone “people knew about,” he had lost an important chunk of his identity. Meanwhile, his younger brother, a violinist, had stayed on track musically and professionally, and wound up as a violinist with the San Francisco Symphony. In some ways, this galled Carl:

MH: Your brother is a violinist with the San Francisco Symphony. What is it like...do you have any...does it feel weird to you that he’s in the so-called “legitimate” world?

CB: Well, I was very jealous, so I didn’t want hear anything about his successes in the music world, and I was also judgmental about it because the music world I felt had spit me out, so anyone who was part of that I wasn’t going to be sympathetic to their ideas.

During those three non-performance years, Carl got his B.S. and then enrolled in Ph.D. program in Cellular Biology at Harvard. After ten years of uncertainty, he was now on an entirely different track, following a very different narrative. During this period he had also gotten married to Marilyn and had a son. This new narrative—education, career, family—had supplanted the old one.

Upon discovering that a fellow Harvard grad student played violin, Carl began playing informally. More than once during our talks, Carl has recalled the less musical eras of his life as periods of feeling “lonely” and needing to “talk to” other musicians.

Abandoning music as a career had no doubt cleared the way for his science career, but the internal drive of music as a means to expressing identity and of making connections remained.

With his Ph.D. from Harvard finished at age 36, Carl landed a job with a government science agency and moved to Bethesda, and was now on the research track. Fifty and sixty hour work weeks were now expected—dedication to science was paramount. Accustomed to such discipline from his musical training, Carl immersed himself in his new world. But something was missing.

The Return of the Prodigy—A Crisis Slowly Resolved

CB: I went back to school because there was nothing else except my music and I thought I could quit. And I went into science and then within four years, I was playing music again. I got a piano and started playing music with another student in graduate school. I began playing restaurant gigs and doing concerts and by the time I finished my Ph.D., I was again torn between music and science. I thought I would make my career in science and be able to manage as a musician, but, obviously, I couldn't stop music. And, then, at some point, it became clear that I couldn't really do both. I had to ask myself what did I really care about the most. Was it research or music? And the answer was music, so I moved out of research into administration.

MH: **So you felt that doing the research was it time consuming or just draining? What was it that made you want to take a step back?**

CB: Well, I felt that research was all-consuming and you had to want it badly enough to really put everything there, or else you wouldn't really accomplish much and I wasn't into that.

MH: **Did you catch any flack from any of the other researchers and did you think they did not understand why you were doing this?**

CB: Well, it was like a Darwinian situation. If you show any meekness as a researcher, you're finished because it was extremely competitive and it was as if you had to be willing to kill and die for it, you know. (Laughter)

Carl's professional identity and its paradigmatic career narrative (long hours, total dedication, and the seeking of recognition through publications, grants and awards) were in conflict with his identity as a musician, whether or not he was on track to be a professional pianist or not. All career paradigms are socially constructed and reinforced, and the "script" of a career in cellular biology was no exception. As a result, when Carl chose to "step back," some of his colleagues abandoned him—he was no longer "one of them;" he had different priorities:

CB: It was hard—there was no way I could keep working those hours and do the music justice. Some of my colleagues were supportive; they understood, even if it wasn't a choice they'd make themselves. But some were very disappointed in me—I wasn't going to be one of them anymore. I had to get out of research; I cut back to a forty hour work week and became a grants administrator at the same institute. I lost some colleagues as friends.

A few others, who, as he described it, "had a life," stood by him, and were in fact some of the most regular attendees of his various concert series. Still his willingness to lose friends, to abandon his socio-professional world reflects the importance of his identity as a musician. He had realized that not playing music was making him unhappy.

Carl had taken a respectable detour in his science career, bringing his scientific knowledge to grants administration within the field, but conflicts with his musical identity remained. He was still working full-time. Could he negotiate a satisfying balance between work and music? How would he find enough time to play at the level he had once been accustomed to? These were questions he would struggle with for the next ten to fifteen years, right up until his retirement at the age of 56.

MH: When you came back, did you have a different desire? Had you pretty much concluded you wouldn't try to fit into the framework most people in that world had come to accept?

CB: I had let go of that expectation. I was trying to find a way to be a contented amateur.

One interesting issue for Carl is that he can never truly restore his own music career narrative to its “preferred trajectory” of student-prodigy-established soloist. He has lost nearly twenty years that he cannot get back. In contrast, as noted earlier, his own brother stayed on track and wound up in the violin section of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. We can understand Carl’s experience of this break with the preferred (and accepted) career trajectory of the classical musician through Bloom’s concept of “synchrony.”²¹

In his study of individuals living with HIV-infection, he discussed how they had internalized a “calendar” that projected where they should be in different dimensions (career, finances, relationship, etc.) of their lives at certain ages.²² Their illness had thrown them off track, much as Carl’s realization that the classical music world no longer afforded him reasonable opportunity for livelihood and professional satisfaction. Individuals in such situations often find themselves employing a dual narrative in which they measure their actual life against the life they had learned to expect or had envisioned.

This issue of being in or out of sync with one’s career narrative both modifies and contrasts with the self’s experience of identity—in almost every interview Carl made strong statements about his *identity as a musician*, as opposed to his experience of his career as musician. The preferred career narrative he had been taught would have had him a well-established soloist at this point in his life—with performance opportunity, and salary and recognition commensurate with his talent. That narrative now existed

only as a shadow, something that seemed to haunt Carl as he plugged away at rebuilding his music career. A satisfying identity as a musician would have to rely on internal and social factors, rather than Carl's ability to match his musical life history to the preferred career trajectory of an established soloist. While the barriers to finding his place in the music world he felt had abandoned him even as he left it behind would challenge him to reaffirm his identity as a musician again and again, that identity remained a relentless force, an inner drive that sustained him through the course of the five years during which he discussed his experience with me.

Although Carl had decided to resume his musical career, there were still numerous hurdles to overcome. The music world involves numerous social relationships—although one may feel he or she is an artist, that doesn't mean the "art world" automatically creates a space for any individual declaring such an identity. In fact, in a cultural world like chamber music, constricted by loss of audience, dwindling employment and performance opportunity, and "petrified" canon, each newcomer is regarded with suspicion. Carl, who declares he "treats all music the same—to quote Louie Armstrong, 'there is only good music or bad music'"—and who arrives with his own ideas about how, what and where to play, was viewed as a threat, a maverick, or even worse, unprofessional.

Even today, Carl expresses a sense of bitterness at the members of the "traditional" music world who refused to welcome him back, when he decided to try to get "into the Friday Morning Music Club. "They run the music scene here. So I auditioned. I thought well you know, I'm getting back to music, I'm lonely, I want to talk to other musicians, try to meet people. So I auditioned, but they wouldn't let me in."

As noted before the classical/chamber music world had atrophied in many ways—audience, employment, performance opportunity, and even its approved music. It was a self-limiting world, no longer dynamic artistically or canonically. The rules of what to perform and how to perform it were increasingly rigid. Carl had been outside this world long enough that he no longer felt constricted by its narrow parameters. As painful as his rejection might be, his alienation allowed him intellectual and musical freedom:

CB: I was playing with my own rules. And they said, “You don’t have enough dynamic contrast”. And, so, what they want is exactly what I hate in piano playing. It’s like banging on the piano. You’re banging on the piano. I won’t do it. I just won’t do it, so I didn’t play loud enough. And they also said, “That it was unconscionable to use the pedal in Bach.” I was using the pedals and they said, “That was absolutely against the rules.” That was it. I break all the rules, and they wouldn’t even let me into the club.

It’s clear that Carl felt being accepted back into the music world was important in many ways—socially, artistically, professionally. He may have even had a sense of entitlement based on his previous success and hard work. He was clearly angry at the establishment for its treatment of him as a young musician, and just as angry for its rejection of him as an adult. In some ways he used his outsider status to motivate himself. It’s instructive to see how Carl, with some relish, tells a story of a later encounter with one of the key figures of that music organization, at a time *when she came to him*, after he had finally made a reputation for himself:

CB: I was playing at a concert which happened to be sponsored by them and the head of the organization comes up to me and said, “Oh, Mr. Banner we would so much like you to be in our club”. I said, “No you wouldn’t; I auditioned and you wouldn’t let me in.” And she just turned on her heels and walked away.
[Laughter]

Toward a New Chamber Music Aesthetic

As noted earlier, Carl was fiercely independent in his thinking about music, and because he had been living outside the musical “box” for so long, he had not had to accept limitations in terms of style and canon that others did to survive. Carl wanted back in, but on his own terms. He had his own ideas about music, forged initially during a decade of intense training in his youth, then slowly modified by influences and experiences both inside and outside the established classical musical world. A concert in Buffalo in his early twenties had been a pivotal experience:

MH: In terms of your musical education, when was the biggest part of your crisis? In your 20s? When did you become aware of the crisis?

CB: Well, I’ll tell you, the one critical memory. It was a series of events, really, but it was in Buffalo in late 1969 or early 1970. I was 21. I was performing in a fairly legitimate venue with a violinist from the Buffalo Symphony and he was a strait-laced Viennese. And we were playing some wonderful music but he played it absolutely cold. No emotion at all. And so, I was very...increasingly upset about it. And um, in those days, I was doing a lot of drugs and took mescaline, and uh...I thought for some reason I thought that I would take mescaline before the concert. And so, I got out there on the stage just as the drug was taking effect, and I felt like I’m playing something which is supposed to be music with this idiot, and the audience looked hostile to me, and I thought, ‘I don’t think so,’ and so I played one movement of the first piece and then I walked off the stage and told the people that I wasn’t feeling well and was going home. My friend, another musician, was backstage, was quite alarmed, and he said, ‘Look, why don’t you just take off your coat, because it’s hot.’ I was wearing a suit or a tux, I guess. So I went back out...he convinced me to go back out on the stage. By this time, I’m ‘tripping.’ So I said to myself ‘what do I have to lose,’ I’m gonna be absolutely there. So I played without...the concert completely full throttle out. The consequence was that I played real music, the violinist was completely beside the point, and the reviewer in the newspaper the next day commented on the contrast between the violinist’s “lack of depth of feeling” vs. the pianist’s “more impassioned playing, sometimes overpowering him.”

MH: Did you play with your Viennese “idiot” again?

CB: No, no. Fortunately, I never spoke with him again. But I learned something there that I really took to heart, which was that you could be way way out there and play music. Now for years after that I played most of my concerts stoned and

it was only gradually that I realized that I had changed enough that I could risk going out on the stage straight.

MH: You could still get to the same place.

CB: Still get to the same place. It took awhile to convince myself that that would be the case, but it was like the crutch I didn't need anymore. You know, I don't tell this story to everybody. It's not something I recommend. I don't think that's how you do it. It's what helped me. It certainly calls into question artificial structures that you might have put together, and if those are in your way, you know, it gives you a handle on dismantling them.

For Carl the prestige of being an established professional was not enough. He needed to fulfill an artistic vision as well in terms of both repertoire and performance theory. The problem, then, would be to find venues, musicians, and an audience interested in sharing that vision. This would be the project of his forties.

The Genesis of Washington Musica Viva

Having decided he wanted to play music again, Carl found the next few years were full of false starts and a real uncertainty of how to create a musical career path for himself. He needed to find places to play where he could explore his increasingly avant-garde aesthetic. He played on the street with a portable keyboard and at cafés. All the time he was conscious of a certain amount of contempt that the world holds for all but the most established artists.

CB: All musicians, classical or otherwise enter with the waiters. When I played concert music at Cosmos club, I couldn't go in the front door. They won't let the musicians in the front door, so it doesn't matter whether you're classical, folk, rock or anything, you're servants. That's the way it has always been.

The first step toward artistic control occurred, ironically, at his "straight" job. "I was complaining at work that I needed a place to play, and one of my friends said, "Have

you tried playing here?” Soon Carl was dragging his portable electric keyboard into a conference room for monthly lunchtime concerts. Not long after that, he made contact with various churches and halls where he was allowed to put on concert series with musicians he had recruited. Still, the experience of using these venues was often grueling and costly—he paid rent for the hall and piano, paid the musicians, did publicity—all out of pocket. And even though he was taking the initiative to create his own series at great personal cost (he generally lost \$6000 to \$9000 per year on his various concert series), he still butted up against the hierarchical nature of the classical world:

CB: There was a time when I had other venues and people would call me... pianists would call me up and say I want to play at your venue. And they presumed that I would set them up and do publicity for them because they were better than me. And I really resented that. I actually did do that for one pianist and I wouldn't do it again.

His bitterness at this sort of disrespect only reinforced his determination to find a space where he could recover the recognition that had eluded him since his “crisis” drove him out of music. His experience of the bohemian residue of mid-1960s Manhattan and then his experiments with different styles of music led him to dream of opening up a “chamber music café” where he would have more artistic control and a receptive audience. Thus was born Washington Musica Viva.

MH: I know it took a lot of work to create this gig for yourself, but it seems like it's the ideal situation.

CB: It was so obvious after the fact.

MH: You had to think outside the box...not very far out side the box...but

CB: I had been playing with the idea for years and years, but everyone I'd tell it to would tell me it was a stupid idea. Right before I started, I was telling people, “You know I think I'm going to rent a warehouse and start a concert series. And my trio that I was playing with were appalled. They were like “It's a terrible idea. Don't do it. It sucks. It'll be awful.”

MH: Why? Because a warehouse is a terrible place to play classical music?

CB: Well, because it was off the ladder of success. So they did not want to waste their time...it was low status. They thought it was such a diversion of energy and that we would never get to the Phillips Gallery that way. And so they hated playing there. And that was part of why we broke up, because I was into something that was (raises pitch into sing-song) “crazy.”

Ironically, his very outsider status, combined with the collapse of classical music’s art world infrastructure left him thinking and playing outside traditional parameters. As painful as it was for his personal identity as a musician to be an outsider after a childhood and adolescence dedicated to music, this separation allowed him to pursue his own ideas. And the traditional musical world’s shrinking influence left him increasingly on his own:

MH: If the music world you trained in indeed lost its vitality, do you feel that you’ve been able to kind of restore a sense of vitality and freshness?

CB: Yeah, yeah. I’m treating all music alike. It’s like classical, old, new rock and roll jazz, folk. I’m seeing all of it as the same stuff and like Louis Armstrong said, “There’s only two kinds of music; good music and bad music” and that’s kind of like where I’m...and, so, that I’m outside of the traditions. I pay no attention to the rules and I can’t begin to list the number of rules that I break in the performance of classical music. What’s remarkable is that I’m getting away with it. One, because the audience likes it and two, because there’s not enough of the musical establishment to really keep an eye on me, you know.

In *Art Worlds*, Becker “presents a comprehensive model of social organization in the arts and elaborates the processes through which the collective activity is transacted and resources distributed.”²³ Becker discusses “patterns of cooperation” in the “art world,” involving a “network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for.”²⁴

Becker notes that no art world lasts forever. They “grow through the diffusion of both organizations and conventions.” However, “art worlds...decline when new

personnel cannot be recruited to maintain the world's activities."²⁵ Changes in media and technology, social class and ethnicity, education, and national cultures can affect how the products of certain art worlds are produced and distributed and to whom they are distributed.²⁶ Clearly, advances in recording technology affected the vitality of classical music while the rise of so-called "low" or "popular culture" through the mass media, and different emphases in the public school on music education and instruction were among the factors that led to the loss of audience for chamber music.²⁷

Not since the days of Leonard Bernstein's televised music lectures in the late 1950s and early 1960s has the American public been exposed to classical music on a regular basis. "A new popular culture...erased the high-culture berths once reserved for classical music on commercial television."²⁸ And when classical music has been encountered by the mass audience, marketing imperatives have led to that audience being "spoon-fed brand name European masterworks."²⁹ Hence a new audience "schooled in the traditions of the form" has not been cultivated.³⁰ In Becker's terms, the conventions of the genre are not being diffused, and so new audiences ("personnel") cannot be recruited to keep that world alive.

Throughout our interview process, Carl repeatedly asserted that "the system is broken," meaning that Becker's idea of a complex social organism of creators, performers, volunteers, audience, and funders has fallen apart (Horowitz refers to this broken system as a "phantom infrastructure")³¹. In this particular case, the music world has lost its infrastructure. Carl's idea was to build a new network. Washington Musica Viva was launched in 1998 with multiple goals—to create a regular performance venue for Carl where he could play interesting repertoire authentically and with full creative

control, to develop a new audience for “contemporary chamber music,” and, in a nod to the old bohemian cafés of the 1950s and early 1960s, to mix different art forms—art, spoken word, music. He also hoped to break down the barriers between performer and audience— something which he thought might create a stronger sense of affiliation for that new audience.

As discussed earlier, there are benefits to this lack of structure—Carl found he could break away from convention in terms of how and what he played. But the costs of this breakdown of infrastructure are monumental in terms of both funding and venues at which to play, and of course each of those impact two more key components of the “music world” Carl needed to sustain and create his particular vision of chamber music—fellow musicians with whom to play and audience to attend the concerts.

Part of the decision to formalize his musical pursuits was a business decision:

CB: All along, I was losing money. We charged, I think, \$7 admission ... and we’d get an audience of forty, and I did some really ambitious productions...I would lose an awful lot of money on every concert.

MH: Because of the musicians you were hiring?

CB: I was paying the musicians. I wasn’t paying them a lot, but the publicity plus the musicians. So I was taking a lot of losses on my income tax. But we thought of forming a non-profit...

MH: For tax purposes?

CB: Yeah. I was taking somewhere between a seven and a ten thousand dollar loss.

MH: Were you able to deduct any of it?

CB: All of it. But when we finally went to an accountant, she said, “Look, the IRS is not going to let you get away with this much longer as a single artist taking that kind of loss.” She said you should incorporate as a non-profit. So we did. We did incorporate in July of ’98, and had this idea that you really have to...the system was thoroughly broken, and you really had to reinvent all the basic parts of it: Bringing together the audience with the creators of the various arts including chamber music, the performers and composers. As well as the visual

artists and literary artists. And doing it Marilyn's studio...the idea was...she had just been evicted from her studio...she had been there sixteen years, but the school wanted the classroom back.

So she was homeless, and I said, look, if I paid part of your rent, you'd have more flexibility about where you could rent. So we found this warehouse and rented half of it.

For a long time, I had this idea of a kind of a chamber music coffeehouse. The idea being that I'd get to play as much as I wanted. It would be relatively informal, that people could just drop in. It's not really what we ended up with, but that was part of the idea.

MH: So the non-profit thing helped you tax-wise?

CB: The answer is yes. I can lose money legally, I can put money into the corporation and it's a simple thing. I just say, "\$9000 to my favorite charity, Washington Musica Viva." But it also means that I can ask people to help out, to contribute money. So people gave about \$5000 last year, so that means when I'm spending money that's part of WMV, it's not just my money.

I'd eventually like it to be none of my money. Money seems to be quite a limiting factor in the arts. I pay the musicians...I don't pay them enough to make it worth their time. So they have to be interested in doing it essentially for free. And that's hard when they're actually making a living playing their instrument. It's very...it wouldn't take much money to make the arts flourish, but it's more money than you can do out of pocket. So there's a strong case for public funding, and I'm seeing it now from the grassroots level.

So long as Carl had his "least horrible regular job" as a grants administrator in the sciences, he could subsidize his own concert series. By all accounts, he has sunk as much as \$100,000 of his own money into the various performances over from 1992 to 2006. This sort of personal investment makes it clear how important his musical identity is to him, and how difficult it is to achieve funding goals for classical music.

Over time, more and more funders, both foundations and individuals offered contributions, but not enough to allow Carl to put on performances of the quality and

(relatively modest) scale he envisions without continuing to be a funder himself of Washington Musica Viva and its related concert series.

Classical music has long been associated with elitism and intellectualism, and to Carl's surprise that elitism extended to the kind of space in which the music was performed for both audience and performers alike. The informality of the studio/warehouse apparently pales in comparison to the presumed elegance of an embassy or museum setting, two venues that became available to Carl's Washington Musica Viva groups a few years after the initiation of the studio concert series. He struggled to get musicians to come to the studio for gigs:

MH: Do the musicians from the embassy spill over to the warehouse gigs?

CB: Well, I've tried. I've said, "If you play this gig at the embassy, you **have** to play one at the studio," but that doesn't work so good either if they don't appreciate what the studio is about. And so far very few people appreciate the opportunity that the studio represents. I thought when I started naively that musicians would see the studio as an opportunity to really cement the ensemble and to work things through with an audience. When you've got your own concert hall, a devoted following, and unlimited repertoire possibilities, you could really get a group together. So far that has not fired anybody's imagination except mine.

MH: What do you attribute that to?

CB: I think that they're discouraged. I think that the musicians don't really think that there's a place for that anymore.

MH: Are they unwilling to pay their dues in some way?

CB: They've all overpaid their dues. It's so hard that they just, most of them, they just want a job.

Morgenstern echoes Carl's diagnosis of a music world full of musicians professionally discouraged and emotionally defeated.³² The collapse of the chamber music "art world" had demoralized the musicians; survival, not art, was now the focus. As noted earlier, when he initially pitched the idea of the studio, his musical cohort

rejected it because it was “so far off the ladder of success.” To them, their own personal career narrative simply could not sustain the associations that playing in a train-rattled, converted warehouse brought. The chamber music world was so difficult to negotiate, their career identities so tenuous, that any apparent step down seemed perilous. Music was being **superseded** by the need to maintain identity through the perceived status of venues, and, often, repertoire. One is struck by the irony of this response to Carl’s idea to reinvigorate the classical music world with new music and energy; rather than being open to new possibilities, the few survivors retrench.

In the early days of Washington Musica Viva, Carl found it took time to win over not just audience but fellow players. As noted before, the group he was with when he launched the studio concert series was very reticent to follow him into a warehouse space. After his twenty-plus year hiatus from a serious performance profile, he also lacked reputation, something which carries a great deal of weight in today’s classical world, which is too often influenced by an emphasis on “star” performers.³³ Because he lacked these “credentials,” his technique and repertoire were subject to scrutiny. He lost a few musicians who were not comfortable with the space and what it did or didn’t represent, but once he started getting a few positive reviews in the Washington Post and elsewhere, things started to change. More musicians were interested in playing with him as he developed a public profile of an artist willing to take on challenging material with a decidedly unique aesthetic vision.

MH: About the other musicians, with one rehearsal and one performance, you say you pay them about \$100.

CB: These days, I pay \$100. I’m actually in trouble with the union, because that’s under scale [more trouble with the music world!]. It’s not...if it were really *pay*...it would be an insulting amount of pay. I can’t afford to pay them enough

to make it a gig. They could play a wedding for \$300, just they won't get to play Lutoslawski at the wedding.

So, I don't take any money. At the end of the series, I split the door. Whatever comes in in tickets, we divide, and they sometimes get a little more than a hundred. But the economics of chamber music is that you can't really afford to produce a concert on what you get at the door.

MH: Have you heard from any of the musicians who play with you, that their fellow musicians are saying, "Why are you playing that little gig?"

CB: I suspect that there's some of that. But there were noticeable differences when I started getting reviewed by the Post. I think it was awhile... some years, before I was taken seriously. I had come out of nowhere, and I'm sure there are people who don't regard me seriously, but that's the least of my problems. There's plenty of politics in the music biz.

I have to maintain my audience, **and** my musicians. Musicians have to feel in some way that this is worth their while, in some way and they can't be doing it for the money.

MH: So how do you make them feel that way?

CB: I think it's an opportunity to play repertoire that they couldn't play anywhere else, and they have to think that I'm doing a pretty job as a pianist, otherwise they wouldn't do it. So, as I said, they're not doing it for the money... Sometimes I get people together because I've got one person who's really god and people want to play with her. So I'll say, "I've got Betty coming down to play this program, do you want to do it? And they'll say, "Oh yeah, I really want to play with Betty." But it's basically the repertoire, the performance opportunity, and the Czech Embassy has some profile, so people do it because it's "embassy." And that can be unfortunate, because people will play the gig and treat it without the passion I require.

Carl repeatedly makes reference to playing with passion, though he differentiates passion from "banging on the keyboard" and other bad habits that he believes the classical world has developed in an attempt to be audience pleasing. Over the years, he has weeded out players who either are unable or unwilling to "go" where the music and the ensemble are meant to go while playing a piece.

Carl discussed his approach to performance numerous times during our interviews. From his viewpoint, there is a social relationship, created on a higher plane, one of “mystery,” which involves the piece, the performers, and the audience:

MH: I know you like performing. Do you feel you’re giving something to the audience?

CB: Yes. The people that we see every day are clearly and obviously to my mind experiencing a deprivation of ritual. Ritual is vital. You don’t what you’re doing without what Aristotle called catharsis and you can’t get that from...well it’s not easy to get that...there’s no obvious places to go.

I can experience this, you can experience it listening to your stereo, maybe. But live performance is really powerful. It’s so powerful that most of the time it is imprisoned. There’s a like a conspiracy to contain the forces of fear essentially. It’s why there’s no good theater, it’s been successfully muzzled because it’s so dangerous. The same is true of music. I’ll get perfectly competent, superb musicians up on the stage, and they become automatons once they’re in front of an audience because it’s very scary. And I want it to be that scary, because that’s what makes it ritual. Because when an audience is with you in that space, it’s what Greg Finch is saying, he came to WMV and he said what you’re doing is you’re clearing away a space for the unknown. And there’s a tremendous need for that, all around us.

So yeah, I feel like we’re very important. We should be treated with great care.
[Laughs]

MH: Is the musician going into the unknown, too?

CB: We’re all stepping into it together. And when it’s really happening, it’s like a soup where you don’t know who’s doing what. I have felt in some of the more interesting performances, that the audience or someone in the audience was doing a performance. And I was just listening.

For instance, there’s this place in the Brahms that’s very beautiful, I know it’s beautiful, but when I play it, it doesn’t work, and I tell myself maybe when there’s an audience, it will work. And sure enough, I get to that spot, and it was quite clear what it was all about, and what I had to do.

I told the audience that I felt quite moved by the music myself and I wanted to thank the audience for that. I was able to get to the place that the music wanted to go, and it was only from the concentrated attention of sixty-five people.

MH: You said, “Without you guys, it don’t happen.”

As the transcripts above indicate, Carl believes that art delivers an essential experience of the unknown through ritual. While his wife Marilyn developed her Masters Thesis around art and shamanism, Carl himself undertook a solo course on art and ritual, reading extensively in Eliade. Eliade's writings on art and the sacred came to be a major influence on Carl's notions of art and performance. "Man in western society... wants to be...completely rid of the sacred. On the level of everyday consciousness, he is perhaps right; but he continues to participate in the sacred through his dreams and daydreams...the sacred survives, buried in his unconscious."³⁴ Eliade saw the artist as a liaison between secular man in his superficial world and the sacred: "Without telling us...the artist penetrates—at times dangerously—into the depths of the world and his own psyche...provoked by his desire to grasp the deepest meaning of his plastic universe."³⁵

Jakobsen defines shamanism as an ecstatic state involving "(a) voluntary control of entrance and duration of trance, (b) post-trance memory, and (c) transic communicative interplay with spectators."³⁶ He further discusses the notion that the shaman makes contact with a supernatural world, acting on behalf of human group."³⁷ Note that the audience is part of this transaction, and the artist/shaman is accessing special information that he communicates to them. Here we get another part of Carl's identity as a musician—he's not interested in mere recitations of a piece—as the audience's liaison between the composer and the ritualized knowledge each composition can impart, he seeks to reach a rarefied plane that he first encountered when playing on the drug mescaline³⁸, and which he now feels able to reach unmedicated each time, though often with the assistance of the audience and the other players. As shaman/pianist, he believes he is benefiting those who listen "spiritually" as well as musically.

Jakobsen's idea that individual audience members can interfere with the shaman's communication is also instructive. In general, the audiences I've witnessed at Washington Musica Viva are "on board" with the program, open to Carl's vision. One can imagine, however, how difficult it would be to "go where the piece is going" with players who are not open to this approach to playing. One can also imagine that as Carl's reputation grows, he will attract more critical focus from members of the old, atrophied classical music world, who may not be as interested in Carl's "shamanistic" flow as they are in his adherence to the established rules of classical performance and decorum.

MH: Your experience has told you that the audience will bring this out. Do you go in there with confidence or with trepidation?

CB: That's a good question. I think...um...I've come to trust that that will happen. If...if I'm prepared in certain ways...um...

MH: What do you have to do to prepare yourself?

CB: Well, I have to know the music thoroughly. So I'm not distracted by my mistakes.

And I can't be distracted by the superficial expectations of the people either that I'm playing with or the audience because they have other layers of expectations and you have to get past those. That's really what the shamanism is all about, because if you stay on the normal transactional level of...uh...then you're never going to play music, because music is on a different level. So you have to get past that, and that takes something that is a little different.

MH: This is the heart of what music is.

CB: Right. It's the heart of what music is.

The informality of the studio concerts created an atmosphere that led other musicians to participate more fully in an ensemble feeling—for instance, the musicians in the studio face each other, so they can "communicate" even as they play. For Carl who once jammed in rock bands, this sort of communication is essential to the ability of the group to take the music to a transcendent place. Unfortunately, the Czech Embassy, a

stately building in a wealthy D.C. neighborhood, site of another of Carl's concert series, seems to have the opposite effect on some players:

MH: Is it different playing at the Czech Embassy versus at the studio? Is it different because one venue is supposedly more legit. Is there a formality to the embassy space?

CB: Right. It is different. The Embassy is more formal despite my attempts to deformalize it. But as you can imagine when I try to do things a little more like I do it in the studio, the Washington Post critic objected to that, they felt it was unprofessional. And also the musicians too are very resistant to being casual at the embassy, because it's, like, legit.

MH: What would be considered casual?

CB: Well, I do talk, and people don't really object to that. But if I...the main problem has been adjusting chairs...

MH: You want to the musicians to be looking at each other, and they want to be facing the audience.

CB: Exactly.

As Carl's concerts moved up the venue ladder, so did the restrictions put on him by the remnants of the classical music world, here in the form of a critic from a major local paper.

While he expressed frustration at players he'd hired who performed like "automatons" and without passion at the Embassy, he also was increasingly excited at the result of discovering various musicians who could let themselves take their music to a "higher place;" other musicians with regular gigs (including the National Symphony Orchestra, or teaching at a prestigious music school) were finding Carl's artistic vision, passionate playing, and innovative repertoire an attractive alternative to the musical limits of their conventional positions.

MH: You were talking about art clearing the space for the unknown and getting to a scary place. And you mentioned that your fellow musicians become scared, almost become automatons under that sort of pressure.

There must be another side—you have this ecstatic thing that you get when you let go of the automaton and move with the piece and the audience...

CB: Well, it's a trance situation and what's really neat is when the other musicians are in it with you. It's really great.

MH: Is “Marie” one of the people who goes there?

CB: Marie is accessible to that. She will go out there, pretty far. I haven't worked with her long enough to find out how far we can go. That's a very interesting question. You know it's what I learned from rock and roll—you can go way out there in a group. And we should be able to do that.

Educating a New Audience

Part of Carl's purpose in creating his Washington Musica Viva series was to initiate a new audience into appreciating and understanding classical music. It is critical they understand the conventions of the music in order for the music world to be more than just a “museum” of rote performances of approved “great” composers. To this end, Carl discusses each piece—giving a piece of history, telling audience to listen for certain things, contextualizing the piece or explaining the piece's meaning to him or its original audience. One is reminded of Leonard Bernstein's nationally televised New York Symphony Young People's Concerts in 1958, the lecture portion of which were designed to explain the music and connect to a young audience being pulled away by popular, vernacular forms.³⁹

MH: The intros...I like them, they help me. You culturally situate the artist and what they're going through at the time. What made you do the introductions and what do you think you're accomplishing?

CB: Well, I like talking to the audience, because it's part of a demystification of music. And people come with assumptions which I don't accept and I want to sort of loosen those assumptions a little bit. I've learned over the years because I've been doing this a long time...it gets harder to do it...I used to just say whatever was on my mind and you can't really do that because you can say things that makes it hard for the audience to listen to the music, so I'm more careful about what I say, because I've learned...also Marilyn has helped me...she says that what really helps the audience is to tell them things that will help them listen. They

don't really care about the love affair of the composer. They might care whether a theme is used in an interesting way or whether something is sad or whether you think it demonstrates a peculiar rhythm.

The audience comes with assumptions. They think they know who the great composers are and they have a hierarchy in their mind. And they also know how they think music is supposed to sound. And they think they know how chamber music is supposed to be played and how we're supposed to comport ourselves. And sometimes they think they know the whole damn thing, so they might as well stay home.

MH: I guess I don't know what it's supposed to sound like.

CB: Well, that's what I'm trying to do, is to create new audiences. Because the people who think they know it all, there's no point in their coming to the concerts if they're going to sit there like the reviewer did and say, "She sang wrong or she didn't behave professionally." I don't need those people in my audience.

MH: What kind of things did you say that put the audience off, made it hard to listen?

CB: Okay, here's an example. I did a concert of pieces by Jews who died in concentration camps, and people were so freaked by the fact that they had died, that they couldn't listen. So the next time, I didn't mention their fate at all. All I said was "This guy likes jazz and was writing jazz pieces in the '20s."

Carl works hard at introducing his pieces, and his enthusiasm for the work shines through. But he is one musician who plays before just eighty audience members at a time. It should be noted that Leonard Bernstein, with an audience of millions and the ultimate mass mediated platform (television), ultimately felt he had failed to keep classical music alive by bringing it to life for the next generation of listeners.⁴⁰ Whether Carl, with a monthly audience amounting, at best, to two or three hundred (depending on how many concerts he offers that month), can have a long-term impact on the decline of classical music in America, is doubtful.

Still he presses on. The music is his passion, but in a barebones non-profit, he has administrative duties that take away from his joy as a performer. To make it work he would have to wear many hats—administrator, musical director, fundraiser, donor—in addition to pianist. The desire to recover his lost identity, to fulfill his own musical vision, and to fight back at a system that he thought was broken and harmful seemed to spur him on, even though a great deal of the busywork involved with making the Café succeed was less than enjoyable.

Administration—Sticking It to the System

MH: What's it like to be a "true musician" and at the same time having to do all this business crap just to get yourself a little space to play in? How does it work for you—do you say, "Okay the musician part of me is going to sort of sit this one out while I fill out this grant form?" Because that's almost like a different part of your brain.

CB: Actually, part of me gets a big kick out of doing the business, because I feel every time I write a press release or send out postcards, I feel like I'm sticking it to the system. It's like survival. I feel like I'm standing up for my survival by doing these things. Now I don't like to be fooled, tricked or ripped off, and that's why the grants thing was painful, because I put a lot of effort and hope them and they did not pay. So that was disappointing.

Some things don't work. It's inevitable. Some things just don't work and that can be really discouraging. But it's a kind of mobilization to fight. And as long as I'm fighting, I'm happy. It's when I go kind of limp and say, "Oh, things aren't working so good, now what?" that I get depressed. As long as there's something to do about it, I'm okay.

I've come to a kind of Marxism about it, which is that nobody's gonna hand it to you. Either...Dylan said, "You Gotta Serve Somebody." You're working for somebody, and at some point, it becomes satisfying to have the means of production in your own hands. So more of that I can do. I want to make my own CD. Really. That's real important. I want to exploit this website much much more, I want to publish some of my ideas about these things. I have a lot of plans, but I can't do everything at once.

Carl's own son had been in a punk band which recorded its gigs on boomboxes and then quickly "burned" and issued those recordings on CD. Inspired by his son's do-it-yourself attitude, and empowered to fight by his own frustrating experiences with an arts funding system that he feels is "broken," Carl issued the first of his own recordings on CD within two years of making that statement. Meanwhile, Carl occasionally found the realities of fund-raising frustrating.

MH: What's it like for you to do the administration? Does Marilyn do some of it?

CB: Well, we share it. And that can be a bit of push and pull. We both get tired of it fairly quickly, she a little faster than I. I wrote a lot of grant proposals last year. I ended up, for all my labor, getting a total of \$1900. Now that was not cost effective. I wrote four grant proposals for that money, and each one took weeks.

And I'm good at it. I evaluate grants day in, day out. It's a very laborious process. And what really was very shocking and annoying was that the reviewers of these proposals were so narrow-minded. And really did not get what we're about. Whereas the administrators are great—the people who are at the arts councils, but they're participating in a system which is not really helping. So I'm finished with the state. The state will not fund us so long as we're in the studio.

MH: What do they expect? Some kind of hall?

CB: Yeah, they want...well, the thrust of arts funding is now handicap accessibility, large numbers of...you gotta go for the middle ground. You have to reach a lot of people in a diverse population, and you have to teach children. That's what the whole thing is about now. And to do cutting edge, quote 'elite' work, nobody wants to fund that shit.

MH: So if you gave a little program for kids thing an hour before, they might throw you a bone?

CB: Well, I could restructure what I'm all about, but I don't need to do that because I have a day job.

Washington Musica Viva's various series consistently lost money, in part because of Carl's ambitious programs. In a discussion ostensibly about the possibility of retirement, Carl laid out the finances of his non-profit:

MH: You're thinking of retiring—so you can focus on the music. Is that still in the thinking stage?

CB: Well, I would like to...see...this was a very successful event on Saturday. We had a full house. And I paid the artists the bare minimum. \$100 per musician and \$50 for the poet. So we did as good as we could do financially. We lost \$101. That's the best we can do.

MH: So your costs...you took in \$650. There were 65 people.

CB: There were four comps. And we took in \$29 from refreshments.

MH: So okay, so there's rent, there's heat, there's promotion.

CB: Postcards. Postcard mailing is a big expense. So yes. Our expenses are not high compared to any other space. What other space could you get for \$175 a month?

The point is if I were taking in money instead of putting out money, even just a little bit, eventually I could go to part-time on my job.

MH: So does this mean—retirement—are you going to get a retirement package. It's not like you'd be living off your savings.

CB: I'm a government employee, so it's complicated. It's partly savings. 401K...

MH: So what's the long-term?

CB: We could keep going exactly what we're doing, not likely...because things have their own momentum. I feel like...one idea is to get a national profile. So I was talking to Marilyn, like "What would we do with a national profile?"

I envision an NPR interview, just enough so people know who we are and what we're doing. But I don't yet have a plan to translate that into activity or money. Like, "Do we want a tour?" Uh, I don't know how to do that. But I need a plan to get bigger in some way because I would like to be doing...because I have big projects and this once a month thing and sustaining the forty hours a week at the day job is an uneasy balance. The bulk of my energy and attention is going into music, so I would very much like to transition to full-time. I don't have a plan.

In the first six years of the non-profit's existence, Carl's day job would be a persistent buffer against the pressures the various factions in the music world would otherwise bring to bear on his vision as musical director of Washington Musica Viva. However, the possibility of an early retirement was beckoning—how would his vision withstand the loss of income, income which he used to subsidize his musical vision?

“Retirement” and Coming Full Circle to Claim Identity

More than four years after our first interview, Carl and I met again. A lot had happened. In addition to the longstanding series at wife and partner Marilyn’s art studio and an ongoing commitment from the Czech Cultural Ministry to continue the Czech Embassy series, two other new series had been initiated, one at a respected museum, and another devoted to Washington, D.C. composers in the old Jupiter movie theater that had been converted into an art gallery and performance space in the District of Columbia. Even more significantly, Carl had retired after nineteen years to concentrate full-time on music at the age of 56.

The fledgling non-profit had grown and now had a board which had encouraged Carl to retire and focus on building up Washington Musica Viva’s many concert series. The board president, an experienced music educator with an advanced degree in arts funding pledged to have raised enough money to enable Carl to take a salary within two years. This was a heady vision, one that could fulfill Carl’s dream of making his living from music—a dream that had been deferred nearly forty years from his days as a teenaged prodigy studying and finally drifting away from the classical world in Manhattan.

We met on a hot Friday before Memorial Day at his modest house in Bethesda. As I entered the shaded front room, Marilyn (who retired a decade earlier than Carl) announced she was off to promote her art—2005 had been her best year yet. She’d had shows in New York, in local office buildings. She was getting some recognition at last. But the money was hardly rolling in: in her “best year yet,” she had made \$6000.

Perhaps in keeping with the theme of the arts and money (and the lack thereof), we spent the first thirty minutes discussing Washington Musica Viva's troubled funding situation. The initial goal of Carl drawing a salary within two years had proven wildly optimistic. Halfway through the second year, they'd run out of money and considered shutting down for the season. An emergency board meeting had led to a number of new donors being contacted and the money had been raised.

Carl's father, the man who had once told his son he could not go to music school, had donated more than \$10,000 to the 2005-2006 season. The donor list had grown, but so had the organization's needs as it expanded its concert series. Carl himself continued to contribute. Relationships with foundations were still being cultivated, and some small foundations had kicked in a thousand here, a thousand there—hardly enough to pay for one concert.

Having started his science career “a bit late” and retired a bit early, Carl had a small pension, and supplemented his income by consulting about four months out of the year at his old job. Clearly, the prospect of continuing to function as prime donor to his own non-profit was worrisome if not impossible. It had been a tough year financially during the Café's most ambition season yet; I was to find out later that it had been a great year artistically. First, we discussed the changes that had come about in Washington Musica Viva's structure.

MH: I wanted to know how WMV is doing and what's the structure now. How has that structure changed?

CB: It has changed. We, uh, Once I got serious, I realized I had to get serious, I needed a board. So we recruited Lisette Josselson. I only knew her as a musician. I really didn't know what she did. I knew she ran a music school in a basement somewhere. But it turns out that she's the darling of the foundations. She's like the master non-profit, arts-nonprofit person in the area. And she's so good it's scary.

She has a degree in Arts Management...And she is quite serious about this. She had said before I retired...I guess she was on the board just before I retired. And she said, well, um, we can get Musica Viva going so that you can draw a salary, and you'd be able to leave your day job in a couple of years. And then suddenly there I was. She got quite...uh...I think it freaked her out because as board chairman she was responsible, she felt for raising enough money to give me a salary. And that was daunting even for her. And what she didn't know is that it's not the same to raise money for a music school than for a performing organization.

So I slogged away for a couple of years trying to do what she told me to do, which was to approach foundations for funding with no success.

MH: Meanwhile, are you drawing any salary?

CB: No [sheepish laugh]. Not even an artist's fee. So that's been disappointing. Nobody's getting anything except the artists.

MH: Are you still sinking money into it?

CB: Well, that was the big change. Once I was not drawing a salary [from the day job], I didn't have the money to put into the organization. Because I was putting between six and ten thousand a year and I don't have that money. And that was scary. In fact, just a couple of months ago, we ran out of money, the organization, so we held an emergency board meeting and I said, "Okay we're out of money. What should we do?" I thought they would suggest that we cancel the rest of the season, and regroup, and somewhat to my surprise they said, "well how much do we need, let's raise that." So we...I've gotten some about my reticence of asking for money. I used to send out one kind of timid appeal per year, and now it's three, four—blech—"Can you give us some more money?"

MH: That's tough—are you getting a lot of responses to these?

CB: Well, we...just about enough to squeak by. We did raise enough to finish the season. We're scraping by okay. And I'm finally realizing what Lisette was trying to tell me for the last two years, which is that...without...in Washington, without foundation support you cannot survive as arts organization.

MH: So you were the foundation—you were the foundation.

CB: Exactly, exactly. There's just no other source, you know, for the money to stabilize the organization. We're talking \$10,000-20,000 amounts—they're not available from any other sources. The foundations...that's just a fact of life. And I just couldn't really face it.

MH: So what were you thinking? There'd be some individual donor who would sponsor it?

CB: I thought that there would be a combination of sources which did not materialize. I thought there was county, state, and federal arts funding. I thought that there were deep pocket donors, I thought that a variety of foundations

eventually would kick in some, and I thought that we would generate more admission fees by doing more concerts.

MH: And that hasn't worked?

CB: The museum concerts now draw enough audience that if you're careful, you don't lose a lot of money.

MH: So what's the picture like for next year?

CB: Well, next year...funding-wise, I have an application into the Cafritz Foundation and a couple other smaller foundations. Since there's no alternative, I must keep putting in these applications even though they're telling me to go away. Which they do, some of them in so many words. The Meyer foundation said don't apply. Kiplinger foundation, "Don't apply." But you can't do that. So for the last two or three concerts I sent complimentary tickets to every foundation in town.

MH: Did any of them show up?

CB: A representative from the Cafritz Foundation came to a couple of concerts.

MH: Maybe one of them will get turned on.

CB: I think that we have goodwill from the Cafritz Foundation right now which may or may not translate into money. But yes, they know who we are, they like us.

MH: I remember last time we talked you said foundations like things for kids.

CB: That's right. We continually would go to experts, consultants, and they would say, "You know, you're wonderful—stop doing what you're doing—do something different." And I would go to Lisette and tell her, "You know, they're advising us to do children's programs." And she said, "Never change your mission to suit a funder." [LAUGHS]

MH: So you would never incorporate those suggestions. Could you offer a workshop or something?

CB: You can't do that.

MH: The money would have to go ONLY for that individual workshop...

CB: Right. So I did propose...I proposed something to the Freeman Foundation once. Because they said they would only fund programs that are directed toward the elderly and children. So I said, I'm going to do a concert series at the Shrader. And it would be noontime, and I would use their money to pay for the bus to bring elderly people from the retirement centers to the concerts for free concerts. [LAUGHS IRONICALLY] It was a generous offer on my part, because actually I would be losing money on it even if they gave me the grant. But they didn't. They didn't think it was such a great idea. And then I thought, you know, I...you're turning yourself into a pretzel for the foundations—it's not really a good idea.

MH: Well, it's not why you wanted to do this.

CB: Yeah, right. I think. I'm going straightforward, and if we run aground, we run aground.

MH: It must be painful and depressing. Do you have to live with kind of a level of stress now?

CB: Yes. It's very, very tough. There have been more of a couple of occasions when I was throwing things around.

MH: So they like to fund kids' stuff—what other kind of stuff do they like to fund?

CB: Well, Lisette gets millions, literally millions of dollars for her school. I don't have insight into the whole workings. I've done a little research. I can only afford to get so discouraged and cynical, because I have to keep plugging away. In the end, it's all people, and so we have gotten...we got a thousand dollars from the Parker-Hirschfeld Foundation. It paid the rent for their thing [ironic smile]—part of the rent. But it's a relationship. Sam Parker and Lisa Hirschfeld came to the concert. I talked to them—their very nice people, they were very supportive, so it's the beginning of a relationship. We've got money from the Randall Foundation. They're very small. They can give us \$500 every year. [Ironic laugh]

MH: Are there any chamber music funders?

CB: I did the search at the foundation center. In the last few years, chamber ensembles have not gotten foundation support in Washington. I think that may be changing, you know they go through phases. So there's a few groups that are getting some money. And then there's—it all comes back to the same few foundations—you've got to be on their list. And you know that's...

MH: So you're getting out some letters.

CB: Yes—kicking and screaming. I tell you, I was not...I was not inclined to do it, but I am continuing to pursue it. You were asking about the administration—the administration sucks.

MH: How many hours a week do you think you spend on that?

CB: According to Lisette, it's supposed to be eight hours a day, but I'm spending probably four hours a day.

MH: And the rest of the time is...

CB: Practicing.

Carl's sarcasm and irony masked the utter frustration and dismay of being rejected for funding again and again. The Catch-22 Café should be the organization's new

name—now that Carl had retired from the job that had subsidized his music and given him the artistic and financial independence to follow his own musical and performance ideas, he could focus full-time on the music. But now that he was focused full-time on the music, he didn't have the financial resources to ensure his vision could continue.

The frustration he felt at the fund-raising picture was palpable even as I could sense how moved he was by the board's commitment to WMV's mission. We decided to talk about the reason for it all—the music. The first thing we discussed was how the way Carl and WMV were viewed by other musicians had changed.

MH: What about reputation? Is there goodwill...I know you said initially the music community was a little standoffish?

CB: Well, now the musicians are on board. The musicians are really with us. I've got a cadre of the best musicians in town who are very eager to work with us. They're busy doing things which sometimes they don't even like as much, but they're very much on board.

MH: So is it the repertoire? What is it that brought them in?

CB: I think it's a couple things. One, the repertoire, two the attitude, and three, the way we operate, which is very relaxed and the minimal rehearsals. If they commit to doing a piano quartet, they're not going to be doing eight rehearsals—two rehearsals and a performance. Because I understand the reality...And I think these are very satisfying performances. So people want to do them.

MH: Are they excited about getting to play stuff that they couldn't play anywhere else?

CB: Yeah. We do repertoire that nobody else does.

Carl sounds proud and satisfied here—as if this is what it's all about—being a musician who is recognized by other musicians as being a quality artist. Having been in conflict with the musical world over its approach to performance as much as its career limitations, and having been rejected initially during his first attempts to rejoin that world, it seems clear that a large part of the satisfaction of Carl's artistic identity is

socially-based. Much more than he needs financial recognition for his ability, he needs musical companionship, communication, and recognition.

In earlier interviews, Carl spoke of problems with other musicians, some of whom didn't like playing in the studio, some of whom didn't share his vision of authentic playing; but the musical chairs had ended:

MH: You talked before about having lots of “exes,” and you didn't always agree musically, so you'd breakup. This group—how long has it been together?

CB: These people and I are pretty steady. I really like these people and they like me. So this has been several years with the same folks. You know, I bring my friend Betty down from New Hampshire. She played Tuesday night. She's wonderful.

MH: How about you as a musician? Are you evolving? Have you evolved over the last few years?

CB: Yeah. I've gotten considerably more mastery. I've learned to do some things that are very helpful in getting a performance to work well quickly. And so, I'm also learning more about working with composers. Right now I'm doing some interesting stuff with an arranger. This is ...I'm very excited about it.

You see, I was not trained as a jazz musician. But I think of the idea that jazz is the American chamber music is an idea that I'm interested in. I wouldn't subscribe to it in those terms exactly, but I want to put jazz back together with contemporary chamber music. But to do that I need arrangers. So I've done three or four programs that were basically jazz programs and I'm doing another one in June.

MH: You used to talk about your “shamanistic frenzy.” With this new jazz-influenced repertoire, is it hard to get there? Easier?

CB: Well, I'm seeing it more as my private business now, how I feel about it. I want the music to do what it's supposed to do, and I'm willing to take more of a backseat than I used to. I used to think, I gotta make this happen, and I trust the other musicians more than I used to.

MH: You've been together longer.

CB: That's true. And, part of being willing to take a risk, is not having a guarantee that a performance is going to be dynamite.

MH: I remember you used to say it always comes together somehow. Do you still have that experience?

CB: Actually, I have a much more confident feeling about it. Now I feel that we're so good and the music is so good, there's nothing we can do wrong.

MH: So you don't need to...it's almost like "getting off" musically. You don't need that experience?

CB: No. I'm not as invested in trying to get that experience.

MH: That ecstatic experience.

CB: Yeah. Because I have it much more routinely now. And I get it as much from listening to the other folks.

MH: So maybe you finally got satisfied in some way.

CB: Part of me has really gotten satisfied. That's right. I did a very interesting bit this last concert Tuesday which was a really good concert. I did a whole Bach cantata, string quartet, bass, singer, saxophone, piano. We used a saxophone for the oboe. I had to write my own part, because all Bach writes is a bass line. It's just like a lead sheet or a fake book. You have a bass line and the chords.

MH: Then what do you do? I've seen the old 1600s books by lute players like Campion, and they don't give you much. You just have to make up parts of it.

CB: Right, right. So I did that, and as I was doing it, writing out what I thought I should play, I realized I can write a skeletal part and then play whatever I want in the performance.

MH: How's that go over with the musicians? Did it surprise them or were they okay with that?

CB: Well, it was interesting that they didn't bat an eyelash. Like, nobody noticed. I thought, wow, this is very cool. I mean I'm playing jazz, and this is Bach! [hearty laugh] So that was very interesting, very successful. So I'm going to do more Bach cantatas.

Eight years after the founding of Washington Musica Viva, Carl had built a network of musicians, composers, and arrangers. This part of his music world was finally strong, affording him more than enough performance opportunities. His ensemble were committed to the same sort of passionate performance he believed in, and so comfortable with him musically that he could improvise an unscored portion of a Bach cantata live. And, feeling recognized and respected, he had been able to let go of his own need for "ecstatic" performance and focus more on flowing with his fellow players. His musical

world was partly reconstituted; the last two segments—audience and sponsors—were still problematic, but compared to our first interview five years earlier, he seemed much more satisfied, satisfied to the point that he felt he could claim a sense of mastery. His possession in combination of both technical and expressive skills at a high level are in keeping with definitions of the “master performer.”⁴¹

He had a fairly loyal audience, albeit a slow-growing one. He was cultivating funders, and had developed goodwill with a few foundations, though no major underwriter had emerged. He had taken the risk of expanding his performance opportunities, thus putting more pressure on WMV’s finances. We started talking about his “Washington Composers” series at the old Jupiter theater in D.C., the opportunities for and challenges of his idea of bringing jazz and classical closer together, the outreach needed to find a new audience, the differences in venues, and before we knew it, we were back to funding. Too much of Carl’s reality as executive director tended to revolve around money:

MH: Initially I know you had some people that weren’t so sure about the studio...

CB: Well, the studio remains a...things have changed somewhat. The studio was our...kind of like the nest from which we sprang, and we moved out to these other places, so some of what...people who would come to the studio to hear us because they couldn’t hear us anywhere else, stopped coming.

MH: Oh. They prefer the museum and the Embassy.

CB: The Shrader, the Czech Embassy. People really like the Czech Embassy.

MH: It’s an *embassy*.

CB: It’s an *embassy*, yes. People like these cushier places. I have long time audience members who, if they can go see me at the embassy or the museum, will avoid the studio. So the studio has changed its role. In fact, I don’t know what it’s role will be next year. We were under pressure for years to terminate our studio concerts. From the county and the state, because the Arts Council will not fund an organization that does anything in a non-accessible venue.

MH: What's not accessible about it?

CB: The bathroom.

MH: And that's very expensive to fix.

CB: Yeah. We don't have permission...it's an old building...you can't go...nor do we have the money for that. So that was...we were under all that pressure. We resisted it, but it's meant that we've foregone county and state funding for the last seven years.

MH: Too bad you can't just incorporate the studio as a separate entity somehow.

CB: [Sighs] Yeah. I'll tell you—I wish I had a full-time lawyer. We're doing our programming in the district but we're not eligible for district funding because we're incorporated in Montgomery County. We're incorporated in Montgomery County but we can't get Montgomery County funding, because of the wheelchair thing and because we're programming in the district. You've gotta prove that most of your programming is in Montgomery County.

So the Czech Embassy and...The Jupiter now are more than half our programming. So it's...you know...the Catch-22 and ironies are just all over the place.

Yeah. You need a team of lawyers.

We talked about this for another ten minutes—the various state, county, and municipal agencies seemed determined not to recognize that art and people cross and recross geographical boundaries in an urban market like Washington, D.C. Short of moving everything to Virginia, it looked like WMV would continue to struggle to get even a drop of government funding. Talking about this reminded me of Horowitz' history of the decline of classical music and the fact that most of the important decisions in this field seem to be made without a single musician in the room—sometimes it seemed as if it was all about money and marketing.⁴² America's national culture, with its emphasis on vernacular forms, its worship of popular culture, and its lack of strong governmental

support for performing arts like classical music, was another cultural tradition that had influenced Carl's life history.

MH: This is the kind of stuff—when I think about art, I don't think about this stuff.

CB: Nobody does.

MH: Even just talking about...we were talking about the artistic stuff and somehow we got sidetracked.

CB: It's very easy. [Laughs]

So each space and its location brings with it distinct influences in terms of audience, in terms of expectations on the part of players, critics, in terms of funding potential and even repertoire. The studio's formality nurtured a certain passionate style of playing, but turned off a certain portion of musicians and audience and was a deadweight for foundation money. The Czech Embassy, a "cushy," high culture setting, with a background ambience of statues and paintings in an attractive older building backing on a forested area, was preferred by many audience members and critics, but seemed to bring out a stilted style of playing in some musicians, and the embassy insisted that only Czech music be played (Carl, nonetheless enjoyed selecting obscure Czech composers to go along with the requisite superstar like Dvorak; he even traveled to Prague to look for scores and new repertoire); the museum had many of the plusses of the Czech embassy and also allowed greater latitude in terms of music selection, but did not favor the offbeat poets that WMV could offer at the studio. Finally, the Jupiter had many of the benefits of the studio in a slightly more upholstered setting, but some of his core audience feared the neighborhood—Carl's Montgomery County/Czech Embassy fan base wouldn't travel to "that part" of D.C. at night (so the concerts were on Sunday

afternoons)—and finding a truly local audience for a series featuring composers like Ellington in a primarily black neighborhood was proving difficult.

MH: You said you wanted to build a new audience. Is it expanding? Is it the same audience? How's that working?

CB: That's a very interesting question. The Jupiter audience. I was not gonna get my people down at the Jupiter, so it had to be a new audience. And the first concert I called every composer in town and said, I'm starting this series dedicated to you guys, and they came. So I had thirty composers in the audience from a total of ninety-nine people. So that was a big success. The second concert—I knew I couldn't pull that off twice—so I tried a different tactic. I sent complimentary tickets to all the composers and to everyone I could think of who I thought should be there. And it wasn't quite as successful. I got sixty some-odd.

We'll see. I understand—everybody's discouraged and no one really believes that anything's that's good is gonna happen. But I'm staying in touch with composers who send me pieces all the time, and if I can't get around to performing their pieces, they know that they can send me stuff.

I'll tell you what did work in terms of building an audience. A person who attends our events, a couple people who were very enthusiastic. They tell other people that you gotta come to this because it's wonderful. That's the only thing that really works. So one friend of Marilyn's brought her dad, four of her dad's neighbors and two other people. None of them had been there before. And there's another guy who's brought a lot of people.

So building an audience is slow and tough, and it's really person to person. I just haven't found anything else that works.

MH: Do you think that African-American community will come out for the Jupiter series?

CB: Very good question. To get...okay...since we're down there in what is a black neighborhood, we really...that's one thing that is going for us. Kensington is a white neighborhood, to get black people to come out there is tough.

I'm performing black composers, and I'm using black musicians. I'm using as many black musicians as I can.

MH: Are these people from your regular group? Or are you recruiting?

CB: It's people who...I use...my clarinetist Ben, my cellist Jodie, Karen and Gary sing, but I'm recruiting black musicians. Blair is light-skinned black. Linda played for us last time, she's wonderful. She's African-American. I've got uh...[laughs]...it's very hard to do. You can't call somebody up and say, "Are you black?" And I can't tell on the phone with some of these people, so I ask if

someone is black, you know, “Who, who, which was black?” So I recruited this person who I think is black, but I don’t know, I’ve never met her.

So I’ve got to have black musicians. But that’s not enough. I gotta make some approaches to the community—businesses. I’ve done a little of that. I’ve got to introduce myself.

MH: Are they receptive?

CB: Well, actually, it’s been interesting. People are very friendly. But they don’t *come*. However, The Jupiter has ushers. All the ushers are drawn from the neighborhood, so if you are on good terms with the volunteers and ushers, they can spread the word.

MH: Do you give them complementary tickets?

CB: Yeah...but having free tickets does not bring people. You gotta want to go. It doesn’t make any difference how cheap the tickets are if you don’t wanna go. As far as bringing African-Americans into the Jupiter, that’s an ongoing project. And it’s something we simply must do. I think that we’re doing some of the groundwork—we always have a black poet. We’ve got Brandon Johnson this time, we had Colin Bass last time.

MH: So this series is a lot like the studio series.

CB: Right. We’ve got poetry, composers, chamber music, old and new music, and we even had a video once. It’s much more loose and wild. It’s very promising, but you never know. But that was the right question—how are we going to get African-American and Hispanic people in there. That will be the key to the success of the series.

MH: Will you solicit composers from African-American and Hispanic musical traditions, incorporate some of that?

CB: Yes.

MH: That’s really exciting—I’m glad we’re talking about an artistic direction.

CB: Yeah. I’m really turned on about it. And I don’t care so much whether... people are saying, why don’t you try this, why don’t you try that. But I think this is such a good idea that whether it works or not, I’m gonna do it. [LAUGHS] If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. But...I’m not going to...somebody was saying... Marilyn was saying, “You know, you’ve got to play some familiar, comfort food music for people because...why don’t you play some Beethoven, Mozart.” And I said, “She’s right.” And so I tried programming those, and I thought “What am I doing?” This is Washington Composers, that’s what it’s gonna be. Not Beethoven...Ellington is the Beethoven equivalent here.

Carl's belief that all music should be treated the same would seem to be in practice in this new concert series where Duke Ellington, J.S. Bach, and various new composers appear on the same program. But Carl worries that his credo of authentic performance which is the end product of meticulous preparation combined with personal passion may not be enough—technical and musical authenticity may not translate into credibility for the audience he hopes to attract to his new series. In order to convince African-Americans in the neighborhood of the Jupiter that he has something to offer them as well as his primarily white, middle class, intellectual following, he is taking care to program African-American poets, hire black musicians when he can, and perform African-American composers.

Carl's excitement in talking about his connecting elements of jazz and classical music is palpable. For a moment, funding is not in the foreground, and his real joy as music director and pianist shines through. A few years earlier, he'd tossed off a list of ideas he had, few of which he had the time or personnel to execute. Now he seemed to believe any musical ambition was within reach.

MH: Four years ago, there was still a sense that you were establishing yourself. I kind of get a feeling of more confidence about what you're doing, of more confidence about how you can branch out. I can feel that, partly coming from the group, you have very strong support.

CB: Yeah. I've got people who trust me, you know. Not having to prove myself, at least within my circle. And people who are enthusiastic about what I propose. But also I feel some responsibility. It's like these people are reserving their time for me, for my organization, for my work. And so I consult with them—what do you really want to do this year?

The bitterness he had expressed four years ago in our first interview hadn't surfaced, but when I asked him whether the feeling he had of being an outsider remained

with him, he quickly acknowledged that while he finally felt accepted and supported within D.C. musical circles, particularly via his strong connections with his ensemble, he still felt angry that the work he was doing “could disappear in a moment,” and that New York remained the creative center of the classical music world in America.

MH: New York’s still the center?

CB: Yeah. And so it annoys me that they don’t know we exist, and they don’t care. I don’t have access to them. I want some connection...I feel like, you know, as a Washingtonian, it annoys me that New York pays no attention to us. But I also understand that there are resources there that I need.

MH: Like?

CB: There’s an arranger I use there. People who really know what they’re doing. People who have a lot of work. People who play concerts all the time. The people who are successful. They’re in New York. And I am not comfortable with that. I have no connection.

MH: Do you think having a relationship with Gerard gives you a foothold in New York?

CB: Well, it’s a small step in that direction. He’s struggling like everybody else. He has a saxophone quartet in Brooklyn. But this guy is a top of the line pro. There’s nobody like that in Washington, you know, working with Latin bands and working with jazz people and who receive composer grants routinely, and you know, has a full successful professional life, because you can do that in New York.

We’re in exile here as artists. We’re all in exile in Washington.

New York was where Carl’s crisis as a musician began, where he began to question both his musical education and his professional future, so remaining unknown to the musical world of New York was still painful. Indeed, Carl’s feelings about his “outsider status” once a real asset in that his avant-garde sensibilities often went unnoticed and a strong motivator as he bucked the system, had changed.

MH: You had this outsider status that was frustrating, but there was that way in which it allowed you greater latitude. How do you feel that—obviously you have a very strong feeling about what you want to aesthetically. You have a strong commitment to your artistic vision. It still sounds like there’s

a lot of frustration about your outsider status, but overall there's a lot more confidence.

CB: Yeah. The outsider status had its benefits. You're beneath the radar, you're invisible, nobody sees you, you can do anything you want. But you can't actually keep that if you're running a non-profit organization, because the public owns the non-profits. And I've been slow to understand that. But I understand it now. I have to stand up for whatever weird stuff we're doing, in public. I have to insist that we have a right to exist and be noticed. And so that's not compatible with maintaining this outsider status. So I don't have the luxury.

MH: Do you think that at some point some part of you wants to stand up? You still want your refuge but at some level you want to stand up?

CB: Well yeah. I was working on this recently with Marilyn. I want to be noticed, but I'm afraid of being noticed because you get attacked once you're noticed. And in fact, now that I do public performances, people say, "You know I don't think you should do this, and why don't you do that, and why are you doing that," you know. They have an opinion.

Standing up as the face and musical director of Washington Musica Viva, Carl's hard work seemed to be paying off in terms of creative risk, performance mastery, collegial respect, critical reputation, and foundation goodwill (if not money). The crisis that had interrupted his musical career was not necessarily over in terms of a clear professional future, but certainly resolved within him emotionally and artistically.

MH: So obviously you're juggling a lot of stresses and you're tired now [after a series of concerts ending three days prior], but is the music still the big joy—what does it do for you now, does it integrate all your other experiences?

CB: I'm much more centrally identified as an artist. That's who I am, that's what I do, that's what I build my life around.

MH: Do you like having that identity?

CB: Well, it's really who I've always been, but I haven't been able to claim it as well.

MH: Now you feel like...

CB: Now it's like I'm, I'm very comfortable with that.

Eight years after the founding of the non-profit Washington Musica Viva, nearly twenty years after his first abortive attempts at returning to a professional level in the

classical world, Carl calmly claims his identity as an artist and musician. The issue of funding still was paramount, but seemed secondary to the struggle he had gone through; the “forty years of hard work” he had put in trying to achieve mastery had paid off. The years of refining technique, of battling to find places to play, assembling musicians who shared his vision, seeking out repertoire he thought was worthwhile and stimulating, of cultivating an audience, had resulted in a new “art world” which made his creative work possible and his identity as an musician ultimately satisfying. He seemed genuinely at peace with his artistic existence, despite the ever-present shadow of funding woes.

I think it best to let Carl’s final words in our final interview sum up:

MH: When you were young, did having that talent mean a lot to you?

CB: Yeah. I thought that I was very fortunate because I knew my destiny. Of course, I didn’t. But I thought I did. I thought it was quite clear that I had this gift and it was gonna guide my life and that it would give a livelihood as well as appreciation and respect and position.

MH: And that’s the part that didn’t quite manifest. We talked a lot about the whole music world shrinking.

CB: Right. But I didn’t understand that. I didn’t understand many things. In one way, I couldn’t have been more wrong, and in another way, I couldn’t have been more right.

MH: How were you completely right?

CB: Because fifty years later, all those things are completely true. I did know my destiny. It just took fifty years to work itself out.

MH: I remember you said, “I peaked at fourteen.”

CB: Well, that’s in the eyes of the public.

MH: Right. How do you feel now?

CB: I think I finally became a master of my craft sometime in the last five to seven years.

MH: That must feel really good.

CB: [Quiet, but firm] Yeah. [Big laugh]

MH: It's nice to hear you say that. It's nice to hear somebody say that. Mastery is a good feeling.

CB: Yeah. I really, really know what I'm doing, but it was a long time coming.

Subjective Reflections on Interviewing Carl

When I first met Carl, I was looking for informants for my life history project; I was interested in talking to creative artists about their lives and their experiences as artists in America. Personally, I was interested in how individuals grappled with taking something as intensely personal as art can be and making it something public, and in many cases, something for sale. Since Carl had created his own chamber music series at his wife's art studio, he seemed ideally suited for the project.

Carl was an ideal informant—his personal history was a fascinating one with a classic story arc: success, crisis, loss, and then a sort of artistic redemption at the end. He also was a very astute aesthete, and eagerly regaled me with his own theories of art and music, and had many examples from his own personal experience **ready at hand**. Since theories about art and society, art and mysticism, and art and personal healing are among my hobbies, our conversations turned into dialogues (usually led by Carl) about the meaning of art in life, the role of art in society, and the experience of being an artist.

But I was a “mere” grad student, and Carl, it turned out was an intense, disciplined, classically trained pianist who had been groomed for a career in the classical music world (to top it off, he also had academic credentials—a Ph.D. in the sciences!). I was intimidated at first by Carl's training and status. For me, classical music, though not my preferred form of music, was the real “official music.” My musical tastes ran more to those often self-taught musicians like the Beatles and various folk musicians of the sixties

and seventies. I myself was a more than competent guitarist (having played for nearly thirty years) with a knack for songwriting and arranging, though I am unable to read music. Self-taught, I felt unequal to someone like Carl who could read and write music, and who had spent hundreds of hours in private lessons and reputable music schools, and literally tens of thousands of hours (five hours per day for over a decade!) in practice. How credible would I be to someone as skilled and professional as he?

As with my earlier folk music study, I had to hit on vocabulary and other forms of connection I could make with him to establish myself, if only in my own mind. I was able to display minimal knowledge of his particular music genre. I awkwardly risked a joke about his fusion of chamber music and jazz when I sang a few notes of Beethoven and turned them into Ellington. I got a great response, knowing that my limited knowledge of those two genres had just barely allowed me to eke out a joke that he got and thought funny. This was later in our series of conversations; I may not have risked it earlier.

My vocabulary about classical music improved throughout our discussions, but it turned out I already had a working vocabulary about creativity, and was able to flow fairly easily with him in our aesthetic talks. We also shared the language of psychotherapy, so we were able to express the meanings of art fairly easily, too. I have also long likened comedy to jazz, and found that my dry wit connected well with Carl's sense of the absurd—we occasionally would riff together before returning to the subject at hand.

Carl also had an academic Ph.D. (in the sciences), so in that way, he, too, was my better. As he came to respect my take on things and my ability to roll with and add to our

far-flung theoretical talks, I found myself placing him into the role of mentor, or at least an older brother figure who taught me important things from his own experience, but who also valued me as a sounding board. Again and again, he would praise my insights or queries—“That’s an excellent question.” “That’s the right question to ask.” Or he would cite the influence our discussions were having on his own thinking, “Since we spoke I’ve been thinking a lot about that.” Like many of my informants, Carl was using our discussions to his own ends, in this case working out issues about performance and also about his group’s musical and marketing futures.

But, for me, the key moment may have come on a night when I was the performer and Carl the audience. Carl’s own story of how his son’s punk band’s low budget recordings had inspired him to make his own CDs and sell them at his concerts had in turn inspired me to make my own low budget two song CD. Not long after that I secured a gig as opening act at a local coffeehouse. I had a fifty minute set to fill. I had more than enough of my own material to do that, and this wasn’t the first time I’d played and sung in public. Over the past few years, I’d probably played live four or five times per year, sometimes as a headliner at another café, sometimes as one of many acts at an open mike. I was not inexperienced, but also not a seasoned performer who was comfortable in front of a crowd.

Carl had said he might come, but I was pleasantly surprised when he showed up. He sat front and center at one of the tables, nursing an apple cider. My wife and a couple other friends sat at the same table. There were perhaps thirty people in the café, some there for the music, many there for the small-town camaraderie, and, no doubt, some just there for a cup of gourmet coffee and a fancy dessert. Some, I suppose, came just to

wander off into the dingy used books housed in an adjoining set of rooms. In any case, performers at this venue face an audience with many demands on its attention, unlike Carl's experience at his own concert series, where there are no distractions.

Carl and I talked more than once about his "ecstatic" experience of performance, and how, if he is properly prepared, he can go where the piece he's playing means to go. He also insisted that the audience assisted him in taking that flight of fancy. My own experience of performance, while not the same as his (which he described on more than one occasion as a "shamanistic frenzy"), was nonetheless an experience of moving to a different level of being and of expression. Indeed, I found that I would often find new parts of myself (more often expressed through my voice than my guitar), and that my body would be moved by the intensity. This night was no different. On both new and old material, I felt as if I were playing it for the first time, and understanding its meaning more completely. I sang some lines differently, played chords a little bit differently. Once again, like Carl, I was moved to seek authenticity, though unlike him, I found the experience draining and a bit overwhelming—I needed to do it, but I did not find myself drawn to do it again soon.

The crowd response was very good. And my witty patter between songs got a few laughs. The café staff passed the hat; I took in forty dollars—a lot, they said. Evidently my performance was satisfactory.

Still, no one bought the CDs I had for sale, one of which I gave to Carl in thanks for his cooperation on my project and his incidental mentorship. He looked over the homemade cover, front and back, and noting the acknowledgements, asked if he were the Carl cited. I said yes. He was clearly moved. I didn't elaborate, except to say

his recording his own CD had inspired me. His rhetoric about taking the “means of production into your own hands” and his reasonable acceptance of the fate of the artist (“no one’s going to hand it to you”) had helped me see my situation more realistically—talent, passion, sincerity...none of those would replace initiative.

I realized I had taken an emotional risk by thanking him on the CD booklet cover. But it was one that had paid off. Our bond shifted a bit beyond researcher-informant or the indirect mentorship I seemed to be experiencing on my end. I realized we were becoming peers. Two days later, Carl e-mailed me to compliment the CD and to praise my passion as a performer. Knowing how much he valued such passion (so much so that he’d broken up with many performing partners who couldn’t stay with him in that way), I felt I’d truly established credibility as an artist in the eyes of someone whom I respected. I got a real boost from this both artistically and intellectually. I found that I had a lot more confidence the next time I interviewed a fellow artist for my project; and I found that, in addition to hours of practice, there was a psychological or intellectual component to my experience of mastering my craft of songwriting.

Final Thoughts on Carl’s Narrative

Caughey’s “cultural traditions” model outlines how individuals form identity by drawing on various cultural traditions such as those associated with nation, religion, family, occupation, race or ethnicity, etc.⁴³ In Carl’s case it would seem that his life has been mostly defined by his interaction with two occupational traditions, each with very stringent rules—the occupation of classical musician and the occupation of research scientist. He was pushed into each of these by family tradition, and he associates his

father's belief in the importance of each of these traditions with the family's Jewish heritage.

But once he entered into the classical music world, family and ethnic traditions became secondary, as he made a total commitment to fulfilling his role in that world that he thought would provide him with a "livelihood as well as appreciation and respect and position." Little did he know that a much more powerful cultural tradition, that of American culture, was already contributing to the demise of the tradition he sought to devote his life to. His encounters with sixties music and culture, mind-expanding drugs, as well as readings on shamanistic traditions also modified his understanding of performance and his acceptance of limits imposed on his playing by an increasingly rigid musical world.

Carl also found his ability to successfully negotiate an artistic identity influenced by interactions and intersections with American cultural traditions of arts funding, traditions of high culture modified by issues of socio-economic class, and even other ethnic cultural traditions. His foray into the African-American community via his new D.C. composers series was risky—would potential audience members in a primarily African-American neighborhood embrace a concert series produced and performed by a Jewish, white middle-class male? Carl sincerely sought authenticity, but would a minority audience wary of cultural appropriation accept him?

"Individuals live at the dynamic intersection of society, culture, and economy."⁴⁴ Each of the traditions to which Carl devoted great portions of his life, music and science, have very strong preferred narratives to offer. "Career in the sense of occupation or profession is the framework for construction one's life story in our culture."⁴⁵ "Careers

can be considered in terms of their objective nature—that is, in terms of the official hierarchically ordered stages through which an individual can be publicly observed to pass.⁴⁶ Because these stages are ordered, the preferred career narratives offered by the various professions assume a tyranny of “linear images of accumulated effort” with “connotations of realized ambition, material success, social recognition and power.”⁴⁷

Individuals rely on coherence systems to make sense of their lives.⁴⁸ Carl uses his identity as a “true musician” as a means of maintaining continuity throughout his life narrative, and refers to times of hiatus and struggle as periods of “crisis.” Indeed, as I discuss in later chapters, each of my on subsequent informants maintained that the identity of “artist” is a “transcendent,” innate identity which exists beyond traditional cultural boundaries. When the crisis was resolved, he was able to publicly reclaim an identity that he believes is internal, though lack of external validation led him to question it at times.

Developmental psychology has long posited mid-life as a time where the individual often engages in self-evaluation and reassessment of meaning in life. Reorientation to time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth leads to stocktaking, heightened introspection, and the destructuring and restructuring of experience. People experience greater meaning with age and increase their skills and awareness of the issues of life.⁴⁹ It would also appear that individuals at mid-life like Carl are concerned with creating meaning and value legacy over mere achievement—hence his decision to retire and focus on what he felt would be meaningful in terms of his “true” identity as a musician and in terms of what he might give to the audience (again, he felt he offered them meaning via the heightened experience of art and music).

We also see that after the initial stock-taking and subsequent planning of life changes that individuals hope will enable him or her to produce a legacy, the individual must actually live out those changes. In Carl's case, after the initial excitement of creating a successful concert (defined in artistic, not financial terms) series, finding compatible musicians, and building a reputation, there was the realization that WMV's financial struggles were not temporary. His hoped-for retirement with a salary as artistic director had not materialized, and the 2005-2006 season was nearly shut down in the early spring. Then came what I might call a "legacy reassessment" which occurs in mid-life after the vision of the first reassessment is fleshed out in real life and real time. Despite the great disappointment of things not working out according to plan, Carl was able to reassess his goals and his experience in a way that was still meaningful and satisfying—he was, after all happier identifying himself (and being identified by the larger classical music community) as a musician.

It is instructive to see how useful Becker's "art worlds" concept is in understanding aspects of Carl's "crisis"—the collapse of the classical music world created a lack of opportunity which led him to question his professional future, triggering the long period of discontinuity and separation from his preferred identity as a musician. The demoralization of that part of the old musical world that remained then limited his ability to find like-minded musicians and created a sense of hostility toward him as an outsider among those still in that increasingly rigid world. His eventual recovery of his identity as a musician was very much dependent upon his ability over time to build his own art world, although that new world's stability was somewhat tenuous.

Meanwhile, I at times struggled to get a fuller picture of Carl's life—it seemed that from the moment he woke till the moment he slept his life was occupied with either his science job or his music career (indeed, he crammed rehearsals into his lunch hour!). It was hard to get a handle on Carl outside of these two traditions, but that was in part because he always directed our discussions back to music and theories of performance. Such focus is a necessity in either of his careers; one can only imagine how much discipline working full-time at both must have required. When I finally asked Carl about his “downtime,” the two major hobbies he claimed, cooking and translating German poetry, seem in keeping with his two careers—artist and intellectual. And while we rarely spoke of his experience as a parent (his punk rocker son has graduated from college and gone into marketing research in Manhattan), when I queried him once more about his love for the work of folk-rocker Bob Dylan, he reminisced about how meaningful playing and singing Dylan songs with his son had been to him. More than just a source of artistic inspiration, Dylan was a bridge between Carl and his young son. In a sense, Carl's quest for authenticity and his disdain for artifice are echoed in Dylan and in his son's embrace of punk rock.

Finally, Carl's response to the lack of opportunity that he was confronted with when he decided to return to music is both inspiring and instructive. Drawing on Marxist intellectual tradition regarding cultural production and aligning himself with bohemian and avant-garde artistic traditions aimed at removing barriers among the arts, performers, and audience, his personal and financial commitment, artistic resourcefulness, and perseverance in the face of numerous obstacles can be a lesson to creative people who wish a stake in our cultural dialogue despite an unwelcoming cultural environment.

The Feedback Loop: Carl's Reaction to His Chapter

As part of treating my informants like the co-researchers and co-creators that they are, I submitted their chapters to them for review. Carl's reaction was generally positive—he said, “I like it. I think it's really interesting, and I think other people will find it interesting.” When I asked whether I had not emphasized the support of his fellow artist and spouse enough, Marilyn, he said, half-joking, “She can get her own dissertation!” He mentioned that his chapter looked at his life in ways he would never have thought of. He was particularly interested in the sociological angles employed in analyzing his life history. As a former prodigy, he found the study of prodigies like himself really instructive, especially, the requirements to succeed (10,000 hours of practice!). Finally, aside from a few factual details like the spellings of a composer's name, or the site of his return to musical communication during grad school (Harvard, not Yale), Carl made no corrections, and asserted that reading his life story was a “weird mirror. It was a little bit creepy; it made me feel my life is already over. But there's also something cool about it. I hope someone does the same for you sometime.”

Notes

¹ Michael J.A. Howe, "The Early Lives of Child Prodigies," in Ciba Foundation Symposium, *The Origins of High Ability* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993) 85-105.

² Ibid., Howe, 97.

³ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) 70-91.

⁴ Lynn Goldsmith, "Tracking Trajectories of Talent: Child Prodigies Growing Up," in *Talents Unfolding: Cognition and Development* ed. Reva C. Friedman and Bruce M. Shore (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2000) 91.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*, 73.

⁷ Goldsmith, 112.

⁸ Goldsmith, 93, 101.

⁹ Howe, 94.

¹⁰ Goldsmith, 91.

¹¹ Howe, 89.

¹² Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music In America : A History Of Its Rise And Fall* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005) 526-527.

¹³ Ibid., 299, 504.

¹⁴ Ibid., 528; Sheldon Morgenstern, *No Vivaldi in the Garage: a Requiem for Classical Music in North America* (Boston : Northeastern University Press, 2001) 159.

¹⁵ Horowitz, 475-483.

¹⁶ Robert W. Schrauf, "¡Costalero Quiero Ser! Autobiographical Memory and the Oral Life Story of a Holy Week Brother in Spain," *Ethos* 25.4 (Fall 1997): 428-453.

¹⁷ Frederick R. Bloom, "Searching for Meaning in Everyday Life: Gay Men Negotiating Selves in the HIV Spectrum," *Ethos* 25.4 (Fall 1997): 463.

¹⁸ Charlotte Linde, "The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story: How History Becomes Memory and Identity," *Ethos* 28.4 (Fall 2001): 608-632.

¹⁹ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*, 70-71.

²⁰ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) ix-x.

²¹ Bloom, 445.

²² Ibid.

²³ Samuel Gilmore, "Art Worlds: Developing an Interactionist Approach to Social Organization," In *Symbolic Interaction and Cultural Studies*, ed. Howard S. Becker and Michal M. McCall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 148.

²⁴ Becker, ix-x.

²⁵ Ibid., 348-9.

²⁶ Horowitz, 354, 397.

²⁷ Ibid., 354, 397, 480.

²⁸ Ibid., 480.

²⁹ Ibid., 528.

³⁰ Ibid., xv.

³¹ Ibid., xvii.

³² Morgenstern, xi-xii.

³³ Horowitz, 489; Morgenstern 147.

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986) 82-83.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Merete Demant Jakobsen, *Shamanism* (New York: Berghan Books, 1999) 9-10.

³⁷ Ibid., 5.

³⁸ Csikszentmihalyi has referred to this state as "flow;" Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 107.

³⁹ Horowitz, 477.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁴¹ John Sloboda, "Musical Ability," in Ciba Foundation Symposium, *The Origins of High Ability* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993) 110.

⁴² Horowitz, 431-432, 484-486.

⁴³ John L. Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006) 14-22.

⁴⁴ Richard A. Young and Audrey Collin, eds. *Constructing Career Through Narrative and Context: An Interpretive Perspective* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992) 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶ Pat Sikes and Kath Aspinwall, "Time to Reflect," in ed. Richard A. Young and Audrey Collin, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992) 179.

⁴⁷ Tod Sloan, "Career Decisions: A Critical Psychology," in ed. Richard A. Young and Audrey Collin (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1992) 170-171.

⁴⁸ Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 16-20.

⁴⁹ Kay O'Connor and Kerry Chamberlain, "Dimensions of Life Meaning: A Qualitative Investigation at Mid-life," *British Journal of Psychology* 87.3 (Aug. 96): 461-464.

CHAPTER THREE: REGINA JAMISON—THE LIFE OF A FREELANCER

Family Traditions and Personal Preferences—

The Beginnings of a Coherent Life Story

Linde suggests that “in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable and constantly life revised story.” Further, she states that individuals will retell and revise their life stories, particularly as regards professional choice, to make it seem that their “choice is well-motivated, richly determined, and woven far back in time.”¹ Within a few minutes of my first meeting with Regina Jamison, she demonstrated this need to tie the choices of the present to the past:

Regina Jamison (RJ): I made my debut in front of my church when I was four years old [Recites]: “Although I am very small, I’m pleased to greet you one and all.” My mother says I wouldn’t stop saying my little poem the whole way there and the whole way back.

She retells this story to me a number of times in the course of our interviews—obviously she sees this as an early indicator of her present career choice. Once the performer, always the performer; she always had a way with words, and she liked an audience. Her life story is laced with continuities—early performance as a precocious four year old (proudly supported by her middle-class, dual-career parents and their church group), the excitement of seeing herself on screen in home movies, writing and acting in school (including writing a play in sixth grade), more serious auditions during high school, studying broadcasting in college, then working in radio and performing as an acrobat in her twenties, pieces published in local magazines and newspapers, performing

with her poetry/music group The Spoken Word, and so on up to the present with her plays, dance exhibitions, books (three published thus far), and lecture career. Each piece of the story seems in harmony with the next. The story she tells about her life makes sense—there are few major disruptions, and, through her interpretation, none in terms of personal identity—like many Americans, she has a coherent life history .

But there are certain negotiations and contradictions in how she feels about herself as an artist and as a businessperson, and how she deals with her expectations of success and failure. She has been forced to renegotiate her identity as a writer/speaker/performer more than once. This chapter will attempt to recount Regina’s life history and to examine the complexities of her life and how she incorporates them into an ongoing, coherent-but-flexible life story.

When I first met Regina Jamison in 1998, she was in her early forties. At the time of our final interview, she was 51. She had been self-employed when we first met, making a living under the umbrella of “writer,” although she provided lectures, seminars on creativity for adult education, “hand-dance” lessons,² writing clubs for middle schoolers, op-ed pieces, and two recently published books.

Beginnings

One theme in Regina’s life is a very strong foundation created by her family, and continuing connection to them (her parents live nearby in D.C., one sister lives in her condo building; her other sister lives minutes away in Maryland and frequently calls on Regina to babysit). Her parents, both college-educated professionals “always loved and supported” her, and made sure the educational resources she needed were available to

her from the start. Hence, Regina was put in a D.C. program for the gifted and talented during middle school, then was sent to Catholic School in Bethesda and finally a Jesuit college in Detroit:

RJ: I loved elementary school. It was cool. I hated junior high. It was a Magnet School for smart kids. Hated it. Then I went to private Catholic school in Bethesda—I expected to hate it. But I liked it.

MH: Why did you hate Junior High?

RJ: Like I said, it was academically rigorous, hours and hours of homework. The students there were either very bourgeois and stuck up or very hoodlum and street, the worst half of both, and I didn't like either. It was my mother's idea.

MH: Then came Catholic school. How come you didn't go to a D.C. High school?

RJ: My mother was very big on education, so she sent me to private school.

Caughey cites “family” and “educational” cultural traditions as among the important influences that can shape post-modern identity.³ Regina's family emphasized education and reading, particularly her mother who had a long career as an elementary school teacher and pushed her children first into magnet schools, then on into the specific educational tradition of Catholic school and finally into college. Regina's parents themselves had been among the first in their families to earn college degrees (bucking an American cultural tradition which kept African-Americans from accessing higher education), and both followed through by pursuing professional careers (her father was a social worker).

Regina's mother emphasized the importance of education, while her father, who had a few poems published in his twenties, gave her a love of the art of writing. Regina attributes her educational background and interest in reading and writing to parental influences; she even admits that her career choice was influenced by her desire to please

them, choosing broadcasting over acting in order to have more career stability. Despite her parents' obvious influence over many of her interests and choices, Regina reserves some credit for herself in explaining why she likes to perform. Kellner's meaning-making model of "subjectivity positions," similar to Caughey's cultural traditions model, includes a category of "self," one produced by unique personal experiences.⁴ For Regina, her love of performing is not a product of family or any other cultural tradition—she claims her enjoyment of the spotlight as her own "cultural tradition," something inherent that she doesn't see demonstrated in the rest of the family—"I was the artistic one," she says, then cites another childhood story to show how early her love of the spotlight was noticed:

MH: Where does that come from? Why do you think you were always like that? Is it nature or nurture? Are you different from your siblings?

RJ: My family tells a story of when I was about four. They were making some home movie, and at that time, they had really bright floodlights, and I was complaining, but then when I saw that the result of this effort was there were pictures of me moving around and talking, then I loved it, and you couldn't get me out of the way of a camera.

As early as elementary school, when asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, Regina would declare her ambition to be a writer:

RJ: I knew that a writer sat in a room and wrote, and I knew I wanted to do that. I was in school plays and in fifth grade or sixth grade, I wrote my first play. We had a student teacher who was working in our class, and the time came for him to leave, so my idea was we should write a play and put it on as a farewell for him. So we wrote the play—I wrote the play and we did it as a staged reading, we didn't do a whole big thing, and my teacher let us cast it. We held scripts in hand and read the play.

Regina had demonstrated fairly sophisticated interest in writing and performing as a child; she received encouragement and reinforcement from her parents and was even

fortunate enough to have a teacher who would allow fifth graders to stage their own play. Both family and institutional structures enabled her to feel pursuing artistic goals was worthwhile and empowering.

But soon she also knew that the solitude of the writer would not satisfy her. A second piece of her identity was that she loved being in front of an audience. She liked writing, but also liked speaking and performing in front of large crowds. “I did plays all throughout school; we also had shows every year around the holidays, so I was in those.” She auditioned for parts in local plays and resolved to find a way to make writing and performing part of her working life.

Still, she chose to major in broadcasting rather than theater in college. “I played with the idea of being an actress, but I didn’t think my parents would go for it.” Broadcasting seemed a sensible choice—it would require both writing and performance and was practical enough to satisfy her parents. Her family’s tradition of education, profession, and middle-class security trumped the far more risk-taking tradition of the theater:

RJ: I knew I was a good writer and a good speaker, and English didn’t seem like it would lead to a job, and broadcasting was a big field with a lot of opportunities, radio in particular. Radio and TV seemed more interesting than just print journalism. That seemed like a good choice. The other thing I had considered was social work and something called urban planning. But Broadcasting seemed more cutting edge than social work.

Choosing social work would have meant adopting her father’s career tradition; but her own personal drive for excitement and performance opportunity led her to choose broadcasting.

MH: Did your parents have much influence on your choice?

RJ: They pretty much let me do my own thing, but there was some unspoken influence. I also liked drama, but I didn't think they'd be too crazy about it if I said I was going to be an actress. They didn't tell me "You have to major in X."

MH: But you got a vibe that you should major in something...

RJ: Where you can support yourself.

Work Experiences—Post-College

Upon graduation from college, Regina got a job in radio, where she got to write some copy. It wasn't long before she realized that while she was getting good writing experience, on-air opportunities were not as plentiful as she had hoped. She quit broadcasting and eventually wound up at a non-profit agency that supported women in the workplace.

She parlayed that job experience into similar duties with the local schools. Even in a more conventional "real job" in the District of Columbia's Department of Education, Regina found opportunities for writing and performance as she did guest lectures and presentations throughout the District. She describes her position as an advocate for women and minorities within the D.C. School System as "the perfect job." Her supervisor supported her twin interests in writing and speaking:

RJ: There were periods where I would be busy and periods where I wouldn't, so I did a lot of writing at work. And my co-workers and supervisors were very supportive, they would say, "If you're not busy, why don't you write something? What's happening with your art?" And the things I did were things I liked doing anyway. So it was, like, the perfect job.

MH: Did you feel good about the work?

RJ: I loved it. I was making sure that women and girls were treated fairly in the school system. So I might teach a career exploration class to encourage girls and minorities to pursue math and science. Or doing a training workshop for teachers to see which ways they're biased for boys or girls, and identifying strategies to

correct that. I also did a lot of multi-cultural education stuff, like working on improving relations between Latinos and African-Americans. And there was writing as part of the job.

Her D.C. Schools job combined parts of her father's professional tradition in social work, her mother's in teaching, and her own special interests in writing and performing. While the workshops she did all over the school district had elements of writing, teaching and social advocacy in them, dropping into a school for a one-shot presentation was much more of a "performance mode" task than the day-to-day grind-it-out of teaching in the public schools.

The time for writing afforded by her generous supervisor allowed her to begin building a publishing résumé. She placed feature articles in the local papers, including the Washington Post. One article led to a book on communication among black women. A small independent publishing house in Chicago issued *Between Black Women: Listening With the Third Ear* 1994.⁵ One year shy of forty, Regina was finally a published author. The book had a small run, and sales were slow. She still needed her day job.

Nonetheless, she occasionally yearned "to do something entrepreneurial." She had been thinking of striking out on her own for some time when events seemed to force her hand. She got "the supervisor from hell" and she also got engaged. Regina interpreted these events from a spiritual perspective (such a view is sometimes referred to as "new age"), seeing them as involved in a sort of "synchronicity" which she felt was in keeping with her long-time feeling of "unconscious guidance" toward her career goal of being a self-employed writer and speaker:⁶

RJ: I did feel that it was sort of a spiritual thing, I did feel called or led, because I loved the job I had. I had a great job. I liked the people I worked with. It was

the best job I ever had—I was there from 1982-83 to 1996. And...I began to feel like it was time to move on to the next thing. One of the funny things that happened...you know, I had been thinking about this for a long time, and then I got this supervisor who was like the bitch of all bitches...to me that was a sign from God—like she was put in my life to tell me go ahead with my plan to work for myself. So I did it.

I had thought about it a long time. Even before I took that job, I had had a longstanding interest in entrepreneurship and self-employment and being a writer. This had been percolating in my brain for a long time. I felt led to leave that job and do this. That difficult supervisor—I had the feeling that she was put in my life to push me out the door. I had a feeling that as soon as I left, she'd leave, too. And I thought that she'd be gone in six months, and she was.

Regina spent twelve years at her “perfect job,” leaving it in 1996 to go freelance.

The Transition to Freelance, First Step: A “Spiritual” Process

It was when we began discussing her work life that Regina began making frequent references to “being led” by God to be a writer and performer, and also to her frustrations at what seemed to her a slow ascent up the ladder of success:

RJ: I feel I'm lucky that I know what I want to do. I've been pretty clear since childhood what my strengths were and what I wanted to do and along the way I've had conversations with God. It's like “Well, I think we're pretty clear what I'm supposed to be doing, so what's the problem, how come you're not kicking in with the manifestations?”

In that statement two themes emerge—first, Regina's reliance on spiritual traditions (both traditional and new age/12-Step) in which one is led to a “right livelihood” and rewarded for one's self-awareness, spirituality, and hard work,⁷ and secondly, her anger at God that “the manifestations” are not meeting financial expectations.

It's worth noting Regina's "magical" thinking that the horrible supervisor was put in her life for a reason, and that the supervisor's tenure was somehow tied to Regina's. This is a noted aspect of what is often called "new age" thinking: that we make internal changes that manifest externally, that we can tap into sources of spiritual healing beyond the realm of western medicine, that everything happens for a reason, and that if we are discerning enough, we can make order out of the chaos of everyday life.⁸ In *Between Black Women* Regina refers to "centering down," an internal process which she believes has external manifestations:

Centering down also includes developing that inner ear and trusting that inner voice. I have missed out on too many blessings by dismissing the thought that didn't seem logical, but later proved to be dead on the money. Not all wisdom is logical, straight-line, left-brain thinking. Not all battles are won by firepower and force. When I self-correct from within, I almost don't have to "do" anything on the outside. That sense of centeredness communicates itself to others without me having to speak a word. When I am communicating with my other, deeper voice, I know that God [my higher power] hears with His own listening ear and responds in a better way.⁹

Here we see a recurrent aspect of the spirituality Regina espouses—internal changes which result in a "oneness" with the world (or universe); this oneness then "calls out" physical manifestations in the world one moves through in the form of job opportunities (in Regina's case, getting published, for example), relationships, and even physical health.¹⁰

Eastland has noted the perception by some individuals of "synchronicities" in their lives wherein "magical or extraordinary experiences are often equated with action...[a] transition from inactivity to activity."¹¹ Seemingly disconnected or even unpleasant events become part of an overarching plan, and the individual even derives

a sense of agency from “meaningful coincidences.”¹² The individual assigns meaning and connection to apparently unrelated events; therefore, “the connection exists in the meaning of the ‘event’ as assigned by the individual experiencing it...It is in that assignment of meaning that the transformative power of the synchronicity is located.”¹³

“Synchronicities are often associated with transformative periods such as falling in love, psychotherapy, intense creative work, and even a change of profession,” like Regina’s transition into self-employment.¹⁴ Eastland further cites Bolen and Jung’s notion that when there is synchronicity, there is also a sense of wholeness of grace and oneness.¹⁵ This is consistent with Regina’s feeling that she was being guided, that God put “the supervisor from hell” into her life to give her the push she needed to quit her job and go freelance, and that writing and speaking were her right livelihood, one that would benefit both her and the world at large. Regina would cite this “oneness” when discussing a second instance of synchronicity with an early experience of being published:

RJ: And the other thing, the whole spiritual part, the day the story first appeared was the day after the last day I worked as a paperboy for the Post. I had taken a job as a...delivering papers in the morning, primarily because I thought the forced exercise would help me lose weight. I came to the conclusion that my job was really important, because there are some people, you know, their life is not right if they don’t have their Washington Post. There were some people standing on their doorstep waiting for me to show up. As an adult, I was more reliable than the kid who had the job before me; I didn’t throw it in the bushes, I put it right on the doorstep. The job I felt was just as important as some hotshot reporter—it was of equal value. And I think that that awareness had to be present before I got my story in the paper. So again, I think that sort of the spiritual growth in realizing that a paper boy is just as important as the owner of the Washington Post was a necessary prerequisite before I could start having my stuff published.

Eastland cites three types of synchronicity, involving external events /internal states; dreams of distant events that are later verified; and precognitions. The particular

type of synchronicity that Regina makes regular reference to is of the first variety, wherein, there is a “coincidence between mental content (which could be a thought, feeling, or attitude) and outer event.”¹⁶ Again, this sort of inner state/outer manifestation “logic” is highly characteristic of New Age thought,¹⁷ although Eastland and others have regularly documented it among members of Twelve-step programs as well (there is some overlap; Kelly has documented the growing interest in Twelve-step programs on the part of some who embrace New Age spirituality¹⁸).

Sociologists like Lynette S. Eastland and Catherine L. Albanese might term this new age causality model “magical,” and suggest even that the individual creates a subjective time frame,¹⁹ but to those who believe in this mode of thinking, it is a different level of truth and connectivity, wherein individuals and events interact through “grace,” “God,” or “HP—higher power.” Stating that “synchronicity requires a human participant, for it is a subjective experience in which the person gives meaning to the coincidence,”²⁰ implies that we are not accepting the individual’s interpretation of the events in question. The fact that “the person links the two events together, and the events need not occur simultaneously” may lead us, unable to empirically confirm the relationship, to suggest that we cannot accept the informant’s testimony of the causal relationship of the two events. But then, are we denying our informant’s meaning? This is an interesting question for life history researchers—how do we treat claims by subjects that are not in keeping with accepted natural laws and “logical observation?” Still, by acknowledging subjective “truth” through interview transcripts, we can least give voice, without judging, to statements like Regina’s that her supervisor “was put into her life” for a reason.

Regina's life story regularly incorporates these concepts of "unconscious guidance" and "synchronicity," even if, at other times, she steps back from it into a much more pragmatic mode (she is fond of saying, "Pray to God, but tie your horse," a reference to the Twelve-step notion prayer is not enough—that you must work to achieve results). And, unlike some new agers, she made certain that her life was in order—rather than relying on "checkbook magic." She very carefully planned her exodus from work and her transition to freelance:

MH: So you had a plan? You knew what you were going to be doing?

RJ: I saved. I had a year's salary in the bank. I had been thinking about it a long time. Even upon graduating from college I had wanted to something entrepreneurial anyway so that's always been a longstanding likelihood, and I always knew I wanted to be a writer. So it wasn't a real, real big, big leap from that standpoint, but still quitting your job is still a leap. I was aware that I couldn't plan the whole thing out, that I had to just jump in.

MH: Did some higher power stuff come in to play? Turning it over?

RJ: Yeah, some stuff came through. When I quit the job, I also was anticipating getting married within a year. I was going to move to North Carolina—he had just gotten a job down there—and his goal was to be self-employed also, and he was moving in that direction. And so, the plan was that I could be at home and sort of do the groundwork for both his endeavors and mine.

MH: Do you think his being there gave you a nudge, gave you support to do this, even though the relationship didn't work out?

RJ: Yes. As you're looking at things that could go wrong, having a husband with a good job was a nice insurance policy. However, it wasn't...his being in the picture or not being in the picture wouldn't have stopped me. This was sort of a longstanding...in elementary school, they said, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" and I said, "I'm going to be a writer. You know, writers sit in their rooms and write books."

Again, Regina reinforces the continuity of her writing identity with reference to a thirty-year old anecdote. In so doing she also protects her career and artistic identity from the suggestion that it was in part created by someone else or that it was not a strong

enough urge to stand on its own. It was just as well that this identity was so strong that she would've gone through with the transition one way or the other, eventually; the intended marriage fell through (this relationship, the major romance of her life, will be discussed in the upcoming section on religion and twelve-step programs).

Religion and Twelve-Step Programs

Like so many others in the late twentieth century, Regina's disenchantment with traditional Christianity played a major role in her reaching out to new spiritual practices.²¹ She noted that her parents were not particularly religious, though her mother did send Regina to a neighbor's church when she was twelve years old. "And I liked it. But it was more of a social thing. Then my father joined some church when I was fourteen, and I had to go to that with him for a while." But Regina missed her friends from the other church, and eventually drifted back to that group.

By high school, she was an Agnostic in Catholic School. "We had religion class and stuff like that. I liked it, but I didn't have to believe it all." Regina's relationship to traditional Christianity was casual—it was not an especially strong family tradition, and she liked its social aspects, but it was not a major influence on her life decisions. Eventually, as a young adult she went through "a pretty traditional Christian phase." But she was struck by all the hypocrisy around her—the married Christian man who "was always trying to get me into bed," the friend who told her she was "going to be spending less time with you this year" because Regina had a "foul mouth." "A few weeks later, that friend got evicted and wound up living with me. I didn't see her asking her new Christian friends for help."

But the pivotal experience that may have shaped her attitude toward religion came when her fiancé, under the influence of his mother, unexpectedly converted to the practices of The Jehovah's Witnesses and their "Kingdom Hall." He wanted her to convert, so she came down to North Carolina to see for herself:

RJ: All the Jehovah's Witnesses I had known had struck me as mentally ill. I thought it must be them, the religion can't be that extreme. But when I walked in, I immediately knew that everything that was off-the-wall crackpot about those people was not just them, but the religion itself. [LAUGHS] ...My belief is that God is in everything, God is in the crumbs on this plate, God is in the dirt on the floor, God is in the clouds floating, and that was the first place I'd been where I could not sense the presence of God. A little voice in my head was saying, "This is a dangerous place." But Holcomb thought it was the best thing since sliced bread, so he joined. He told me I'd have to join, too, for him to marry me. So that was that.

Holcomb was under intense pressure from the sect, and if he were to renounce that particular religion, he would have been unable to speak to anyone who still belonged, including his own mother. Later, his regrets at his conversion and how it cost him his relationship with Regina were apparent.

RJ: And a month after he was baptized, he got married. And the last time I talked to him, he had gained a lot of weight, and turned gray. I said "I don't think you understand why I didn't join." And I told him of how when I was sitting in the Kingdom Hall, that little voice told me it was a dangerous place. And I was expecting him to say, "You don't understand, this is so wonderful, so great." But he said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

Losing Holcomb was one of the hardest things Regina's had to endure in life. Holcomb even contacted her a week before *he was to marry someone else* to ask her once more if she'd reconsider. Regina once again said no. Regina truly lost him to the Kingdom Hall. Not surprisingly, Regina displayed some bitterness toward religion. In one interview, she referred to religion as "existential bullshit." And our talks were

sprinkled with, on the one hand, testimonials to the healing honesty she had encountered in Overeaters Anonymous and Arts Anonymous (also known as A.R.T.S.²²) and stories about the many hypocrisies she had encountered when interacting with “conventional” religions. After a fairly standard upbringing in a neighborhood Baptist Church which she enjoyed socially as much as spiritually, followed by “fairly active” Christianity in her twenties, she has drifted away from traditional religion and moved eagerly toward New Age and Twelve Step spirituality.

MH: How did you discover 12-Step programs?

RJ: At the time I came into the 12-steps I was a real active Christian, I had hit a point where church wasn’t doing the trick, and I came to the 12-step rooms, and said, Oh, this is what I need. I also read Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Traveled*, and he was in town and I went to hear him speak...and one of the things he said that impressed me a lot, was “AA is more of a church than church is.” And I thought what do a bunch of drunks know about God? So I wanted to go to a meeting, and it was a year before I went to a meeting, but I went to one and I loved it. I loved the honesty.

MH: Are you a drinker?

RJ: No, but I wished I was one in a way. [LAUGHS]

The “crisis” which Regina was experiencing that led her to try new spiritual practices had much to do with her writing, and also with her trouble managing her weight. She had been experiencing a long period of writer’s block when a friend told her about Overeaters Anonymous.

MH: How did you make the personal connection to 12-Step?

RJ: Well, a friend of mine said she went to a meeting of Overeaters Anonymous and didn’t like it, and I thought, Oh, “Anonymous”—send me the information. And I did the checklist, I said yes to five or six things, so I started going to OA and one of the things they recommended was keeping a journal.

So I kept the journal in OA, and somehow the journal freed up my writing, in other words, freed up my writer’s block. I knew there was a connection between those two things. When I wrote, I was not comfortable with self-disclosure, and

thought that I should not be present on the page. But I found that some people could read between the lines about things that were going on with me at the time I wrote it anyway. Being in 12-Step programs got me comfortable with self-disclosure—being “naked” on a regular basis, so that when I sat down with a piece of paper, I overcame that reluctance to allow people to see me.

“Overeaters Anonymous considers compulsive eating a disease of isolation.”²³

The keeping of the journal, the regular self-disclosure to the larger group, a sponsor, or other individual members are all strategies used by OA and other Twelve-step groups to “reduce isolation and self-ostracization and promote a better psychological sense of community. They also function as behavioral settings that instill practical, tried and true coping techniques through repetitive rehearsal of ritualistic programs and procedures.”²⁴

One tool offered in OA and other programs is mentoring through Twelve-step “sponsors” or other members of longstanding who can serve as guides on how to apply the program. In talking about OA, Regina quoted the old Twelve-step slogan, “Stick with the winners.”²⁵ “There was a woman in OA who was a writer, and in inquiring what she did, one of the things she did was Arts Anonymous.” Regina regularly talked to this woman who modeled two successful roles Regina wanted—success as a writer and in managing her relationship to food—and later also followed her into Arts Anonymous. This would be another key part of Regina’s coming to terms with her artistic identity. She talked at length about how OA and then ARTS helped her writing on many levels. Self-acceptance, regular self-disclosure in front of others, and working the first few steps with a sponsor,²⁶ enabled her to integrate spirituality into her artistic process; all helped “jumpstart” her artistic career in her mid-thirties.

MH: A.R.T.S—what have you found there? Do you think it’s changed your life?

RJ: Oh. I loved Arts Anonymous, particularly in the beginning. My group, The Spoken Word, helped, OA helped, and Arts Anonymous really, really helped my art. Arts Anonymous was more transforming. The biggest piece for me, the missing piece for me was the spiritual aspect of doing one’s art. I understood it as a hobby, and I understood it as a profession, and I understood it as something that was part of my personality, but I didn’t sort of factor in that there was a God-quotient to this whole thing of practicing one’s art and that was like the major piece.

As Marrus has noted, each Twelve-step member is encouraged “to regain his or her spiritual self in a reframing process,”²⁷ Regina used the Twelve-step discourse to move her creative process into a spiritual framework.

MH: How did OA complement ARTS?

RJ: When I started keeping the journal, I got several opportunities for freelance writing—out of the blue—and I knew that keeping a journal was connected to this opportunity to write. I would consider that the start of it. Then I was given the opportunity to be a member of a group, The Spoken Word, at the end of 1988 or 1989. That was something else that started my engine going.

I was creative but inconsistent, and A.R.T.S. helped me with that. A.R.T.S. helped me process the feelings, or the junk that needed to be out of the way so I could be more creative more consistently. Arts Anonymous helped me go back to the God part. Putting God back into the reason for writing, being...what is it doing for me spiritually, opening up a larger channel for God to work through me. That was the main thing that I needed to do. Instead of doing a lot of it from my own intellect, being a vehicle for God to do it with me and for me, and help me or just being aware of his presence in the midst of trying to pursue these things.

MH: Is it the 12-Step concept of turning it over that has enabled you to trust the process?²⁸

RJ: I have the same kind of skills that serve me in good stead as a lawyer, and would make it easy for me to slip over the line. I could easily do something unscrupulous, and wouldn't care. And ARTS anonymous provided the spiritual grounding so that these skills in writing and speaking could be used—first of all so that they could be used period, and in a way that is a blessing to me as well to others. That sounds kind of “new agey...”

Regina connects inner and outer “events” to explain how changes in her own way of thinking about her art or herself enabled her to be successful as a writer. Although some call this a “subjective timeline” and attribute the “synchronicity of events strictly to interpretation by the individual experiencing them,”²⁹ Regina seems quite clear that they are part of one process. She keeps a journal, and her writer's block ends. She works out her issues about self-disclosure, and job offers follow. She rediscovers her spiritual connection to her art, and suddenly a career is possible. It's all of one piece to her, and **not** a product of subjective or imagined connection.

Right Livelihood, Entrepreneurial Personalities and Self-Promotion

RJ: I do like self-promotion, and I do think I could go too far with it, though I never have. As a teenager, I recognized I would be a good lawyer, but morally, I thought it wouldn't be good, I would be too unprincipled, too unethical, and would sleep fine in the midst of it. I feel that being a writer, I can use the same kind of skills that would serve me in good stead as a lawyer, but everyone can benefit, both society and me.

Regina's notion that she would make a marvelous but unprincipled lawyer along with the metacognition that there were other jobs that would be better for her that used the same talents but in a way that benefited everyone reflects an incorporation of New Age beliefs about work that it should constitute “right livelihood, ecologically sound, and good for the Self” as opposed to being “ecologically-unaware and good for only

oneSelf.”³⁰ Though she felt a need to put herself in the spotlight, she also wanted to find a way to avoid the pitfalls of too much celebrity and self-will. Working as a writer and speaker seemed to be a good compromise that would allow her public personality to flourish but also contain possible excesses of entrepreneurial spirit.

“There is an entrepreneurial personality.”³¹ Regina would appear to fit into Miner’s “Personal Achiever” category of entrepreneurs: “Personal achievers are classic entrepreneurs, bringing tremendous energy . . .and putting in long hours at work. They like feedback about their performance, and they like to plan, including setting goals for future achievements.”³² When I asked Regina what success looked like to her, she was able to tick off a list of achievements:

MH: So you’re entering the third year of your freelance program. What would you picture ten years from now as your best case scenario?

RJ: That I have had at least one bestseller, that one of my plays has been made into a movie, that I’m getting lots and lots of royalties, that I can pick and choose what I do, that I’m more than financially stable, very safe, very comfortable. And even if I could stay here, I could afford to live somewhere else. Although I like this apartment and I like this neighborhood. The apartment next door is vacant. I’d like to buy that and make it an office. That’s just a fantasy. Ten years from now—I’d have an easygoing life. Work when I feel like it.

In my observations of Regina, I noted several other “entrepreneurial” qualities: being “more concerned with achieving success than with avoiding failures,” “constantly struggling to accomplish more and more in less and less time” (she busied herself addressing a brochure to a prospective client even as she was pitching her various lectures over the phone), finding herself “hostile and impatient with people and situations that seem to block accomplishments” (“At readings I find myself thinking ‘Are you going to buy the book?’”), and being unwilling to take a vacation for fear she’d lose an

opportunity.³³ While still close to her parents and sisters, Regina was content, at this time, to set aside any desire for a relationship or family of her own, something she seemed ambivalent about throughout our talks (and something which inspired not one but two of her published pieces). Like many entrepreneurs, focus on her goals affected focus on personal relationships, though unlike some, she still made time on occasion for family visits, and regularly babysat her little nephew, even as she questioned this enjoyable-but-not-profitable use of her time.

She also had “strong personal initiative... Personal Achievers show great initiative; they act independently and initiate action without any stimulation or support from others...They want to be able to say, ‘I did it myself.’”³⁴ Regina had a need to receive recognition and credit, and a willingness to put herself on the line through cold calls, unsolicited submissions, and long distance travel (without guaranteed rewards, as with her travel to promote her children’s book in Alabama, or a play at a college arts festival in Pittsburgh).

Regina was also realistic about being a professional—and thus willing to compromise her artistic autonomy (to a point—I will discuss her boundaries in this area later). Noting that her readings about other writers revealed to her that few, if any writers got to consistently pick and choose what work they were willing to accept, she herself was often willing to tailor her products to the needs of clients and editors. True, there was some give-and-take in this area, as she would develop lectures on her own initiative and offer them as a menu for clients to choose from, but on more than one occasion, she took on work to fill a clients’ need.

There was now some conflict with her “pure” artistic identity—when she was working full-time and writing “on the side,” she pursued ideas that intrigued her. Now she would often take what was offered, even if it wasn’t entirely interesting. Hence she spent several months doing interviews to promote an op-ed piece about “blacks and marriage,” long after she’d started to lose interest in the subject. The publicity off of this one piece might pay off later, down the line...help her make more money, get another piece published or even a book. In fact, she even pitched a book on marriage in general (not just about “black marriage”), stating that it was not a particular passion of hers. “It would just be a project.” Self-employed writers, often called freelancers, are often in this position: They “will master some new subject, even though were it not for the business they would have absolutely no interest in the topic...This is not the scholarly dedication of the intellectual, nor is it a love of learning for its own sake. It is a practical desire to acquire any information that will make the venture more successful.”³⁵

Studies of entrepreneurs have found them to be “significantly more willing to gamble than employees were,” focused on autonomy and personal recognition, extraverted, and more likely to be college-educated and have a college-educated father.³⁶ Regina matches up well with all these characteristics, and often noted how much she enjoyed having control over her own calendar, her workplace and hours, and what she could wear for work. She also regularly expressed her enjoyment of networking on her own behalf, of speaking in front of large crowds, and of getting recognition through the press for her own writings. There were complications and qualifiers on several of these characteristics which will be discussed later, such as the occasional conflicts between being an artist and being a business, the sometimes awkward negotiation of her private

versus her public identity with audience members and readers, her missing the daily chit-chat and physical reality of the workplace, and her careful planning to offset the risk of going freelance.

The notion that all self-employment and freelance writing in particular involves risk is well-documented in even the most affirmative guides about freelancing.³⁷ But risk-taking is not necessarily recklessness. Regina's planning was thorough—she entered into self-employment with one year's salary in the bank and a “worst-case scenario” of failing and going back to work at a higher salary (as many experienced workers who go freelance do when they return to paid employment).³⁸

Regina's choice of writing and lecturing as her business was a wise one, since “in industries dominated by large, capital-intensive firms...the latter often have a comparative and absolute advantage in raising capital.”³⁹ Obviously, there were small capital requirements for Regina to launch her business, and she had some other advantages as she set out—she had almost a decade-and-a-half of experience as a writer and speaker to bring to clients, she had already published a book and several articles, she had ties to the D.C. School system, which would be one of her regular clients throughout her years of self-employment, she was familiar with the “formula” of grant-writing, she had a few specialties (a number of lectures she had created on subjects related to African-American history), and she had long-standing ties to the overall D.C. community, particularly the black community. She was clearly not an amateur, even as she set out to become recognized as a professional.

Entrepreneurship was but one cultural tradition she drew from and it served her purpose in one arena. There were other dimensions to her life where she needed to

draw on different resources and discourses. And, of course, there were always areas of friction, where two or more cultural traditions would overlap, bumping against one another, leaving her to negotiate. Such boundary areas very often deliver the richest material for analysis and discovery of personal meaning through the conflict of identity which they reveal.

The Business of Freelance—Early Years

Regina had a year's salary in the bank when she finally quit to go freelance. The first year was a struggle, as her income dipped from the previous year's \$37,000 to a mere \$22,000. Her tax liability was also higher, since there was no employer to pay part of her federal taxes. Her second year saw a jump to \$28,000 and the third (\$34,000) took her almost all the way back to her last position's income. Yet her success was mixed. She was getting her name out there, developing more products for her clients, and most importantly was learning how to ask for what she wanted and how to say "no to the free stuff." But her "business plan" had projected earnings of \$50,000 in the second year alone. Instead, it had taken her two years to earn \$50,000. The vision and the reality had different timetables.

As a freelancer, Regina had become aware that it would be a marketing advantage to be able to say she's the "relationship writer" or the "dialogue between black women" writer, but she found that intellectually stifling. To maintain some degree of intellectual freedom, she was willing to forgo marketing imperatives in our soundbite culture, though part of her still wanted a clear marketing tag with which to meet the world:

MH: Teacher, performer, writer—they're all coherent pieces of you.

RJ: The only problem is, sometimes, I've wanted to seek out an image consultant, because for example, when my play was done last summer in Annapolis, I had copies of my book in the lobby, if anyone wanted to buy it, but the book had nothing to do with the play. You know, somebody, who has a consistent image, you know, the book-the play-the movie...from a marketing standpoint, it's easier to sell.⁴⁰ So sometimes I wished I could find somebody who could connect the whole thread. A children's story has nothing to do with the hand-dancing—so how do you sell it?

Although the life story she had been telling me seemed to satisfy her and make sense to me, Regina was also trying to construct a coherent identity for the marketplace—there was a difference between her personal or amateur life story and the one she felt she need professionally. Her story was coherent to her, and her careers all seemed to work together, but she had come to realize that to a broader audience, she hadn't achieved the “brand name” stamp which our commercial culture seems to insist upon. In a soundbite media culture, Regina's many jobs continued to defy an easy label, though to me she identified herself as a writer. Meanwhile, partly from personal interests, partly from financial opportunity, she had cobbled together a living from several different sources:

- Dancing exhibitions and lessons
- Double Dutch Rope Exhibitions
- College Lectures on subjects such as assertiveness training, black history, black media
- Creative Writing Classes in middle schools and psychiatric wards
- Seminars on creativity
- Freelance Journalism
- Plays
- A Non-Fiction Book About Black Women and Relationships
- A Children's Book
- A Book of Affirmations for Teachers
- Op-Eds on Various Subjects, including blacks and marriage

While she sometimes struggled to make a living from her many jobs, Regina had earlier told me how important she felt it was for her to project an image of success. She took this so seriously that she would often buy new clothes for a presentation rather than be seen in some presentable, though slightly worn outfit. “Fake It Till You Make It” is the Twelve Step Slogan that comes to mind.⁴¹ However, this not-entirely-false front had had some consequences. “People think I’m making a lot of money.” And, as a result of her “success,” some organizations with smaller budgets have assumed that Regina could afford to work for them for free—that as an established professional, she should do some *pro bono* work:

RJ: When I had a regular job and was doing my art part-time, the money didn’t matter the way it matters now. I’m getting more requests to do free stuff, and I need to find a way to tell these people no.

MH: Is there any chance of selling books if you do the free stuff?

RJ: I ask people if they have a budget. Then I ask them if they can guarantee the sale of a certain number of books. That makes it more worthwhile for me, if I can sell books at the event. ...One of my former sponsors owns a bookstore. And someone called her and asked her for a Black History Month speaker, so she gave them my name and when I talked to the lady, she was from a federal government agency, she wanted me to speak for free, it was a very small agency. I asked her how many would be in the audience, she said about 100, which is a fair size. When I said could she guarantee a certain number of books, she said no, but she said “I’m sure you’ll sell some.” I’m sure I would. But Black History Month is a busy time for me, and a time when I’m able to earn a lot of money and to spend it in places where I could go and be paid and sell books. So I told her I could speak a different time of year, but not then. And so she called my sponsor back and she was upset, and my sponsor said, “What did you expect? You’re asking for a one-way relationship. You’re not guaranteeing sales, why should she bother?”

But I also want to be a nice guy. So that’s been sort of tricky. If I let it, I could be busy every day doing free stuff, but I’d starve. And I do think I should do some free things, it’s just a matter of establishing the criteria. Right now, some of the things emerging as criteria are, does it sound like something fun and interesting. So: Am I already real busy? Do I have any personal connection the person or the cause? Will it give me publicity or will it put me in position to meet important people?

One would hardly term Regina naïve, and her long period of planning and saving showed that she certainly hadn't relied strictly on New Age affirmations promising her that should she "follow her bliss," the money would flow. But there had been a learning curve about how to market herself, how much to charge, how to say no, which contacts to cultivate, etc. Like many writers, she was forced to support herself through teaching. Weekly classes in creative writing at two different middle schools were her "steady gig," the job that made sure something was always coming in.

The Life of the Freelancer, Part I

***Tambourine Moon*—Anatomy of a Children's Book**

The life of the freelancer is appealing—all that freedom, independence, and creativity. Set your own schedule, choose your own work, wear what you want, never go into the office. But the reality is far more complicated than the glamorous fantasy. For writers, much work is done "on spec," with paydays that may be three or four years away. Or a writer may receive a small advance, hardly enough to live on, for a book that might not be published for several years. When Regina got the go ahead for *Tambourine Moon*, she received a \$3000 advance for a book that was to come out within two years. This was in 1995. Then the two years passed, and still the book had not been released. It finally came out in 1999, four years after the small advance. And the first three thousand copies of the book would have to sell before Regina would see any more royalties.

So Regina found herself promoting a project she had not worked on in three years, knowing that each time she took a three or four hour block of time to promote the book, she was passing up other opportunities for speaking engagements, part-time jobs,

and much needed self-promotion and networking. Her business rationale for traveling to Alabama to promote the book, or taking a day to go to Richmond, Virginia was that should the book sell enough, not only would she start getting those royalties, but that a pleased publisher might offer her a chance to write a second book. On the other hand, one could tell from her recounting of the trip to Alabama (below) that there were other satisfactions to be had from this promotional junket.

MH: Are you feeling reconnected to this thing you wrote two or three years ago?

RJ: Yeah. And my father has been coming with me to things, so that's been fun.

MH: Do you feel like you're giving your dad something through this book?

RJ: Oh yeah. I do feel that for all the times my parents said, "Do your homework, turn off the television," or whatever, this is my small way to say, "Whatever guff you took from me, whatever you had to put up with or sacrifice, here's a little bit of saying "thank you."

As noted above, one characteristic that Regina shares is a willingness and even enjoyment of self-promotion, of doing anything that will help "grow" the business. I was surprised to learn how little the publisher was doing to help her. For *Tambourine Moon*, she was setting up her own promotional appearances, many of them local, but often hours away.

MH: How are the books sales building?

RJ: I had a conversation with the head of publicity to see if they'd do more on my behalf during the Christmas season, and the bottom line was "no." He was very nice about it, and said "keep doing what you've been doing." A place like Montgomery, Alabama is not usually on a book tour. So when someone from out of town comes, they are more predisposed and willing to give some publicity. So I'm going to do some midsize cities like Montgomery and I'm planning on going to Richmond at some point. Good sales in Richmond count as much as good sales in New York.

MH: So what do you do, you just call? You get a list of bookstores?

RJ: Well, Richmond I picked because I can go there and come back in a day. And from time to time I get invited to speak out of town, so if I get invited to speak out of town, I ask if they know any bookstores in the area. Can they suggest the name of a store, either a chain or a small independent. And then the store usually has a press list, and then I just do the legwork, send out a letter, follow up with a phone call, try to schedule something.

Meanwhile, with such speculative income streams like *Tambourine Moon*, Regina had to ensure she had money coming in on a regular basis. Hence her two teaching gigs—the weekly creative writing club at two middle schools, and her regular visits to the Forensic patients at the Psych Ward. She found herself juggling her need for steady income with her desire to promote *Tambourine Moon* and reap the potential payoffs it could bring. On one occasion she passed up a short-term job that would have brought in some ready cash and instead made a promotional appearance for the book. Again, she was taking the long view of things—should the book do well, it could result in another. This could be a career-maker for her. On the other hand, passing up a few hundred dollars guaranteed was “disappointing.”

For a few months, it seemed that every time I spoke to Regina, she was on her way to yet another promotional appearance:

MH: How many times have you done a reading of your book and a brief talk?

RJ: Maybe fifteen and I have five more between now and Christmas.

MH: You sold ten books today at the library.

RJ: Normally, it's twenty. I called the publisher and asked how many they had sold, and they said they had shipped out 4000, but many of those won't sell. So my guess is that if they ordered 4000 maybe 3000 have sold.

MH: That's not bad.

RJ: That's what they told me. I asked them how many copies I needed to sell to be successful. And they said 5,000 to 12,000 is considered a developing title. 20,000 is a strong title. And above 20,000 is a bestseller. With my first book, they

printed up 7500 copies and we haven't sold them all yet. And that was five years ago.

I found out the local library systems have been buying the new book. I have phone calls into Howard, Prince William, Arlington counties, and am looking for more contacts with other counties. I'm playing up the local angle.

MH: If this sells well, would you do another book in this genre, make it a series?

RJ: I think if this book does well, I would consider doing another book like this one. One nice thing about children's books is they do have a longer shelf life. Children aren't consumers like adults are. They're not looking for the latest thing, so it's less tainted by commercialism.

Usually when we discussed the book and all her other writings we talked sales or other aspects of the business. Regina seemed very focused on how she was doing as a business. Getting her to talk about other areas of satisfaction she took from her work was not always easy, but occasionally she would bring it up on her own. Clearly, there were other dimensions to her writing "career" that made it worthwhile. What struck me when she described her Alabama trip was that although the publisher had failed to deliver the books she had hoped to sell in-store at her readings (she pockets a larger amount of these proceeds than she would normally get from sales royalties), she nonetheless had a great time, because she had other personal meanings attached to going to Alabama. Her dad's family hailed from the Selma area, and her dad himself had accompanied her on the trip.

MH: How was Alabama?

RJ: Oh, that was a great trip! They did a nice story in the paper.

MH: Did the Alabama angle work for you?

RJ: Oh yeah. I did a book signing at a black bookstore there, and I sold twenty of the new book, and about seven or eight of the old one, so that was good, and I also went to Tuskegee University, and that was sort of...that wasn't planned in advance. That was set up by a friend of mine. And I was supposed to have copies of this book, but the publisher for some reason didn't send them, but I had

my other book, so I sold that one, I sold five or six copies. And then I talked at another gathering, but again the publisher didn't send the books, so I just talked, but I'm sure that will result in some sales.

MH: You must've been frustrated.

RJ: Well...it wasn't going to make me or break me. In some ways it less trouble for me.

MH: So your dad was there.

RJ: He was there for all of it. At the book store he spoke, and signed autographs.

MH: So Selma was fun?

RJ: Yeah. And the school was actually in a place called White Hall, Alabama, where my grandmother was born, and they gave me the key to the city. It was an actual key—a brass key, and on one side it says the name of the city, and on the other side it says the mayor's name. And it's also a combination bottle opener.
[Laughs]

Seven years later, during our follow-up interview, Regina would tell me that *Tambourine Moon*, unfortunately, had not sold enough copies, and was out of print. I told her I had spotted it on display at our local public library. She smiled, only partly with regret. She had invested a lot of time and effort in promoting it. Sales had been “okay,” but not enough to lead to a second book in today's tight publishing market. She had passed up other jobs, spent time and money traveling around the D.C. area, into Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia, and on down to Alabama. She took in a little extra on sales made at promotional appearances, but often not enough to recoup expenses.

Yet it had been worth it. Freelancing *is* risky, but this was a risk worth taking. Had the book's sales “taken off,” her career might have been launched. Instead, ten years after the initial advance, nine years after writing, seven years after publication, and five years after her last promotional appearance, the book—her favorite project, was “dead.” Still, the time spent with her elderly father had proved invaluable to her. She still felt

proud of the book and its connection to family. There was more to her writing, at least in this case, than career and money.

The Life of the Freelancer, Part II

Like many freelancers, Regina had slow times and peak times. July, August, and part of September were always quiet—the bulk of her lecture and training gigs occurred at colleges and schools in the area; summer is always a downtime for them. When I interviewed her in late summer of 1998, her budget was temporarily strained until revenue streams opened up again. On the other hand, having positioned herself as an expert on Black History Month, Regina actually experienced overflow each February, to the point that she had to prioritize and even turn down jobs.

Despite enjoying her autonomy, she had found that there were pluses and minuses to working freelance, some social, some economic (she left the guaranteed salary and benefits of a school district job), and some just part of day to day living.

MH: What's the best thing about working freelance?

RJ: I set my own hours. I can get up late, work late, whatever. There's no dress code, except when I'm on a speaking engagement. On the other hand, I miss the social interaction of a regular job more than I had anticipated. I knew it would be an adjustment. At work, people would say, "Is that a new hairstyle?" When you come in, do your project, and leave, you could be wearing the same thing you've worn for the last twenty years or something new, they don't notice.

Another issue that had arisen for her was that as a one-person business, there was no one to cover for her if she was sick, needed some time off for personal reasons, or wanted to take a vacation. Still, to her mind, the freedom to work when and where she wanted, to take mini-breaks from work to do other things like babysit her nephew, was so satisfying that she no longer needed escape from the usual stresses that work brings.

MH: How do you relax in this kind of job situation? It must be hard to get a break.

RJ: I remember I had a day when I first got started and I was feeling sick, and I thought, okay, today's going to be a sick day. So, in my other life, a sick day meant I didn't go to work and I stayed at home, but now it means I'm staying at home but that's no different from every other day. It was sort of weird, and it's hard to resist answering the phone, particularly when it's going to be something "money."

MH: Do you ever get a vacation, two weeks?

RJ: Last September a girlfriend said to me, let's go to Pennsylvania. She's a freelance writer also, and she wanted to write a story about something in Holmesville. She said, we'll drive up, the leaves are changing, it'll be nice, da-da-da, and I realized on that trip that I don't have a need to vacate my life in a vacation, because a lot of my life is sort of relaxed. I can sit and have a chat with you, I can sort of change my schedule.

There are certain things I have to do. If I don't work, I don't get paid, unlike a regular job where you can sort of slack off for a while before they fire you. There's an immediate relationship between the work and the check. But I wake up when I pretty much want to wake up, and if I don't feel like doing something till 8 p.m., then I'll do it at 8 o'clock. If I want to lay in a t-shirt and blue jeans and gaze out the window while I write a report, then I'll do that, I can write the report in the park. And, this is the curse of entrepreneurs—I don't want to not be available for an opportunity that might come.

The flexibility to work in the park, to gaze out the window as she writes, or to teach French to her nephew depicts a life that moves at a non-traditional pace and a schedule that enables her to incorporate rich, textured experiences into her to daily experience. At the same time, one senses the tension she feels about the possibility of missed opportunity—she talks of how babysitting her nephew has eaten time up she could be using to make contacts and drum up business. There are signs that some of the most personally meaningful things she does conflict with building her public persona, the business that is "Regina Jamison."

Freelance—Nuts and Bolts

Meanwhile, Regina's multiple teaching jobs were in place as a consistent income, the foundation of her financial life—something steady coming in. From these she got a little security which enabled her to tolerate the financial ambiguity of waiting for a book that was written three years ago to be published or an op-ed piece written nine months earlier and submitted to multiple sections of a newspaper to finally find its proper “home.” Other skills like lecturing and training helped round out her financial picture while she waited for her writing career to establish itself.

While many of the writing sales she made came from sending in work cold to an editor who knew neither her nor her work, her teaching and speaking jobs often came out of contacts and networking she had done in the past. Having spent her entire adult life in the District of Columbia and having worked for the District's school system for ten years, she had numerous contacts inside the system. She used these contacts to get the job teaching creative writing.

Regina's contacts in the school system may have helped her generate interest in her creative writing club, but her background as an administrator within the school system also had taught her which District foundations to approach for funding. With typical self-deprecation, Regina noted that “writing grants is pretty formulaic. You don't have to be talented. [Laughs]” Perhaps “talent” is not required, but in the course of our talks Regina ticked off a half-dozen grant sources she had been able to tap for her many projects. She had gotten grants to teach children creative writing and poetry slamming, to do art projects with mental patients, to give hand-dancing classes, and even to start a

jump rope club for adults. When one source dried up, she was usually able to identify another source. This was how her weekly visits to the Psych Ward were kept alive.

The Psychiatric Ward class in creative writing came about from connections made through her father. She identifies writing as a “family tradition” that she has from her father. She notes that he had been published occasionally as a poet in his twenties and thirties, and that while employed as a social worker, “he was always the one to write something for special occasions—when someone was leaving or having a birthday.” Her father brought Regina into the Psych Ward to read poetry to the patients in the early 1980s, and twenty-five years later she still has a contract for a once a week class there. When we talked in 1998, she was still the primary instructor. Despite Regina’s focus on the prestige and satisfaction of writing, this was yet another example of a teaching situation that gave her great emotional rewards:

RJ: I always like going to St. Elizabeth’s. The audience is appreciative; I’ve been going there a long time now, and I know everybody and everybody knows me. When I have funding, I go once a week for a creative writing class. I went twice in the last two weeks, once for a special program, culminating a project we had done. They wrote a play, they had photography and poetry on display, awards were given out to patients. For that particular project they were escorted out and took pictures along U Street.

MH: It must be pretty meaningful to them.

RJ: Yeah—it breaks the monotony.

The visits to the Psychiatric Ward have special meaning to her. “I would go there for free, and I have done so. I guess it’s because I have longstanding relationships with both the patients and the staff there.” Indeed during our visit there, she felt very relaxed as we passed through massive security and deserted hall after deserted hall. To her this

was not a high security “prison” for dangerous men who had indeed murdered people, it was a sort of home transformed by her fond associations with her Dad’s history there.

Vignette: Afternoon at the Psych Ward

It’s a long, gray drive through a part of the city I’ve never seen; we turn off one of the many highways that crisscross the district and are soon hastening toward a complex of buildings surrounded by a high wire fence. A uniformed guard greets us as our car pulls up at the gate. Regina, an attractive, African-American woman with braided hair in her early forties identifies herself; she’s on the list which the guard carefully checks, and we’re waved through. Long, low red brick buildings (not more than two or three stories) are massed on our left. To our right is the city and, just ahead on our drive through the complex, a low grassy field (“They used to grow their own food here; it was like a little city,” she tells me). We wind around the black tarmac drive and finally hang a right into a small parking lot outside an L-shaped building. Regina points out to me a fenced in area marked with crosses. “That’s where they bury the patients who die here and have nobody on the outside.”

We are entering the hospital. Patients and staff greet her as she walks by in her sleek raincoat; some of them look to have had a hard road. One man sees Regina and reminds her of a poem he wrote about his feet (and where they’d been) some time back. They hardly notice me. I’m a little nervous, but Regina seems more relaxed than when presenting a book or seminar.

We go through a metal detector and then Regina checks in at another window inside the building. I sit on an uncomfortable metal chair. Eventually, the thick door (so

thick it muffles all sounds on the other side; not even laughter echoes out of the long tiled hallway we are about to enter) is pushed open and we go through. Through to another barrier, that is. Having turned a quick corner, we go through some more metal doors and then wait in front of the heavy-doored elevators. A man with a key appears and unlocks it. We get in.

We exit onto another floor and are quickly inside another, slighter door. A few men, all black, are sitting in some of the ten or twelve chairs right of the doorway. The room is decorated with Twelve-Step signs and slogans. One lists over thirty signs of possible relapse into drinking. The problem for the men here, however, is not alcohol. They take other medicines—for schizophrenia, for other brain disorders. They are “forensic patients who have been found not guilty of a felony by reason of insanity.” Some will stay here the rest of their lives.

In the back sits a striking man with a well-trimmed beard, not more than five foot-six. So polished and intellectual-looking that many take him for staff, he is a murderer, Regina tells me, and, surprisingly, also quite wealthy (he won a sweepstakes). He’ll never get out, but has, managed to attract a girlfriend from the outside. Another man tells Regina “I just started a new medication” to let her know that his attention may be in and out. Indeed, he seems to fall asleep at one point; later he can’t remember the rhyme he has just recited to us a moment before.

Only five men show up this day. The social worker apologizes to me (as if my university connection confers upon me the status of a visiting dignitary), but says “They’re having their Thanksgiving party in Ward 11 at 3 o’clock, so we’re a little short today.” The room is uncomfortably hot, a product of the bureaucratic mentality which

turns on the heat on a certain day each winter, and cannot turn it off, no matter what.

The social worker asks one of Regina's students to set up a fan.

In the front row sits Preacher, a stocky man with a mustache. He's a natural rhymers. We have a couple of minutes before class starts, and Regina chats with him and some of the others. There is an intimacy born out of something beyond a long-standing teacher-student relationship. These men are not necessarily here to learn, I imagine, but to process—as Regina's poem "Rx" says:

*Do you feel bad?
It's because you haven't had your creative daily requirement...
Are you sick?
Well you should be—
a lack of art causes constipation and mental illness.
Don't call no doctor.
buy a box of crayons.
Didn't you know that playing a musical instrument
raises your IQ by ten points
and a song sung through your tears
will do more to draw God nearer
than a hundred hail Marys.*

*Be mad and original and comic thoughtful and glorious in your play
for it will make you wise and mystical.
See if you can get your next orgasm by writing a poem.*

*You are made in the image of your Creator
So you have no choice but to be Creative.
Anything less is a sin.⁴²*

Regina is here as a conduit, a guide, once a week for an hour or so. Although these men are partly numbed with "meds," they can still benefit from the chance to exercise their creativity.

It becomes apparent that the five men assembled represent the totality of today's group, so Regina sets class in motion. We sit at a small table, facing them. The social

worker is in the other half of the room, half out of hearing and sight thanks to a wall and a divider. Regina greets the class, then, to my surprise, announces me. She leaves out my graduate student status, saying instead that I “teach at the university.” She asks me to explain why I’m here.

I’m a bit flustered. I have explained this project to friends, family, colleagues, strangers at parties, but am not sure how to put it to this audience. Considering the troubles they are faced with, the difficulty of day-to-day equilibrium often obtained through medication and contained within a succession of muffling, powerful doors, doesn’t my project and its little problem seem like some dalliance, a luxury for those lucky enough to live on the outside?

I mumble something not unlike my party spiel, then regret it as they stare at me—not with judgment but with a general lack of comprehension. Academics live in a rarefied atmosphere, I would think later, where we get to ponder such problems as the place of the artist in society.

I feel a bit of embarrassment, but Regina pushes on, and I am thankfully again just a spectator. She does what I have seen her do in another workshop about two months earlier—she introduces a short piece to the class and then asks for reactions to it. Today’s prompt is a brief essay on how one’s instincts can often be right even when some external evidence goes against this instinct. Regina gives an example and asks for class members to give theirs.

Benjamin, the polished intellectual in the back, raises his hand and begins to read, elegantly, a lengthy allegory about a mule who was digging in a hole, but found strength to keep going. While it is not quite on topic, it is quite impressive, biblical in scope, tone,

and style. On the heels of that one, he launches into another. After he is done, we learn that he has written these himself. We are impressed.

Regina, as discussion wanes (two of the men are having difficulty staying focused because of their medication, a third is almost asleep), assigns a few minutes of writing while the full group is still alert. After several minutes, Preacher announces he has written a poem about me. I am surprised, maybe a bit pleased, and a tiny bit worried. “Hummel is a teacher/he’s fine with his art/but he’s still learning his lessons/he’s just starting to start.” Somehow Preacher has divined my still in-training status. The last line is “But we love him just the same.” I feel honored, in a way, to have been so included in the group by Preacher.

Strangely, I also feel a desire to reciprocate. Preacher has an ability to rhyme extemporaneously, and demonstrates this with at least four poems of at least eight lines within the hour (one of which celebrates the fact that this day is Regina’s birthday, and suggests some level of attraction toward her on his part). Some sort of good-natured competition is stirred up by Preacher’s tribute. My child-like inner rhymer wants to respond. I work surreptitiously on my poem while the others read theirs to Regina.

At last, I present my poem to Preacher, using his nickname and his real name. This is no great work, but is my way of saying thanks for his attention:

Jonathan Kay

*There’s a preacher among us named Jonathan Kay
He’s always so clever—just hear what he says!
He’s quick with his rhymes,
Fast like a bird
Just give him some time,
And he’ll be smart with his words.*

*Jonathan Kay—he's our resident poet
A freestylin' man who generously shows it.
Whenever he speaks, attention is paid
To that quick-witted wordsmith Jonathan Kay.*

Regina and the social worker both say “That one will have to go in the book.” There’s a binder where the best work of the class is preserved. A few weeks later I type it up and send a hard copy to Regina for the book, and one for Preacher (with the notation that he’s still the fastest poet in the east).

Back in class, Benjamin has to go to some special session, and the rest of the group fades fast on this humid, gray November afternoon. We end a little early. Benjamin shakes my hand, as does Jonathan, who launches into another poem, this one about my height (which he accurately gauges at six-feet two) and the pleasure of meeting me. I stifle my competitive side, for I can see Preacher needs the last word (Regina had made a point of letting him read last during the sharing). The patients go off to their treatments and occasional family visitations. Regina and I pass back through the series of metal doors and then back to the car and the city outside.

Amateurs vs. Professionals/Art vs. Commerce

To Regina art is for everyone, even forensic patients. She discounted traditional boundaries between artist and public and seemed impatient with those who insisted they held themselves to standards above and beyond commercialism. She scoffed at these individuals whom she termed “artists with a capital ‘A’” and dismissed the classic elitist-populist dichotomy. Of course, as a freelance writer earning her bread from the marketplace, she may not always have the luxury to indulge aspirations to fine art. To

her art and entertainment needn't be separate, and to think otherwise smacks of cultural elitism:

RJ: I think Shakespeare was a hack. He was just entertaining the people of his day, like a TV show writer. And there's nothing wrong with that. I consider myself an entertainer. I just want to entertain you. I'm not particularly trying to be an artist with a "capital A."

Wealthy people, what they enjoy that's considered real art, and what the common man enjoys that's considered entertainment. And I think entertainment is just as honorable and beautiful as art with a "capital A."

I wondered whether there were some disconnect between Regina's poems and writings declaring art a form of healing therapy and her refusal to elevate certain aesthetic approaches over others, but true to her word, Regina cited her own experiences with art and healing, including a viewing of a television special by "I Can't Get No Respect" comedian Rodney Dangerfield as a prime example of "art" that had moved and healed her:

RJ: I looked at the show for an hour and laughed myself crazy and my spirits were lifted, and I realized that was the right prescription, moreso than going to the church and praying about my problems. And most of my Christian friends would have said 'you missed the boat' but I didn't.

Finally, I asked her about her own art and its connection to entertainment.

MH: Are you serious about your art even though it's entertainment?

RJ: Yeah. I'm serious even though it's entertainment. I think art should be entertaining. I think entertainment is art. If you don't want to look at it or you don't want to read it or you don't want to go see it, then, if it's only value to the person who created it, which is valid, too, if someone other than you or your mother wants to enjoy it, then it needs to be entertaining, it needs to be accessible.

I spoke of my skepticism about poetry slams and the element of competition it introduces into what I consider a refined art. While she agreed with me that some poetry

is meant to be read on the page, she felt slams were a good thing. Her creative writing classes for middle schoolers ended with participation at a slam.

MH: What do you think of poetry or art as a competition?

RJ: [Laughs] I like it. Because it makes poetry more accessible and less academic and staid. It's fun. You don't have to be an English teacher to be one of the judges. You know "do you like it or do you not" which is ultimately the test of any art.

She noted that her students were "pumped up" for the slam, and cried when they lost.

RJ: I choose six students who will be in the slam event, and then we have competitions throughout the school year, and then a big championship in May. It's citywide, within D.C. The goal of the organizers of this project was to make the academics as exciting, a big deal at the school, as the football or basketball team. Last year, the slam team came within a couple of points of winning, and they were crying, and one boy who has these big aspirations of being an athlete was upset when he didn't get a high score. I thought wow, I can't believe they're that into it.

Identity: From Amateur to Professional

The switch from writing as a hobby to writing for a living involved more than just a lifestyle shift, more than just a financial shift. The new pressures on Regina to make every hour pay changed what she wrote about in some cases. Suddenly, she was focusing on the financial potential of each writing project or speaking engagement (as noted, she almost always arranged for her books to be on sale at her lectures and seminars). She found herself less easygoing when involved when booking speaking engagements or in chatting up audience members afterwards, and more concerned about the bigger picture. "I find myself thinking, 'Are you going to buy the book or not?'" Whereas, as an amateur with a full-time job, she had been more relaxed about fees, she now set conditions on each job—the client would have to guarantee her sales of at least twenty books (having bought them at cost, she would make \$6 per book, or \$120). When a client could not

guarantee that outcome, she turned down the job. Saying no was getting easier, but was still unpleasant.

Another adjustment was her sense of her own worth—she found that the same clients who didn't blink at paying her \$1000 for day of seminars, were also willing to pay \$1500. She had to set limits on low-end customers and ask more of those on the high end—and in each case she had to adjust her own self-image. In one case she had to let go of her desire to appease; in the other, she had to value herself enough to ask for a fee that she might have once found daunting.

As a writer, it was rare that Regina's muse and booming sales would come together. Enjoyment of the work and the actual commercial result were not automatically compatible. As proud as she was of being published, the only time she expressed a combination of commercial and personal satisfaction was when her children's story *Tambourine Moon* came out. As noted earlier, much of the satisfaction she experienced from that book came from the sheer pleasure she found in sharing the project with her father (whose invented bedtime stories inspired the book). There was a personal dimension to the project that was unusually rich.

Some of the work Regina most enjoyed writing, namely her plays, was the least remunerative. Despite claims that she usually considered the financial return of each project first, it was clear that the plays were dear to her heart. "I think I like writing plays the best. I love turning it over to the actors and director and seeing how they can bring out the meaning in it."

Artistic Identity: Intersections with Race-Ethnicity and Gender

Regina's gender and ethnicity influenced some of her subject matter and some of her thinking about her success as well, but she was reluctant to talk at length about either issue. Despite having written *Between Black Women: Listening With the Third Ear*, and "Marriage Is For White People," and having worked for nearly fifteen years as an expert on racial and sex equity at two different jobs, she was not comfortable discussing at length whether her own gender and ethnicity affected either her writing's focus or its subsequent success. She was reluctant to be pigeonholed, and her answers to questions about these aspects of her identity were always brief. I wondered whether my own gender, ethnicity, and the professional world I represented influenced the level of disclosure I received from her, or whether her reticence was a result of the story she wanted to tell about herself and for herself.

Interestingly, in discussing her finances in 1998 and 1999, she herself suggested that her gender was affecting how much she could get for speaking engagements. She began to explain that as an administrator in the D.C. School System, she herself had seen pay discrepancies between what was offered to men and what was offered to women (statistics show that women still earn only 70 cents to the dollar of what men make.⁴³ Perhaps out of loyalty to her former employer (and her many friends and colleagues still working there), she stopped that recollection short and then offered a different example about gender discrimination in pay.

But when asked, more than once, about how being an African-American woman influenced her writing, she at first demurred to answer. She finally did tell a story about her trip to Guinea and how it transformed her views about focusing on things African:

MH: What was it like as an African-American person to travel to Guinea?

RJ: After I'd been there awhile, I wondered if I'd bitten off more than I could chew. Because by American standards...you know, they didn't have latrines, you were just squatting over a hole in the ground. The no electricity part at night—you walk around with a flash light if you're an American, but if you're not, you just walk around. I realized I had never really been in total darkness. It was pretty scary.

MH: Did you feel like you had reconnected with anything?

RJ: Well, not in some cosmic sense. But there was a girl who washed our clothes with a washboard, so I had my picture taken with a washboard, and I thought, you know, "Regina, your parents escaped rural southern poverty, to come to the city, to go to college, to work hard, so you don't have to do what they were escaping from—washing clothes with a washboard, living without electricity and latrines, and here you are paying thousands of dollars for that same experience all over again" [UPROARIOUS LAUGH]. There's some sort of ludicrousness to it.

MH: Did it inspire you artistically when you got back? Did it show up in your poetry?

RJ: No—in some ways, how can I put this? I remember hearing about people they call "professional Irishmen." There are these Irish and Green fanatics and there's a similar thread among black people who are professional Africans, and it sort of reduced that tendency in me, because it's sort of, I'm not sure how to verbalize it...You know, although it helped me to see some of the connections between black Americans here and Africans in Africa, it also helped me to be more celebratory of just the distinctive things that are unique to black Americans here.

Regina seems to be suggesting that this visit to Africa cured her of overemphasizing Afro-Centrism as a cultural identity. Still, I wonder if there may have been a reluctance to share with me, a white academic, about her interest in this cultural tradition and its meanings to her. We pressed on in our interview, and she tried to express me the line she feels she is walking between writing about black experience and simply being a writer. She admittedly enjoyed exploring African history, dance, music, and oral traditions, and liked discovering that there were parallels to African-American oral traditions which she felt she and her group The Spoken Word had unconsciously

incorporated. But she was adamant that focusing too much on African identity and history was not where she believed she wanted to go intellectually or creatively:

MH: I felt like your poems were drawing upon a black oral tradition. And as an African-American, or a black writer, is there anything you're trying to express?

RJ: Yeah. That's very much a part of The Spoken Word as the name would suggest. I think my main message is just celebrating the ordinary. There have been members of The Spoken Word who were into a real heavy-duty African tradition, whereas my thing is more, "let's look at our lives." I love black history, I love reading about Africa, I eat that stuff up, but I think that hearing what the secretary did at her federal government job is just as important as hearing what some African king did a millennia ago. I think eating dinner off a formica kitchenette is just as profound as wearing gold and sitting on a throne. I want to demythologize the idea of...I'm at a loss for words.

MH: Are you trying to say all experience is valid? That you're elevating the mundane?

RJ: Okay. What's special about the ordinary.

MH: Is your subject matter influenced much by being black?

RJ: Yes, but I like to think of myself as...but I don't write much about the pathology or the dysfunction. Again, just celebrating the ordinary black life.

While it's admittedly risky to conflate opinions expressed in an author's works with those the author personally holds, it is legitimate to note that in *Between Black Women: Listening With the Third Ear*, Regina did indeed stake out a position vis-à-vis African-American media images that seems to back up her personal statements about "celebrating the ordinary black life" without focusing overly on "pathology or dysfunction:"

Thoughtful members of the African American community are concerned with promoting positive Black images—and rightly so. Some situation comedies, evening news broadcasts and a whole host of TV crime shows would give the impression that black folks are all fools or crooks. The predominance and popularity of these images subtly color our own views of ourselves, even though we know intellectually that it's a distorted picture. Story and image are powerful and they imprint without the permission or active participation of the intellect.

There are Black folks who pay bills on time, maintain their families and who are not on drugs. There are Black men who cherish their wives, and Black women who love their men. We don't hear about these quiet doers as often as we'd like or as often as we need to. We vitally need to tell and to hear those stories.

It's been hard to identify many stories that celebrate flourishing Black family life and couples who succeed. I find this frightening because in many respects it is hard to become something if you have never seen it...At this time...where so many marriages are in trouble or failing, it becomes even more imperative to have cultural mythology that provides examples of how to live...When we can't look to our immediate circle of peers and superiors for an example of what to do, we must rely more on the cultural mythology to provide role models, signposts and direction.⁴⁴

As a member of the greater African-American community and as a writer putting into circulation representations of aspects of that culture, she felt some responsibility to that community in terms of the quality of representation she created.

Although in her writings I could find many examples of the “ordinary black experience” she speaks about, and *Between Black Women* directly addressed certain issues in the African-American community, there was still a relative silence when I followed up with questions about how being African-American and being a woman had affected her experience as a writer. As I pondered this, I remembered another time when Regina had spoken of her experience of two cultural traditions in school:

MH: You told me about how you learned to speak black and white English in school—consciously—did you realize you were doing that?

RJ: Yeah. And that distinction is often made in school—you know, talk one way around your friends, talk another way on a job interview. That's not unconscious; they delineate that for you in school.

With her reference above to what is often called the concept of *code switching*,⁴⁵ Regina may have been letting me know that since I was a member of a dominant culture and a representative of that culture's academic world, one in which she is aware she will

be represented by me, she felt inhibited about discussing “blackness” at too much length with me, or at the very least, that she had to act out another identity in relationship to me. Or perhaps she was just indicating the simple, practical reality that “identities are pluralistic and overlapping. People typically assume multiple, overlapping identities in any situation...one might simultaneously be enacting gender, culture and occupational identities.”⁴⁶

While I was asking her to explain her life to me through **all** her cultural traditions, she seemed comfortable discussing her life experience as a writer through only a few (profession, self, nationality, family). E. Fine has noted how “many Afro-American artists... feel compelled to direct their work toward the specific interests and sensibilities of Black people...toward an enshrinement...of the Black cultural heritage” while other “black artists resented ...forced identification with Africa, claiming the American experience was stronger than the racial one.”⁴⁷

Playing the dutiful role of cultural studies analyst, I may have been privileging the cultural tradition of ethnicity over education and profession. Raised middle class by dual career parents, Regina had grown up around many of the same educational and professional traditions I had (both my parents were college-educated, although only my father had a professional career). In our discussion of writing as a profession, she may have been choosing to speak of it only as a profession. The frame, the label “writer” had been one that she had embraced as far back as fifth grade.

There has been a sort of cultural pressure from within and without on individual African-American artists, many of whom, like Regina are simply trying to get published, get their art hung in a gallery, get a gig. The notion that the individual minority artist

“represents” the community is problematic, in that it ignores diverse elements within that minority community which may lead individual artists to draw upon different artistic and cultural traditions and also in that it potentially limits the post-modern artist’s freedom to choose from the broad palette he or she has been exposed to. Many times Regina expressed the need to be free as an artist to express her own intellectual and personal multiplicity, even if much of her work seemed to draw on African-American experiences and stories. In our update interview, I asked her about her current thoughts on “subject matter:”

MH: A long time ago you said you didn’t want to focus so much on the pathology, but preferred to celebrate and elevate the ordinary and the everyday. How do you feel about that now?

RJ: I still like focusing attention on the ordinary, and the only thing I might modify is that there’s ordinary, fun, and celebratory and ordinary, dark, and edgy. So the ordinary in a broader continuum. I like saying things that other people have difficulty articulating or are afraid to say out loud.

In an e-mail follow-up to our final talk, I asked one last time what she thought of “labels.” She told me that she would answer to either “writer” or “black writer.”

RJ: Nearly every black writer is pigeonholed as a black writer. In fact, I tried to broaden the “Marriage is for White People” piece, but the Post wanted a black essay. Once again, it comes with the territory and I’m too old to fight it.

At 51, currently unable to support herself full-time as a writer, she has resigned herself to our sound-bite culture so obsessed with labels and marketing, and accepted that these limitations exist, even if she is still eager to work both around and without them.

Dealing with the Public—Personal Reality, Artistic Persona, and Public Imagination

Although Regina may feel a combination of acceptance and frustration at the way our hyper-marketed culture constrains her ability to write about what she chooses, over the years she had also struggled with another aspect of public projection. Her degree of celebrity based on her written work, coupled with her entrepreneurial persona had led members of her audience, and even some peers, to create unrealistic notions of her personality and financial situation.

One aspect of her identity outside of Regina's personal control is how others view her. As a public personality who speaks in front of large groups regularly, performs poetry, and has had numerous books and articles (some of the articles being rather high profile), Regina has found that she has to cope with the impressions certain individuals have of her. My first question about this was about the difference between Regina the performer, and Regina the person, but she didn't see that as much of a difference. Instead, she focused on her audience:

MH: What's it like performing and going back to being Regina Jamison ?

RJ: That kind of dichotomy hasn't happened yet. Where I'm more likely to find a dichotomy is...in Alabama there was a woman who was helping organize stuff, and she was making comments like "You all have such a healthy normal family." She has this idealized image of who we are. On a continuum from dysfunctional to perfect I do think we're somewhere in the middle. We're not crazy abusive, but we're far from perfect. But I can see the beginnings of the emergence of a public persona. When this woman is saying how perfect my family is, I want to say, "Get a grip."

And the other times that kind of dichotomy shows up is when people think I'm making a lot of money. And to a certain extent, I want to project prosperity. Yes, I'll go

out and by a new outfit for a presentation—I need to look professional and successful—it gives me more credibility and I think it makes it more likely I’ll get the next job. But I’m not there yet.

As noted before, some have assumed she’s successful enough that she could (and should) work for them for free (especially when they feel their cause is just).

MH: Is there a difference between you in front of people and the everyday you?

RJ: There’s a difference, but it’s not a chasm. In the same way I try to project prosperity, even though there’s a big gap between that reality and the public perception.

MH: The 12-Step slogan is “Fake it till you make it”⁴⁸

RJ: Yeah.

MH: Well, maybe not fake it.

RJ: Well, yes, fake it until you make it. [Laughs]

Regina lightly referred to being a celebrity more than once. However, she was well aware that her fame was not widespread outside the D.C. area. She once said jokingly said that if she were a celebrity, she was indeed at the bottom tier, but nonetheless, she had encountered male fans who became fixated on her. One man pursued a friendship with her, and was disappointed when he decided the Regina of print was not the Regina he went to lunch with:

MH: Is it weird for you when people think they know you through your writing? And they imagine they’re having some sort of relationship with you?

RJ: There are a few people who have met me in my writing and think they’ve met me, and I don’t like it. [LAUGHS] I don’t like to cultivate friendships that way. It’s my writing and I say what I mean and mean what I say, but they perceive me a lot differently than people who just meet me in an ordinary context.

MH: Is it an intensified piece of you?

RJ: Maybe an intensified piece of me. Plus, with any art, the person who is perceiving brings a lot of themselves to it. They are projecting a lot of things into whatever it is. So they're looking in the mirror and thinking it's you.

There was a man who read something I wrote and liked it. And then he met me. I was performing with my group The Spoken Word—then he met me, and we became friends, he had read something I'd written, and I did a workshop, and he was in the workshop, and he said after a period of time, "I used to want to meet Iyanla Vanzant"—she's a black writer from Silver Spring, she's on Oprah regularly, she's making tons of money—"but after meeting you, it cured me of that desire. What you wrote was inspired, insightful," whatever the word he used, "but you're crazy as a loon." [Laughs uproariously] He said, "Iyanla's probably the same way. I can see god in her writing, but probably to meet her would be a different experience."

Regina also noted that she liked being in front of a large crowd, but that knowing someone in the audience was actually disconcerting. Even though the public persona made her uncomfortable when individual audience members projected their own needs onto her, she actually preferred the subtle distance between the real Regina and the Regina up at the lectern.

RJ: The larger the audience, the better I do. And the fewer people I know in that audience, the better I can do, because I don't want them to get all of me, because then I'm really naked or fully exposed. And it's easier to detach and fully do the public persona if I don't know the people, if I can't see them as individuals. So when it's a faceless mass, then I can get more into whatever it is. If it was five of my closest friends, then I would do a horrible job.

Finally, after our last interview we had an e-mail exchange about how she maintains personal boundaries, while allowing for some self-disclosure:

MH: I know the “Marriage is for White People” article was triggered by what a young man said, but how much did your own life experience influence the article?

RJ: I suppose my relationship with Holcomb and its demise have colored a lot of things in my life including the article. Plus, I am sure there are other experiences that are influencing me that I’m not even aware of. I don’t worry too much about it. I just try to reflect my reality at the time that I happen to have the pen in hand. The main thing that motivated the article was the realization that although I had thought getting married was important (and it is)—not getting married has been a pretty good experience, too.

MH: Was the level of self-disclosure you used in the “Marriage” piece a calculated risk? What led you to incorporate it into this piece? And do you regret it (based on reactions you received)? Did some folks attack you, personally?

RJ: Once I realized that I am always self-disclosing whether I intend to or not — I stopped being overly worried about how that feels. I’m not trying to reveal **all** of my personal business — in fact, there were stories about myself that I believe would have been more powerful things to share, but I do need to keep some things private. Both praise and criticism received in a public forum can become a great nuisance, but that’s the price of admission for being in print.

After nearly twenty years in print, Regina has developed a sense of how far to extend herself personally and professionally, and when to protect the personal from the public.

Meaningful Work

As noted above, although Regina seems particularly proud to be able to call herself a writer, she often expresses her greatest satisfaction when describing her teaching experiences. From the Psych ward, to lecturing on African and African-American history at a middle school, to her poetry “slam” club, to a workshop at a high school, over and over she feels most moved by her work when it reaches someone else who has in some way been cut off from life or society but is suddenly restored by art. One story she told me on two occasions was about a visit to a middle school:

RJ: One black history month, I was still working for the school system—teachers could call me and I'd do a black history program. And it was the end of the month, and I'd done five zillion presentations, the same one, and I was tired, and I was going to go home right after I left the school. So I walked in the classroom and I'm sort of on automatic and...it was a presentation that included poetry, so I recited the poem and the kids said, "We have poems too, can we recite our poems?" They had them memorized, and it was cute—I got engaged. Then I mentioned a relatively well-known queen in Africa, and they said, "Oh, oh, we know her; she's on the wall." And like in a herd, they all jumped up and ran over to the wall to point to the picture of this queen. They drew me into the activity.

At any rate, when I had walked in there was one kid whose desk was right next to the teacher; and I thought he's a troublemaker, I'll keep my eye on him the whole period while I'm talking. So he didn't say anything. Then at the end of the class, we had a great time, it was a great lesson. I said, "Were there any questions?" And that little boy, he raised his hand, and said, "That was the best class I ever went to." And all the children said, "What?!?" And they turned in their seats and stared like this boy was always causing trouble. For him to actually pay attention to the lesson was like a miracle. And so it made me feel good that lesson did something for him.

Another story she related to me had to do with a linguistically isolated boy coming out of his shell during an in-class exercise she had devised:

RJ: The other situation, I was doing the Hispanic Heritage Month...the lesson I had is what I call dialogue poems. I ask them to prepare two things, two points of view that are different, and we alternate. Like you'd have a black man talking, then a Hispanic woman, or a good student versus a gang member who's dropping out. Anyway, this school was very racially mixed, Asians, whites, blacks, and Latinos. And this little boy from Central America who had just got off the boat yesterday, he didn't know any English and he had one teacher to sit with him the whole school day to translate...he didn't know *anything*...He was able to pair up with another child and they wrote their poem together, and the girl he was working with...wrote one thing in English, and he wrote the Spanish version, and then they did their poem for the class, and the thing that was gratifying for me was this was the first lesson he had that wasn't different from what everyone else was doing. It was a lesson where he was doing what everyone else was doing and he was able to participate and it wasn't just make-work or catch-up work, and the expression on his face was "At last I get to belong, I get to do what everyone else is doing, I get to use my Spanish and it's not a handicap." That was my second most satisfying moment.

Her enjoyment of working with the forensic patients at the Psych Ward is more layered than her straightforward pleasure at mentoring schoolchildren. Regina expresses enjoyment at being able to touch on any topic with these patients, at being free of the self-censorship she experiences in a school classroom. She also admits to gaining insight from her work with them:

MH: Is going to the Psych Ward very rewarding for you?

RJ: [Decisive] Yes!

MH: How so?

RJ: [Laughs] I don't know how to start...they're really hungry for that kind of stimulation, being incarcerated, a lot of time their main stimulation or their main art is looking at television, and television is cool, but hours of it every day, if you weren't mentally ill when you started...a lot of times they're glad to have something to do besides TV. And having worked with them over a period of years—when we first started, we would present poetry by other writers and make comments, but as time passed, we didn't have to do that anymore and they started writing their own stuff, and they made that transition from being a consumer to being an artist in their own right, and producing your own work, that's good to see. And, you know, I do a lot of work with children; with children you have to watch what you say, and they might not get every nuance, but that's not a problem with adults, so we're more like peers. And sometimes you have a thought that someone who killed ten people had, and, hey, that's another way to look at myself, I'm having the same kind of thoughts, and makes me look in the mirror and self-correct.

The first time I went there was a man named Melvin who wrote, "I thank Jesus Christ my lord and savior for my paranoid-schizophrenic behavior." And he went on to say in the poem he hopes to get out of St. E's one day, but if God felt like it was okay for him to be there then it was okay for him to be there. He had a level of acceptance I would not be able to entertain; I'd be pissed, I'd be mad at God, even if I deserved to be there. And he died there. He never did get out again. Just for him to be accepting and trusting...wow.

Regina works with these criminally insane men for pay as well as for the reward of bringing much-needed diversion to men who rarely ever move beyond their high security complex, for the intellectual stimulation their own writing gives to her, and for the power of their own spiritual realizations. Regina even admits that if she has “something going on,” she might throw it out there for comment—“many of them are 12-Step people, and they can have valuable insight.”

Regina would frequently pepper her responses with references to success (half-ironically declaring herself a “celebrity” at her last steady job) and power (her long term goal of being able to choose which work she accepts), and was clearly satisfied to have had two books published (a third was to come out three years after our first interview), as well as a number of pieces in local papers and magazines, including the Washington Post, but I noted a change in the tone of her voice whenever she would discuss work-related situations where some sort of special connection had occurred.

It was particularly interesting that the written work she admitted to getting the most satisfaction out of was her children’s book, *Tambourine Moon*. And it seemed that the biggest kick from this book came from the fact that she was able to involve her father in the promotional appearances for the project, since it was loosely based on a story he had told her as a child. She had been critical of herself for not always properly promoting her books and thus not selling well at one library appearance I had attended, but when the publisher failed to deliver books for her to sell at two separate appearances, she seemed unconcerned, because she was having so much fun appearing with her father.

Regina’s greatest satisfactions in her freelance life seemed to come from being connected to others through her work, not just the work itself. Her work life ran on two

tracks—trying to establish credibility as a writer but also establishing important spiritual and emotional connections in her teaching and speaking. *Tambourine Moon* was one project that seemed to integrate both sides of her working life.

The Meaning of Art

Regina's theories on art and commerce have been discussed earlier, but it's also worth discussing her opinions of the healing role of all art. Her poem "Rx" quoted in the psych ward vignette lays out her theory that art heals:

*a lack of art causes constipation and mental illness...
You are made in the image of your Creator
So you have no choice but to be Creative.
Anything less is a sin.⁴⁹*

In her recently produced play, the monologue "Help Me Father" again considers the meaning of art to the individual practitioner (in the scene below, a minister makes an unexpected artistic connection with a Latino man whose car he is jumpstarting):

Minister

I was the new kid in school, just arrived in New York from the South. The other kids laughed at my Alabama accent and I could tell that the teachers thought that coming from the country was the equivalent of being dumb. Like a lot of teen age boys, I liked comic books and I liked drawing cartoons. I was good at caricatures and I could draw fast. Soon, I was doing miniature portraits for all my friends, then friends of my friends. Teachers paid me to sketch portraits. I was happy to do the work and even happier to get paid, but I was proudest of my collage.

My collage was a picture of the four seasons, a panel for each one. It was so good that Mr. Johnson, the principal, had it framed and hung it at the entrance to the school. My collage showed them that even a country boy had talent. My collage was Art with a capital A. The principal had said, "Art like that is the alphabet to the soul and the keys to the universe"...He sounded like my picture was a prayer or something you should study in divinity school. But years later, after having worked a million soul-killing jobs, I found myself thinking about what he had said about my work. I knew trying to become an artist was impractical for a black

man. But it made me wonder if perhaps I should do something in the church. That's how I became a minister.

“Yo es el pintura anos hace,” I tried to say in my grammar school Spanish. “I used to be an artist.”

Latino Man

Ah—show me your pictures.

Minister

I had no paintings to show. It had been years and years since I had painted anything. Although from time to time I still found an excuse to doodle. Sometimes sitting in the pulpit, I'd sketch one of the members. I had done renderings of my children when they were still young. Instead of photographs, I kept those small sketches in my wallet.

I took them out of my wallet and showed them to the man. I felt shy, like I was back in ninth grade, scared of what the teachers would think, what the kids would say. Afraid I'd be teased for being the odd man out, the bumpkin with the funny accent, the boy who wasn't expected to be able to do the work. But this Hispanic guy, he looked at my pictures with reverence. [pointing to pictures] My son, my daughter, my wife.

Latino Man

Es excelente. You are an artist.

Minister

No, not any more.

Latino Man

To do one's art—es muy importante. Doing art is God's work.

Minister (snorts)

Doing God's work is what has worn me out. The definition of a good pastor is one who can survive his congregation. The congregation is always around when they need you. But there never seems to be anybody or anything around to supply my need. When I snorted, the guy gave me this strange look.

Latino Man

You must do it. Su arte es del alfabeto de su alma y las llaves del universo.

Minister

I wasn't sure what he just said, but I caught the word 'arte' which means art and 'alma' which means soul. I suppose if I was just off the boat in a foreign country as he was, I'd need to make art every now and then to take my mind off

the drudgery of the day to day. I remember when I first moved up north, the only place I felt safe was on the blank page, the clean canvas. Painting really did strengthen my soul and sweetened my life in a way that I haven't experienced since. Could I really go back to doing my art?

Excerpted From *Searching For a Signal*⁵⁰

What started out as a minister misinterpreting another man's request for a jumpstart as a request for charity turns into a healing experience for both, particularly the busy, stressed-out clergyman. After he gets the man's car started, he wants to talk more about art, but the man has to go. The minister looks to the sky as if to say the same words the Latino man first said to him: "Help Me Father." Instead both men spontaneously shake hands and say, "Thank you, brother." The scene closes with "a tight spotlight on their hands."

To Regina, being physical is one way to get closer to God; making art another. Intellectual explanations are not as effective. "Help Me, Father" seemed to convey many of the themes Regina had expressed about the meanings and uses of art, but without the qualifiers or personal disclaimers. She intentionally has the clergyman and the Latino man say the same thing about art in their respective languages. "Art like that is the alphabet to the soul and the keys to the universe," says the minister. "Su arte es del alfabeto de su alma y las llaves del universo," echoes the man with the dead battery. As a playwright, Regina is making the claim that art is a universal language which can transcend barriers of race and ethnicity, dialect or language, regional origin, social class, or gender.

And on a personal level, the artist benefits in various ways—by being distracted from the drudgery of his life, by "strengthening his soul" and "sweetening his life," by

connecting him to other people, by showing him a glimpse of the spiritual, yet nurturing him in ways that traditional religion cannot. Where religion might be a divider as groups adhere to different dogmas, art crosses boundaries. Whereas Regina may view religion as “existential bullshit,” her play suggests art is truly spiritual and can provide healing. These are some of the things that Regina’s interviews touched upon, but always with a sense that such discussions were pretentious. Only in her actual writing do we get such unfettered, unapologetic declarations of the power and meaning of art.

Throughout our conversations, Regina and I would begin discussing the power and meaning of art, but more often than not, Regina would wind up an especially metaphysical reflection with a laugh, a joke, or a verbal or physical shrug. “I’m having a hard time making this clear,” “Maybe this isn’t making sense,” “I don’t know what to say,” “I’m B.S.-ing them” and “I’m a con artist” were among the self-deprecating statements she made at different times when discussing her art. She also expressed misgivings about the power of her own ego at times, and a sort of relief that she had aligned herself with what the Twelve-step programs sometimes call God, “HP” or “higher power.”⁵¹ As an interviewer, I felt it frustrating at times that she was either unable or reluctant to explain the meaning of art to her, even as she referred to writing as a time when “God was speaking through me.” However, as a musician and composer, I was well aware that I had often written songs that conveyed things I was unable to otherwise articulate, and that there was a feeling of “oneness” or at least elevated consciousness when I had written those songs; attempts at explaining such a “higher plane” of thought were often less than satisfying.

Regina had expressed doubts about such flights of intellect—art could soar, but intellect might just as likely keep us out of touch with the spiritual. I asked her which of all her “gigs” she enjoyed the most. I knew she had enjoyed publicizing her children’s book, that she found writing plays particularly satisfying aesthetically, but I was surprised when she said she especially relished teaching “hand-dancing.” I asked why.

RJ: I was in a 12-Step meeting and they were reading some literature, and there was something about what are the most inviting conditions for God to act in your life and that phrase caught me, and so when I went home I wrote down, “What are the settings or situations where I feel God most keenly?” So I wrote down the list and then looked at it, and most of the things on the list were physical activities, and I think for me there’s so much in my head, I like to intellectualize and analyze that God probably said, “She thinks she’s smart and she really isn’t.” How do you find another entrée to reach her? So when I’m physically engaged, by brain’s not taking the lead.

Ironically, Regina prefers writing plays over any other genre. She has received little to no income from her plays; the flip side of this negative financial equation was that here she had the most creative latitude. When marketability was not a concern, and the pieces were being selected based solely on artistic merit, she could range far and wide in terms of subject matter. Her plays dealt with the anger of a physically challenged man who raged against a religious woman’s attempt to make him accept his disability as “God’s will,” a young Christian girl’s heavy-handed curiosity about Islam, the ambivalence of a young black father, and issues of emotional and sexual betrayal and abandonment. She could delve into what she calls “the edgy everyday” experience.

Update/Reflections: From Nine-to-Five to Freelance and Back Again

Nearly eight years after my first meeting with Regina Jamison, I received a bright red flyer in the mail. Regina’s play *Searching For A Signal* was being performed by a

local community college. It was a cool windy Saturday in late spring, as I drove to the functional but attractive campus built in the 1970s. The huge parking lots were empty; almost no students lingered at this dormless commuter campus. Admission was free.

I wandered through the complex of buildings till I found my way to the campus performing arts center and down some long hallways to a small “black box” theater (so-named because the larger theater it lies within is not used; instead about 80 chairs are on stage with the actors), where smiling student volunteers welcomed me and a handful of other attendees into the frigid auditorium.

The audience was mostly students, probably friends and family of the large cast, and few of them conversed with each other. A few adults, some with young children, slipped in just before the show’s start. Among these last minute arrivals was Regina herself. Although we had exchanged e-mails and cards over the years, I had not seen her since our last interview in 1998. Her hair was shorter, more of a business cut. She sat upright in a calf-length black skirt, with a black shawl pulled round her shoulders. She looked very much the *grand dame* of the community college theater.

The student production was soon smoothly launched, a fingerpopping chorus of four young women asking the audience a series of existential questions. They would reappear, ushering in each of the twelve short scenes and monologues to be performed over the next ninety minutes. The subject matter was introspective and challenging. A young man thinks his ex-wife’s child is his, and makes himself a presence in the young boy’s life. A later DNA test reveals he’s not the father, and the young man struggles to maintain the bond to a child with whom he no longer shares blood ties. A man in a wheelchair rages against God and anyone else in his way. A minister helps an immigrant

jumpstart his car, and gets a lesson about the importance of artistic expression. Christian and Muslim women find common ground. Relationships are questioned or given new perspective—between man and woman, man and God, parent and child, artist and art.

From the back of the small dark stage, Regina’s throaty laugh led the others in the audience, most of them no doubt unaware that the author was in their midst. I spoke briefly afterwards with her, renewing old acquaintance (despite our long layoff from in-person contact, we each recognized the other), as a few of her former associates from the D.C. School District and elsewhere congratulated her (one former District teacher even gave her a small potted plant as a gift) on her success. I looked at the polished professional woman sitting with comfortable assuredness in the last row and wondered how she was doing now. Surely, this play was a sign of her growing success?

Regina was gracious enough to meet with me one more time to give me an update and allow me to follow up on some of the themes we had explored together. She said, “You make me feel like a celebrity” when I thanked her once again. Then she caught me up on her life as a freelance writer in 2006.

MH: I understand you’re now working full-time at a “regular” job.

RJ: I now do public relations for a psychiatric institute full time and write part time.

MH: And how that did come about?

RJ: Well, I freelanced for six years, and after 9/11 there was a period where I wasn’t getting much work and that made me a little nervous, and that made me decide that I would get a regular job, so I did. And that was in 2002. September 2002 I started working again. It’ll be four years next month.

MH: Does your new job feel creative to you?

RJ: No. It’s not real creative. There are spots where I get to be creative, but I kind of like that it’s not demanding in that way, doesn’t compete with what I consider my real creative work. It’s creative enough to be interesting, so I’m not bored. I don’t want it to be too demanding.

MH: Are you the kind of person who regularly sits down and starts writing? Or do you just write when you're inspired?

RJ: Well, actually, this year, I haven't done that much writing, and I have told myself that I didn't want to do much writing, I wanted to sell what I already have. [LAUGHS]. So I've been more focused on marketing and promoting than creating new work. But I still see myself as a writer. And I still do speaking engagements. I have a fairly flexible schedule at work. I have a supervisor who thinks I'm a celebrity so she gives me a little bit of leeway, and when I have something else, I just take off.

Identity: From Professional to Amateur

In 2006 Regina authored a controversial article about attitudes toward marriage among African-Americans. Originally Regina had wanted to cast her net wider and discuss the state of American marriage in general, but the Post editor had pushed her to focus the article on African-Americans. When the article caused local and national comment, led to an on-line chat with Washington Post readers (over 1000 e-mails were generated) and numerous radio appearances, a career possibility presented itself. Regina was presented with the opportunity to be the “blacks hate marriage writer.” A book deal seemed likely, but for all the times Regina had told me she needed to come up with some identifying soundbite or marketing umbrella for herself, she was not eager to cash in on this opportunity. This unwillingness to cash in on such a potentially lucrative opportunity shows her in negotiation among conflicting cultural traditions.

Earlier she had cited her belief that her writing should “celebrate ordinary black life,” and not focus on the pathology. While she later qualified this to say she was interested in looking a bit more at the edges of the African-American experience, it seems unlikely she would want to be labeled the “blacks hate marriage writer.” Her own traditions about representation conflicted with a current tradition of publishing that

thrives on controversy, conflict, and simplistic labels. Some might define the marketplace as the site of professionalism and define her as an amateur for turning down a chance to expand her article into a book. Always eager for publicity but seemingly paradoxically wary about the possibility of fame, she refused to follow up the article with a book on the same topic. Instead she negotiated with an agent to pitch a book on the state of American marriage in general, not that of African-Americans specifically.

As a writer, she remains “unlabeled.” Her writing career would seem to some unfocused: a book on black women empowering themselves, a children’s story, a book of affirmations for teachers, and now a proposal for a book on the state of marriage in America in the twenty-first century. But to Regina, this variety is a reflection of a negotiation among intellectual, ethnic, and professional traditions.

In 1998, when we first spoke, Regina ticked off her “ten year plan” quickly and easily. Among the goals she hoped to realize was the ability to pick and choose her projects. Eight years later, she was still writing, and had just had a play produced and a leading op-ed piece in the Washington Post. But she was back at a nine-to-five desk job, and her expectations for her creative career had been tempered. She was doing writing that was not as close to her heart, but she thought might lead somewhere:

MH: Let’s say you write this book about marriage, would that be satisfying to you?

RJ: No—that would be more of a project. Here’s an opportunity, and if I can make a name for myself, maybe that will allow me to do more stuff that I really would like. And you know, the more I read about other successful writers, you know, very few people get to sit home and write and nothing else.

MH: You thought, “Oh, I’ll be a full-time artist” and it didn’t happen. Is that okay with you, that it didn’t happen that way? Do you still feel like “I’m an artist at heart?”

RJ: Oh yeah. I still feel like an artist, you know; I live comfortably. I'm published, I'm produced, so, you know, when I was a child thinking, I'm going to be a writer when I grow up, I had a much grander image in my head, but you know some people don't get to, don't even know what they want to do.

Regina uses a number of strategies here to make her inability to obtain her earlier goals acceptable. She accurately notes how few writers do "make it," and further notes that her present life is not all that bad. She notes the ways in which she *has* obtained some of her goals, and thus reframes her experience. No longer does she need to be published and well-paid, just being published is enough. No longer do her plays have to be moneymakers, just being produced is enough. These are practical intellectual "survival" strategies, which recast her life story in a positive light and keep her feeling positive about both her working and artistic life.

She also uses two sources of comparison to validate her own experience. On the one hand, she notes that many people aren't as fortunate as she. And, on the other hand, most writers have also done work not fully satisfying intellectually or artistically. The life stories of the other artists and writings about a writer's life (including Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*) serve as a "fantasy relation" which affects her life through "imitation and role modeling."⁵² She has read many books on writing and on writers, and uses these sources to put her own experience into perspective. Such "informal training" is characteristic for amateurs wishing to turn professional in the writing field.⁵³ While she is not like some people who never found their "calling," she is like others who did so but were unable to achieve a fully satisfying career in terms of creative independence, workload, and financial remuneration. Eight years ago she had said she hoped she would no longer be living in her condo in ten years; she now proudly

states that she has paid off the attractive but modest one bedroom apartment; there are no current aspirations to move into something fancier.

Regina has revised her goals (at least her public statement of them) in order to reevaluate her life achievement. Now instead of having failed, she finds a new reference point (those who have not had any success) which reestablishes her as a successful writer. She also has altered her vision of the reality of high achievers in her field. Even successful writers have experienced similar setbacks and had to settle for the work at hand. All of this is logical, and helps her create a useable past that will inform her present and future. In order for her to maintain a satisfying life story, she revises her interpretation of her original vision.

As we wound down our interview, eight years later, Regina stood somewhere shy of her goals, but felt clear that she had reasons to feel successful and even grateful. Still, she was honest enough to admit her frustrations. When I asked if any of the monologues in her newly produced play might be autobiographical, she said, “Maybe the one about the man in the wheelchair, because he was sort of angry at God, because I suppose I have a lot of unanswered questions.” Although Regina still maintains her participation in Twelve-step meetings and makes allusions to New Age thought about the “unconscious guidance” of her “higher power” which led her to be a writer (and as noted before, she is able to construct a coherent story of herself as a writer, dating back to an early age) she is not fully satisfied with the results she has achieved, and seems frustrated with God. “I asked for A, B, and C, and I only got A.” We joke that when she “called God,” he put her on hold. I joke that when I called, I got a busy signal. “He was talking to you,” I say. When my tape player runs out on this in the middle of this exchange, in our last interview,

she jokes, “And I see that God just cut you off!” So ends our final session; below, let us reprise Regina’s thoughts on her experience as an artist, now fully into mid-life:

RJ: I’m published, I’m produced, so, you know, when I was a child thinking, I’m going to be a writer when I grow up, I had a much grander image in my head, but you know some people don’t get to, don’t even know what they want to do.

Self-Reflexive Notes on Working with Regina

During my first round of interviews with Regina in 1998, for a thirty page “dual life history” paper in Dr. John Caughey’s Life History course at the University of Maryland, I had wondered why Regina didn’t answer certain questions directly. Included among the questions that had interested me the most were those relating to what made her able to put herself “out there” and also what her writing meant to her as a woman, as an African-American, as an artist.

When I would attempt to touch on these issues, Regina’s fairly free flow of anecdotes and personal reflection would often slow. She sometimes resorted to brief answers that led no further:

MH: But is there anything you’re trying to do artistically as a woman?

RJ: Nah.

I asked her frequently about how she saw her identity as an African-American author and speaker. Her book *Between Black Women: Listening With the Third Ear* purported to be a conversation among black women. And her recently performed play *Searching for a Signal* dealt with subject matters pertaining to many issues facing African-American men and women in terms of identity (the Muslim religion in America, African roots, successful black men, paternity and responsibility for younger black

men) as well as more generic topics (anger with God, connection to self-expression, self-esteem). Finally, in her decade-long association with the poetry and performance troupe The Spoken Word, Regina made frequent use of African-American discourse, oral traditions, and subject matter. Yet as I raised the issue of how salient her ethnicity was to her writing, or how it had influenced her experience as an artist in the D.C. area, she seemed to hold back, even as there were indicators of another side to her experience.

I found myself wading into uncomfortable territory. As a student of cultural studies, I felt I had been sensitized to how external forces impose identity and meaning in our society, simultaneously with my awareness of how internal needs frame the experience of identity and free will allows for choices that modify the power of the external. By birth I was from the dominant culture—I was a middle-aged white male talking to a middle-aged African-American woman two years my senior. I had the “official” status of an academic doing advanced research. I had notions that I brought with me—namely that our identity is a mixture of choice and imposition, and that, in particular, being an ethnic minority meant a struggle to bring choice into equilibrium with imposed identity.

I felt awkward when I asked the questions; and my subject was not particularly eager to answer questions about how her ethnicity and gender might affect her experience as a creative artist in America. Was it the way I asked the questions? Was it simply because of my institutional affiliation (the academy) and my own inherited cultural traditions (white, male, East Coast “WASP”) that my subject was reticent? Would she have unburdened herself to another woman? To another person of color? She had referenced the notion of code-switching⁵⁴: “You’re taught in school that there’s one way

to talk to your friends and another way to talk in the world.” Was she feeling a pressure to represent herself professionally—did she see me as a representative of a world which on more than one occasion had employed her as a lecturer?

Or was she merely reticent for personal reasons? Again and again she noted her discomfort with self-disclosure, with others knowing her through her writing. She burst out in embarrassment when I asked whether I should interpret a line in a poem about “giving birth” literally—“No, no, I didn’t actually give birth—that was just for the poem!” she laughed sheepishly. She told me several stories about how she had slowly become more comfortable with self-disclosure, but my impression was that it was still not a “natural” experience for her, albeit one which she had come to accept, not to embrace. She had, perhaps, developed tools for coping with the ways in which others read her into her work, but she had no desire to participate in her own deconstruction.

In *Venus On Wheels*, Frank says that among other things, we must learn to “listen to silence.”⁵⁵ As Regina continued to lightly parry certain questions, I realized it must be my task to “listen” to those partial and non-answers. And it would also be my job to respect her own agency in determining the meanings she derived from her experiences.

Clearly Regina possessed a personality that was outgoing and enjoyed self-promotion. Clearly, also, she was aware of that and worked to modify the potential excesses of her entrepreneurial side. She made sure her work would benefit all. Many times I got the feeling Regina saw herself acting alone, the classic entrepreneur who wants to make sure she gets credit when it’s due.²²¹ But that was not to say she wasn’t part of a larger community—she had strong family support and reciprocated that through part-time care of her nephew and regular visits with her parents. At every event I went to,

friends, former co-workers, most of them African-American, would show up to support her, give her gifts, or buy her books. She also seemed to stay in touch with many of the young men and women whom she had taught. She was clearly part of a larger community even as she sought individual recognition.

Caughey's cultural traditions model helps us work with this seeming duality.⁵⁷ Instead of seeing Regina as having conflicting personality traits, we can see her as taking from and "performing" multiple traditions. It seems sensible that a person could enjoy both individuality and community simultaneously. This seems particularly American, in many ways. Additionally, Regina's reticence to label herself as a "black writer" may be a result of her seeing Afro-centrism as just one more tradition from which she can draw. Now this may conflict with the very definition of "centrism"...but it does seem in keeping with a culture of hybridity like that of the United States.

Humans have agency in the actions they take within cultural contexts and subjectivity in determining how they experience the meaning of their lives. For her own reasons, in our conversations, Regina chose not to focus on the "details" of her life that related to her race and gender. Having spent the first fifteen or so years of her career working on advancing opportunities for women and minorities, she was keenly aware that barriers to success did and still do exist for women and minorities. Nevertheless, nearly every question I asked about how her race and gender affected her identity as a writer was dispatched with one-sentence (and even one word) answers.

She responded positively to discussion about her education, her professional experience, and especially the "career frame" of "writer." I began to feel that my own preoccupation with the psychological and twelve-step models of looking at individual

pieces of self in order to discuss “who we are” wasn’t working with her in part because of the public context of the dissertation. I was an academic engaged in research at a major university. She herself was a speaker in demand by colleges and universities, and seemed determined to focus on the frame of self as “writer” and “speaker.” So her focus was on the externals that would be recognized by the public, while my interest seemed to always turn back to “Well, how do you **feel** about that? What’s it like to be African-American and have that experience? What’s it like to be a woman and have that experience? What sort of barriers have you met up with?”

Interestingly, the one time those barriers arose concretely in conversation, Regina herself brought them up as she discussed her frustration at her financial growth as a self-employed person. In a wide-ranging conversation about the ups and downs of self-employment (busy periods, dry months), Regina took the drift of our talk into some specifics about how much a professional speaker like herself can ask for, and how she was learning to ask for more. Suddenly, she was stating that she knew she got less because she was a woman. As much as I had been pursuing aspects of this subject, this caught me by surprise, and I asked her for an example. She began to cite such an example from her own experience on the other side of the freelance equation, working for the D.C. School District. Clearly, she had seen contracted speakers come and go and had noted discrepancies in pay between men and women.

But just as suddenly as she had wandered into this subject, she pulled the plug on it, and replaced it with an example disconnected to the professional worlds she had worked in for twenty years, and unrelated to her previous employer, to whom she was still loyal (indeed, she still had many key contacts and good friends in the school system;

future jobs would no doubt come from these relationships). Suddenly we were talking about her shoveling snow as a teenager and getting paid less than a man who was doing the same job. Strangely, this example was even modified by her admission that the man looked bigger and stronger than she. So, even though she objected to his getting paid more for the same work, she implied she understood why, at least *on the surface*, potential employers gave her less. The point—that there were assumptions on the part of employers based on gender—was still made, but it was undermined by her implied acceptance of the perception of those hiring. Meanwhile, something entirely germane to her current profession was put aside—and it was clear she did not wish to pursue it.

Another aspect of these seeming disconnects and contradictions about gender and race was that many of Regina's themes when she wrote revolved around issues and dialogue within the black community. Clearly these were of great interest to her personally and intellectually.⁵⁸ So her writing's *content* was often influenced by her identity, but to her *the frame* of being a writer was separate from that content. And that **frame** was her **public identity**. My delving into the specific content and trying to “pin” it on her as a form of identity became an exercise in labeling, not life history. Again and again, I was brought in contact with the rough edges of the overlap between personal content, public framing, and overall identity, and the careful and sometimes awkward negotiations among those three realities.

Far from disclaiming her blackness or suggesting that writing about African-American issues was less intellectually challenging than writing about other subjects, Regina was trying to create a space where her blackness could be one of several key cultural traditions from which she fashioned her identity. My rather naïve and

unconscious assumption that she would eagerly embrace her blackness as the major cultural tradition influencing her identity and then fit her other traditions into that context failed to grasp the tension created between her need for and pride of professional identity. I cannot be sure whether she adopted a different public frame in other contexts, but I do know that in her daily life she moved eagerly and positively through different social worlds, sometimes using the “black writer” identity when she toured African-American bookstores, sometimes using the one-word “writer” identity when offering workshops on creativity and writing to a largely white audience, other times having her “black woman writer” identity underscored by her publisher when discussing marriage in the black community in the op-ed that had local and even national buzz.

On the other hand, her reaction to my **socially subjective** frame may have been one of weariness at the simple readings some take of her writing and the narrow editorial window her writings had sometime been forced through. Her play *Searching For A Signal* had monologues featuring blacks, whites, and Latinos. Were they all “autobiographical”? It turns out that two of the monologues were based wholly on someone else’s experience. A third monologue, that of a wheelchair-bound African-American man raging at God for his handicap was the only one Regina could clearly term “autobiographical.” My simple readings were way off—here was a story of a man frustrated at God for the limitations in his life. Regina, an artist hoping for financial reward, and widespread recognition was expressing her own frustrations at the middling level she had achieved.

Regina had ruefully told me the story of how her “marriage is for white people” article had originally been a much more wide-ranging examination of marriage in

America at the beginning of the millennium, but that an editor had directed her to drop the wider view, and focus on African-Americans and marriage. For someone who felt strongly about celebrating the “everyday” in black American life, and not focusing on the “pathology,” and for someone who sees herself as a writer, not just a “black writer,” this winnowing of her creative palette was just one more blow against her creation of her own identity, one more foray into labeling by the marketplace, much against her will. Her words bear repeating: “Nearly every black writer is pigeonholed as a black writer. In fact, I tried to broaden the “Marriage is for White People” piece, but the Post wanted a black essay. Once again, it comes with the territory and I’m too old to fight it.”

In my first paper about Regina, the “dual life history,” I wrote about my own beliefs that my own lack of public success as a creative artist had been caused by growing up in an alcoholic family which had undermined my confidence and my ability to express myself. I also expressed skepticism that society was open to real self-expression now, in part because of the takeover of the creative world by commercially driven interests.

The self-reflexive component of that paper noted that Regina had indeed had a loving, supportive family. I had wondered aloud why she seemed able to “put herself out there” and I didn’t. I also wrote that my determination to find a model that fit my use of the cultural tradition of “developmental psychology” had led to my pushing and pushing until I got an answer that fit that model—and there it was: her family loved and supported her; mine didn’t. Hence she was “out there,” and I wasn’t.

But I also reflected on how hard she worked, how many obstacles she faced, and how available she needed to be to clients all the time. Her membership in not one, but two Twelve-step fellowships was also indicative that she had struggled with her own

personal issues on the way to her first tastes of success. As I had with another informant, the pianist Carl Banner, I became more aware of the realities of practicing one's art on a professional level, and hence, a little less naïve about it, and perhaps, a little less hopeful that some "magic" would occur to give me a creative career without having to work so hard. That taste of reality had spurred me onto making my own recording, and made me less certain that I wanted that kind of life. The research had helped me sort out some of my ambivalence about having a public life as an artist, and given me new-found respect for those who did, because I now knew how much work they put in.

It's eight years later, and I'm writing my dissertation (definitely an achievement, if not wholly an artistic achievement); I can hear my three year old daughter's sleep sounds via the baby monitor. My informant has worked hard and acquiesced to the realities of the marketplace; she is back at another nine-to-five job. I have a steady adjunct job at a local university, my wife and I have bought our first house, and I, my first car. Adult responsibilities are mushrooming. I haven't performed musically since the baby was born, though I have written songs and had poems published (and have attended and read at a poetry reading for the first time in three years just this month). My "rock star" dreams have faded; a late bloomer, I will be fifty in a few months. My mother died suddenly, just before I met with Regina for the last time. Milestones, passages, aging, all these things were upon us.

Heelas has noted that the 1960s ushered in an "expressivist revolution," in which individuals sought self-actualization above social stability.⁵⁹ "This shift involved moving from a view of one's well-being in the context of one's social roles (the sociocentric view) to a view of one's well-being based on a psychological model."⁶⁰ It is not difficult for

me to locate both Regina and myself within the context of this expressivist revolution. Both of us middle-of-the-pack baby boomers, we partook, often unwittingly, of a radical shift in cultural tradition that emphasized individualism coupled with introspection “By the seventies ‘all national surveys’ showed more than seven out of ten Americans (72 percent) spending a great deal of time thinking about themselves and their inner lives—this in a nation notorious for its impatience with inwardness.” There was a “rage for self-fulfillment;”⁶¹ added onto this was “New Age” component—that somehow our individualism must be in harmony with the rest of the world (including, somehow, everyone else’s individualism).

That there are contradictions inherent to this approach should be self-evident; the mental gymnastics needed to keep one’s life story coherent and one’s identity consistent are quite taxing. Hence, Heelas has noted the way many individuals make use of new age “tune-ups,” if you will, to enable themselves to feel that they are still in harmony with the universe as they head back out to do battle once again. “Material from a variety of sources...strongly suggests that the New Age is...drawn upon to restore the self of the go-getting individualist.” Some New Age “teachings and practices...treat inner spirituality as the means to the end of materialistic acquisition.”⁶²

So many of the baby boomers, “victims” of a bountiful mindset created by an unprecedented set of economic, political, and social circumstances,⁶³ are facing the possibility that they will not be able to achieve self-actualization in their lifetime.⁶⁴ The majority of us who will not obtain such perfection may now be busy, as Regina and I are, in accessing spiritual traditions and philosophies that aid us in reassessing and revising

our life stories to recast such “failure” in a more successful light and create more realistic expectations for the rest of our lives.

Elsewhere in this dissertation I refer to this reevaluation as a “legacy reassessment” of mid-life. Like Carl Banner in the previous chapter, and Regina, at mid-life I reassessed my life, prioritized certain values and cultural traditions, and launched a plan to change my life and create more satisfaction. Like them, things didn’t turn out quite as I’d planned; though there are a number of successes each of us can point to, there are also some disappointments. Now, eight, nine, or ten years down the road, we look back at the results of our respective plans and forward at the rest of our lives, reassess, and make new plans based on the lived reality and our changing goals—the results of the old plan mixed with the unexpected turns that make up a large portion of life. Hence, Regina’s feeling that the level of success she has achieved is, indeed, acceptable; and hence her decision to go back to the nine-to-five world but to keep working on that “state of marriage” book proposal. And hence my feeling, now that my little three-year old replacement is here, that my legacy of wit, compassion, and creativity, passed on through a child, coupled with an enjoyable adjunct teaching job and the occasional homemade musical CD, may be enough.

None of us feels quite the same way about our lives or our art. In some ways, we are recasting our lives in a less individualized light—Regina speaks often of her involvement with her eight year old nephew, her continued closeness to family, and her own interest in leaving a legacy:

MH: What stage of your life do you think you’re in now?

RJ: The last. [LAUGHS]. I heard someone say that forty is the youth of old age. This is the beginning of the last stage. I think about, like I said, I have fewer

tomorrows. I feel an urgency about making the best use of my time. And it's difficult to talk about aging with people. They'll say "Oh, you're only as old as you feel and age is just a number," and there's truth in that but at the same time, you know the quality of life and the range of things you can do at fifty is not the same as when I was thirty or thirty-five. There are things, activities that I can't do at 51 that I could do at 50. And some things are not going to happen no matter how much I pray or meditate, or eat vegetables.

MH: One part of the 12-step program is accepting things you can't change.

RJ: Yeah. So I want to make sure that the rest of my time I use wisely and that I take advantage of things at 51 that will not be available at 52. And trying to identify what those things are is tricky, too.

MH: So what are you going to prioritize?

RJ: [Laughs.] I do not have the answer to that yet. I think about it a lot but I don't know yet.

MH: My mom's passing has made me think a lot about legacy, what I'm going to leave—I'm kind of shy, and I think about my music as the main thing that I'm good at, and I have this little daughter who's so outgoing, and I don't want to pass it on to her that I had this talent but I was afraid to use it. I'm also thinking how I'm 50 and my mom died and I'm that much closer to the end of my life. So I'm thinking about legacy. Do you ever think about that stuff?

RJ: I've just begun to think about that a little bit more. And it's just begun to emerge on the edge of my consciousness. I heard Bill Clinton said I woke up today and realized I had more yesterdays than tomorrows. That's a sobering thought. And I'm trying to plan for retirement. Retirement's no longer abstract—I'm going to wake up tomorrow and I'll be there. [LAUGHS]

MH: It feels like that.

RJ: Yeah. I had an interesting moment earlier this week. I was talking to my English teacher from Catholic High School, trying to catch up with her, playing a lot of telephone tag, and I was talking to her, and as we were hanging up, my phone beeped, and I had another call and I hung up with her, and on the other end was one of my former students. It was interesting to me to be in that continuum. And I had the thought that I wanted to cultivate relationships with much younger people and not just have friendships among my own age category or older people. When I've had friendships with older people it was because I wanted to learn from them or benefit from their experience. But now I'm one of those older people, and I need to pass that on to those younger folks.

Reorientation to time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth leads to stocktaking, heightened introspection, and the destructuring and restructuring of experience.⁶⁵ And so as Carl, Regina and I move into new phases of life, and the notion of the “potential” of life shrinks, we each revise our interpretation of that life history and start changing the subjective grounding of that life, or at least, we incorporate a more social context, modifying the need for self-actualization. We begin to focus on legacy, children, and passing things on. Somehow that little girl who made her debut in front of her church at age four (“Although I am very small, I’m pleased to greet you, one and all.”), the piano prodigy, and the wisecracking, precocious four year old boy (“Don’t call me honey.” “Why not?” “Because I’m something of a grouch.”) have grown up and are thinking about what they can teach to those who will replace them. The last stages, and thought of legacy, beckon.

The Feedback Loop: Regina’s Reaction to Her Chapter

As I noted in the self-reflexive portion of this chapter, I felt some tension around certain issues during our otherwise cordial and interesting conversations about art, life, and writing. When I sent Regina her chapter for review, she responded with the usual corrections on dates, spellings of names, and other facts. She noted that it was “interesting” to read someone else’s take on one’s life, then used the internet abbreviation “LOL” for “laughing out loud.” I could almost hear her voice when I read the e-mail—our conversations were often punctuated by her self-deprecating laughter and well-developed sense of the absurd. In general, she voiced few objections to my overall analysis, though she did raise two issues. First, she thought I had exaggerated the

financial concerns she was experiencing at the time of our first interviews in 1988—I had implied things were dire when they were merely tight. I have changed the text to reflect her interpretation.

Her second concern regarding her chapter came in response to the following original passage: “Regina uses a number of strategies here to make her inability to obtain her earlier goals acceptable. She suggests that the goal was unrealistic, and further notes that her present life is not all that bad.”

This of course was my interpretation, and I used an interpretive word—“suggests” rather than a declarative one. But Regina took exception to the adjective “realistic.” She matter-of-factly replied: “I don’t consider the goal unrealistic; it just didn’t happen.” Her point is well-taken. True, the financial goal she set for her writing career is one that few achieve, but when one considers how carefully she planned, saved, and researched her attempt to reach it, it seems as if she did everything she could, except, perhaps violate her own personal code by embracing a theme she didn’t believe in intellectually. Does her refusal to “sell out” and become the “blacks hate marriage” writer denote her unwillingness to choose professional writer status? Only if one defines professional without any reference to ethics. Her acceptance of other works for hire has always remained within intellectual and personal parameters she set for herself.

Meanwhile, her ability to make her freelance career work financially for six years, then return to the job market at a higher salary, as well as her having paid off her condo, and having an agent interested in her latest book proposal all point to a certain level of success. My thinking, influenced by my research, was that it is unrealistic for almost all creative people to think they can make a living at their art, let alone achieve the bestseller

status Regina had hoped for. But the term “unrealistic” implies that Regina should not have set her sights on such a lofty goal at all. The level of professional and financial success she did achieve are evidence otherwise. Her accomplishments may have in part resulted from the high aim she took. I have altered the text to reflect that she reassessed her achievement and normalized it through comparisons with other writers, but not that she thought her goal was unrealistic.

Finally, she expressed reservations about having her real name used in the dissertation, and so the pseudonym Regina Jamison has been employed. Although she did not specify her reasons for not wanting her real name used, she is a public figure and may have felt uncomfortable with some of the self-disclosure contained herein or even at my speculation about areas in which her self-disclosure was kept a minimum. In any case, she has been very generous with her thoughts and feedback, and I respect her wish to be anonymous.

Notes

¹ Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 3-6.

² Regina defines hand-dancing as “old-fashioned dancing,” usually to R’n’B music, in which the dancers actually touch hands as they move, but in which each dance partner has her or his own set of dance steps.

³ John L. Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006) 17.

⁴ Douglas Kellner, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,” in “*Gender, Race, & Class in Media*,” ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003) 9-20; Caughey, *Negotiating*, 14.

⁵ Joy Jones, *Between Black Women: Listening With the Third Ear* (Chicago: African American Images) 1994.

⁶ For a discussion of the concept of “synchronicity” as an explanatory system, see Lynette Eastland’s article “Archetypes, Synchronicity, and Miracles,” in *Communication In Recovery: Perspectives on Twelve-Step Groups* ed. Lynette S. Eastland, Sandra L. Herndon, and Jeanine R. Barr (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1999) 18; for an explanation of a “new age” approach, sometimes called “unconscious guidance” see Darren Kemp, *New Age: A Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 114.

⁷ Paul Heelas. *The New Age Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 93.

⁸ Eastland, 18; Catherine L. Albanese, “The Magical Staff: Quantum Healing in the New Age,” in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 68-84; Susan Love Brown, “Baby Boomers, American Character, and the New Age: A Synthesis,” in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 87-96.; Heelas, 120.

⁹ Jones, *Between*, 20.

¹⁰ At one point in *Between Black Women*, Regina recounts at some length a personal healing she had experienced from a serious illness; the well-known new age self-healing text by Louise L. Hay, *Heal Your Body* is credited with putting her on the path to self-awareness that resulted in a less drastic surgical intervention; Jones, *Between*, 61-65; Louise L. Hay, *Heal Your Body* (Santa Monica: Hay House, 1988)

¹¹ Eastland, “Archetypes” 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

¹⁷ Albanese, 74.

¹⁸ Aidan Kelly, "An Update on Neopagan Witchcraft in America," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 136-151.

¹⁹ Eastland, "Archetypes," 19; Albanese, 68-84.

²⁰ Eastland, "Archetypes," 19.

²¹ Heelas, 148.

²² ARTS stands for "Artists Recovering Through the Twelve Steps," and is interchangeably referred to as "ARTS" or "Arts Anonymous" by members.

²³ Ann Marie Minnick, *Twelve Step Programs: A Contemporary American Quest for Meaning and Spiritual Renewal* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997) 135; Judith A. Rolls, "Overeaters Anonymous Discourse: Resistance to the Dominant Weight Loss Paradigm," in *Communication In Recovery: Perspectives on Twelve-Step Groups*, ed. Lynette S. Eastland, Sandra L. Herndon, and Jeanine R. Barr (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1999) 83-99.

²⁴ Minnick, 135.

²⁵ http://www.aabibliography.com/12_step_acronyms_and_12_step_slogans.htm

²⁶ Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. *Alcoholics Anonymous, 3rd Edition*. New York: 1976, 59-60. The Twelve Steps used by all Twelve Step programs may be found here in what is known commonly known as the "AA Big Book." Each program substitutes its own particular problem (food, narcotics, money, etc.) in the first step—"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." In the case of Arts Anonymous, the individual members are not *addicted* to art, but are still using the Twelve Step framework as a means of dealing with the issues they have surrounding their struggles to be artists.

²⁷ Francine E. Marrus, "In The Spirit: Communication Performance in a 12-Step Program," in *Communication In Recovery: Perspectives on Twelve-Step Groups*, ed. Lynette S. Eastland, Sandra L. Herndon, and Jeanine R. Barr (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1999) 110.

²⁸ Step 3 of AA's Twelve Steps is "Made a conscious decision to turn our will and our life over to God as we understood God," Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. *Alcoholics Anonymous, 3rd Edition*, 59.

²⁹ Eastland, 20.

³⁰ Heelas, 93.

³¹ John B. Miner, *The 4 Routes to Entrepreneurial Success* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 1996) 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁶ Simon C. Parker, *The Economics of Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 78-83; Robert W. Fairlie, *Ethnic and Racial Entrepreneurship* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) 3.

³⁷ Parker 83; David Martindale, *How to Be A Freelance Writer*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1982) 5; Ernest E. Mau, *The Free-Lance Writer's Survival Manual*. (Chicago: Contemporary Books Incorporated, 1981) 15; Judy E. Pickens *The Freelancer's Handbook* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981) 9.

³⁸ Pickens, 8.

³⁹ Parker, 93.

⁴⁰ David Croteau and William Hoynes, "The New Media Giants: Changing Structure," in *Gender, Race, & Class in Media*, ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003) 23. Much of our modern media marketing relies on the concept of "synergy," as she notes above, wherein one product or artist generates multiple revenue streams.

⁴¹ <http://www.enotalone.com/article/10419.html>.

⁴² Joy Jones, "Rx," unpublished poem, 1997.

⁴³ Hildreth Y. Grossman and Nia Lane Chester, eds., *The Experience and Meaning of Work in Women's Lives* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1990) 4.

⁴⁴ Jones, *Between*, 66-67.

⁴⁵ Michael Hecht, Ronald L. Jackson II, and Sidney A. Ribeau, *African-American Communication* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.) 2003, 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁷ Elsa Honig Fine, *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1982) 4.

⁴⁸ <http://www.enotalone.com/article/10419.html>

⁴⁹ Joy Jones, "Rx," unpublished poem, 1997.

⁵⁰ Joy Jones, *Searching for a Signal*, unpublished play, 2006.

⁵¹ Marrus, 121.

⁵² John L. Caughey, "Mind Games: Imaginary Social Relationships in Sports," in *Meaningful Play, Playful Meaning*, Proceedings of the 11th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, ed. Gary Alan Fine (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1985) 28.

⁵³ Stebbins, Robert A. *Amateurs, Professionals*, 82.

⁵⁴ Hecht, et al., 67.

⁵⁵ Gelya Frank, *Venus on Wheels*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) 91.

⁵⁶ Miner, 10.

⁵⁷ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 14-20.

⁵⁸ Cf. Regina's complex deconstruction of the effects of the proliferation of negative media images of African-Americans elsewhere in this chapter (see note 44).

⁵⁹ Heelas, 115.

⁶⁰ Love Brown, 95.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶² Heelas, 146.

⁶³ Stephanie, Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York, NY : Basic Books, 1992) 23-42.

⁶⁴ Heelas, 148.

⁶⁵ Kay O'Connor and Kerry Chamberlain, "Dimensions of Life Meaning: A Qualitative Investigation at Mid-life," *British Journal of Psychology*, 87.3 (Aug. 96): 461-465.

**CHAPTER FOUR: MARITZA RIVERA:
MID-LIFE POET, LIFELONG TRANSLATOR**

*I stare in amazement as it grows.
I think that if I were planted in
Fertile soil, were watered
And weeded on occasion
I too would yield.*

From *Vegetable Garden* by Maritza Rivera¹

First Vision: Origins and Portents

Like my other informants, Maritza offers up a family influence and then a personal story connecting her being a poet today to early signs of creativity in her childhood.

MR: I don't consider either of my parents creative. My aunt...my aunt was very creative. Everyone thought she was...eccentric. She and I connected in a way that I never connected with either of my parents, which is interesting. I was trying to remember when did I start to write, and I really can't pinpoint, but I can see now where things were leading up to it. I was so perceptive about things going on around me that it was scary.

It was between the ages of seven and nine, and the apartment we lived in New York had a huge window from ceiling to not quite the floor in my bedroom, and I was terrified of that window, because to me, that window came to life at night, and it was like "Oh God, I must be nuts." I'd have terrible nightmares, and I'd sleep under the covers because I was so afraid.

Then I remember getting up in the middle of the night because I was tossing and turning. And I remember getting up because I just could not sleep. And I got up to go to the kitchen to get a glass of water or something, and I looked out the window. The apartment that was adjacent to mine, it was engulfed in flames. So I got my parents and they literally had to bang the door down in the next apartment to wake the people up, their apartment was on fire. And from that moment...ever since then, I slept through the night, it didn't bother me anymore. For years, this had been such an annoyance, to just put it mildly, and then this happened, which

almost made it, which almost made sense to me. “Oh, okay. That’s what that was all about.”

Maritza’s first story of perception and creativity may be more dramatic than that of my other informants, but like so many of us, she seeks continuity by illustrating creativity in the family, heightened perceptive ability, and, in this case, a sort of visionary quality (her precognition of the fire, and, as a child, her easy recognition “that’s what that was all about”). “One of the stories that we, as a culture, respond to is the story in which the... end is contained in the beginning... [often] you have a childhood episode that prefigures all that is to come.”² The past prefigures the present—her identity as an artist is “woven far back in time” and is made more coherent³ by its association with another family member’s creativity and a specific anecdote that foreshadows the development of her talent for writing and creative perception.

Maritza’s reach into the past to create continuity is all the more interesting because her life has been, as she describes it, “a series of adventures,” with seeming discontinuity all around. Until she was fourteen, however, her life had been, by some measures, fairly stable. Born into a Puerto Rican immigrant family in New York, she lived in the same neighborhood, went to a series of Catholic schools, and planned on being a journalism major at Columbia University.

Prior to this, there had been one big disruption in the life of the family, and hence Maritza’s life—her older sister Lourdes died suddenly when Maritza was six. It was a shock that Maritza did not fully understand at the time: “I knew everybody was so sad, and I remember trying to make everybody happy. And I was scolded, and I just didn’t

understand, I just didn't understand." She links this experience to her later motivation to write:

MR: I think that was one of the first situations that contributed to writing because then I know I read a lot...or...and I had friends, because we were in New York, people I was growing with, family friends, and kids I had been in school since nursery school, but it was different, it was so different, and so I created, you know, stories, and scenes in my head. So from an early age...you think everything happens for a reason, God forbid, had it not been for those early experiences, it's almost like it takes trauma to make you an artist.

Her family life was not entirely happy—her father, an accountant, was a “dictator” who charmed everyone *outside* of the family, but ruled with an iron hand at home. Maritza asserted regularly during our interviews that her father was mentally ill and also, that he, like my father, was an alcoholic. Her battles with her father ran through out her childhood. As the eldest, she had to pick up the pieces of the family life that were so often being broken by her dad's abusive behavior.

MR: I was always the strong one who dealt with all the garbage no one else wanted to deal with. When my grandmother died...there used to be a tradition in Puerto Rico that the body of a family member was never left alone up to the point of burial. Someone always stays...and someone accompanies the casket in the hearse. And when my grandmother died, everyone was a bucket of you know, and I would've expected one of her children to do it, but no one did, so I did, and I'm actually glad that I did.

Maritza mentioned “working things out through poetry” and other forms of writing in most stages of her life--childhood, teenage years, single motherhood, and still today after remarriage. Her use of language and imagery as a way of integrating her experience is a consistent theme, a consistent cultural tradition she draws upon. One of her early spoken and written practices was to talk in riddles:

MR: I was always the strong one who dealt with all the garbage no one else wanted to deal with. When my grandmother died...there used to be a tradition in Puerto Rico that the body of a family member was never left alone up to the point of burial. Someone always stays...and someone accompanies the casket in the hearse. And when my grandmother died, everyone was a bucket of you know, and I would've expected one of her children to do it, but no one did, so I did, and I'm actually glad that I did.

I remember growing up people said I talked in riddles. I didn't understand what they meant, because I knew what I meant. I knew what I was thinking that created the words that I said. It was like, "What are you talking about? It's almost like I spoke in imagery, so I wouldn't say, "Oh what a pretty painting!" It would be something like "Oh I can imagine how people felt riding that boat." Always been very sensitive to art, very sensitive to colors. And one of the things I say I miss about not living in Puerto Rico is the colors—because they're so vibrant.

MH: Are you talking about the houses, the art, the foliage?

MR: Yes. There are colors that houses are painted...if you go to Miami, that's the closest you can get to those shades of pastel. And the grass and the different trees. And the different kinds of changes, the subtlest changes in the seasons. You couldn't see the changes, but you could feel it. And I would know it was winter when you looked at the sky and the stars looked so far away. That was winter. It's not like the trees dropped and the...smell. There's certain kinds of smells that I associate with the seasons.

MH: When you associate different senses, I think it's called synesthesia. When I was a kid I used to think different days were different colors.

MR: Sure. So many things make sense to me that other people think are odd, strange...it is a certain level of sensitivity. And recently they came up with that certain people are hypersensitive, etc. Always feeling like I was different than everybody else. And what is this strangeness that you sense about yourself?

MH: Did you write about it as young girl? Do you have any of that stuff?

MR: Not some of the old stuff. My mother sent me a lot of the old journals I had. Diaries were popular back then, and I got my diary from when I was 12 or 13 years old and tried to read it. It was written in code. I wrote it to myself in a language which, that I must have understood then. But it's complete gibberish to me now.

Once again, Maritza's past can be reintegrated into her present to create a sense of continuous identity, despite changed circumstances, something Bateson refers to as "change as continuity."⁵ The lives of many women are filled with discontinuity because of

lack of choice.⁶ But Bateson notes that while the details (geographic location, marital and parental status, job) of the situation may change, “skills and adaptive patterns [can be of] use in the new situation, [thus] emphasizing continuity...You could see that the choices people made on how to interpret the continuities and discontinuities in their lives had great implications for the way they approached the future.”⁷ Maritza employs this way of looking at things throughout the story of her life and her becoming a poet.

Family Life

The family Maritza grew up in was a patriarchy with an emphasis on extended family. For the Riveras, then, in both New York and on the island, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents were part of the regular family mix. Even then, though, Maritza’s father, easy to anger, would break with this tradition, cutting siblings off with little or no warning for the slightest offense:

MR: In my home there was this picture of perfection. And I could always sense that there was something not right. As an adult my cousins and I have gotten together, and one of them basically said how she hated to go to my house. It was the pressure of don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t touch this, it was “just be perfect.” And no wonder—I only saw my cousins when we visited them, not the other way around. And I remember one time when my uncle...something happened, and my uncle, my father’s brother, had come from Puerto Rico, was staying with their other brother in Brooklyn, but came to visit, and I don’t know what argument they got into, but my father literally banished him from ever setting foot in our house. And it was like [laughs] what is it with this man, he’s wacky.

MH: Did you ever see him again?

MR: I saw him again, when my father was dying. He came...his two brothers...

MH: How many years later was that?

MR: My two uncles, I saw my two uncles. And I have male cousins, one of my uncle’s sons...he had four sons...I have these four male cousins. One’s a cop, one’s a fireman in New York that I wouldn’t know if I stood next to them. So it turns out that my father was a classic schizophrenic. He was...everybody who knew

him loved him. He was such a social, gregarious person, and then there was this monster that he kept at home. And it was so unbelievable to be raised as if everything's perfect, everything is normal. And then I didn't discover the layers of this monster until I was 35 years old.

Maritza's father was clearly abusive, both physically and verbally, but in a patriarchal culture, the idea of intervention from the outside (as in Child Protection Services) or from within by the women in the family, was untenable. Maritza's only choice would ultimately not be intervention but escape. Men ruled the roost, and women had few choices. In fact, Maritza's mother had not been especially motivated to marry her father:

MR: My mother never wanted to marry my father. And my parents...they have that age difference. My dad never asked my mom to marry him. He asked my grandmother and my mother...it was that kind of culture.

MH: So how old was your mom?

MR: My mom was 18, and my dad was 28. He was ten years older. He picked her and got permission.

MH: He "picked" her?

MR: Exactly.

MH: So that was partly...

MR: Cultural. It kind of sort of is, but I think my dad took stuff to the nth degree.

MH: And that generation never got divorced.

MR: Divorce wasn't an option.

Maritza, found herself in a caretaking role in her troubled family. Already able to translate between two languages and cultures, she was also a bridge for her incompatible parents:

MR: My parents related to each other through me. My mother would tell me what she wanted, and I'd explain it to my father. My father would say something and

I would translate it for my mother. “He really didn’t mean that, he meant this.” It was tough trying to find some way when something came out of my father’s mouth to find a way to make it more gentle for my Mom.

Growing up in the individualistic United States until her early teenage years, exposed to early signs of feminism in the late sixties had enabled Maritza to modify her relationship to the patriarchal culture that she lived under in Puerto Rico. In many ways, she felt that she was just biding her time until she could get out. Still, she feared turning into a woman like her mother, who seemed to have so few choices and whom her father so completely dominated:

MR: I’ve been in therapy off and on forever. Because of my parents’ relationship I was so afraid of relationships. And it was, I was so afraid to become my Mom, and I was so afraid to find someone like my dad, and I adored my father, but there were so many issues and fear. I never even thought I could contemplate marriage, I never even thought I’d contemplate having children, because I was afraid to damage anybody [Laughs].

We see here a combination of cultural experience and personal experience working together—Maritza’s biculturalism gives her two models for being a woman. Her family experience gives her firsthand experience of extreme versions of masculinity and femininity. She would eventually turn to another cultural tradition, that of psychology to work out the issues she brought with her after leaving her family of origin. The field of psychology argues that when conditioning is brought to a level of conscious awareness, the individual’s ability to choose is restored. Maritza, in mentioning her years of psychotherapy, describes her fight to cope with the reality of her father’s (undiagnosed) mental illness and alcoholism, and how she was able to apply what she learned in treatment to her own life and her subsequent marriage and divorce.

Puerto Rico—Some History

Maritza's father was from a wealthy Puerto Rican family who, unfortunately, fell on hard times when the economy of Puerto Rico collapsed as a result of the Great Depression of the 1930s, as well as manipulation by the sugar industry, and did not recover.⁸ He became an accountant and moved his family from Puerto Rico to New York in the early 1950s, part of a wave of Puerto Rican immigrants during the 1940s and 1950s.⁹ New York's Puerto Rican subculture was strong:

During the post World War II period (1945 to 1950) the flow of migration was almost exclusively toward New York City...Puerto Ricans became an established part of life in the New York metropolitan area...In 1960, a single neighborhood in New York City contained more persons born in Puerto Rico than the total for twenty-six of the fifty United States; and a dozen other neighborhoods in New York city approximated the same total.¹⁰

Congressional legislation in 1927 may have made Puerto Ricans American citizens,¹¹ but that hardly meant that Puerto Rican immigrants were welcomed on the mainland, or viewed as Americans. "Americans generally had not come to think of Puerto Ricans as real citizens—rather...as citizens of a sort of second class."¹² One of the main signifiers used by both the American government and the white-European majority population to denote Puerto Ricans as an undesirable, lower class minority was the persistence of Spanish as the island's main language.¹³ Leaders of the incipient American empire movement even went so far as to suggest maintenance of Spanish as a "native tongue" was a sign of a determination to maintain "foreignness" and indicated a "lack of discipline" on the part of Puerto Ricans.¹⁴

Maritza grew up bilingual, and was taught that "Spanglish," a hybrid form of Spanish and English,¹⁵ was unacceptable. This kind of "code-switching"¹⁶ was seen

as “ugly...pathetic, clumsy” by both white Americans who and also by the “academic establishment of Spanish-speaking countries.”¹⁷ Although Spanish was spoken in the Riveras’ New York household, it was kept strictly separate from English. The same applied in the Catholic schools that Maritza and her siblings attended:

MR: You were not allowed to speak Spanish in Catholic school, yet it was a Latino community. And so I was brought up in a very strict environment where I had to speak Spanish correctly and I had to speak English correctly, so melding the two was not approved of. So in a lot of my poetry, now, I’m inserting some Spanish words, where I never did before because it was like, no, these two need to be separate. I have a poem about it, “Why I Don’t Have an Accent.” It has the line: “And that single solitary word, bacalao...”

In the poem I’m a child in school, and I’ve been assigned to read a paragraph, and it has a Spanish word in it, bacalao, which is a kind of fish, a codfish, and I’ve been taught you can’t use Spanish in school, and I just panic, because I don’t know what to do. How can I read a Spanish word out loud in school?

Raised with two national cultures, Maritza remembers this moment as a point at which the two collided, and, having been taught they must always be separate, she, a child unaware of the possibility of different languages and cultures coexisting, froze. Rather than being allowed to live two cultures, applying her knowledge of each system’s customs and values, she had been taught that they were two entirely separate spheres. Her home life was in Spanish; her public life—first school, then college and work—would be in English, or so she was taught. The dominant national European-American culture has adopted English as its language; indeed the United States government took extreme measures to eradicate Spanish cultural influence from Puerto Rico; the education, business, and legal systems all promoted English, usually to the total exclusion of Spanish.¹⁸ Maritza emerged from this separate-but-bicultural experience fluently

bilingual, but states, “Spanish is my native language; I learned English because it was there.”

Caughey notes the shortcomings of “the assumption that the person has one single culture. Such an approach weakens the potential power of cultural interpretations of individuals...most of us know and think with a variety of different cultures or cultural traditions.”¹⁹ Maritza is not simply Puerto Rican (in fact, within Puerto Rican culture, she would be referred to as both a New York Puerto Rican or *Nuyorican*,²⁰ or as a returned/revolving door migrant—one who has moved back and forth between the island and the U.S. mainland multiple times.²¹ Hence it is “absurd to ask: “What is her culture?” “In each case, a better question is, What are her cultures?”²²

Such complex cultural negotiations are a facet of almost every American life. To understand American lives in this postmodern era with accelerated mobility, mass migrations, multiple Diaspora, “we need to address the complexities of the individual’s relationship with multiple cultures. ...every individual is influenced by a variety of different and competing cultural traditions. How we negotiate these multiple cultures is a basic issue that life history needs to address.”²³

Maritza asserts that Spanish is her first language, but this doesn’t mean that we can know all about her by learning that she is a Latina from Puerto Rico, or that she is a person of color. A native New Yorker, she is from one of the stronger urban subcultures in our nation; she is also a Viet Nam era veteran who enlisted right out of college and served in military intelligence. She was a single mother for over fifteen years. She worked in marketing research in the cutthroat private sector world of media research for most of that time. And she is a published poet who ran her own arts salon for three years.

Clearly she has been influenced by multiple cultural traditions, and often negotiates them *simultaneously*. As Caughey has noted in his recent book *Negotiating Cultures and Identities*, the idea that people are “bicultural” and have two distinct “halves” suggests that they “know two monolithic cultures” and fails to recognize the complex identity of the postmodern individual in America, where most negotiate multiple cultures daily and often concurrently.²⁴

When we interview our research participants we find that they naturally talk about their lives in terms of their engagement with different social situations...They also recognize that values and customary behavior shift as they enter different social worlds where one or another of these systems prevails.²⁵

As Maritza said in our first interview, referring to three periods of living in the United States and two in Puerto Rico, “It’s like—who am I now?” She is distinctly aware of the two national cultures she is living simultaneously, each with its own language, music, literature, values, and gender roles. Her ability to negotiate these two cultures has been a key to her life story. What she learned and experienced at critical junctures as a result of sudden geographic shifts out of one culture and into another will be one focal point for this cultural biography, for when Maritza was fourteen years old, poised to enter a Catholic high school that was particularly known for its academics, and planning to use that academic training as a springboard to Columbia University and then a career in journalism, her father moved the family back to Puerto Rico. A whole new set of rules was suddenly in place, and Maritza, an unusually focused fourteen-year old, saw her life plan go wildly off track.

Returned Migration: Nuyoricans, Puerto Ricans, and Culture Shock

MR: My parents decided in the mid-sixties that they didn't want to raise their children in the city. They decided to pick us up and move us to Puerto Rico. At the time, my brothers were just five and seven, so it wasn't so hard on them. But I was fourteen years old. I had never been to Puerto Rico before. The image I had was some remote, backward place that everybody left, so why would anybody want to go back to it?

My mother had always planned to go back to Puerto Rico. She was never happy living in the U.S., because she came to the U.S. at the same age that I went to Puerto Rico so it was really hard on her like it was really hard on me, but I had the advantage. I knew the language, I knew the culture, versus for her, English was foreign. The first year was pretty hard, even though I spoke Spanish, I read and I wrote Spanish, because my family...I spoke Spanish all my life, and my aunt had taught me to read and write Spanish. But it was a big, big...it was, ahh, pretty traumatic in terms of going from one world to a completely different world, and that is exactly when I started writing poetry.

Writing poetry was in keeping with Maritza's interest in another kind of writing, namely journalism, although journalism examines the outer world, and her poetry focused on the struggles she was experiencing in her inner world as transplant from New York City: "I always wanted to be a writer, I wanted to be a journalist. My father did not consider that a worthy profession." The move "back" to Puerto Rico meant that Americanized Maritza had to adapt to a whole new set of cultural rules; whereas in New York, she had to live two cultures simultaneously, her father's idea in returning to Puerto Rico was that the children would be "Puerto Rican." Suddenly, Maritza, a child raised with American cultural values like "personal occupational achievement and success, and individualism,"²⁶ was caught up in a new set of rules:

MR: It's almost like when they moved back to the island, they assumed all the very stereotypical very traditional roles. Which was a complete shock to me.

MH: Right—you were Americanized.

MR: I was very much Americanized. My mother has always said that I am so Americanized that it was hard for her to deal with me especially as a teenager, not

so much with my brothers because they were younger when we moved to Puerto Rico so they kind of grew up with that. But I was in culture shock, basically. So all of a sudden there were things that I couldn't do that I never had the limitations in the city. There were new curfews, new rules about being a girl, a woman, that... it was all new to me. And the expectation was you will leave your father's house when you get married. And it was "Oh no, that can't be. That's not in the cards I thought I had drawn."

Maritza saw herself as an individual, not simply as a female expected to marry and bear children; not a woman who would go from one male dominion to another.

Her career goals had fired her imagination, inspired her with scenarios for her future.

Suddenly, journalism was not a "respectable" profession for a woman:

MH: Did your mother work?

MR: My mom was a nurse. Of course, this was the 50s, so there were certain professions it was okay for women to be in—the teaching profession, the nursing profession. So the closest thing that I could come to studying something I was passionate about was English. I pursued a secondary education credential, too.

MH: Where did you go to college?

MR: In Puerto Rico, because my father would not allow me to come to the States to go to school. I had planned... When he moved us to Puerto Rico, I had been accepted at the high school of my dreams, which was Cardinal Spelman High School, which for a Catholic High School was a really good high school in New York. I had wanted to go to Columbia, and I thought Spelman would help me get in.

I figured, well, that's okay, I can go to high school in Puerto Rico, I can still go to [Columbia]. My father would not allow that. As I said, it was a complete shock to me.

So I basically went to school, in...high school and college in Puerto Rico, and I joined the military, that was my way out of...

MH: How old were you...straight out of college?

MR: Straight out of college, I was 22. No, no. Actually, there was this program where as a junior you could join the military. You're on active duty assigned to your college to become a commissioned officer. That was prior to ROTC. That was the last class in this program before women started being commissioned through ROTC.

MH: Why were they okay with that?

MR: They weren't okay with that. My father was not okay with that. And because it was in my junior year, and I hadn't turned 21 yet—in Puerto Rico, the legal age was 21—he had to sign a legal authorization for me to join the military. He told me the only reason he had signed it was because he knew I'd be 21 soon, and I'd do it anyway, so he wanted to give me the permission to do it. He was always playing mind games like that.

MH: He was a very strong-willed person.

MR: Yeah. But...And he taught me how...we...he trained me in...it was weird...we would get into these conversations which would turn into debates which he would always win. But I learned to argue.

Americanized, as naturally she would be, by having spent her first fourteen years in the United States, she felt trapped by her father's insistence that she adhere to his interpretation of Puerto Rican gender roles. Unable to get out from under his tyrannical rule, expected to leave **his** home only for her husband's, she reached out to another strong cultural tradition to escape, and went from one patriarchal system to another: from her father's home to basic training in the United States Army. At least with the army, she knew she was only up for a five-year hitch. The patriarchal system her father represented would have given her a permanent assignment.

In the Army: Adhering to and Breaking with Family Traditions

I had always been curious about Maritza's military background; her gentle, calming energy seemed the opposite of what I imagined the military to be. Her strong aesthetic bent seemed at odds with the pragmatism I associated with the army. In fact, she would admit that those years were almost completely without poetry—the bustle and discipline of the army were not conducive to contemplation or flights of imagery:

MR: My military years there was no virtually writing.

MH: Was it because you had no time? Or because of the kind of discipline that was imposed on you?

MR: The focus was different. The focus was very much outside myself. And I think that's where the difference is...when I write the focus is inward. And when I don't write, the focus is outward.

Using the army as a way out of the family makes a certain kind of sense, much as I had used the suggestion of graduate school by a professor during my senior year as a way out of my own alcoholic home (like Maritza's father, mine had also taken steps to ensure that I would not go away to college, despite my being accepted at two respected institutions just hours from home). Individuals make use of the resources and cultural traditions they have access to and even if those traditions appear to limit their options, we must attend to the choices they make within the framework they live in. Much of the research on women and the career choices they make has focused on this seeming paradox of limited agency. Maritza, who dreamed of becoming a journalist on the mainland, was going to be "trapped" in set of roles undesirable to her—she foresaw herself trapped in a marriage like that of her parents and, at best, teaching school. And she would be in Puerto Rico surrounded by, or perhaps smothered by family influence. The military, at that time represented her only way out.

She first cited a tradition of media representation of the army as one source of her understanding of military culture. And there had already been a woman in her family who had chosen the military, so that family tradition gave her an inkling of possibility:

MH: What appealed to you about going into the army?

MR: Um...it was...I grew up watching Abbott and Costello movies and listening to the Andrews Sisters, those movies, those old movies, and I just thought it was so different from anything that I knew. I view a lot of phases in my life as

adventures, and that was a challenge to me because I had always been rebellious, I had always been sort of strong-willed, but I saw that as a challenge to myself to see if I could do that, and a second cousin of mine, a first cousin of my mother's, had been in the army.

MH: Male or female?

MR: Female—she was a nurse, but that was okay then. And I'm the oldest of my cousins from my mother's side of the family, and one of my younger cousins had wanted to join the Navy before I joined the army, and it was not approved of, she could not do that, that wasn't something that nice girls do, and dadada, it went on and on, and that was too bad because when I did it, it was like, "Okay, she did it." And that's not fair. Her life hasn't been great, and I think probably the military would have been a good experience for her. When I was stationed at Aberdeen, she came up to live with me for awhile, and that was the closest to the military that she was able to get.

MH: What about now? Do you think it was a good experience?

MR: It was, uh, an amazing experience for me to do things that I thought I would never be able to do. I'm not a physical, gung-ho type of person. I was all of 5 foot 2, and they had these little miniature uniforms that I could fit into [laughs]. And so I chose military intelligence—it was supposed to be the hardest thing to get into—so that's what I chose, so of course I got into it. And when I was in the military, it was the early years when women were training with men. And they've since realized that's not the optimum way to train. So...physically, we were that generation where if a man can do it, I can do it. So that was a lot of pressure. I remember the final test before graduation, which was a live fire obstacle course, which the women were allowed not to do, but if the men had to do it, I was going to do it, because we were not going to be the exception.

MH: When you say live fire, you mean...ammunition.

MR: Live fire, where they're actually shooting while you're running an obstacle course.

MH: Do you they use blanks or are they using real ammunition?

MR: [Nods when I say "real ammunition."] They just aim it in one direction. People go to extremes to prove themselves. And I wasn't trying to prove anything to anyone else, I was just trying to prove myself that I could do it.

Maritza spent 1974–1978 in the military, and still thinks that the teamwork and self-discipline she learned there serves her well. In fact, one would describe the military as a cultural tradition that Maritza has passed onto her own children:

MR: So now, I raised my children with several options. Definitely school, definitely work, or the military. And both of them chose the military.

MH: How do you feel about that? Are you happy with that?

MR: I am proud of the choices that they made. The timing is awful. My son...it's been really harrowing.

MH: Has he been deployed?

MR: My son is scheduled to go to Iraq in January. But it was October, then it was January. It's flipped back and forth so many times, I can't deal with it anymore.

MH: Now how old is he?

MR: He is nineteen. On his eighteenth birthday, the Marines came knocking and whisked him away. Luckily, we had finished blowing out the candles. But it was something he chose.

MH: Was their dad in the military, too?

MR: No. I'm the veteran. And because of those dates, I'm considered a Viet Nam Era Veteran, not a Viet Nam veteran, but a Viet Era veteran. And a lot of people I know went, and did several tours in Viet Nam, and my theory of why we have so many screwed up Viet Nam veterans is that they can't live the reality of what happened there, and the atrocities. And how could they?

That's one of the reasons so many Viet Nam military who had already served in Viet Nam kept going back. Because you could request another tour in Viet Nam, I know people who went three tours in Viet Nam. After the first one, you asked to go, you'd be sent, because functioning in the real world was insane. I was in the military four years, it took me two years to adjust to being a civilian. It's that much of a subculture of society.

MH: Is there any thing that is part of you today that you think is a good thing or a bad thing that you got from that?

MR: Yeah. One of the things that you have to do when you're in the military, you have to get to know people really quickly. And to socialize. You can't just take years to get to know someone. And I've usually been kind of a slow burn to get comfortable with other people. But in the military you...and these are people that you lived with, these are people that you depended on...and so that's something that that I learned in the military, and to confront fears. Because believe me, there's some scary stuff. And I was in military intelligence—talk about paranoia.

Maritza may have initially joined the military as a way out of her oppressive family situation, but the military culture soon took hold of her and changed her; she

herself recognizes the military as a strong “subculture of society.” Some of the skills she learned in the military—the ability to get to know people quickly, the teamwork, and the “can-do” orientation would come in handy as she moved out into the business world and the go-getter private sector, and then later as she participated in the D.C. poetry scene, and finally throwing herself into the creation of her own corner of it. She would also find that the military experience opened doors for her in the working world.

Dietz, et al. have noted how the military has been a vehicle for social integration in multi-ethnic states like the United States and how young men and women who are conscripted or who enlist become socialized and changed by their experience.²⁷ Maritza was no exception. They also cite the long-term economic value of military training to those not making a career of it:

In the process of army service...recruits would be trained in a particular skill or skills which could be utilized in the civilian sector following discharge. The army would contribute directly to the integration of the citizen into the economic, social and political spheres of the state.²⁸

“The armed forces have long been thought of as offering...an opportunity for education and personal development for those who did not have access to appropriate”²⁹ opportunity, and the combination of access to training and meritocratic evaluation has enabled women and minorities to seek new employment opportunities after their service time is up. Despite earlier problems with discrimination, “since 1940 the vast training in engineering, logistics and enterprise within the military produced changes in occupational and professional structure of the nation.”³⁰ As a woman and a minority, Maritza’s military service gave her access to specialized training which then translated into career advancement after her discharge. Had it not been for her military experience,

she would have had to live out her father's plan for her, pursuing an "acceptable" career for a woman, that of teaching. The military's emphasis on individuals since its major bout with racial strife during WWII has seen it, in some ways, outpace the rest of American society in terms of egalitarian treatment of its members (studies show that despite its imperfections and some systemic racism, minority personnel still see the military as more egalitarian than society as a whole).³¹

[While] other nations use the military to maintain the status quo of ethnic power distribution...Butler's work on the United States Army portrays an institution that has made large strides over the past four decades as a vehicle for social change, both within itself and for the society at large. The military's unique structure—its separateness from society, its strict hierarchical nature, its practice of enforced close contact between different groups, and its advancement on merit and not ascription—allowed it to undertake rapid and successful integration, and to send its veterans back to a civilian society where they could operate at an advantage, at least compared to their non-veteran counterparts. Overall, Butler credits an approach of "individual nationalizing" within the military as crucial in its success.³²

While gender discrimination is still documented in the military, its record on integration "in some respects offers a model for the rest of society to emulate."³³ It's not so much that the "military is perfectly integrated, but that relative to the rest of society it has made significant and basic progress."³⁴ High-level skill training and the military's (relatively) egalitarian treatment of personnel translated into early career success for Maritza. Her satisfaction with her military experience is such that she still sees it as valuable in her life, wishes an unhappy cousin could have had the same experience, and has recommended it to her own children.

In 1978 after four years of pushing herself physically and mentally, of meeting every challenge, of intense intelligence training and analysis of "scary" data, Maritza

was discharged. The military years had broken her father's hold on her, and she didn't return home. She had been stationed in Maryland at one point, so she moved there and looked for a job. As noted, it took her two years to feel like a civilian again. Soon she found a job with substantial responsibility, but her early life in Maryland lacked the social structure of the army.

Maryland: Work, Marriage, Motherhood

Maritza's training in military intelligence impressed a number of prospective employers and her ability to analyze data translated well into the field of marketing research. It also got her a couple of interviews she might not have gotten. One interviewer took one look at her military experience and called her in, confessing that he hadn't even realized she was a woman. The implication was clear; she might not have gotten the interview had her gender been known. But once she was in, she impressed, and was hired as a production manager, one of her earliest jobs.

MR: And after the military, it opened up doors for me that I traditionally wouldn't have gotten. I remember getting calls for job interviews, and people saying, "Oh I didn't know you were a woman" because they read the resume and didn't focus on the name. They assumed I was a man.

MH: What job did you finally take?

MR: I got hired at Frito-Lay, one of the last Frito-Lay plants in Brentwood. I was the first female production manager, I was in charge of the packaging part of the plant, and something like nine months after I was there, they actually closed down the plant, because they started up the super plants, everything automated production and all of that.

Maritza even found that her bilingualism opened different sets of doors. Despite two employers' embracing her bilingualism it's hard to miss her feeling that something

she's proud of, her ability to speak two languages like a native speaker, is something that society either outright rejects or has ambivalence about:

MR: Then I wound up--I was also going to Hopkins studying counseling--and I actually got two job offers to work at one of the schools in D.C. that had bilingual...one of the bilingual schools...or work at Arbitron, because I was bilingual, you see. It was the only time that anyone ever wanted me because I was bilingual, you know [laughs], both people wanted me because I was bilingual.

MH: Why was that good for Arbitron?

MR: Um, because they do ratings and research, and there are pockets of Hispanic areas, and that was what I did. And then unfortunately, or fortunately, I don't know, I chose Arbitron, because they offered a lot more financially than the school system did.

MH: How long did you work for them?

MR: I worked for them for seven years in my first incarnation with them.

Maritza hated the corporate environment, but stayed there for her family—the money was much needed when she lived alone and during the early years of her marriage, and then was critical when she and her husband divorced after five years of marriage.

Her military experience may have given her a leg up in the job market, but her new life lacked continuity. This would be a recurring theme of our interviews:

MR: But it felt like a completely different life. My life feels like from this year to this year it was this life and from this year to this year it was that life. And I feel like I've had nine lives.

MH: There's Maritza in New York, Maritza in....

MR: Puerto Rico. Mmhmm. Maritza in Maryland because I was stationed in Aberdeen and I fell in love with Maryland. It was kind of like, Oh this is a nice little place. I went back to Puerto Rico to kind of see what I needed to do, came back in the January after that, interviewed at different places, got hired in Maryland. And so this is where I lived the most as an adult.

Maritza's military experience may have gotten her the interview that got her the production manager job in Maryland, but it didn't prepare for life on the U.S. mainland

without the structure of the military—she was no longer part of a team twenty-four hours a day. The ready-made family the military provides was gone, and she felt isolated. At long last, she found a Hispanic community in Maryland. It was there she would meet her first husband.

MR: When I came to this area...no, I was living here for awhile already. And I was in that weird place and time...I knew nobody, I had no family. And I remember there was one Thanksgiving. In this area everyone disappeared. And I was in absolute tears. “I don’t have any family.” [TEARFUL VOICE] And I was questioning my identity, that kind of thing. And then I discovered this whole Hispanic community. And I went “Wow.”

MH: Your first husband was Puerto Rican?

MR: He was Puerto Rican. I had this international dating list, and Puerto Rican was not on it. I...we met on the dance floor, and one thing led to another, and before I knew it we were living together, and I was like “Hmmm....?” [MAKES DOUBTFUL SOUND], and one thing led to another and it was when I was pregnant, it was like “Oh my goodness,” I was just so thrilled and so I excited.

By Puerto Rican cultural standards, Maritza came late to both marriage and children; meeting her husband in her late twenties, having her first child the year she turned thirty. In so doing, she defied one cultural norm, while embracing another—educated American women have been marrying and having children later, as they pursue life and career options.³⁵ Even today, Maritza remembers those who wondered “why I was waiting so long.” But she had good reason for her ambivalence about marriage and family:

MR: Because of my parents’ relationship I was so afraid of relationships. And it was, I was so afraid to become my Mom, and I was so afraid to find someone like my dad, and I adored my father, but there were so many issues and so much fear. And my last...I never even thought I could contemplate marriage, I never even thought I’d contemplate having children, because I was afraid to damage anybody [Laughs].

Here she employs the language and interpretation of psychotherapy, finding the roots of her ambivalence in her own childhood. As Maritza noted in another interview: “I’ve been in therapy off and on my whole adult life.” And, in an unusual string of connections, she wound up being a friend of the famous pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, who became one of her guides on her therapeutic journey, although he didn’t treat her specifically as a patient. But the bulk of her therapeutic work would come later, after the collapse of her marriage.

As I noted in another chapter, Frank underscores the importance of learning to “listen to silence.”³⁶ Like many informants who have undergone talk-oriented psychotherapy, Maritza was unusually forthcoming. However, when it came to discussing the dynamics and events of her marriage, she only gave hints. I chose to respect her reticence on this subject, and to work with what she did give me. Clearly, the work of parenting, as it often does, fell on Maritza, as the mother. Her first child, a daughter, was born in 1983. Two years later, her marriage in “shambles,” her son was born prematurely. The marriage, already under stress, continued to buckle, but she had to focus on her child:

MR: I think our marriage lasted slightly longer because of the baby, but...so I didn’t have as much fun with him because there were so many other issues, and he was born ten weeks early, so the whole beginning was very traumatic. I remember when I left the hospital without a baby [pained expression and vocal inflection]. And for a month. He was in the hospital for a month.

And then that was just the beginning. We had to make so many accommodations for him. He was—I was a monitor Mom—he was on a monitor for close to two years, I think. He was on heart and respiratory monitor. Every so often I had to take him to Georgetown.

So I couldn’t take Tony home until I took infant CPR, until I stayed with him in the hospital for a night, until...there were all these issues, and the response time when the monitor goes off, you have I think six or nine seconds to get to the baby when the monitor goes off, so I was a nervous wreck.

MH: Did you ever have to do infant CPR?

MR: No, but there were times when I'd pick him up, and not shake him, but move him so he'd breathe. So it was like...it was horrible.

Maritza and her husband did rally together briefly while dealing with their new son's health issues, but their divergent response to the situation only reinforced her feeling that the marriage couldn't work. She resented her husband's lack of involvement with parental decision-making.

MR: In a way, I couldn't see raising my children in a relationship that wasn't working. You're sharing these responsibilities, but your making most of the decisions anyway. Now looking back at things, there couldn't have been any other choices. And it wasn't easy.

MH: You were a single mom for all those years. Do you write about that?

MR: I've just skimmed the surface.

MH: They should have "single parent day."

MR: It's nuts, it's absolutely nuts.

In the long run, whatever cooperation had emerged during their son's health crisis was simply not enough to keep them together, and Maritza and her husband divorced. Puerto Rican women traditionally didn't divorce her husbands. But once again, Maritza was defying her ethnic cultural traditions by using a resource available to her through another national cultural tradition. The marriage over, two small children in her care, and her ex-husband almost entirely out of the picture (to this day, he doesn't initiate contact with the children), Maritza was faced with a real scramble for emotional, familial, and economic stability.

Maritza's cites her divorce as a situation where there was no other choice, but she alone was left to pick up the pieces and create a life for herself and her children. "In our

society, mothers are held totally responsible for children—even for things they cannot control.”³⁷ Despite evidence that the “stay-at-home mom” model is actually a rarity associated with middle-class affluence,³⁸ the “cult of domesticity” which idealizes the role of the mother as nurturer of children, and purports all other roles as a “threat to society, which look[s] to the institution of home for a sense of stability and continuity,”³⁹ still holds sway in much of our cultural discourse.

MH: You were a single mom...

MR: I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. There was about a ten-year period in my life where my life was so chaotic, and the kids were along for the ride, and I really, really worried...they're okay. My son still has some resentments, you know, about things, but I tell him, “You know what. I did the best I could under the circumstances. It could have been a lot worse.”

Bateson notes how women's lives, with competing duties, have led to a sort of life pattern of “improvisation” and adaptation.⁴⁰ Gerson notes how women's lives often do “not simply progress through a natural, pre-determined, and uniform sequence of stages. Their adult development was instead variable, problematic, and typically open-ended. Their choices reflected ... interplay between socially structured opportunities and constraints and active attempts to make sense of and respond to these structures...”⁴¹

But rather than look at the lives of women like Maritza, whose self-proclaimed “ten year detour” would strike some as chaos, as lives whose trajectories have gone badly awry, she notes how “the work and family decisions of these women were sensible reactions to the socially structured contexts they faced.” In fact, some would see Maritza's scramble over the decade following her divorce as a sign of resilience strength, and the development of “an extraordinary ability to translate” one's skills and meanings from one context to another.⁴²

The period wherein most American women's life stories end with marriage is over.⁴³ Bateson, Gerson, and others all note that focusing on how women have negotiated simultaneous roles and complex personal changes (sometimes self-initiated, but as often not) has great import for life history studies of men's lives as well, as all lives become increasingly complex and improvised as a result of national social changes and global economic shifts.⁴⁴

Women have been pioneers in dealing with complexity that our cultural discourse has been slow to recognize. "Traditional notions of women as the caretakers of children who, if employed, work only for "pin" money...[are] at odds with...the reality of women as family breadwinners."⁴⁵ Marital instability and economic constraints...[are among the] forces propelling women in general to follow non-domestic pathways.⁴⁶ Single women most often have no choice about whether they should follow the culturally accepted model of the full-time domestic mother.

Peters underscores the dilemma and opportunity of the single mother:

If single motherhood magnifies the problems of contemporary motherhood, it can also underscore the rewards of mothering while pursuing independent goals. Because the single mother is rarely privileged to play the traditional stay-at-home role, she is also more likely to have independent goals. Put another way, the single mother falls so short of the [socially constructed] maternal ideal, she is often more motivated than the married woman to create her own mothering rules and therefore is often freer to live her life.⁴⁷

Unlike the majority of American single mothers at the time, she had a skilled position which paid a pretty fair wage.⁴⁸ But as a single mother, Maritza had two roles for which "our society demands a full-time commitment from both its successful professionals and its mothers and therefore makes it exceedingly difficult for women to

function in both roles.”⁴⁹ “Single moms need more than the usual ingenuity to set up an extended family network and avoid isolation...more is better, particularly for single mothers, because the ease of parenting is directly proportional to the breadth of the parenting network.”⁵⁰ With no family nearby and two “full-time” positions (breadwinner, mother) to manage, Maritza reached back to a cultural tradition she had previously avoided—she sought out extended family, and in 1988, she moved back to Puerto Rico with her two children in tow.

Detours: The Second Return to Puerto Rico

Devastated by the collapse of her marriage, she returned home to the same volatile family situation. Despite the feeling that she had no other choices at the time, she feared she was “doing to my kids what my parents did to me” by moving back. Of course, there’s a big difference between the experience of a fourteen year old in a new culture and a five or three year old (the age of her children at the time), but still it was a major move. She had a good job lined up in media research, but wound up leaving the corporate world and moving from job to job, which was hard on her single-parent family:

MR: With more than one child...two is more than enough. It was insane, and I was traveling, I was doing all kinds of different things, and kind of juggling, you know, taking the kids along, and you know it was like, anywhere I went the kids had to come, and they had to behave. I just didn’t have the sanity to deal with anything else.

Her five year-old and three year-old in tow, she got an apartment near the beach in San Juan. Because of Puerto Rico’s proximity to the mainland, and its American commonwealth status, a sort of “revolving door migration” has evolved, where some go back and forth multiple times.⁵¹

MH: Do people go back and forth a lot?

MR: Yeah, people go back and forth a lot. The first generation tended to move back to Puerto Rico after they raised the children and all that.

MH: I would think that would kind of keep the culture alive for those in the States.

MR: But then there's kind of this, um, when you've grown up in Puerto Rico, you grow up feeling that you're more Puerto Rican than the Puerto Ricans that live in the States.

In the transcript above Maritza hits upon a cultural stress within Puerto Rican culture; the tension between Puerto Ricans who've grown up in Puerto Rico and returned migrants, often those from New York, the so-called "Nuyoricans," many of whom do not speak Spanish as fluently as the islanders, or who don't speak it at all, and almost all of whom speak English. English speakers are often greeted with hostility in Puerto Rico:

"Spanglish" is looked down upon. Nuyoric Spanish is generally stigmatized on the island... In Puerto Rico it is certainly true that in the competition for scarce jobs, the applicant who knows English has an advantage. The returnees and their children also have an educational edge of two and four years respectively over the permanent residents, which helped them fare better in the 1975 crisis. The harsh economic realities of an island plagued by a 50 percent unemployment rate, with 70 percent of its population on food stamps, in no small measure contribute to the island vs. migrant misunderstandings."⁵²

With such a weak economy, jobs are scarce. After leaving the corporate sector, Maritza struggled, but still was hired by the State Department's office in Puerto to translate documents from English into Spanish and vice-versa. Her ability to speak, read, and write English was clearly as advantageous as Zentella suggests above.

Her fluency in Spanish also qualified her as a real "Puerto Rican," and the fact that she did not engage in the code-switching of Spanglish immunized her from accusations of being a Nuyoric; she had also taught her children to speak Spanish. To her, biculturalism and bilingualism were an accepted fact; and even though she

maintained the two languages as separate grammar and vocabularies, she still felt herself possessing hybrid cultural traits in other ways—her comparatively late marriage and child-bearing, her experience in the army, her determination to have a career, the expectations she set for her own children, particularly her daughter. The typical gender roles would not be rigidly enforced for young Maria; for example, Maritza regularly represented the military as a reasonable option for a young woman, and Maria would join the reserves straight out of high school.

Zentella’s study of Puerto Rican return migrant Nuyoricans in Puerto Rico found that biculturalism was recognized as a phenomenon but not necessarily a welcome one. “Although 81 percent thought it was possible to be bicultural, 50 percent doubted that it was healthy, citing confusion as a problem.”⁵³ What to Maritza was part of her identity was not something they trusted. Still, even Maritza, when discussing her two migrations to Puerto Rico and the subsequent returns to the mainland that followed each, said, feigning a sort of befuddlement, “It’s like: Okay, who am I this time?” Although she accepts the multicultural reality of her national and ethnic affiliations (to label Puerto Rican culture as a single culture is a bit simplistic anyway, with its mixing of Spanish and Afro-Caribbean influences), she also recognizes that with this richness of influence comes a rather complicated and sometimes conflicted identity.

Maritza’s return to Puerto Rico as a single mother after four years in the military and ten years as a civilian on the mainland would have been a complex negotiation on its own, but she also had to cope with a looming family crisis, when her father was diagnosed with cancer shortly after her return:

MR: He passed away in '89. After Hurricane Hugo, my first hurricane. At the time I had moved back to Puerto Rico with the kids in '88. In '89, we had Hurricane Hugo. In '88, when I moved back, he was diagnosed with cancer. He was in the advanced stages, so when they found it, it had already metastasized. So it was like, "Great. He waited till I came home." And that following year, he was pretty much bedridden. And he died December 10 of 89, after Hurricane Hugo.

As she had throughout her childhood, when the family failed to cope, Maritza was left to pick up the pieces:

MR: It was so infuriating that it's always me. When my dad died, my mother was out of it, and I can understand that, but I couldn't believe that it had been a year since he had been diagnosed, and my mother was in denial for probably nine months out of that year. And I kept saying to her, that this is what's happening, so when he died, there's this funeral home that's pretty much where our family is gonna go. And I had to pick out a casket and I had to pick out the clothing that he would be buried in, and I've always felt that I've never had a life because I've been expected to take care of stuff like that. And I did all of the funeral home stuff, getting in touch with estranged. family that he hadn't been in touch with for decades.

The next sentence in that transcript is significant, for in it Maritza ushers in a new era in her life, as a key cultural tradition that will be an influence for the rest of her adult life emerges:

MR: And I worked things out through poetry.

Maritza wrote a poem about the kind of abuse her father subjected her family to; "Time Will Tell" is specifically about the abuse her youngest brother Guillermo lived with and how Maritza, as the eldest, pleaded with their father for mercy. We see her three family roles clearly delineated—witness, intermediary, and, now, via her writing, truth-teller:

Time Will Tell

*That polished brass buckle
you gave him on his birthday
raised welts on your young torso;
dislodged boyhood dreams
from your bruised back.*

*No matter what you did,
nothing ever pleased him;
yet nothing you ever did
deserved his unleashed fury,
your writhing fear of him.*

*I couldn't stand
there watching
while your wide eyes
screamed silent tears.*

“por el amor a dios”
I pleaded with him
to have mercy on
your tender soul.*

*He glared at me with that
twisted, chilling smile of his
(that once was so charming)
thinking no one would
challenge his authority...*

*Now, except for
your nervous tick and
his cold lonely grave;
no one else dares remember.⁵⁴*

**[“for the love of god”]*

Her father gone, what financial help she might have gotten from her family was no longer available. Maritza had fled the pressures of the corporate world, which she had always hated, but had stuck with to support her children. Despite the aforementioned instability, she felt she “just couldn’t do it any longer.” Her life would be a lot more

improvised over the next decade, both in Puerto Rico and in Maryland (she took the kids back to the States in 1994, after five-plus years in Puerto Rico). “I spent ten years doing all of the different things that I thought would rather have done than do what I did at Arbitron.” Her break from the corporate world enabled her to experience and evaluate other career paths that financial pressures had influenced her to abandon:

MR: I literally one day decided I can’t do this anymore, and quit my job. I’ve quit jobs and I’ve always had two children to support, but there’s always come a point where I can’t do this anymore. And something else will come up. There was a time when I actually worked for hospice, hospice caring. And I learned, I was trained to be a caregiver, I was trained to do bereavement counseling and all of that. And that was like a total detour. But I had quit, I did, and I wound up doing hospice caring, which was an amazing experience to be working with people who are dying, who know they’re dying. And I met some of the most amazing people that way. And it was such an incredible...I don’t know, source of strength? I don’t know what to call it.

Eventually, she returned to Maryland, and her period of career and work flux continued:

MR: When I came back in 94, I started subbing in the Montgomery County School System. I got a long-term sub assignment. Then I was still looking for something a little bit more stable with benefits because I have two pre-teens in tow. And then I eventually wound up back at Arbitron. But I spent ten years doing all of the different things that I thought would rather have done than do what I did at Arbitron. And I still wound up there. Because I swore I’d never go back to a corporate environment because I hated it so, and I still do. And now this year, now that the kids are grown, they’re gone, Maria’s married, it’s like I have no real reason for being there. I don’t have kids to support, and so, the timing is right.

As with many working women with children, Maritza’s career decisions have often been timed to coincide with child-rearing transitions;⁵⁵ in this case, her children are on their own both physically and financially, allowing her to focus on her own fulfillment a bit more. Her career path by the end of our third interview had taken yet another

interesting turn, one which will be discussed in a later section; however, starting in 1994, Maritza's journey down a different road entirely, would prove to be even more freeing and transformative. That was the year, shortly after her return to the U.S. mainland, that she finally "came out of the closet as a poet."

Poetry, Part I: 1994–95—"Coming Out" to a New Reality

Maritza had long had an interest in writing; as noted in an earlier section, her family's move back to Puerto Rico when she was fourteen had been one early stimulation to write:

MH: Why do you think you started then?

MR: Because I didn't know anybody, didn't have any friends, was in a completely new environment. I kind of turned inward.

MH: Was anybody in your family into poetry?

MR: My maternal aunt. She was a reader and a writer. And I gained a lot of the sensitivity. She was a very big influence on me during those quirky teen years.

MH: Did she share books with you, or did she talk to you about things, or did you kind of admire her?

MR: Um, we had an interesting relationship. It's not like we talked a lot, because I've always been very private. Very, very private. But she took the time. She took the time to...well, I read and wrote Spanish with her, she taught me to read and write in Spanish.

Maritza's poetry was her private way of working things out, and in a family with a father who played "mind games," it served as a refuge:

MH: Did you ever share your poetry with your family?

MR: No, it was my secret world.

MH: Was that a good thing for you?

MR: It was a good thing for me. Because growing up, during those years, I did a lot of writing...being sensitive, I did a lot of writing. When you're that sensitive at such a young age, the intensity of normal hormonal, yeah, changes, were so devastating overwhelming, and it gave me a place to put things.

MH: So do we say fourteen is one phase? Then?

MR: Fourteen. The college experience...the college experience was more experimenting with short stories. And I've got a couple of those.

Then came military service, where she did no writing whatsoever ("Most military poets write about it *after* the experience.") Maritza's interest in poetry did not resurface during her marriage, either—"I was too emotionally off the charts then." After her father died, it wasn't until she had begun to sort things out through cultural traditions she has made frequent use of, namely psychotherapy and its offshoot, psychodrama, that she felt grounded enough to start writing again. Soon after returning to the United States, she found her way to her first open reading. And it felt like a homecoming.

MR: I moved back to Maryland in '94. In 95 was the first time I ever shared any of my work with anybody at all.

MH: Where were you?

MR: At Borders at White Flint. Joe McManus had started a series. I had started going and I found a world that I belonged in all along that I didn't know existed.

MH: Did you feel 'normal' there, in a way?

MR: Yeah—I fit in!

MH: Did you ever feel crazy because everyone else seemed so...too normal, and you're so emotional, and they make you feel like you're nuts?

MR: Yeah. But the artistic world is that world that allows for idiosyncrasies, that those idiosyncrasies aren't something bad. It's called "talent," it's called sensitivity.

MH: For me it seems obvious, but for other people it's like...

MR: Yeah—They want to say, "Whoa, what's wrong, that sounds really odd or strange."

MH: So '94 was the first time you had shown your poetry? What was that—at White Flint? What was that like? Were you scared?

MR: I was very scared.

MH: Bowie Barnes and Noble, Borders...those big places can be overwhelming...

MR: It's intimidating at places like those. The first time I did it, I could hear the clinking of the cups.

MH: You don't seem scared now. When I see you read now, I don't think you're scared—are you?

MR: I had gone to poetry readings, and it was like I knew I had to bite the bullet. And when I was doing Mariposa, I'd say the same thing to the people almost like Joe said to me, "You only have to do it for the first time once. After that...you know," you know that it's okay, you know whether you're reaching people. And I heard applause, and it was strange, it was almost like a disconnect. What is that? And I said, "Oh My God, someone enjoyed what I wrote." And it almost gave me purpose, that if I... this isn't just what I see. This isn't just about me. There's somebody out there who might be able to relate.

Maritza has written a poem about reading for the first time—a sort of how-to for beginners who are afraid as she was. The title "Doing It" suggests a sort of loss of virginity:

*It doesn't happen often
but today, she thinks about
the first time and remembers
how excited and nervous she was
to explore fertile ground.*

The fertile ground is the richness of art and expression. After life dominated by the perfectionism of her father, the caretaking roles she adopted at home and in marriage as spouse and mother, and the "can-do" push yourself worlds of the army and the private sector, she finally found a place for herself, for self-expression.

*She'd dreamed and planned
for so long: what to wear
what to say, who else
would be there to witness
her emerging and she couldn't
wait for it to happen.*

Interestingly, Maritza would soon adopt the pseudonym *mariposa*, the Spanish word for butterfly. The metaphor of emergence is clear.

*No one had warned her
that her heart would
pound so loudly
that her palms would
sweat and her mouth
would go dry.*

*Her voice quivered
with anticipation.
Her words exploded
like a summer storm
soothing the parched pavement.
Her attentive audience was pleased.*

Her satisfaction at the recognition from the audience is something that she comes back to again and again. Note the word “attentive.” To a woman who had been in attendance to the needs of others all her life, this was a luxurious experience.

MH: What does the audience do that tells you something works?

MR: It’s more what they don’t do. There is this level of silence, and there’s this... it’s almost like you hear this gasp when it’s one of those powerful poems. You need to have some kind of reaction. Intense silence is a reaction because you have their attention. That gasp when you know you got them. You need a response, you need some kind of feedback. And not after the reading. After the reading the majority of people will say “Oh I really enjoyed the reading.” But there are some people who are physically affected by it. I never listen to, I try not to listen to “Oh, I enjoyed your work.” I always say thank you, but that’s not how I gauge whether the poem worked or not. It’s the level of silence, the level of attention that you feel. And after you start, and there’s a moment in your poem where there’s a pause before you conclude it, and if you look around everybody is waiting for something. That’s what tells me that it worked.

*In retrospect, it wasn’t
her best performance
but yes, the most memorable.
With time and much practice
she learned to relax, enjoy
and please an eager gathering.*

*“You only have to do it
for the first time once”
she tells other novice poets.
“After that, you’ll
always want more.”⁵⁶*

In our last interview, nearly a decade since she had started reading, Maritza was clear about the meaning she derived from reading before an audience, “I enjoy reading so much; I would rather read than publish. I enjoy it so much.” Her early experiences with reading were so fulfilling, so validating that she felt she was emerging from her cocoon at last. She even came to use the readings and audience reaction as an editorial tool:

MH: I know some who say they don’t like their poems when they first write them.

MR: Poets don’t. And when you read it in public, that’s when you know, if it works or doesn’t work. And if I make a mistake... And I’ve done this a dozen times, with what I’m reading and I’m saying out loud, I edit the work to what I’ve said, because for some reason what I said was the more natural thing than what was written.

There are many levels of achievement in the poetry world, which, being so far off of the mainstream of popular culture, has far less structure. Some write only for themselves, others are just happy to have a chance to read, some want to be the featured reader at a publicized reading house, some just want to self-publish and distribute within their poetry community, still others want to be published by an actual, reputable publisher and establish a reputation outside their local scene. Maritza was a busy reader and had self-published a chap book. I wondered about her long-term goals:

MH: What are you trying to achieve as a poet? Are you trying to achieve “success” as a poet? Do you have a goal?

MR: Self-actualization. I remember from taking counseling and psych. And you do write at a basic need level when you first get started because you’ve got all this

stuff that you need to do something with. Then you move to the...you know, so your basic needs are met, shelter, da-da-da. And you do move up to...

MH: Are we talking Maslow?

MR: The Maslow hierarchy of needs. Then you get to the point that you wanna read, you read, then you get to the point where you want to get published, so you get published, and then where I am now is the MFA.

Maritza explains her poetry goals in terms of the Maslovian hierarchy of needs.

Here her training in counseling (another chapter of her life that met with a detour—she never finished her Master’s degree. As a working mother, she couldn’t find time to devote to her practicum.) and her personal experience in psychotherapy come into play. She also echoes a recurring feeling of my other informants—a belief in personal fulfillment through self-expression. As discussed earlier, this is part and parcel of the “expressivist revolution” the boomer generation grew up with. As a generation, we were taught to expect an unprecedented level of self-fulfillment and to believe that our highest goal should be self-actualization and self-expression. No longer satisfied with secure roles within reliable social structures, we shifted, like Maritza, “to a view of one’s well-being based on a psychological model.”⁵⁷

Although she seems to prefer reading her poetry to writing or being published, she agreed that the writing process can seem to come from an equally elevated state—as with her chap book, which she felt “came from somewhere else,” and individual poems, in which she was “taking direct dictation from the muse.”

MH: It came “from somewhere else,” but do you think it still uses something of you?

MR: Absolutely. “My Daughter’s Ashes” is like that, and it’ll probably be published as part of an anthology because I read it at Iota, but I’ve never submitted it for publication, and I’ve read—hardly edited it—it was written very much

autobiographical. And that was just...there was nothing for me to do to it after it was written.

MH: Higher power?

MR: Yes. It was a gift. It was a gift from the gods. And I guess that's what they call...you know...some people call it the muse...some people call it...I had nothing to do with writing that, except...I was the scribe. I have other things like that that are almost magical.

MH: Do you have anything that you craft and craft and craft? You feel “I really worked on this?”

MR: Yes.

MH: Did it ever wind up morphing into something else?

MR: Actually there are things that...if I'm starting to make this work, it's not working. But I had this one poem that tormented me for about a year till I got it right. The poem didn't take that long to write, but it took a year to finish it because I wasn't happy with that last line.

MH: Do you feel that you were waiting for something inside you to get it?

MR: Yeah. Yeah.

MH: Because a lot of people feel you should sit down and you write and you craft it, it's all very mechanical.

MR: There's a lot of personally crafted poetry and the majority gets published. But it doesn't move me. Li Young Lee, I read his poetry and I call it quiet. His poetry is so quiet, but the power of his words is amazing. But I can read other people, and maybe it's a perfectly good poem, but it does nothing for me, I don't care. It's not the...it's the content, not form.

The poetry world soon became Maritza's private haven; back in the States with two pre-teens to support and care for on her own, she bounced from job to job, until she finally “accepted reality” and went back to work for her old, highly corporate employer for the salary and benefits. Hating the corporate world as she did, those poetry weekends became even more of an oasis. “It was so hard to go back to reality after the weekend.” It was important enough to her that she would travel all over the Washington Metro area for readings. “I ran from reading to reading.” And the poetry community, with

its eclectic mix of the offbeat and the pedestrian, the expressive and the formalist, and unschooled and the academic, became her extended family. Her ability, learned in the military, to make friends fast served her well once again. She traveled to readings out of state (Delaware, New York) with various poets, staged mixed media programs with artists from other genres.

She continued to read as often as she could, published her own book, served on panels, and volunteered as an editor on a respected D.C. area poetry journal where she was also published regularly. And one summer, co-hosting a sort of offbeat “artist’s afternoon” at a deli in Rockville, Maritza began toying with the idea of creating her own poetry salon, a meeting place for artists and by artists that would be more than a one-shot deal. Out of this came *Mariposa, Center for Creative Expression*. For the next three years it would be a major hub of the local poetry scene.

Vignette

Artist to Artist at Mariposa

It’s late September in Maryland, summer giving way to fall, short-sleeve afternoons giving way to jackets in the evening. This Saturday night has the feeling of that one last warm night; the evening breeze has a hint of transition, of impending chill in it. As we sometimes do, my wife Susan and I have traveled the two-plus miles from Riverdale Park to Berwyn to participate in another night of poetry at Mariposa, Center for Creative Expression.

We see a mix of regulars, newcomers, and “stars”—

- Jesse Liggett, a lanky, bespectacled gentle giant with a beard who has been published far and wide and is one of the PG poetry scene's resident gurus, his folksy poetry reminiscent of Robert Frost
- Nita Taylor, who, in partnership with Jesse hosts or facilitates half the county's readings at various bookstores, libraries, and café and is also a link between the local African American arts scene and the greater PG poetry scene—her expressive poetry incorporates elements of African American “spoken word” traditions
- Ronald Paulson, a seemingly frail man in his seventies who reads his own romantic poetry with a surprisingly resonant bass voice, occasionally breaking into song
- Oscar, a stocky white-haired man who often reads Rilke poems in German and English.
- Betty Lynn, her Texas twang modified by years of living in Silver Spring, who belongs to an women's writing group—her sophisticated poetry is grounded in the rough reality of her difficult childhood and first marriage
- Red Dix, long gray hair cascading down his back, whose poems veer between erotic and sexist
- J.J. Lester, with his seemingly never-ending batch of haikus, some serious, some light
- Dwayne Waykin, mail carrier, new to the scene, whose work has a touch of jazz
- Morty White, with his battered folk guitar, in his usual head-to-toe denim and white ponytail who claims to have known Ginsburg back in San Francisco's old Haight-Ashbury days
- Dennis Roberts, a physics grad student who writes neo-Gothic poetry fashioned after Edgar Allen Poe
- Carina Monet, a self-proclaimed poetry goddess and one of the scenes leading self-publishers, who, as usual, has not one, but two male groupies in attendance. Her poems embrace other art forms, especially music. She has spearheaded the publication of three anthologies of local poetry.
- Bill Grimes, a boyish, though thoroughly graying poet whose dead serious but occasionally off the wall reading style is oft-imitated but never quite duplicated
- Warren Ng, who specializes in designing websites for non-profits, and writes nature poetry
- Lee Reynolds, the man of a hundred keys, which jangle as he reads—another naturalist
- Justin, a guitarist and sculptor whose music and words mix lyrical punk and folk
- Eleven-year old Singer Stephanie, and her guitar-playing dad
- and Jane Nguyen, a respected academic poet and teacher, who, with one other published academic poet and one unpublished “populist” poet plucked from

obscurity by Mariposa's host Maritza Rivera, is among the three featured readers of the evening.

It's an eclectic bunch with a wide range in academic training, subject matter, reading experience, and style. And many of that diverse assembly would come to call Mariposa "home."

My poems tucked into my jacket pocket and my guitar in its case, we trickle in with the rest of the crowd: poets, musicians who may also read or may just use their three minutes of open mike time to sing one song, wannabes, unsure whether they're going to read tonight or not; and friends, family, children, and lovers of all of the above. The age range is from ten to seventy-five. While the crowd is majority white tonight, on other nights, depending on who's reading, it can be majority black, or simply diverse and multi-cultural. Latino and Latina poets have been featured; poetry collectives have celebrated their publications here. Mariposa has also co-sponsored a night of poetry aimed at addressing illegal incarceration and torture around the globe and hosted by poetry heavyweight E. Ethelbert Miller.

At the center of all this activity is Maritza Rivera, chief proprietor, booker, and spiritual guide of Mariposa. Paper versions of her namesakes (*Mariposa*, Spanish for butterfly, has, on occasion, been the name she uses as poet), large and small, dot the walls; the five dollar cover is deposited in a butterfly-shaped dish on an unguarded table just inside the door. Flyers for tonight's reading and future readings lie beside it.

It's a small place; the fire code says "Maximum Capacity" 38, but on some nights, it's been pushing 50. On warm summer nights, this old corner storefront, dominated by large glass windows on each side, grows stuffy—the only openable window is a small

transom above the one and only door. It's an old building, thirties vintage, that harkens back to a day when malls did not yet exist, light rail ran out to neighborhoods in the slowly growing D.C. satellite suburbs, and every residential hamlet had its own business district. In some ways, it's ideal for poetry—serene, quiet, decidedly small-scale, local. The Catholic School across the street is always quiet this time of the week; the hippie café down the street draws a little traffic. The poets gather on the raised doorstep of Mariposa to chat, many, to smoke, before, during and after the featured readings and open mike, even as the cooling night mist proclaims autumn.

Maritza is over in the corner, behind an oversized desk, chatting quietly on the phone. Five foot three, with straight black hair that frames large brown eyes in a sensitive face, she wears a simple black dress tonight. The soft lighting of the room doesn't quite reach her, so she is in shadow. We can't see her but we hear her low, musical voice, and an occasional peal of laughter. Soon she hangs up and seeks out the three main readers who will start the evening at 8 p.m., followed by an open mike for the rest of the poet-audience at 9. She checks in with the first reader and the two of them work on microphone placement and decide which chair Jane Nguyen will use, and where to place the music stand that will hold her notebook of new poems and her three collections of published work. She also talks to the second reader, a white male in his mid-40s who teaches writing at the nearby University of Maryland. She seemingly knows everybody. Finally, she goes out on the Mariposa's front stoop to say hello to the third reader, a first time headliner who is nervously chain smoking under the awning, looking out into the early evening light.

She moves with equal comfort between these established, “academic” poets, and the unschooled rookie reader who “writes what he feels” and reads with more passion than polish. A Latina of color, New Yorker by birth, Puerto Rican by ethnicity, her life story embraces a multitude of traditions. Here in her poetry salon Mariposa, as in other areas of her life, she is a bridge—between wildly divergent poetry scenes, between cultures, between languages. Maritza has established herself as one of the poetry “gurus” of the local scene, and some of the younger poets look up to her. Tonight’s first-time reader has adopted Mariposa as his home away from home and shows up early to help set up the intimate room—with its small round club tables, each one with a small dish of candies, its mishmash of wooden and folding chairs, and its snack table (bought on a \$20 weekly budget at the local Costco in Beltsville, though she often throws in a bonus like fresh-cooked *samosas*) with coffee, tea, and cookies, and finally the soft-lighting from a few carefully placed floor lamps.

The room is a rectangle, maybe twenty by thirty; perhaps that’s why no one ever feels far from the space that serves as (non-elevated) stage; after reading, poetry “stars” mingle with the neophytes and other veterans. The usual distance from the more formal staged readings of Strathmore Hall, the Writer’s Center, or the academy is missing here. Maritza, as is her custom, emerges from the shadow of her corner to welcome the audience, and thank them for coming out to participate tonight. Before she introduces the first featured reader, she reads a short poem of to get the night started.

As the reading unfolds over the next two hours, Maritza pops back into the light to introduce the next featured reader, make an announcement, usher in the break time. She may be just outside the light, but her welcoming spirit permeates the room—her “mmm”

or “ahhh” when she likes a poem or song is the reward each reader seeks. In the course of the evening, she may not talk to each of the twenty-plus poets, but each reader feels her presence.

Tonight’s main attraction, Jane Nguyen reads a series of sonnets so natural that they don’t sound like sonnets; she has reinvigorated the form. Her poems range from reflections on her travels to Europe to struggles in marriage and middle age. Ben Chase, from the university, reads what seem to me like a series of riddles—I can’t follow the grammar of his poetry enough to make sense of it. While Jane’s polished verse brings me in contact with the emotional and physical realities of life, Ben’s opaque poetry leaves me frustrated. The rhythms are exquisite, the content impenetrable. Still, some like Ben’s work, though Jane is the clear audience favorite. She’ll sell a few copies of her books during the break (after the third reader takes us on a Gothic romp).

After the polished poetry of the academic poets, and the featured rookie’s brief star turn, it’s time for the open mike. The readers range from the oft-published to those just happy to have an outlet. Betty Lynn stuns the room with the powerful imagery of a poem about her painful Texas childhood. Jesse reads a complex poem about the push-pull of relationships—this one will be published next month in *The Written Life*, a respected local journal. My wife and I make eyes at each other as Greg Garland reads “Barcelona Bus” for the zillionth time (has he only got one poem?); we wonder if it’s possible that the “Haiku Jukebox” guy really has 1000 haikus in that big blue notebook; we laugh along with everyone else when Dwayne Waykin borrows my guitar to do his wacky, jazzy song-poem about a leaky faucet. We meditate as Lee, who we surmise must come straight from his building maintenance job, reads another of his ecstatic nature

poems, a hundred-plus keys jangling on his hip; like many of the others in the poet-audience, we scribble quietly as the other poets inspire new ideas—being in a room full of poets gets the juices flowing.

We fidget nervously when we're the next up. Susan, a bilingual kindergarten teacher, reads her poem about the journey of one student's mother across the Mexican border, "Juana Crossing the River," a little shyly, but gets Maritza's "mmm;" I sing my song about intimate communication, "Speak My Language," a little shakily, but I can tell the room is connecting to my song. We trade "you were okay" glances and hand squeezes, then try to get back into the flow of the other readers' work. By the time Steve and his daughter, Joanie, sing a duet, we've taken in enough to stoke the creative fires for a good while.

Maritza bookends the night with a final poem, *My Daughter's Ashes*:

My Daughter's Ashes

*She insisted on being cremated.
Had her own strange way
of viewing life and death.*

*Had a passion for trees,
butterflies; snakes, spirits;
old movies, night music.*

*She loved to dress up
and dance; wore
lots of black and
shades of purple;
never cared much for red; said
her brother was her best partner.*

*She lived like a gypsy, wanted
her own enchanted island; wandered
off into the rain forest, followed
forgotten trails in El Yunque.*

*She learned to camp
under mountain stars;
slept to the rush of
the Wallingford stream;
drove for miles in the rain
to reach Maine, but
never made it to Nova Scotia.*

*Told her once when she
was young, it wouldn't last
forever; asked her what
she was trying to prove.*

*Though she tried to explain,
never quite understood her
poetry or who she really was.
Guess I wasn't listening, didn't like
the sound of things she said.*

*She believed in things I never could,
took the risks I never would, found
a way to soar with her own wings.*

*She insisted on being cremated
and always had a way
of getting exactly
what she wanted.⁵⁸*

Again, the room is hushed—one woman gasps, she is so moved. The last poem of the night packs a wallop. Maritza thanks all the poets—and we all applaud each of us. Another night of exchange at Mariposa, with art received, art given.

Afterwards, Maritza asks us if we would like to be featured readers *together* some time in the near future. The “guru” has validated us. We say yes, drive home happy from a night of poetry and music, a little bit buzzed by the excitement of her offer.

Poetry, Part II: Mariposa—Soul Work

MH: I was talking with Carl Banner and I mentioned Mariposa, and he said, “That was an act of heroism. Pure and simple.”

MR: [Laughs, delightedly] Well, yeah, I know he’s had his share of...actually, I don’t know if he mentioned it that the inspiration for Musica Viva and Mariposa came from Joe McMahon when we did a summer artist’s salon in Rockville, at Moonlight Deli. And we just got people together and the owners of the deli had stuff to purchase like food and stuff, and people read and shared other artistic things, and Carl came and he said something like “This is what I want to do.” So he started doing Washington Musica Viva before I started Mariposa. It was like this is kind of a neat concept, how can you maintain it and sustain it, and his wife Cassandra had that art studio...

MH: You started Mariposa in 1999?

MR: This was August, it must have been August of ’98. 99. It was August of ’99. It just...it took on a life of its own. I was with my best friend, Dennis. We had worked together, then we’d dated for awhile, but we saw that wouldn’t work. But we were still close friends. And he encouraged me to go for it, because it was like, I remember, we used to...he was vegetarian, and I was practicing vegetarian or non-practicing vegetarian or something, and we’d go to Beautiful Day Café for breakfast. And one morning we went, and that corner place which had been a thrift shop for a couple of years before had a “For Rent” sign in the window. And I thought “Wow, that would be a perfect place for me to do this.” And Dennis was like my “silent partner.”

MH: I remember you’d always be in the corner around 9:30 or 9:45, just before closing, quietly taking a phone call.

MR: That was probably him checking on how things went. He didn’t go very much. He wasn’t social. He was diagnosed with cancer. And I thought...why do people around me—I have this love-hate relationship with God. I could never have done that without him, because...never in a million years. And in a sense that was his shining star in a very crazy, very traumatic life. And so he was pretty pathologically anti-social. But he was very encouraging. He was a friend I had known from my first days as a civilian in Maryland back in the eighties.

More than once in our interviews Maritza used the slogan, “Everything happens for a reason.” Such new age thought was sprinkled throughout her explanation of events—that my high-powered daughter “chose” me for her father, that what happened at Mariposa was “meant to be” and “magical.” Frankly, I subscribe a bit to this way of

thinking myself, and now that I have a child understand other parents who feel as Maritza does—that our children “choose us.” “New Age” thought often sees events as involved in some sort of synchronicity—meaning that objectively unrelated events are seen as related.⁵⁹ Maritza was thinking of opening up an outlet for creative artists, and (so) suddenly sees a storefront available for reasonable rent in a quiet neighborhood; she has a small budget, and is able to find furniture at cut-rate prices. Everything comes together, and, in retrospect, events are subjectively related to one another—often as cause and effect.

MR: I used to say it picked me, I didn’t pick it, because it happened. And I used to say if I had thought about the logistics of this, there’s no way I could have done this. Financially, there’s no way I could have done this. It took close to two months to get the place ready, to repaint it, to furnish it. And I remember it, the last thing that it was that we couldn’t find. We had found a great deal on tables, and we couldn’t find chairs. And the chairs were just so expensive. Folding chairs, they were expensive. And one Saturday, there used to be this kind of resale place, and there were these chairs that had been five dollars apiece, and they were selling them for a dollar a chair. And I said, “There they are, there are the chairs.”

Maritza had to deal with the financial reality of being a single mom with two kids while coming up with money for rent and supplies for her ambitious project:

MH: What was the rent?

MR: It was... The first year it was \$600 a month. And then because it was viable, and she knew I struggled to pay it, she reduced it to \$500. So the last two years, it was \$500.

The poetry salon was so meaningful to her that she went to great lengths to make it work, investing her own money in it, and even altering her living arrangements. She drew on her people skills and personal discipline (partly learned in her family where she

was often the one everyone leaned on, partly learned from the military's can-do spirit and feeling of impromptu camaraderie). She learned to improvise to achieve her goal.

MH: Did you put a lot of your own money into it?

MR: Uhh—[hesitates]-Yes, I did. There were months, in the fall and the winter were the best months, when literally the money that was collected did cover the rent. But I wound up renting a room in my house, so I'd know that no matter what Mariposa did that I'd have the money to pay the rent there. You get resourceful.

MH: The windows didn't open...

MR: The windows didn't open. And when I first went in there, it was in August, and I couldn't be in there more than five or ten minutes without being drenched in sweat, because it was so hot in there.

MH: How much money do you think you put in there?

MR: I can't even...because we were lucky on finding the deals we found, we probably got it ready on about a thousand dollars.

Maritza also had to deal with that most hallowed of American traditions—bureaucracy. There were zoning regulations (bookstores and art galleries are somehow considered too risky to place in residential areas) to contend with, fire and insurance requirements, inspections. She mostly worked around the rules, doing anything she could to find a way to bring her vision for a poetry and arts center into being. Its ironic that something so innocuous, yet so meaningful to so many would face so many bureaucratic hassles.

MH: Was there insurance, and stuff like that?

MR: I needed to have insurance, but I never did because I couldn't afford it. The county gave us a hard time because that area has a different kind of zoning. It's not commercial zoning per se. It's in a residential area, so that area is zoned for only certain types of businesses. So we couldn't be a bookstore.

MH: Why's a thrift store okay but a bookstore isn't?

MR: A thrift store was okay. It couldn't be an art gallery. It couldn't be an art gallery, it couldn't be a bookstore. Because art galleries are open to questionable displays, and when you're in a residential area...It couldn't be a bookstore because of content...there were certain things it couldn't be. So I registered it as a

magazine. I found a category that I could register it as. So it was newspapers and magazines. I had available newspapers, I had available magazines, I had available literary journals. I had to have that stuff available in order to operate.

MH: Did they come by and check you out once in awhile?

MR: We got inspected a couple of times. That was the county, then the city of College Park, there was other inspections. And I think the owner of the building which had the shop and store, you had to have so many fire extinguishers. I think at times we shared fire extinguishers. I had it at night, because I was open at night. I think she had it during the day. We were right next door. Or when she knew she was being inspected, she'd come next door and get the fire extinguisher. [Laughs] It was nuts, it was absolutely nuts.

But it was such a unique experience, because everything fell into place. And like I say, I rented a room in my house to make sure that I wouldn't be financially stressed about it, although I was financially stressed about it, but at least I knew that I had income to cover that expense if I needed it.

MH: You also had refreshments. I saw you at Costco shopping for stuff. How much did one night cost you?

MR: Well, I should've been a little bit more, you know...economical. I remember somebody saying that you always had to feed poets. Because that might be the only meal for a working artist. But I'd spend...my limit was usually twenty dollars. But...uhh...who knows [sticking tongue out]? But that was my soul work, so if I went over....

MH: S-O-U-L?

MR: S-O-U-L.

MH: That was a unique place, because it was for the artist.

MR: Because it had a life of its own. I was just there to open the door and set things up and help keep people from sweating. From the beginning it was like that.

MH: Did you plan to have poetry readings all along?

MR: Yeah. It was designed to do that. And I had other plans. I had ideas of what to...and if I had been...not more organized, something else. More business-minded. I had planned to have it open during the week for yoga classes. And I knew a yoga instructor, and I never got all of the other things coordinated. I was traveling on my job, I was out of town, two or three days out of the week. And there were all these other things I had planned to do that I couldn't. But I didn't push it because sometimes you know, you forge ahead with what you think something should be, and it doesn't work, and what worked there was what it was. And as much as I...I had people trying to help me because I had initially applied for a 5013c, but I was horrible at the paperwork. I established a board, we met a

few times, but I needed somebody else to do the paperwork, I needed somebody else to do this. And some people came up with good ideas and brought up and did certain things, but it was almost like I wasn't yet able to delegate. I was too obsessive about it. And I think the last year was when I was able to do that...so we divided up the weeks. One person would host this week, and another person would host that week.

Becker's previously mentioned *Art Worlds* describes discusses the "patterns of cooperation" in an "art world."⁶⁰ The earlier chapter on Carl Banner described the ways in which an art world can collapse, and the pains that must be taken to rebuild a failing art world, or put together a new one. The D.C. poetry scene was such an art world, with a mix of local journals, reading sites (ranging from large bookstore chains, to cafés, coffeehouses, college campuses, libraries, independent retailers, and avant-garde performance spaces), arts councils (with small grants to distribute each year), key poet facilitators (both non-academic full-time "amateurs" as well as academic "professional" poets) like Maritza, writing teachers, computer experts, on-line resources, low budget in-house poet/publishers, and audience members, among others. Maritza's venue was created against this backdrop.

MH: Did Mariposa have a mission statement? A goal? I always felt it was a place for artists.

MR: A lot of the other reading places I felt had something else going on there. Mariposa was one place where there wasn't anything else going on. Well, I named it "Mariposa, Center for Artistic Expression," and the purpose of it was to provide artists with a place to express themselves. That's what it was for. It was in support of...to have a place where, if you're a writer, you could say that your work is for sale here. If you're an artist, that your art was displayed here. People need resumes, and I knew that from going through the reading process and the writing process, the submission process, that you need to build your resume. And there weren't enough places where you could go where that's what the focus was. Giving you your sea legs. Giving you wings. A lot of people read for the first time at Mariposa, where it was an accepting audience.

MH: I liked the fact that it was an audience of artists. That's totally different than an audience where you're trying to entertain them.

MR: And a lot of them, especially musicians would say that it was intimidating at some point because they weren't used to playing to an audience that was listening. And the attention that...there was really a lot of energy in that place, and it was positive energy, and the people that---I remember the very first time that I stood up in front of an audience I thought I was going to have a heart attack and die before I would get there. And I wanted that experience although I thought Oh my God, I'm going to stand up...I wanted that experience to be a nurturing one for people, so it wouldn't feel like death, you know? [Laughs]

Operating on a shoestring budget, she made use of the poetry network (some of whom made use of her space and time to promote their own events) to get the word out:

MH: How did you find, how did you get the word out about Mariposa?

MR: It was word of mouth. Absolute of word of mouth. It was in the City Paper, I got listed in the City Paper every week to the point where finally I have stopped getting calls about Mariposa. It was on websites. That's how Jordan found Mariposa. He found a website that had a link to Mariposa. He says he's never been able to find it since. And just people I know, but it was just word of mouth. I had these flyers, and I made sure they were in the Writer's Center and Beautiful Day and Smile. So it was a labor of love, it was an absolute labor of love; the word got out.

MH: You got significant poets to read, known poets, I mean. Was that hard?

MR: It was hard. Nobody ever got paid at Mariposa. That's the one thing I tried to do differently with the music, because musicians like to get paid but that just didn't work. Lynn Lifshin came out, and she new Ethelbert Miller, and Grace Cavalieri. The people that came out are amazing. Laura Bass is from New York. There were two San Francisco people.

MH: Were they concerned about being paid? Or they didn't care?

MR: They didn't care. Because if you have a book what you're trying to do is sell your work and enough people were able to sell enough work that I guess it was worth their while. And I know, for example, the Kensington Row readings, they know it's a non-paying gig. There are several that know you're not going to get paid. There are poets who refuse to go places that charge that don't pay the poet.

MH: They charge admission...

MR: But don't pay the poet. But I always explained that I'm charging to keep this place open.

MH: It's not like Borders where it's going to be open anyway...and the reading is just something extra. How many regulars did you have at Mariposa?

MR: There were usually, there were at least. I knew that if at least a dozen regulars showed, we'd be okay.

Despite her many connections throughout the various D.C. poetry communities (there are distinct constituencies in Montgomery, Prince George's, and Arlington counties, as well as in the District itself, notwithstanding much overlap), *Mariposa* remained very much Maritza's show. *Mariposa*, the Spanish word for butterfly, was also her sometime *nom de plume*. The décor—paper, cloth, and plastic butterflies from floor to ceiling, a butterfly-shaped contributions dish—reinforced the identification of space and proprietor. For the first two years, she hosted every reading or performance (initially she ran the salon two nights a week, Fridays for music, Saturdays for poetry; the Friday music series closed down after the first year), and single-handedly recruited and booked two or three performers for each night. She handled all the refreshments, cleaning, repairs, decorations, and business. Despite the many in the poetry world who might have helped her (of whom she would finally avail herself as she started realizing the lessons of arts management, and the wisdom of delegating, when a crisis necessitated her occasional absence during the third and final year), she did it all herself. A labor of love, it was also exhausting going to work at her salaried position where she often traveled and worked overtime, attending readings all over the area to find readers, then shopping for refreshments and supplies (I still recall vividly that time I ran into her at Costco, her cart loaded with crackers, nuts, candy, and toilet paper for the salon) in her “spare time.” And, of course, at home she was still single parent to a fourteen year old and a sixteen year old.

By business standards, Mariposa was neither unbridled success nor dismal failure. Over the years, she lost some money, but nothing compared to the money Carl of Washington Musica Viva (chapter 1) sank into his project. Of course, he was earning a government scientist salary (while his wife, retired from teaching, collected a small pension) so he could afford it, and while poets will work for free, classical musicians will not. But as Maritza stated earlier, this was her “soul work,” so making money was not the goal, and anything close to breaking even was enough to sustain the project.

She also was well aware of the hierarchical nature of the poetry world, and one of her goals was to help poets build their resumes. “When you can say, ‘I read here, I read there, I was published here,’ it gets you started; it opens doors.” And for the large number of poets without academic credentials or connections to publishers and critics, too many doors were closed—the professionals, who create the “rules,” had locked out the amateurs. One Mariposa regular reflected on Maritza’s help in getting poets’ careers rolling: “We owe her a big debt. She birthed a lot of us.”

Maritza came to be an unusual figure in the D.C. poetry scene, quietly charismatic, academic but without credential (namely, the “MFA”), expressive but schooled (through numerous writing classes) in form, bilingual (but just beginning to mix languages in her poetry); she was the bridge between very different approaches to both poetry and the building of an artistic circle. She was, if you will, the poetry scene’s “translator,” the person who moved easily among scenes—from the more reserved, white, mainly upper-middle class of the Montgomery scene and its central venues, The Strathmore and The Writer’s Center, to the offbeat Iota café of Northern Virginia, to the formalist -oriented bent of the academic poets at the area’s many colleges, to the urban

slams of D.C., and to the scene I was most familiar with, the ethnically diverse, eclectic of the Prince Georges' County poets. A Latina of color, with connections (as volunteer editor and contributing poet) to a respected journal, she had taken numerous master classes with respected and even prestigious published poets, her ability to work with others had enabled her to build a formidable network on which to draw for Mariposa, and when that network became exhausted, she was more than willing to scour the area for potential readers. She overcame any initial reticence at asking so-called "heavyweight" poets to read:

MH: So you're not intimidated to talk to them?

MR: Not anymore. I used to be in such awe, every poet, you know. I used to be in awe of all of the name local poets. And it was like oh my goodness, you know, how do you do this. I couldn't walk up to anyone and say anything. When I met...Lucille Clifton...when I met Lucille Clifton for the first time, I met her on Amtrak. She was going to up to New York to accept her book award for Blessing The Boats. And I was like "You're Lucille Clifton," like she doesn't know she's Lucille Clifton. And it was such a thrill for me. And I've seen her at The Dodge Poetry Festival a number of times, and the Poet Laureate from Maryland, Michael Glaser. I have a great relationship with him. He and I, because of Mariposa, I got to meet a lot of local poets, and so Michael and I, anytime I'm doing something, I always ask him, I always ask Ethelbert Miller. When I first read with Ethelbert Miller, when I first read with Hillary Tom, I was awestruck, absolutely awestruck. So I realized, oh poets are real people, too.

From novice reader in 1994, Maritza had quickly graduated to first name relationships with the Poet Laureate of Maryland and other leading figures in the more-respected and professionalized academic scene. But she was also not averse to coupling a "star" like Ethelbert Miller or Hillary Tom with a first-time featured reader who had only read in-house at her open mikes. She also broke tradition by regularly booking both women and ethnic poets (she noted that most featured readers are white men, although she was not averse to featuring white men, either). Again, she was the bridge

between two worlds—the “official” world of the academic poets (with their graduate writing degrees and teaching posts) and the unofficial world of the unschooled or semi-schooled amateurs with their relatively casual relationship to form and tendency toward expressive reading, broad humor, emotional/personal, and even erotic poetry. In fact, as much as she admired certain credentialed “poets,” and recognized that her own career path in poetry would require their ultimate endorsement, she had some disdain for poetry that emphasized form over content. Like Jay, Astley, and others, Maritza thought the academic poetry world had become too selective, too self-limiting,⁶¹ with too much emphasis on form and too much disdain for expression:

MR: A lot of poets begin very passionately, but then go into an intellectual pose. There’s a lot of perfectly crafted poetry and the majority get published. But they don’t move me. Li Young Lee, I read his poetry and I would call it quiet. His poetry is so quiet, but the power of his words is amazing. But I can read other people, and that’s a perfectly good poem, and it does nothing for me. I don’t care. It’s not the...it’s the content, not form.”

Similarly, in a recent interview, poet Gerry Gomez Pearlberg, remarked on the limitations of academic poetry:

The dominance of academic poetry is a real loss for the eclecticism and health of American poetry,” Pearlberg noted. “It places poetry at the mercy of academic fashions in terms of what younger poets are being exposed to, and what is rewarded in terms of the style and content of the writing itself. It’s a loss for the free-wheeling, self-educated, question-asking, trouble-making, role-breaking democratized poet-wanderer of the streets, the roads, the bars, the big wide world outside the ivory tower.⁶²

Astley also cited the emergence of exciting new poetry scenes at the grassroots level in England that were being thwarted by the stranglehold of elitist academics, editors and publishers, urging that it is time for the poetry world to revitalize itself. And to do

that it must “shake off academic elitism and celebrate voices from our communities and around the world.”⁶³ Maritza’s own embrace of multiculturalism has made her open to poetry from many different traditions, styles, and languages. In the course of our interviews she recommended to me Iranian, Puerto Rican, Asian-American, African-American and European poets. And in the weekly readings at Mariposa, she was as likely to respond to a ten-year old’s traditional rhyming poem or Grandma Slam’s latest crowd-pleaser as the Poet Laureate’s latest sonnet. She sought out diversity both in terms of the readers she booked and the poets and anthologies she chose to read on her own time:

MH: You talked a lot about an anthology you loved, *Unsettling America*. So I wanted to ask you, what does multi-culturalism mean to you? Are you a multi-cultural human being?

MR: Multi-culturalism for me is...you have...you can only speak from your own experiences in your life, but that shouldn’t limit you to experiencing someone else’s influences and experiences in life. And I like variety. I don’t want to hear the same influence. When I talk about Rita Dove or Lucille Clifton, their experiences are very different from mine, just like Naomi Shehabenai, her experiences are very different. Ed Hirsch, who else did I mention—Marge Piercy. But I hear different voices, and the more I expose myself to all their different voices, the better poet I become, the better person I become, and if you take it to a human level, the more different people you know, almost the more human you become.

Maritza’s enjoyment of the space for multiculturalism created by the creative arts and the local poetry scene in general is such that for years she has been a visiting poet in the schools:

MR: I’ve got a poetry library in the trunk of my car. Because the Montgomery County School System has this registry of people that they call when they’re doing events for the kids on Poetry Day or whatever, and I put together this whole gamut of poetry, different poets, different languages geared towards giving every student in Montgomery County something they can identify with. And one of the things I always do when I do this is, I read something in Spanish because as

many Hispanic students are in Montgomery County, they have so few role models, so few things that they can identify with, but they will identify with the sound of Spanish. And the teachers always tell me it's amazing how they perk up when they hear it. So I do it for them. And I think that's the underlying reason that I do it, so that I go there and I read something in Spanish that the kids will be able to hold on to.

The world of poetry was one where all of Maritza's cultural traditions were able to co-exist. Traditions of language, nation, gender, ethnicity, even her military discipline all could work together here. Forty years after being taught that Spanish must never mix with English, Maritza began playing with using Spanish words in her poetry, and even writing whole poems in her first language (one about Puerto Rico was in the works as we spoke). One poem is about "El Cuco," a sort of monster who lurks to catch children who don't go right to sleep. Another mentions "el duende," which she defined for me as a sort of "half-devil, half-angel" rascal who stirs things up and imparts inspiration:

*Her writing hand
had been perfectly poised.
Her favorite pen (put down like
a sick dog) had rested leisurely
between her thumb and forefinger blissfully awaiting el duende
to lead her into deep song.⁶⁴*

Finally, the many pieces of her identity seem to be meeting in one place.

With Maritza as host, *Mariposa* became a real haven for all kinds of artists, both sacred and profane, serious and downright funny. But Maritza's energy and attention were being drawn away from the poetry salon; for the fourth time in her life, she was about to lose a person very close to her. Dennis, her silent partner in *Mariposa*, the man who was there the day she saw the for rent sign in the storefront window, had been

diagnosed with brain cancer. Long estranged from his family, he needed care, and as it had so many times before in her life, it fell to Maritza to fill the gap.

She moved him into her home, even outfitting the house with special equipment for her increasingly impaired friend and now patient. During the non-corporate, “detour” phase of her work life, she had trained as a hospice nurse. “My involvement in hospice didn’t make it easier, but helped me understand the phases.” Dennis’ illness progressed quickly, and he became increasingly irrational, even persisting in driving when he was clearly too cognitively disabled to do so safely. Maritza used powers granted to her by the state to have him committed to a hospice. Still the devastation of his death was too much for her to bear—having already lost her sister, grandmother, and father, and having had to try to pick up the pieces while others grieved (and rebelling against what she regarded as her own mother’s exaggerated emotions by quelling her own), this time she broke down. Her period of grieving would soon spell the end of Mariposa.

MR: He was in hospice. I was so involved with him and things were going from bad to worse. And it was oh what a relief for him to be with caring people. Then I was home after Dennis died. I was very depressed. I was nuts, and I was home for about four months, trying to get my pieces back together.

In the midst of Dennis’ health crisis, Maritza had finally surrendered to necessity and turned over many of her duties at Mariposa to a handful of regulars. They opened and closed the space; they shopped and cleaned. They booked readers and they hosted. The “art world” she had become so much a part of sustained her vision while she recovered. Finally, in October, 2002, three years after it had opened, she returned to Mariposa for a farewell reading. Almost all of the regulars were there. Maritza signed off the evening with the one poem she had been able to write about Dennis.

Poetry, Part III: Dreams, Credentials, Realities And Integration

As our first spate of interviews concluded, Maritza talked about big changes in her life. At 51, she had just remarried--to Justin, a songwriter and sculptor who had been one of the regulars who attended Mariposa. The wedding was held at a rented mansion in Montgomery County. Soon after that, her daughter, just turned 20, got married; this wedding was held in Puerto Rico. Maritza and Justin paid for both weddings. Her other child, who had just turned 18, had joined the Marines. As noted before, like many working mothers, Maritza timed her career and life changes around milestones in her children's lives.⁶⁵ "With the kids gone, there's really no reason for me to be there any longer," she said of her corporate job.

But even bigger changes were in the works. Maritza and Justin hatched a two-year plan: she would temporarily move to New York to take a job created for her by one of Arbitron's clients, and while there, she'd take classes in the New School's MFA program. Meanwhile, Justin, who was just starting to make a name for himself as a sculptor, would build his reputation, "get his name out there." She would "make a killing" in New York; then after two years, they would fulfill a dream of hers and retire to Puerto Rico.

This meant living apart early in their marriage, but with a definite goal in mind. The American dream of early retirement to an island paradise seemed within their grasp. Maritza would also finish an incomplete chapter of her life—having left New York at fourteen, and not by choice, she could find out what she had missed. She described her reasons for going and her goals for an MFA program to me:

MH: You've been talking about the MFA. Are you still thinking about that?

MR: I am very serious about it. It's expensive, horribly expensive. Because I want the New School program, because the New School program isn't so much a classroom MFA. They just started offering on-line courses, and their curriculum is more experiential. You have to go to readings, and participate in readings, and the classes are just "write and discuss" classes. It's horribly expensive. I could start on-line. The cost for a degree program is prohibitive. But you can take it as a non-credit course, and they allow you to do it as a non-credit course, for still a substantial fee, and if you decide to continue with the program, you can get the credits to count.

MH: Is it important to get the MFA as a credential? Or is it something else?

MR: It's almost something else. I've taken classes with...I like taking independent workshops with people. The Poet House in New York offers a masters poetry workshop. I took one a couple of years ago with Ed Hirsch, I recently took one with Toi Deracott. And the Writer's Center started to do that, I took one with Cornelius Eady. And that's what I want to do. I want to take classes with people who have made it, are recognized poets. Recognized, accomplished, successful poets.

Maritza here is expressing her own ambition, the standards she has for "successful" poets (and which she, no doubt, would like to be measured by), and the way in which she wants to be mentored. Despite her consistent expression of disdain for aspects of "academic poetry," it is clear she thinks individual poets in that world have something to offer her, as does such a program, that validates the corner of the poetry world she has come to inhabit with its emphasis on readings, and hence its acceptance of expression. Still, even as she talked about this non-traditional MFA, she maintained her creative boundaries and her thoughts about the limits of academic poetry:

MR: I don't want to become an academic writer because a lot of the MFA programs are churning out perfectly well-crafted workshop pieces. And that's what you see; that's what the universities are publishing. And it doesn't do anything for me. I need, when I read something I want to be moved by it.

MH: So what do you think you're going to learn from this MFA program at the New School?

MR: It's not what you learn from them. It's almost the experience of working with them. With the last workshop I took with Toi Deracott in New York, the experience of what we wrote in those classes, it was amazing. Her class and in Cornelius Eady's class were the only two classes where I've ever been able to write something that I was happy with based on the seeds that were planted.

In Toi Deracott's workshop we had homework to do. We had an assignment to bring to the class, bring in the work of a poet that you're not familiar with. Find a poet, so weeks before, we're working toward bringing something to contribute to that class. We needed to bring in enough for everybody. It wasn't just, this is what I wrote, and pick it apart and put it together again. It was also studying other poets and that's what I want. I don't know who I like until I read them. And that's how I judge who I read. If it's poetry that I like that moves me, then that's the poet that I'm in love with at the moment.

MH: I'm confused. You don't want to be an academic poet, so why the MFA...?

MR: It's the experience. I'd love to create my own MFA program.

Maritza seemed to be wrestling with issues of credentials versus actual quality.

The MFA seemed to be the credential most needed to *externally* establish expertise on the poetry scene, but with her doubts about the ultimate worth of meticulously constructed but often dry academic poetry, she didn't want to take a course from just anyone. With all the master classes under her belt (as opposed to Master's degree courses), I wondered if she felt she'd already earned her degree, in a sense, and felt frustrated that she lacked the official credential:

MR: I don't want to have to submit work to get in. I've taken workshops with so many legitimate poets. I'm selective...and I don't know who some of these [MFA teaching poets]people are... ..I don't know what makes a person an authority....

MH: Do you think you've already done enough that in a way you could have an MFA?

MR: No, because I haven't read enough poets. I could do it on my own, but I need somebody to point me, so I can say, okay, I'll try that. I've read poets that will probably never be remembered by anybody. There are lots of poets that are fabulous poets that will never be published. There are a lot of published poets that I've read that it's like, "So what?" It doesn't do anything. It doesn't create

any experience for me. And I actually wanted to teach in the Writer's Center for close to two years now. And I guess I don't have the credential. I don't know. I know there are a couple of people in the Writer's Center who teach who don't have credentials.

Lucille Clifton who teaches, she never earned a B.A., never earned a degree. She was a fabulous poet, and that's what got her—now she has all sorts of honorary doctorates and what have you—she never earned her degree. She earned her respect as a poet from the poetry. But what I would love to teach—not teach, present to poets or writers, is...there's an anthology called *Unsettling America*, which is probably one of the best poetry anthologies ever compiled. It's *Unsettling America* because it's all multi-cultural poetry. And you have a dozen different points of view and experiences. And everybody has an experience and that's one book that just covers the gamut. And in December I'm going to be on a panel, and I want to discuss how different poets have affected people's work, how their culture, their heritage has affected their work, and just open the span of writers that we read. There are a whole bunch of other people in it; it's a cross-section of every poet that's in the U.S.

Maritza returns to two themes—despite a few exceptions, the seeming need for a credential to move up to the next level in the poetry world (that of teaching and publication; though she had numerous poems published, her presence on the poetry scene as reader, facilitator, editor, had not led to her goal of teaching), and her desire to articulate a multi-cultural experience through poetry. She looked forward to working and studying in New York with the right people—their mentoring could help her reach her goal of teaching at the Writer's Center.

Our next interview was scheduled to coincide with her new husband's sculpture exhibit in her large backyard adjoining a park. It was a beautiful fall day, in the low sixties, a few days before a key political election. My wife and young daughter, just learning how to walk, accompanied me. We kicked around political ideas (including the folk wisdom that if the NFL's Redskins beat the Cowboys, the Democrats would win), looked at Justin's enormous sculptures which my daughter viewed as huge toys, talked

about art in general, movies, our lives. Leaves fell all around us, a squirrel jumped the back fence. Neither Maritza nor I was in the mood for research that day—we tabled our interview and along with my wife, took turns holding the hand of my daughter, aiding her fledgling steps as she climbed among Justin’s sculpture.

I would not talk with Maritza again for over a year, except by e-mail, as she put together her plans for New York.

Now I Know...

A year later, as I was about to enter a small grocery, a voice greeted me from behind. It was Maritza, back early from her New York adventure, and now working for Maryland’s Department of Employment, evaluating unemployment claims in a nondescript building with reflective windows at the end of the parking lot. I was surprised and glad to see her, and of course, curious—what had happened? Why was she back so soon? We made plans to catch up.

We met a few months later, and after checking in about our children (mine was in nursery school, hers out of Iraq, for the time being) and spouses (mine had a new job, hers did too, and had just recovered from a serious illness), we got around to New York. It was clearly a subject about which she had great ambivalence. I gathered her experience had not been completely satisfying:

MH: So you were in New York...so let’s go back to New York.

MR: [Ruefully] Oh, let’s go back to New York. It was so...yeah...

MH: How long were you in New York?

MR: Six months.

MH: And where were you working?

MR: I was working with a company that was doing market research. You know, what I've done professionally for a long, long time. But it was such a...what kind of environment was it? It was such a negative working environment. I was working for the owner of the company. They were a contractor to the company that I worked for here. And they literally created this position and I said, "Great. I'll take it." I was the project manager for their project team. And I said, "Sure." They needed to make the project team more sensitive to client needs, and I said, "Yeah. It's basic customer service."

One of her reasons for going to New York, a high-paying job that she hoped would enable her to retire to Puerto Rico after two years, did not work out. Maritza cited New York as a subculture with its own (negative) business traditions:

MR: And the results were there, but the owner and I could not...I mean, his style of management was totally contrary to mine. And it was typical New York, you know, treat people like garbage. And people responded to that negative reinforcement, and that wasn't the environment that I was used to working in. And it was, I was too nice. And it was something to do with being nice, and he said, "People like you." And I said, "There's nothing wrong with that. If you treat people decently, and you ask people to do things for you, versus treating them like crap, very likely people will respond to that. And we were getting compliments from clients instead of "Nobody's doing anything right, da-da-da." Even when people made mistakes the clients would be "Yeah, well, you told me this and this and this, and I approved it, so I have to accept the results."

But the owners and the management were, the problems that they had were based on basically how they treated people. They lose a lot of talent, myself included, because they don't appreciate what people do. And...but the treatment was horrible, was absolutely horrible. An employer cannot treat you this way. If you allow it and you accept it, you don't do anything about it, that's one thing. So we just agreed to disagree."

Despite her frustrations with her work situation, Maritza found New York the inspiration for a series of poems:

MR: I have a whole series of poems that I wrote in New York that I haven't done anything with, that I call the Subway Series because I think the subway system is a fascinating environment, and the whole lack of etiquette. There's a whole mentality of subway. Some of the best jazz and modern music. And classical

music. There was a cellist at my station two or three times a week and he would play the most wonderful classical music

I asked her about the other half of her plan—the MFA:

MH: So you originally went up there for the New School? Was the first reason you went up there for the MFA?

MR: I decided, okay, if I'm going to do an MFA, I want it to be the New School, because it's not traditional and all that, and because of my work hours, I was working ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, it was horrendous, there was no way that I could do it.

MH: Was it a disappointment?

MR: It was a huge disappointment for me. But I was walking distance from the Bowery Poetry Café. And I went to some amazing, amazing...uh...the Tribeca Performing Arts Center was like...I was living on the Lower East Side. It was the neighborhood I wanted to live in, it was vibrant. It's terrifically expensive. A one bedroom in New York was bigger than our house mortgage. But I negotiated a decent salary.

It was an amazing experience. I'm glad I did it, because it gave me an opportunity to do it. It's something that I've always wanted to live in New York. Well, I did.

MH: Did you always want to go back?

MR: I always wanted...there was always, "Well, what if?" So I got the opportunity to go back to New York, and do the, have the New York apartment.

MH: So in terms of the MFA...do you still think you want to get one of those someday?

MR: Um, what I really enjoy because I've had an opportunity to take master classes like at the Poets' House, like at the Writer's Center here, to take a workshop with Cornelius Eady, Ed Hirsch, Toi Deracott, so I've taken these classes, and I really enjoy that.

MH: So you don't need the...at one point you were almost suggesting that you might consider teaching at the Writer's Center if you could...

MR: I've proposed several different, uh, classes.

MH: Are they open to it?

MR: I've never gotten a positive response, never got...or any response for that matter.

MH: Do you think they need you to have...

MR: A credential...

MH: Or a “resume” of some sort?

MR: Probably.

MH: I would think you have a resume.

MR: I do. Apparently, it’s not what they want.

MH: Are they looking for all the MFAs of the world?

MR: Probably. Because most people who have taught there have MFAs.

Her inability to break into the Writing Center’s inner circle of instructors is a source of continued frustration. And this is the third goal that her working life or her role as a mother or daughter has interfered with—first her father stymied her desire to study journalism, then her situation as a single mother working full-time prevented her from completing her practicum in a Master’s in Counseling program, and now working overtime had made her hope of participating in the New School MFA program unworkable.

The world of professional poetry would seem to defy Stebbins’ categorizations of amateurs and professionals, since few, if any, professionals make fifty percent of their livelihood directly from their sales of poetry, and almost all teach. Still that world does resemble some of Stebbins’ definitions in terms of its hierarchy, especially in the setting of rules by the professionals and an awareness of serious amateurs as to the existence of those criteria. Maritza’s embrace of the need for an MFA degree represents a tacit acceptance of the rules the academy have in place to enforce their hierarchy. Her attempt to evade the traditional ladder of success through a combination of networking, entrepreneurship, and use of a more flexible grassroots poetry scene were not enough for her to crash through the “poetry ceiling.”

When asked about her earlier goal of retiring with Justin to Puerto Rico within two years, she comments wryly, “I’d settle for redoing my kitchen,” then adds, “Puerto Rico will have to wait awhile.” In the meantime, Justin had fallen seriously ill—and once again, as with her father and best friend Dennis, it was thought to be cancer, but it wasn’t, and he was on the road to recovery after surgery for scar tissue on his lungs. Here her luck was changing.

Like many in mid-life, Maritza had made major reevaluations and changes in her forties—pursuing poetry as first a serious avocation, then opening her poetry salon; dropping out of the private sector for awhile to explore other career options, then returning. Like my other informants, her dreams had not manifested in quite the way she had envisioned them. So, on her second shift of mid-life, a decade after the poetry world entered her life, she has taken stock of the lived reality of those goals, and like my other informants, modified them, in what I call elsewhere a “legacy reassessment.” Not fully satisfied, she still takes great value from what she did accomplish. As one artist said, “Mariposa was an act of heroism,” and Maritza herself says, “Mariposa was magical.” Most of us who spent much time there concur. To run such a series for three years is a special achievement; to run it on one’s own, with no financial assistance, is a stunning accomplishment.

She entered mid-life with two pre-teens in tow. Ten years later, both are grown and doing well, though as of this writing, her son’s military status could still take him back to Iraq. But her days as a single mom supporting two children had been successfully negotiated. As noted before, when children move on to their own lives, parents in general, but mothers especially, often reevaluate their options. For Maritza,

this meant having more time for a new relationship, which led to marriage, and changing her work situation—first moving to New York to pursue a hefty salary and then considering other job options that might offer more satisfaction than money.

The New York career move and the MFA dream did not work out, but the way Maritza views that situation shows again how individuals can interpret experience in a way that gives their lives continuity and logic. First Maritza cites the powerful experiences she **did** have in New York—living walking distance from well-known poetry hubs, going to exciting readings, finally getting that New York apartment that she must have fantasized about when she was fourteen with her sights set on going to Columbia. And she also, in writerly fashion, uses the experience to close her own long-interrupted chapter on New York. The longing she had for the vitality and freedom of New York, once wrested from her life by her parents' abrupt relocation and subsequent insistence that she must go to college on The Island, has been fulfilled. Employing psychological discourse, she uses a form of self-talk to demonstrate to herself that completing this long story arc with New York, while not with the result she'd imagine, is healthy—it puts to rest a long held “What if,” allowing her to move on. “I couldn't live in New York,” she says now. Finally, applying some new age causal thinking, she insists, “Everything happens for a reason; everything has a lesson in it.”

I then asked her, “What was the lesson of New York?” and she replied, “The lesson of New York was that it was a reality check—and it led to me really appreciating the poetry community that we have here” rather than looking to New York as some cultural mecca (interestingly, each of my other informants referenced New York as setting the standard in both the musical and theatrical worlds. It is as if D.C. artists suffer from

an inferiority complex and have a fierce rivalry with New York artists that the latter are barely aware of.)

With or without the MFA, she was still a poet, and a key member of the local poetry scene. Unlike New York, where it seemed that everything was competitive—scrambles for apartments, subway seats, jobs, reading slots at poetry cafés, she had a “home” in the D.C. poetry world where she didn’t need to prove herself from moment to moment.

MH: What about your poetry career? Where do you think that’s going?

MR: I took a workshop with Grace Cavalieri. And part of the reason for my taking it was that I felt like it was like I had no inspiration. I was at writer’s block hell. And as much as I tried, I couldn’t get anything to come out. And that’s basically why I was there. Because I love Grace Cavalieri. I think she’s such a giving, wonderful person.

And it was helpful to hear other people’s voices, and I think I’m in a different place poetry-wise, where I’m not running from poetry reading to poetry reading. I’m selective where I go, and time is now another factor. I don’t know what direction I’m going to go. I know the next book is way overdue.

MH: You mean chap book?

MR: I know that I’ve had like two or three manuscripts in my head for the longest time, and you would’ve thought, and I would’ve thought that while I was looking for work I would’ve taken that time to get a lot of the writing done, but I was too focused on looking for work. That whole anxiety of employment. It was too anxious, too much of a negative time. It’s almost like I need to be in a calmer, quieter place...

The demands on her were fewer. Her 23-year-old daughter was out house-hunting with her husband (looking to buy) as we spoke, an American milestone of maturity. Her second husband was home recuperating from what turned out to be a non-life threatening illness; from all indications, the marriage was progressing well. And she had a new job, one that seemed to integrate more of her skills than any she’d told me about before.

She had already abandoned the misery of a temp job at the unemployment center to teach English as Second Language classes and do private tutoring in Spanish; from there, she landed a job at a county Health Center servicing minorities with Tuberculosis and HIV, a full time position where her bilingual skills would be of special value. She seemed to be moving farther and farther away from the private sector: “It’s not private sector, and the majority of my experience has been private sector, where... you constantly...need to outdo yourself. And I think it’s good to get away from that as well. Teaching gave me a lot of freedom.”

She actually had not been the first choice for the new job at the health clinic:

MR: My boss, he said he had reservations about hiring me, because he thought I was overqualified. And it’s not a matter of what I’m doing anymore for me. And he just felt I’d be bored. And it’s kind of an undefined job, so I get to create my own job description. And I filled it with things that are all of the things that I enjoy doing. So I don’t have to do any one of them all day long. I don’t think I’ll get bored for a long while. I can...I’m a resource, I’m more of a resource to social workers because there are things that they don’t have time to do. And I said, if you have a project that you can’t do the research on, I can do it...in a couple of hours... you’ll have your research. And then you go do your job and I’ll go translate for someone, translate in clinic for a couple of hours. I’m not in a constant frenzy, the way I was at my old corporate jobs.

She describes her duties—translating for Hispanic patients, teaching Spanish to the doctors when there’s time, doing research, organizing support groups; these are all cultural traditions that are part of her life, or things she has been trained in (teaching, counseling, data gathering and analysis) at college, in the army, or in her not quite completed graduate program in counseling. Her personal interest in bridging cultures, in understanding the experience of others (something she learned to do within her own

family, and then came to understand more through her own experience in psychotherapy and graduate school) are also part of the job.

The difference between working in the private sector with its cutthroat competition and working in the public sector for dedicated humanitarian doctors is such that her work life and her non-work life no longer diverge quite so much:

MH: I remember you used to talk about going to your poetry weekends, then coming back to work on Monday, and it was like “Oh my god, what am I doing here? This is not reality, or it’s a different reality.”

MR: Well, I’m glad you mentioned that, because I go to The Dodge Poetry Festival every two years because it’s every two years, and before because what I was doing [for work] was so drastically different, it was such a thrill, and I’d be in poetry heaven. And then the letdown of being back to reality, where I guess now it’s part of my reality, this is part of who I am and what I do.

MH: Do you feel more integrated?

MR: Yeah. I think so, I think so.

Her new job with its varied and satisfying components, her new marriage, and the personal knowledge and self-acceptance gained from her adventure in New York had left Maritza less in need of a haven: “I’m no longer running from reading to reading. I’m no longer so worked up about submitting poems for publication—I’m sending some in, and keeping others. Some are still my babies and I don’t want to send them out there.”

Having stepped out of the private sector with its relentless pursuit of perfection and results, having seen her two children move out on their own as competent adults, and now married to a fellow artist, her life was calmer and her inner reality was feeling more and more “normal.” She wrote a poem about the validation her vision got when she married another artist:

RAW SHOCK

*I failed an inkblot test
saw too many familiar
faces in their smudges.*

*I've seen stranger things
staring back at me
from shower walls
like the guy who said
he saw the face of Lenin.*

*I've sometimes had to scrape
their images off the burnt toast
I eat for breakfast.*

*They've stalked me
from the tree bark in the park
and I've even caught them
looking up my dress
from the cracks in the sidewalk.*

*Prescription drugs and therapy
haven't cured me
so I married an artist
now nothing seems strange.⁶⁶*

It was as if she'd recovered a long forgotten inner reality, giving her life new grounding. We talked about her relationship with her two grown children and her view of spiritual traditions:

MR: Life is so short. I have so many reminders every day how short life is. And it's like...and I think that's why I've chosen to raise my children the way I have and my relationship with them is what it is, because I don't want all this garbage in the way. And it's unfortunate, it really is that...because I remember when my dad died, and that was so insane, because our relationship was so insane. But I'm grateful that my mom and I have had an opportunity to get past our differences. But it was hell. And I think that what we learn is not to make our children go through that much pain. Because love and relationships should not be painful.

Look at the influence of our parents, the effect that it has on us. That's the same influence that we have on our children. And I look at my children and I know that they're a lot more emotionally healthy than I was at their age.

MH: Those are very spiritual thoughts. Where does your spiritual center come from?

MR: Out of the insanity of my life. I was raised Catholic, I was...my religious beliefs start from the Sisters of Atonement, the Sisters of Mercy, the Sisters of St. Joseph.

MH: A lot of sisters.

MR: My parents were devout Catholics. My father went from being a devout Catholic to an Atheist to a Mormon. Which my mother still is. And I married a Jewish husband. And I think my beliefs are in the power of the universe to keep this planet in its orbit [LAUGHS]. I think I get my sources...I don't think I'm a religious person at all. I'm more spiritual. I love some of the native American ritual. Where, yeah, some sort of energy force, an energy exists. And if that is a Supreme Being, a higher being, then, you know different people call theirs different names.

MH: How did you arrive at that? I remember your telling me the story about your vision of the fire that came true. Do you feel you were always in touch with that?

MR: Yes and no. Because I was always very sensitive to outside things. And from what I understand children have a sensitivity that they lose as they get older. So I think had that sensitivity all along, but I was raised in a household where there was so much lunacy and it was represented as normalcy, that I lost touch with my own sense of "something's not quite right." And I think I regained that, I guess in my mid-30s.

Then, as happened so often in our talks, her thoughts shifted from poetry specifically to creativity in general. She related another childhood memory, yet another example of her father's thwarting of her creative ambitions, channeling it into something supposedly more "respectable." As in the case of her dream of being a journalist, the culturally acceptable, seemingly related alternative was not satisfying:

MR: I remember, I wanted to be a dancer. I loved to dance. I've been dancing since I was little. My father was a great dancer. But it wasn't respectable. I was told to take piano lessons. I didn't want to take piano lessons. So I took nothing. It was all or none.

We talked more about creativity and the interaction of different modes of expression:

MR: I've noticed there are periods where I don't write. Maybe then I'm dancing. It's just creativity manifesting in a different way. It will always come out. Periods where dancing was what I did, I probably didn't write. Right now, I'm taking just ballroom dancing. I've been dancing all my life...Latin dance mostly. And my brother and I dance together so well. And Jordan saw us dancing at my daughter's wedding, and he said he wanted to dance like my brother and I danced together. And I said, well you've got a few classes to take. So I don't have to drag him. It's so enjoyable.

“It will always come out.” After years of repressing so much feeling, repressing her language, of being in a “constant frenzy” trying to hold her fragile childhood family together, throwing herself into the achievement-oriented cultural traditions of the military and the corporate world, of working to hold her marriage and children together, Maritza has reevaluated her life and sought out new cultural worlds to explore, set new goals, and been willing to amend those goals to fit her lived experience. Now, so long after then nuns told her “No Spanish,” and her father said “No dancing,” then stopped her short of her goal to be a writer, she's found her way into artistic and work worlds where everything can co-exist—poetry, dancing, Spanish.

Reflections on Maritza's Life

Women's Lives: Negotiation, Sequencing, Improvisation, Integration

Maritza's life demonstrates the complexity of postmodern life as well as any in this dissertation—as Caughey writes, to ask the question “What is her culture?” is absurd. “A better question is, What are her cultures?”⁶⁷ Maritza's life reflects the intersections of many strong, and sometimes opposing cultural traditions—Puerto Rican

culture versus “American;” American individualism versus American motherhood; outwardly directed military culture versus inwardly directed artistic and poetic traditions; English versus Spanish; the cutthroat world of corporate culture versus the helping tradition of the public sector; rugged “just do it” self-reliance versus the culture of the helping professions and psychotherapy. Her negotiations are complicated, often simultaneous, and not always all together satisfying, though she finds ways to integrate her many traditions.

In researching this chapter I was struck by how different the cultural assumptions are for a woman’s life, especially when that woman is a mother. (My first informant’s role as a father was rarely raised by either the informant or me, the researcher.) Maritza’s role as mother was with her constantly as she negotiated other roles and traditions; her decisions were regularly modified by that role. When that role changed with the coming-of-age of her youngest, her son, her options, too, changed dramatically. Although her attachment to her children had only deepened, the fact that she was no longer physically and financially needed day-to-day triggered several major transitions in her life, as her focus could shift back to her needs as an individual.

Bateson has written extensively about the dilemma of multiplicity women have long faced, one that men have been far less prone to:

For a long time it was possible for men to think in terms of a line between the public and private. A man would go to the workplace, and then, at a certain point, he would switch that part of the day off and go home to a world where the atmosphere was different. He could switch gears from one aspect of his life to the other.

But it hasn’t been possible for women to separate their commitments in quite the same way. It is one thing in the traditional nuclear family for the husband to go to the office and stop thinking about his family during the day because he has left

the wife in charge. It is quite a different thing for both parents to go off and feel that they can completely forget what is happening with the family. Many women have the sense that the combining of different areas in their lives is a problem that is with them all the time.⁶⁸

In the same passage, Bateson does note that “less and less are men able to compartmentalize their lives,” as gender roles and work situations have changed. Research on women’s lives, therefore, now has greater implications for how we look at the lives of men; the assumptions that men’s lives are monolithic and monocultural is less and less valid:

Women, whose lives have been radically reshaped by the possibility of controlling conception and the other new freedoms it has offered...have taken the lead in understanding changes in the life cycle that affect men as well and define the meaning of lifelong learning for all our futures...Women are today the pioneers of the new territory that both men and women will inhabit.⁶⁹

Like my other informants, Maritza used multiple explanatory models in telling her life story—in this case, Maritza employed developmental psychology and psychotherapeutic models, and also occasionally referred to new age concepts (“everything happens for a reason”). She also was well aware of her own multiculturalism. And like most of us, she sought to make a coherent life story; even as she referred to certain chapters of her life as “chaos” and “adventures,” she referred regularly to certain continuities: her creativity and vision (sourced all the way back to childhood—another consistent feature of the life histories in this study), her love of her children and her dedication to motherhood, her Puerto Rican identity (which includes her first language, Spanish, as a key component), her role as caregiver and family organizer.

Bateson would note that Maritza's life of seeming geographic and role discontinuity is full of continuity of skills and personal vision.

At first, the feature of Maritza's life that struck me was the apparent pattern of discontinuities in it—the many geographical moves, the career shifts, her apparent pattern of “five year adventures.” Upon closer examination of our interview transcripts, and in-depth reading about life history work on American women, in particular research that considered women and their work lives, I discovered threads of continuity, many of which Maritza herself already perceived. I also became aware of my own assumptions grounded in American cultural ideals about men and women's roles. When a man tells a life story with numerous geographical relocations related to his evolving career picture, our presumption that it was done for career advancement legitimizes the discontinuity and recasts it as continuity when a woman's life has these same sort of shifts, we sometimes interpret it as drift or instability.⁷⁰

But we can apply the same framework we applied to the man's life to a woman's, recasting discontinuities related to managing the woman's dual role of career woman and mother as a form of continuity. Bateson also notes that as a woman moves from experience to experience, many of the skills learned will transfer from job to job, place to place, role to role. She refers to this as a way of “seeing continuity at a very abstract level.”⁷¹

Much of coping with discontinuity has to do with discovering threads of continuity. You cannot adjust to change unless you can recognize some analogy between your old situation and your new situation. Without that analogy you cannot transfer learning. You cannot apply skills. If you can recognize a problem you've solved before, in however different a guise, you have a much greater chance of solving that problem in the new situation.⁷²

“Because our society has preferred continuous versions of stories, discontinuities seem to indicate that something is wrong with you. A discontinuous story becomes a very difficult story to claim.” The work of Bateson, Garey, and others has given “people who feel that they’ve been bumped from one thing to another, with no thread of continuity, a way of positively interpreting their experience.” Bateson even suggests interpreting “*change as continuity*,” which may be a very valuable tool for those of us bewildered by a postmodern world where culture has apparently gone from monolith to buffet, and life stories have seemingly lost their linearity.⁷³

Garey’s discussion of life sequencing is also particularly relevant to Maritza’s life. Garey notes how transitions in women’s work lives are often coincident with key passages in the lives of their children.⁷⁴ Maritza’s decision to pursue a job in New York and possibly an MFA degree was made possible in part by the second of her two children’s graduation from high school and enlistment in the Marines.

Garey notes three types of sequencing: planned, situational, and involuntary.⁷⁵ Maritza’s life would seem to emphasize the latter two—involuntary sequencing occurred in her life when her parents decided to take the family back to Puerto Rico. Maritza had no choice in the matter—external factors are decisive. Maritza’s planned sequence—academic Catholic school, Columbia University, and then a career as a journalist—was no longer possible. Maritza’s joining of the military fits into Garey’s “situational” sequencing—an opportunity presented itself (one that would get her out from under her father’s domination), and Maritza took it without a definite picture of what would happen after that. One is struck by how often Maritza acted upon situational sequencing—using a new opportunity as a way out of a difficult situation. Her divorce, a situational decision,

had involuntary consequences—her new, dual stress as single mom. Her move to New York, however—a situational decision, based on an unexpected job opportunity— was part of a planned sequence: make money, get an MFA, move to Puerto Rico.

One is struck, upon reflection, by how much of Maritza’s life is influenced by either involuntary or situational sequencing; and then one is struck by how much most of our lives, and particularly the lives of women, are that way as well. Looked at in a less positive light, it has been said that “traditional gender socialization has meant that most women...have been brought up to ‘drift’; that is, to allow extraneous events and significant others make major life decisions for them and not to plan their lives.”⁷⁶ But Garey critiques the notion that women lack agency have been encouraged to put the needs of others first, and thus to “drift” in their work life from opportunity to opportunity without a long-range plan:

This way of describing women’s actions valorizes a particular concept of planning and diminishes the extent to which women are actively making life decisions with a context of extraneous events and in relation to significant others. Although both men and women make major life decisions based on external events, and one might argue that this is the human condition, there are gender differences in terms of whose external events have precedence...most people practice a combination of approaches to sequencing. However, whether they have a specific plan for a new pattern or are forced to alter that pattern of their work/family lives, it is opportunity-taking that is the hallmark of sequencing in the lives of the women I interviewed.⁷⁷

Garey echoes Bateson’s assertion that the lives of women are often full of overlapping demands, simultaneous identities, entangled roles, and that women improvise responses to these intersecting influences:

The concept of a single trajectory, mapped out in advance from which few deviations are made, is foreign to most of the women I interviewed. Nor does the ‘career model’, in which occupational status is central and all-consuming, resonate

with most of them. The women I interviewed are weaving patterns in which employment and mothering are not two independent lines but are overlapping, interwoven, and entangled...In order to shape and respond to the interconnection of their work and family lives, they wove life patterns that were flexible and varied. And through all of this they were implementing strategies of being by which they constructed identities as workers and as mothers.⁷⁸

Indeed, Maritza's recounting of her life experience is full of agonizing decisions between individual goals and the needs of family members; drift seems to suggest "ease," and as a single mother (and before, as daughter, college student, then spouse), Maritza weighed many options, negotiated amongst her various cultural traditions and made the best choices she could at a given time. Bateson, Garey, and Peters all note the great strengths that are summoned, the improvisations that are made, and the independent rules and roles so often constructed by each woman over the life course—and note that we can often find continuities when we take the long view of a woman's life.⁷⁹

Maritza's perseverance against all the obstacles she encountered and her ability to negotiate multiple cultures are both great strengths. I was particularly struck by the way her discovery of poetry and the poetry world became a haven which welcomed all her traditions. Her "who am I this time?" feeling (referring to her two returns to Puerto Rico and her three periods of residency on the U.S. mainland) faded on those poetry weekends.

Stages of Mid-life: Visions, Reality Checks, Revisions

Developmental psychology has long posited mid-life as a time where the individual often engages in self-evaluation and reassessment of meaning in life.⁸⁰

Maritza, like my other two informants upon reaching early middle age, searched out new resources, and elevated the importance of key activities. Each also had fairly lofty

goals—one to have a fully funded music series of his own, another to work full-time as a self-employed writer, and, Maritza, to achieve a level of validation in the writing scene which would allow her to join the ranks of the mentors, teachers and presenters.

In each case, the achievement of the dream or goal was either not wholly congruent with the initial vision, or at least, was much more difficult than at first thought. Then came what I would call a second phase of mid-life. After the first phase, wherein issues of self-evaluation, the meaning of life, and legacy are addressed, there is a period of reevaluation, which reflects upon the actual lived experience. There is a reassessment of legacy goals. The individual revisits the goals, assesses the distance between the vision and the reality, considers whether the vision is possible (usually some aspects of it are not), factors in newly discovered priorities (like Maritza's remarriage) and then often modifies the vision to make it compatible with the reality.

This doesn't mean they are abandoning the vision entirely, but that they are making peace with it, discarding parts of it that were unrealistic, reclaiming aspects of their life that they'd undervalued (both Maritza and David expressed a desire to be recognized by their parallel New York art worlds, as if that were the true measure, but both have negotiated some peace with their lives here in D.C. and the creative circles available to them on their home turf). Other life satisfactions also come into play to modify their dissatisfaction—a new marriage, a new job that fits them better than the old one, a paid-off condo, experiments with new musical or artistic forms, personal and family connections that remain valuable and might suffer if they “went for it” elsewhere).

Individuals are constantly negotiating these cultural traditions and values, managing so many relationships, traditions, occupations and avocations, and

simultaneous roles that it dizzies the mind. And, most often, my informants have found ways of making a life story that coheres, that incorporates aspects of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, continuity and discontinuity.

Art Worlds: Membership as a Sustaining Force

Finally, the uses Maritza made of the art world that she encountered (the D.C. poetry scene) were multi-faceted, ranging from simple self-expression, to mentoring given and received, spiritual and psychological integration (through works made and heard), self-acceptance (as woman, mother, Latina, and bilingual), social network (friendship, networking, travel, and even remarriage), and translation of existing skills (e.g., teamwork and organizational skills) to the new scene. The D.C. poetry scene was a sort of loosely organized set of discrete but often overlapping scenes, with people playing multiple roles in many cases (Maritza's ranged from student to mentor, from individual reader to host, from part-time volunteer to full-time facilitator). Becker's venerable "art worlds" concept still has utility, and as I will note in my conclusions, could be quite useful in conjunction with life history work on, say, a half-dozen participants in a certain art world. More qualitative research on how scenes like these are constructed, how they interact with other scenes (at different levels—from amateur to professional, for example), would be valuable.

I was also struck by how membership in an art world lends identity to individual artists in times of struggle, and how much easier it was for Regina to step back from her art when she didn't have the social reinforcement that the art world regularly provides. Meanwhile, Maritza and Carl had developed multiple close relationships within their

respective art worlds which regularly drew them back into that world and which even helped sustain them in difficult times. Beyond strictly artistic experience also lay a formidable social network.

Finally, I became aware of the commitment certain key individuals like Maritza have to their respective art worlds and how important that is to making that art world viable. While other individuals (like me, for example), come and go with a light, semi-regular commitment, for an art world to really come into being and achieve stability and reliability certain structures (and people) need to be regularly in place. This calls for great commitment of time, energy, and even money on the parts of key individuals; as noted elsewhere, I refer to these key individuals as “hubs” of activity and motivation that others draw upon.

Self-Reflections

Cultural Frames: Parallel Lives, Divergent Life Histories

I found it overwhelmingly tempting to interpret Maritza’s life through the “Adult Child of an Alcoholic” (ACA) framework, one that I spent the better part of a decade studying as part of the process of understanding my own life. To me, Maritza was the “hero” of her family, the one who achieves and who sometimes serves as caretaker for a dysfunctional family.⁸¹ And Maritza’s particular set of skills—the early autonomy, her desire to keep the family on an even keel, her role as go-between for her parents and siblings, the adult roles she took on within her troubled family, clearly echoed my own “ACA” experience.⁸²

Maritza and I both had grown up with an alcoholic father who was physically abusive to either us, our mother, or other family members. Both of us had later realized our fathers, so charming and popular to the rest of the world, were mentally ill and reserved the dark side of their personalities for the family. Each of us grew up feeling we had to be perfect, and resenting the loss of our childhoods. Strangely, each of us had been prevented from going away to college by our controlling dads, and each had found an escape hatch straight out of college—hers was the army, mine was grad school with the promise of a teaching assistantship.

Each of us eventually turned to writing as a way of processing the trauma we had experienced. When Maritza's father died in 1989, she "worked it out through poetry," often sharing her poems about her loss at open readings. When my mother died this past summer, within two days I had written the first lines of a song; two weeks later it was finished. I played that song everyday for two months as a way of processing my grief.

These similarities only made me want to impose my version of life history more. However, although Maritza identified her father as an alcoholic, and we each spoke a psychotherapeutic language linking childhood trauma to both our later difficulties **and** our creativity, she didn't employ the particular psychological tradition associated with the "adult child" movement.

Caughey cautions against imposing a framework that an informant doesn't use on that informant's life.⁸³ Even though through my own cultural belief system, Maritza was a fellow "ACA," if she didn't subscribe to that particular cultural belief system, telling her life story through it would ignore her own personal agency and the meaning systems

she has employed. It was more important to discover what cultural traditions Maritza did know and live, and how she negotiated the meaning of her life through/among them.

The life story Maritza did tell me acknowledged those childhood difficulties *in her own way*, and incorporated so many other cultural traditions and value negotiations, that the “ACA window,” which I had set aside to ensure she would be able to tell her own story, was, at best, only slightly relevant. Although I still felt kinship to her as our lives had many similarities and we had shared many experiences in the poetry world (and had both used art to work out specific issues in our lives), her own telling of her story was a powerful lesson for me, and illuminated for me some cultural struggles I hadn’t even articulated in my own life.

Caughey advocates that we seek “someone interesting” to interview.⁸⁴ American Studies scholars like Gene Wise⁸⁵ have seen cultural studies as starting with a single point and moving out, making connections. Maritza demonstrates the wisdom of Caughey’s recommendation and Wise’s basic tenet of cultural studies and its seeking of connections and intersections. Her life weaves in many traditions—we see connections that can give us a specific window on American empire and cultural provincialism, on the friction between grassroots and academic poetry, on postmodern identity, on the lives of both career women and mothers, especially those who are both. And we must pay close attention, always, to the person at the center of this complex cultural biography, listening to her as she charts her course for us, explaining the negotiations she has undertaken in order to make a meaningful life.

Listening to their silences, reading their works, listening to their music, telling me their lives, I have gained from my informants’ generosity with the material of their lives

the utmost respect for the power of the individual life story seen in a context of ongoing cultural negotiation. Their struggles with the cultural currents, and the once unknown strengths they tapped into as they strove to create their own identities both from and within multiple cultures, are one great lesson of this study.

Feedback Loop: Maritza's Response to Her Chapter

As I did with my other informants, I submitted Maritza's chapter for her to review. I sometimes got confused following her back and forth between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland, so she offered a few clarifications and corrections on her personal chronology, and the kind of work she was doing in her different locations. In terms of cultural analysis, she let my interpretation of events stand, though she wanted me to know that her relationship with her father was more nuanced than what I described: "As for my dad, he was brilliant, charming, and tremendously social, but the meanest SOB I've ever known and I loved him dearly. Mental health problems and alcohol are a deadly combination." I fully understand the ambivalent residue of love and disappointment she carries with her, and I regret that I may have painted too limited a picture of her relationship with her father. I viewed him as representing certain cultural traditions, especially patriarchal dominance and repressive family secrecy. My alcoholic, mentally ill father, too, was gregarious, popular, witty, and all too often, cruel; like Maritza, my feelings about my father and my family are full of paradox, love, and conflict. And like Maritza, I realize that cultural analysis cannot fully explain a human relationship as complex and elemental as parent and child.

Via e-mail she told me “I read the whole thing in one sitting and it was remarkable. It was strange because sometimes it seemed I was reading about someone else.” And finally, she said, “I am truly honored to be part of this.” Her sentiment truly touched me, for, by the end of this project, each of the lives that my informants entrusted to me had come to have a feeling of, for want of a better word, *the sacred*, and their chapters represented my attempt to represent their reality with simultaneous portions of respect, good-faith compassion, and scholarship. It was I who was honored by their sharing so much of their inner identity and outer reality with me. Their joys and disappointments, their wisdom and weaknesses became my windows onto aspects of American culture and also onto my own life. Surprisingly, even when I didn’t think some aspect of their stories applied to me, I wound up finding it important, useful, and often transforming. Each one offered me new life improvisations and new ways of applying old skills to my own life that transformed it both internally and externally. Their perseverance, their good humor in the face of adversity, and their faith in their artistic vision helped guide me in my own intellectual and creative work.

In life history work, I believe we are often drawn to the subjects that have the most to teach us, who resonate most deeply with our own inner struggles, who have grappled with the cultural traditions we are still grappling with, and they serve to illuminate important issues we need help with. And these individuals, my “informants” did more than inform me, they taught me about their lives and showed me my own. To each of them I am profoundly grateful. They were generous with their time, yes; each gave up about a dozen hours over a period of a few years, a real investment for busy professionals and committed artists with equally demanding personal lives. But

more importantly, each trusted me with their personal reality, with their own spiritual struggles. There is no greater gift.

Notes

- ¹ Maritza Rivera, *For You* (Rockville, MD: self-published chap book, 1998) 18.
- ² Mary Catherine Bateson, *Willing to Learn*, (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2004) 71.
- ³ Charlotte, Linde, *Life Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 3-6.
- ⁴ Richard E. Cytowic, *Synesthesia: A Union of the Senses* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1989) 1; Patricia Lynne Duffy, *Blue Cats and Chartreuse Kittens* (New York: Times Books, 2001) 2.
- ⁵ Bateson, *Willing*, 69.
- ⁶ Anita Ilta Garey, *Weaving Work and Motherhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) 182.
- ⁷ Bateson, *Willing*, 72.
- ⁸ Rodolfo F. Acuna, *U.S. Latino Issues*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003) 172.
- ⁹ J. Hernandez-Alvarez, "The Movement and Settlement of Puerto Rican Migrants Within the United States, 1950-1960," in *Latinos in the United States, Volume 1: Historical Themes and Identity, Mestizaje and Labels*, ed. Antoinette Sedillo Lopez (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995) 372-374.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 373-374.
- ¹¹ Acuna, 172-173.
- ¹² Pedro A. Malavet, *America's Colony: The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University Press, 2004) 172-173.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.
- ¹⁵ Ed Morales, *Living In Spanglish* (New York: LA Weekly Books for St. Martin's Press, 2002) 4.
- ¹⁶ Ana Celia Zentella, "Returned Migration, Language, and Identity: Puerto Rican Bilinguals in Dos Worlds/Two Mundos," in *Perspectives on Las Americas*, ed. Matthew C. Gutman, Felix V. Matos-Rodriguez, Lynn Stephen, and Patricia Zavella (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) 245.
- ¹⁷ Morales, 4-5.
- ¹⁸ Malavet 114; Zentella, 245.
- ¹⁹ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 3.
- ²⁰ Zentella, 250.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 251.
- ²² Caughey, *Negotiating*, 12.

²³ Ibid., 5-6.

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁷ Henry Dietz, Jerrold Elkins, and Maurice Roumani, "The Military as a Vehicle for Social Integration," in *Ethnicity, Integration, and the Military* ed. Henry Dietz, Jerrold Elkins, and Maurice Roumani (Boulder, CO: Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 1991) 1-26.

²⁸ Ibid., 9.

²⁹ John Sibley Butler, "The Military as a Vehicle for Social Integration: The Afro-American Experience as Data," in *Ethnicity, Integration, and the Military*, ed. Henry Dietz, Jerrold Elkins, and Maurice Roumani (Boulder, CO: Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 1991) 27-50.

³⁰ Ibid., 32.

³¹ Ibid., 30.

³² Henry Dietz, "Conclusions," in *Ethnicity, Integration, and the Military*, ed. Henry Dietz, Jerrold Elkins, and Maurice Roumani (Boulder, CO: Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 1991) 209-227.

³³ Ibid, 209.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Kathleen Gerson, *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 7-10.

³⁶ Gelya Frank, *Venus on Wheels* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) 91.

³⁷ Garey, 172.

³⁸ Gerson, 217; Judith Schwartz, *The Mother Puzzle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993) 117.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Penguin Books (Plume Books), 1990) 232; Bateson, *Willing*, 79.

⁴¹ Gerson, 192.

⁴² Joan K. Peters, *When Mothers Work* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997) 175; Bateson, *Willing*, 75-79.

⁴³ Bateson, *Willing*, 83.

⁴⁴ Bateson, *Willing*, 81; Gerson, 38-39.

⁴⁵ Phyllis Moen, *Women's Two Roles: A Contemporary Dilemma* (New York: Auburn House, 1992) 28.

⁴⁶ Gerson, 217.

⁴⁷ Peters, 169.

⁴⁸ Moen, 28. In 1987, 45 percent of families with children headed by women were living in poverty, compared to only 7 percent of married couple families.

⁴⁹ Barbara Harris, "Two Lives, One 24-Hour Day," in *Career and Motherhood: Struggles for a New Identity*, ed. Alan Roland and Barbara Harris (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1979) 26.

⁵⁰ Peters, 177.

⁵¹ Clara Rodriguez, "A Summary of Puerto Rican Migration to the United States," in *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring Latina and Latino Lives in the U.S.*, ed. Mary Romero, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Vilma Ortiz (New York: Routledge, 1997) 104.

⁵² Zentella, 250-251.

⁵³ Ibid, 251.

⁵⁴ Maritza Rivera, "Time Will Tell," unpublished poem, 2005.

⁵⁵ Garey, 186.

⁵⁶ Maritza Rivera, "Doing It," unpublished poem, 2006.

⁵⁷ Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 115; Susan Love Brown, "Baby Boomers, American Character, and the New Age: A Synthesis," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 87-96.

⁵⁸ Maritza Rivera, "My Daughter's Ashes," unpublished poem, 2002.

⁵⁹ Lynette S. Eastland, "Archetypes, Synchronicity, and Miracles," in *Communication In Recovery: Perspectives on Twelve-Step Groups*, ed. Lynette S. Eastland, Sandra L. Herndon, and Jeanine R. Barr (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1999) 13-27; Darren Kemp, *New Age: A Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) 114.

⁶⁰ Becker, ix-x.

⁶¹ Karla Jay, "Preserving Unique Voices: Our Poetry in an Age of Assimilation," *Lambda Book Report*, 10.6: 10-12; Neil Astley, "Give Poetry Back to People," *New Statesman* (Oct. 23, 2006): 54-55.

⁶² Jay, 10.

⁶³ Astley, 54-55.

⁶⁴ Maritza Rivera, "El Cuco," unpublished poem, 2006.

⁶⁵ Garey, 186.

- ⁶⁶ Maritza Rivera, "RAW SHOCK," unpublished poem, 2006.
- ⁶⁷ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 12.
- ⁶⁸ Bateson, *Willing*, 67.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 81.
- ⁷⁰ Garey, 186, 189.
- ⁷¹ Bateson, *Willing*, Bateson, 71.
- ⁷² *Ibid*, 70.
- ⁷³ *Ibid*, 69.
- ⁷⁴ Garey, 186.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 189-190.
- ⁷⁹ Bateson, *Willing*, 79; Garey, 189; Peters, 169.
- ⁸⁰ Kay O'Connor and Kerry Chamberlain, "Dimensions of life meaning: A qualitative investigation at mid-life," *British Journal of Psychology*, 87.3 (Aug. 96): 461-465.
- ⁸¹ Sharon Wegscheider-Cruse, *Another Chance: Hope and Health for the Alcoholic Family* (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, Inc., 1981) 86, 104.
- ⁸² Claudia Black, *It Will Never Happen to Me* (Denver: M.A.C., 1981) 19.
- ⁸³ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 9.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid*.
- ⁸⁵ Gene Wise, "Some Elementary Axioms for an American Culture Studies." *Prospects* 4 (1979): 517-547.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

A Closing Poem In Epigraphs

A strict capitalist, the economic equivalent of a fundamentalist in religion, might argue that the inability of art forms to survive in the marketplace is the best indication that they probably do not deserve to survive.¹

I understood it as a hobby, and I understood it as a profession, and I understood it as something that was part of my personality, but I didn't sort of factor in that there was a God-quotient to this whole thing of practicing one's art and that was like the major piece. —Regina Jamison on the spirituality of writing.

What you're doing is you're clearing away a space for the unknown. And there's a tremendous need for that, all around us. So yeah, I feel like we're very important. We should be treated with great care. —Carl Banner, reflecting on the function of artists and musicians in American society.

You hear this gasp when it's one of those powerful poems. That gasp when you know you 'got' them. And that's a magical sound. And that's still priceless. It helps me write. —Maritza Rivera on reading poetry.

“Never change your mission to suit a funder.” —Lisette Josselson, Chairperson, Washington Musica Viva Board of Trustees

Life History Research and Emergent Design

R.O. Gardner has noted how we in the academy who analyze cultural systems too often attempt to foist theoretical “Hobson's choices” upon the individuals who are interacting with that system.² Our deconstructive “either-or” approach—secular anomie or community, mass cultural thrall or “pure” localized “folk” art—can too often take the individual down with it. The qualitative approach of life history and the new ethnographic research helps to restore agency to and represent the complex negotiations individuals make with multiple cultural traditions. We find that individuals do not

passively accept the institutions with which they interact, and that the institutions, while they are often rigid, are not wholly inflexible.

For me, this research project has been a startling and often moving process. What started out as a vague, too-broad notion of a study about the “artist and society,” became, when limited to a three-person-plus-researcher study, a journey that took me to concerts at fancy European embassies and off-beat art studios, readings at poetry salons, my own music gigs in coffeehouses, plays at community college theaters, and the like, and also, via my informants, half way around the world. My informants brought their own travels to life—taking me to Prague where Carl sought new and old Czech music. Maritza took me back and forth between Puerto Rico and U.S. mainland, where she learned again and again the need to translate both self and language, and twice into the army—once with her, the next time with her son, deployed to Iraq. Finally, Regina took me to Alabama with her father to promote her book based on his bedtime stories, to North Carolina, site of personal heartbreak, and to Africa where she lost her illusions of being “more African than Africa.”

This small study, grounded in the micro of an informant’s day to day living—Regina’s one bedroom condo and her many connections with her hometown of D.C., and her celebration of “no respect” comedian Rodney Dangerfield; Carl’s modest Bethesda home, his wife’s art studio near the railroad tracks, his five minute commute to his grants administration job that allowed him to rehearse during lunch, and the pocketful of promotional postcards he eagerly handed me at our last interview (“Are you going to a bookstore or a café?”); Maritza’s shopping trips to Costco for snacks for the poetry salon, her meeting and marrying through the salon a musician /sculptor, and her return home

after a disappointing relocation to New York—demonstrates the meandering nature of the artist's life and hence of qualitative research itself.

Drawing on contemporary life history and ethnographic theory and specifically employing Caughey's cultural traditions model, I did my participant-observation footwork: I set up and taped multiple interviews with each informant at various locations and transcribed them; I (sometimes with my pulse racing) assisted or participated either in their venue or some parallel situation: Carl played live, so I played live; Maritza read poetry at bookstores, private readings, and cafes and got published locally—I did so, too. Regina promoted her new children's story at the library; I carried a boxful of her books. There was reciprocation, too. Carl attended one of my musical performances at a local café; Maritza hosted my readings and performances at her salon.

I was repeatedly struck by the emergent nature of the study; I came into this study with theories about the experience of artists and culture, but most of those ideas were modified by project's end. I sometimes had to struggle to set aside my preconceived notions of both art and self and find new ways of understanding the lives my informants were sharing with me. I had notions of a tension between internal and external artistic identity—this was confirmed by my interviews and observations of my informants, as my informants all showed keen awareness of the differences between amateur and professional status. These were the areas where I expected to do research. But as Cole and Knowles have noted, “Qualitative research approaches in general are based on a principle of emergent design. It is not possible to anticipate how the research process will unfold, because of the unpredictability and messiness of research into the human condition.”³

Once I started down the road of life history with each of my informants, unexpected worlds opened up. “It is not possible to know in advance the kind of theorizing that will eventuate or the bodies of literature that will inform that theorizing, . . . if the researcher embraces the indeterminate nature of the research journey.”⁴ I found that my informants’ lives were influenced by a multiplicity of family and cultural traditions, many of which seemed, initially, far-flung from the simple amateur/professional dichotomy I had imagined—motherhood, military culture, Puerto Rican “returned migration,” entrepreneurship, “New Age” and Twelve-Step spiritual practices, the classical music world, etc. Each of these cultural traditions had an important place in the personal, professional, and artistic lives of at least one of my informants. My own personal, artistic, and professional identities also became part of the research experience—my informants’ life histories challenged my understanding of the cultural traditions that shaped my life. My preconceived notions were a useful starting place, but the study called me to venture into unexpected places intellectually and emotionally.

Finally, I was surprised to find, after all was said and done, that all three artists still affiliated themselves with the identity of artist as if it existed on a higher plane, an umbrella with room for all other cultural traditions. I may have entered the study with such a belief on a personal level, but listening to and observing the struggles of my informants had nearly dissuaded me of it. Their continuing to claim such an identity despite their many travails was intriguing and inspiring, and eventually came to make sense in light of my research into literature by Bateson, Minnick, Caughey and others on the issue of identity.⁵ I had also not anticipated my own intellectual journey on this issue;

it was indeed, a winding road down which I followed my informants to this new (and renewed) perspective.

Other themes I had not even anticipated emerged—it became clear that my informants had just passed through two stages of midlife reassessment—where they considered issues of vision, revision, and legacy. The time frame of the study lent itself to this discovery. Issues of institutional rigidity and flexibility also became apparent; my informants were all resourceful at finding ways around many aspects of cultural traditions that boxed them in. This realization in turn gave me new ideas for the application of the “cultural traditions” model I was using.⁶ Additionally, I came to see how crucial were the networks that Maritza and Carl operated in or attempted to create, but also how one person can serve as a hub—a key qualifier for the “art worlds” approach.

Just as each of my informants’ lives took unexpected turns—early retirement, remarriage and relocation, sudden loss of income due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the research also had unexpected personal side effects. I had come to see Carl as a peer, so when he recorded a CD making my own seemed doable. His maxim, “Take the means of production into your own hands,” stayed with me. And Regina’s hard work in the face of the insistent pressure she felt to keep her business going demystified the writing world for me. Maritza’s slog through the invisible upper layers of the supposedly egalitarian poetry world reminded me about the power discrepancies between professional and amateur statuses, and the need for credentials. My own need for higher credentials in my field (the Ph.D.) became apparent, and gave me motivation to push on. My own legacy, grounded in the reality of my new fatherhood, became an undercurrent of the research.

Thinking them older and more accomplished than I, I didn't initially think of my informants as peers, though each shared my membership in the baby boomer generation. Of course, the boomer cohort has many variations; in this group there were differences in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, and professional training among other cultural traditions, but we nonetheless shared certain generational expectations: a belief that we should seek self-actualization, and engagement with therapeutic explanatory systems. I was the youngest of the group, and came in impressed, if not a bit intimidated, by the achievements of my older boomer "brothers and sisters." Completing this study, which has led me to reassess my own cultural traditions and sense of legacy, has given me a similar sense of achievement. I now embrace my informants, for the first time, as peers.

On Being an Artist in America—Internal Visions, External Identities

John Adams' valuation of pragmatism over the luxury he associated with art was as much driven by fear of a state which might make monuments to itself at the expense of its people as it was by revulsion at any particular content: "An artist's works "like other luxuries..., were superfluous..., for they served no real need; they could not grow, be planted, or reproduce their own kind."⁷ Hyde has noted that "wariness about art and its supposed luxuries has often been repeated in American politics, though generally it appears not so much as an aversion to art itself but as an attachment to the useful, the practical, the down-to-earth—values, that are, in turn, linked to an egalitarian ideal."⁸ The rhetoric of those like Senator Jesse Helms, however, shows that, for some, pragmatism has been replaced by a genuine hostility toward art and artists themselves: "No artist has a preemptive claim on the tax dollars of the American people; time for

them, as President Reagan used to say, ‘to go out and test the magic of the marketplace.’”⁹ The “culture wars” launched by the organized right in the 1980s are still very much with us—the NEA remains under fire, and funding for arts education, PBS and NPR have been slashed in the latest federal budget.¹⁰

As noted in the introduction to this study, government agencies devoted to promoting the arts were late arrivals in the United States.¹¹ Taking advantage of art’s lack of deep roots in American society, the culture wars campaign has been fairly successful in crippling funding for the creative arts in America. Competing for scarce resources, many arts organizations have chosen to limit their repertoire to proven crowd pleasers, and steer clear of experimentation.¹² Arts organizations have been forced to “adopt the practices of the entrepreneurial world, and pull [their] own freight,” scrambling to “brand” themselves.¹³ Each of my informants eventually sought to provide their own version of an entrepreneurial answer to this funding crisis. Movement from amateur status toward professional status, or from internal artistic identity toward external artistic identity, was one significant factor in triggering an entrepreneurial response.

Throughout the course of my study it became clear that artistic identity was complex and multi-faceted, influenced by factors internal and external, and in many cases, woven far back in time. Each of my informants could point to an event or a series of events that was an early indicator of their artistic vision and talent. For Regina it was a church performance at age four; for Carl it was his steady progression from free piano lessons to more serious study as early as age seven or eight; for Maritza it was the notion of her sensitivity and perceptiveness confirmed through a childhood precognition.

For each of my informants, identity as an artist was initially internal, and they were allowed to progress without much pressure. For each, however, there was a point where they decided to declare themselves artists in a public sense—such a declaration then shifted their identity outward. For Carl, this came early, when a teacher insisted that he commit to music full-time, forsaking other hobbies; soon after this, he won a competition, cementing public identity.

Meanwhile, Regina enjoyed her status as an amateur writer, receiving encouragement at her day job as she published here and there; however, her decision to go freelance full-time in 1996 changed the equation; a new measure was instituted—how many dollars was she bringing in annually? Did she have a bestseller? Part of this was a fiscal reality, but part of it was a new measurement Regina imposed upon herself—she could not call herself a success unless she made a real living at writing and enjoyed a certain notoriety.

For Maritza, arts identity and professional aspirations came rather late--in her forties-- when she found the local poetry scene. Reading throughout the D.C. area and writing, literally, hundreds of poems over a period of several years was intensely meaningful on a personal level, but Maritza also invested time and energy in other roles as editor, panel member, and host. She networked well, and became a key figure in the D.C. area poetry world. She also identified for herself the steps needed for a poetry career: headlining (being a featured reader), publishing, mentoring, and finally teaching (usually with an MFA degree in hand). Having taken many master classes, attended numerous poetry retreats, headlined with “stars” like Maryland’s poet laureate, her internal, amateur identity was shifting to an externally validated one.

Each of my informants negotiated their relationship to the cultural tradition of entrepreneurship differently. Regina repeatedly admitted to liking self-promotion, more than any of my other informants. She saw herself as a business, and was constantly marketing herself, striving to find a label for herself that would sum her up to all prospective customers. My research showed that she clearly fit the classic definition of a “personal achiever” entrepreneur—driven, willing to put in long hours and unwilling to take time off, eager to take credit, more interested in success than afraid of failure.¹⁴ Still, there were moments when her internal artistic identity seemed to supersede her desire for external “branding” and success—her desire to keep writing plays despite their poor financial return, her refusal to assign herself the controversial (and hence potentially lucrative) moniker of the “blacks hate marriage writer,” and her rejection of more remunerative work to promote her favorite project, her children’s book. Her relationship to entrepreneurship was not as clear-cut as I’d initially thought—other factors, like her internal artistic identity, family feelings (related to the children’s book) and ethnic identity (she preferred to accentuate the positive side of African-American life) modified her business practices.

Maritza’s entrepreneurial step was driven more by a commitment to the arts and what she saw as a need for a nurturing space for poets than by any notion of business success. Dissatisfaction with the lack of résumé-building venues (and with the distracted ambience of readings at larger bookstores) led her to open up her own poetry salon. It is noteworthy that she used a career term, “résumé,” when discussing poetry, for it is indicative of a desire to move toward professional status and the need for others to have career-building opportunities.

She did exemplify some aspects of the personal achiever entrepreneurial approach, almost single-handedly maintaining the space, and booking and hosting every reading for the first two years (which additionally necessitated regular travel to other readings to find poets). Unwilling to delegate until the very end, she failed to make good use of her non-profit board. Finally, she burned out, and closed Mariposa. For three years, Maritza had maintained this artistic oasis, subsidizing it with nearly \$20,000 of her own money. She preferred to shut its doors rather than let others keep it open. As her namesake and creation, Mariposa was more a personal work of art than a business; it was her “soul work.”

Although Regina truly liked promotion and marketing, and Maritza preferred running her own show, Carl actively disliked wearing the “administrative” hat that came with creating a successful non-profit arts organization. But as Washington Musica Viva has grown in profile, reviving his career, Carl’s experienced a shift from an internal artistic identity to that of a public artist responsible to a growing constituency of fellow musicians, board members, and audience:

CB: The outsider status had its benefits. You’re beneath the radar, you’re invisible, nobody sees you, you can do anything you want. But you can’t actually keep that if you’re running a non-profit organization, because the public owns the non-profits. And I’ve been slow to understand that. But I understand it now. I have to stand up for whatever weird stuff we’re doing, in public. I have to insist that we have a right to exist and be noticed. And so that’s not compatible with maintaining this outsider status. So I don’t have the luxury.

MH: Do you think that at some point some part of you wants to stand up? You still want your refuge but at some level you want to stand up?

CB: I want to be noticed, but I’m afraid of being noticed because you get attacked once you’re noticed. And in fact, now that I do public performances, people say, “You know I don’t think you should do this, and why don’t you do that, and why are you doing that.”

Carl's major entrepreneurial step had been to organize *and fund* his own performance series. His "contented amateur" identity wasn't working; the Washington Musica Viva concerts slowly built up his professional identity. Then came the Catch-22: Carl had built enough infrastructure (audience, musicians, composers, board members) that he could expand his performance schedule. But to do that, he had to retire; if he retired, he didn't have the money to subsidize Washington Musica Viva any longer. In the classical world, the next step of entrepreneurship means securing funding; funding means administration and pressure to compromise one's artistic vision:

CB: We continually would go to experts, consultants, and they would say, "You know, you're wonderful—stop doing what you're doing—do something different." And [board chairperson] Lisette said, "Never change your mission to suit a funder." [Laughs]

I recall how our last conversation at first lacked the enthusiasm of our previous heady talks about music and the realm of the unknown that art delivers us to. We spent a good half hour bogged down in the complexities of non-profit status, funding, and the Catch-22 effect of Carl's retirement. Accustomed to spending five hours a day at the piano, Carl was now faced with the prospect of similar hours spent on the phone and at the computer. He was also realizing that if he wanted WMV to continue and thrive, he would have to put aside his discomfort with certain aspects of fund-raising.

MH: How many hours a week do you think you spend on administration?

CB: According to Lisette, it's supposed to be eight hours a day, but I'm spending probably four hours a day.

MH: And you're getting out some fund-raising letters.

CB: Yes—kicking and screaming. I tell you, I was not...I was not inclined to do it, but I am continuing to pursue it. You were asking about the administration—the administration sucks.

The negotiation between artistic and administrative identities, one a personal and artistic cultural tradition rooted in notions of personal and spiritual satisfaction, the other a cultural tradition rooted in American bureaucracy, entrepreneurship, and a longstanding hostility to the arts looked to be difficult and ongoing for Carl. As we paused to let the burdens he now shouldered sink in, he saved the moment with a typically flippant, half-bitter statement of determination and commitment to his artistic vision:

CB: You're turning yourself into a pretzel for the foundations—it's not really a good idea.

MH: Well, it's not why you wanted to do this.

CB: Yeah, right....I'm going straightforward, and if we run aground, we run aground.

It would appear that my informants' experience of their artistic identity exists on two different, sometimes overlapping cultural continuums, one internal and the other external. Amateurs enjoy freedom in terms of level of commitment, external standards of productivity and repertoire, and required credentials; they can more easily determine their own subjective level of satisfaction with their art. Yet they are fated to be left on the sidelines at key moments (as I was in the comedy club vignette in the introduction); they may enjoy outsider status and can pursue their art to their own satisfaction without significant public pressure, but there may come a time when they feel they are ready to assert a more professional identity. Such a move leads to increased scrutiny: Carl has felt it with critics in the local paper asking more questions about his unusual repertoire; Regina, increasingly reliant on the marketplace for creative *and* financial validation, was pushed by editors in directions she did not necessarily want to go, and also felt a need to *look* successful to build confidence in her clientele; and Maritza found that she hit the

poetry “ceiling” when it came to her goal of teaching—her academic credentials were lacking. Hence, her dream of an MFA and the move to New York to pursue it; and hence, her bitter disappointment that she lacked the time and financial resources to follow that dream through.

My study found that Stebbins’ conceptualization of amateurs and professionals remains useful,¹⁵ but that his definitions become problematic when we consider those on the edge of “success” like Carl and Regina, and miss out on a whole range of subjective experience. He acknowledges that there must be such a continuum, but doesn’t explore the experience of those who exist along it, privileging a culture of professionalization. His approach does, however, seem in keeping with western entrepreneurial traditions that place the marketplace above all other forms of identity and meaning. Interestingly, while my informants insisted upon their artistic identity whether they had achieved their stated goals (either professional or financial), they also displayed a keen awareness of external measurements and the status that they implied, whether they agreed with them or not.

Another tool used in this study was Becker’s “art worlds” approach.¹⁶ As noted in the introduction, Becker’s depiction of an art world’s infrastructure is highly instructive—witness the collapse of the classical music world and the professional trauma experienced by those trained for careers in that world. Clearly, there are “art worlds,” and they play a key role in the ability of both players and audience, at different levels of interest and expertise to enjoy and participate. One of the most interesting aspects of Carl’s story is how he has rebuilt an art world infrastructure to support his own creative vision, seeding it with his own money.

Both Carl and Maritza underscore a weakness of Becker's conceptualization of the art world. His insistence upon equal weight for all members of an art world, his admitted "dehumanization" of each "cultural worker" to a mere cog in the machine is fueled too much by a desire to challenge what he saw as a "star system."¹⁷ My study has shown that within art worlds there are individuals that serve as hubs—and those art worlds can collapse absent the work and personal drive of those individuals. Without Maritza, Mariposa closed and a corner of the D.C. poetry scene vanished. The impact of all "cultural workers" is not equal.

Finally, neither Stebbins' approach to studying amateurs and professionals nor Becker's approach to studying artists gives us a sense of the subjective experience of the individual people involved. Stebbins is too busy defining categories of practitioners to take much interest in individual experience; Becker is too concerned with what he perceives as an unfair hierarchy to inquire as to the experience of individuals in that hierarchy. Each approach is a tool with both utility and flaws that can be used to inform studies of artists, both professional and amateur, but qualitative research is needed to bring out the meaning creative people find in practicing their art in the world.

The Cultural Traditions Model—Rigidity, Flexibility, Negotiation

In *Negotiating Cultures and Identities* Caughey describes how a person can carry multiple cultural traditions or cultural frameworks in his or her mind *simultaneously*:

When we interview our research participants we find that they naturally talk about their lives in terms of their engagement with different social situations...They also recognize that values and customary behavior shift as they enter different social worlds where one or another of these systems prevails.¹⁸

He goes on to describe the struggle between two strong national traditions experienced by his informant Salma:

Both cultures are “out there” but also exist within her mind, her consciousness and her heart. Mentally and emotionally she can switch from one language and culture to another, but being bicultural means she carries the knowledge, symbolism, and imagery of both cultures in her mind. And while she usually chooses to operate with the appropriate mode in the appropriate place, her subjective sense of what is going on, the problems she copes with and how she feels about them is complexly affected by both Pakistani and American cultural meaning systems and by her conscious awareness of the differences.¹⁹

Each of my informants had experience with multiple cultural traditions, and had encountered moments where one or more of those traditions clashed. Such moments usually create great stress for the informant, but are fertile ground for the researcher. As a person works to sort out the differences or find some sort of harmony between two or more competing cultural traditions, she or he must engage in self-work that speaks directly to identity; the assessment we witness Salma struggle with above would lead to a real choice of identity—either she would stay in America and live the life of an American career woman, or she would return to Pakistan and live the life of a Pakistani wife. Of course, not all choices are so severe as the choice between two national cultures as different as those of Pakistan and the United States.

Gerson has noted the subtle pliability of many apparently rigid cultural traditions: Although social institutions constrain behavior in powerful ways, of which we are often unconscious, they are rarely static or completely unyielding. Social arrangements, like the people who embody them, are constantly being constructed as successive generations inherit a specific historical context and make their imprint on the social order.²⁰

When faced with a rigid cultural tradition, my informants often availed themselves of a more flexible, related cultural tradition as a way around such strict rules.

When Carl was rebuffed by the local classical music scene because of his improper use of the sustaining pedal, among other “transgressions,” he realized the music world he had left nearly twenty years earlier had gotten more and more “petrified” and wasn’t open to his style or repertoire. But Carl’s motivation to play publicly at the level he had been trained for was so strong that he took whatever openings he could—including a room with a piano at the National Institute of Health, and most significantly, shared “happenings” at his wife’s art studio, where he or his ensemble would be the featured musicians. These performances, drawing on the avant-garde cultural tradition of breaking down barriers between music, art, and the written word, featured talks on visual art, poets, sometimes backed by a jazz bassist, and always, Carl, usually with a trio, quartet, or quintet.

Slowly, the performances at the offbeat art studio (so different from the opulent rooms usually associated with classical music) built an audience for Carl’s musicianship and vision. Then came the reviews in the Washington Post, local papers, and on-line ’zines. Finally came the core of respected musicians (many of whom had lucrative musical posts elsewhere) who finally accepted Carl’s mastery of repertoire and performance. It took nearly a decade, but Carl’s career, seemingly tragically cut short, was rejuvenated and Washington Musica Viva was on the local map. His use of the avant-garde tradition of mixed media and experimentation was the back door he had gone through to stage his comeback. Ironically, once his reputation was established and he was invited to play in “straighter” venues (the Czech embassy, the Ratner Museum), Carl found that the funkiness of the studio, once a selling point, became a liability, especially with potential funders. He was back inside the more rigid cultural tradition of “chamber

music.” He might have to “settle” for fancy rooms to play in, but he would fight to maintain his reputation for “repertoire no one else will do.”

As noted earlier, Maritza similarly embraced a more flexible cultural tradition as a way of out of an inflexible one—she joined the army to escape her father’s tyranny. His conception of Puerto Rican womanhood was full of career restrictions, evening curfews, and rigid gender roles. Frustrated that he would not let her be a journalist, she “got out” by joining the army. She would also avail herself of a more flexible cultural tradition as she negotiated the world of poetry.

Faced with the reality that established poets usually come armed with MFA degrees and teaching jobs, Maritza found other ways to establish herself in the poetry scene. Her salon drew on the traditions of grassroots open mikes and personal entrepreneurship. She was able to recruit leading academic and published poets eager for an audience as headliners. Additionally, Maritza was able to gain valuable experience and make contacts with key figures in the local scene by volunteering as a first reader and assistant editor at a leading poetry journal. The salon and the work on the journal allowed her to raise her own profile and make connections that helped her advance her poetry career, despite the professionalization of the poetry scene. The Poet Laureate of Maryland “took her calls.” She came to know everyone and got invited to read at some respected venues. As of this writing, however, her ultimate goal of teaching poetry remains elusive; the MFA too might still be needed to make it *all the way* to the top. Nonetheless, Maritza was able to get the poetry world to bend, to a point, by borrowing from more flexible traditions.

These two informants made use of more flexible traditions in order to maintain the growth of their artistic identity and careers. They were also able to simultaneously maintain contact with the more rigid tradition, which they might have had to abandon altogether without a “safety valve,” another tradition that allowed them to pursue aspects of the rigid tradition while not having to be subsumed by it. Instead of succumbing to the external measurements associated with the more rigid cultural traditions which most certainly would have disqualified them, they found another cultural tradition that allowed them to hold on to their internal artistic identity.

Even Regina, under pressure to produce salable work was able to reinforce her more personal artistic identity by writing plays. The theatrical world, while less than remunerative, embraced the more wide-open content of her stage works. In a way, her “straight” work subsidized her plays in much the way that Carl’s science job supported Washington Musica Viva in its early years. Regina also found alternative ways to make a living when coping with the all or nothing business tradition of publishing—teaching and lecturing offered much more flexibility, and enabled her to continue to pursue writing by giving her income and a flexible schedule that allowed for her to make public appearances to promote what writing projects she did manage to get published.

A Legacy of Artistic Service: Benefits for Community and Self

It is interesting to note that part of the legacy of each of these three artists has involved service to or mentoring of other artists or students. Carl’s music and performance series has offered opportunities to new composers, fellow musicians and singers, as well as poets and visual artists. Maritza’s poetry salon gave less experienced

poets and musicians a place where they could, in her words, “build a résumé” in a supportive environment. Regina saw herself as part of a continuum of mentoring, now passing on what her mentors gave her to her own students.

Both Carl and Maritza had experienced frustration at either the paucity of or the commercial orientation of venues for arts performers. While this move toward service clearly seems to have some altruistic grounding, and each was open about their desire to respect and nurture the artists they worked with, Carl and Maritza also experienced a dimension of personal opportunity and satisfaction through the performance series they created. As Stebbins has noted, it has been established that such volunteer service “has both altruistic and self-interested motives.”²¹

For Carl, music is not just a solitary experience—in grad school in his late twenties, having quit music for three years, he remembers being “lonely” and needing to “talk” to other musicians through playing music. Washington Musica Viva did draw on a collectivist avant-garde approach which integrates multiple artistic genres, but it also gave Carl an outlet for his own artistic expression. And having been trained in the chamber music world, where most pieces are written for ensembles, and having witnessed the collapse of that musical world, he knew that an infrastructure of supporting players would be necessary. His readings in shamanistic theory, Eliade particularly, also had led him to believe that other players (as well as an audience) are needed for an artist to move toward “the unknown.” Hence, Carl’s service meets both his own needs and those his artistic community. And Carl’s generosity has some limits—“You’ve never seen another piano player at Washington Musica Viva have you?” he asked during one discussion about his contribution to the arts community—while Carl is more than happy to give others a place

to read and play, and finds the poets he hears and musicians he works with, he will be the only pianist invited to share in that opportunity.

Maritza, stimulated by years of reading at open mikes in often noisy coffeehouses and distracted bookstores, had long thought of opening up a “salon” when she stumbled upon the tiny space she turned into Mariposa. As noted elsewhere and above, her goal was to give fledgling poets a safe space to build their reading credentials; like Carl, she also opened her space to visual artists, so that at a given poetry reading, photos, paintings, or work in some other visual medium would be part of the overall experience. Again, we see service offered to other artists, but we also see personal satisfaction: the salon helped Maritza build her own network in the poetry world, making her a key player in the local scene; and her whole-hearted devotion to every detail of Mariposa shows the artistic satisfaction she took in creating a space which was, in its own way, a work of art. And by making a safe space where the artistic community could gather, she, like Carl, helped build more infrastructure for the particular art world she embraced. She even experienced interpersonal benefits from running the salon; the regulars at the salon became her extended family, and she met the sculptor/musician who would become her second husband through the salon. Finally, since she has cited the artistic world as the place that allows for idiosyncrasy, and has written of how marrying an artist has normalized her particular way of seeing the world, it therefore makes sense that creating a space for artists would further validate her artistic identity, making it safer and less marginal for her to be an artist. Artists who help create art worlds benefit both themselves and others.

Emergent Themes: Stages of Mid-Life—Vision, Reality, Revision

Mid-life is known as a time of reassessment. “Reorientation to time-left-to-live rather than time-since-birth leads to stocktaking, heightened introspection, and the deconstructing and restructuring of experience.”²² Bateson has noted that mid-life can present people “the option of taking a time for reflection and retooling [so that] they might clarify priorities.”²³ Each of my informants took key steps in embracing and supporting their artistic identity as they entered mid-life. Regina, as she prepared to turn forty, quit a job she loved to pursue her vision of being a creative writer full-time. In his early forties, Carl started playing occasional concerts during lunch hours or at home, which led to the creation of his own concert series in his late forties. Maritza, back on the U.S. mainland and post-divorce, had just turned forty when she discovered the previously hidden poetry world of the D.C. area.

Bateson’s notions of a new conception of extended mid-life as “a new and wondrous opening in the shape of lives, a new and uncharted stage of the life cycle,”²⁴ presumes a middle class and upper middle class notion of life choices. As middle class professionals, my informants were able to gather the financial resources at mid-life to take entrepreneurial steps in support of their artistic identity. Each informant experienced a different level of financial security and flexibility: Carl had the most ample resources while he was still working full-time; Regina was able to save startup costs and create a reserve; Maritza, with two teenaged children, felt the most pressure, but was able to rent out a room in her house to offset costs. Other aspiring artists without such resources of property and salary might not be able to take such steps.

It was no accident that these artists were both able and interested enough to direct personal and financial resources toward artistic fulfillment at this age. Each went through a reassessment of life goals that often occurs at mid-life. Carl, realizing he would be unhappy without a music career, scaled down his career goals; Regina, despite a satisfying job in the school system knew she “had to try” to fulfill her dream of being a writer; Maritza, recovering from divorce and the death of her father reconsidered the role she wanted to play in life (too often she had found herself in the role of caretaker) when she found the world of poetry and “came home.”

Each, assessing his or her life story, and thinking about how she or he wanted that life history to read when it reached its end, was primed to take a risk artistically and, eventually, financially. McAdams likens such reevaluation to the Eriksonian concept of “generativity” in which a person “...understands his own work in terms of generativity—in terms of fashioning a gift for the next generation...Generativity may be expressed through one’s family life, friendships, work life, church or community activities, and even pastimes and hobbies.”²⁵ Each informant associated artistic creativity with a higher spiritual realm—to Regina her writing was “God speaking through me;” to Carl, art and music took both him and his audience into a much-needed embrace of the “unknown;” and Maritza longed for the moments when poems moved and healed the audience. Each felt an artistic legacy would benefit both self and society.

So Carl founded Washington Musica Viva, launched an increasingly ambitious concert series, and fantasized about a time when he could afford to retire and play music full-time. He also sank \$6000 to \$8000 of his own money into the series every year. Regina, with a year’s salary in the bank and some contacts from her occasional lecture

and publication work, set out to make a living full-time from her wit and creativity. Her ambitious plan imagined annual earnings of \$50,000 within two years (more than she had ever made at her D.C. schools job). Maritza, after five years of building her poetry résumé decided to follow through on her vision of a nurturing arts center which would combine headliners and an open mike; she would invest nearly \$20,000 of her own money in the center over a three-year period. Clearly, for these three informants, serious arts participation required substantial capital.

The early years of arts entrepreneurship for these three were heady, magical times; the satisfaction of a concert coming together buoyed Carl and kept concerns about eventually developing a sustainable financial base at a distance; Regina was still excited about the prospects of her children's book while packing in lecture work during Januarys and Februarys (primarily Martin Luther King, Jr. and Black History Month-themed programs). Her third year looked ready to match the last year of her nine-to-five office job. Maritza found herself buoyed by the magical nights that seemed to happen often at the poetry salon and arts center; she put together reading after reading, building an audience and a network of performers. Those were the early years when my informants first implemented their visions. What would their legacy really amount to?

An unusual dimension of this study noted in the introductory chapter is that my association with my informants took place over a period of years, rather than a six month or one year window. The result is more than a snapshot; it is more of an album representing a longer period.. Each of my informants would experience at least one additional major life change during the study. Carl's longed-for retirement came, spurred along by non-profit dreams of funding that would enable him to draw a salary as artistic

director. But the funding is yet to arrive, even as he expands his artistic reach. For Regina, 9/11's drag on the contract-worker economy put her out of business as a full-time writer. Her dreams of a bestseller seem distant now. For Maritza, while Mariposa remains a fond memory, the next step, the gaining of a credential (the MFA) has fallen through—the new job became untenable and time and money considerations left the MFA out of reach. Within a year she was back home, looking for a new job; her husband was indeed making a name for himself as a sculptor, but not fast enough to quit his day job. Retiring to Puerto Rico had been replaced with thoughts of remodeling her Rockville home's kitchen.

One reaction to these results would be to suggest that each had failed. In a culture that likes to measure experience by clear cut commercial measures of the bottom line, this would be an easy but unfair assessment. I inquired of each how they experienced this later stage of their vision. Each displayed an ability to reassess and revise their life stories in accordance with the actual events of their lives, as opposed to the visions that had led to those events. What emerged in these discussions was a combination of disappointment, wry humor, attempts at contextualization, and acceptance, coupled with a determination to maintain artistic identity—Carl would keep the series going, Maritza would publish another book of poems, Regina would develop a new book proposal off of her freelance article on marriage. External aspects of their artistic identities may have been in flux, but their artistic lives were hardly over.

Carl's assertion that his frustration at getting funding had actually led him to "throwing things," Regina's anger at God, reflected in her play *Searching for a Signal*, and Maritza's "huge disappointment" at not being able to make her financial and MFA

goals work were all honestly confronted in our interviews. Each admitted to frustration and anger. But each displayed an ability to adjust, to take new opportunities, and to revise their life stories as they entered a second stage of mid-life, which I refer to as a “legacy reassessment.”

Regina, in particular, looked to the lives of other writers to gain a sense of grounding about the realities of the writer’s life, noting that many writers had been forced to take work they didn’t want. She also compared herself to less successful aspiring artists: “I still feel like an artist, you know. I live comfortably. I’m published, I’m produced, so, you know, when I was a child thinking, I’m going to be a writer when I grow up, I had a much grander image in my head, but you know some people don’t get to, don’t even know what they want to do.” And her lack of bestseller success was not stopping her from continuing to pitch new proposals and ideas, submit new articles. Her creative output had been scaled back, but she was still marketing her older work, still open to new contracts. With four books published, she had realized the form of her dream, if not the scale, and with her northeast D.C. condo paid off, she was willing to accept a combination of minor artistic and acceptable material comfort with a measure of satisfaction. And, at age 51, aware that she was in a later stage of midlife, her thoughts turned to the young people she had taught in her creative writing clubs in the school system. It was time, she thought, to start spending more time and energy with them. There are different forms of legacy and generativity—Regina’s body of written work can also stand alongside her connection to her students as equal parts of her legacy.

Carl’s legacy—bringing new life to classical music through expanded repertoire, commissioned pieces, the merging of jazz and chamber music, the building of a local

infrastructure and audience—is threatened by the arts’ perpetual struggle for funding. But Carl’s parallel project, rebuilding a musical infrastructure, paid off during WMV’s last season, when several board members kicked in donations and found other donors to keep the season afloat after numerous foundations had denied funding. And WMV got two small composer grants in early 2007, allowing them to support new work. Still, the funding picture is not rosy, and WMV is relying more and more on ideas for house concert fundraisers, auctions, and the like. This is not the “fun” part of art.

In our last interview Carl shrugged off business talk and became more and more animated with talking about new musical directions. Despite external threats to his artistic identity in the form of non-funding, Carl’s artistic identity has never been more sure:

MH: So obviously you’re juggling a lot of stresses and you’re tired now [after a series of concerts ending three days prior], but is the music still the big joy—what does it do for you now, does it integrate all your other experiences?

CB: I’m much more centrally identified as an artist. That’s who I am, that’s what I do, that’s what I build my life around.

MH: Do you like having that identity?

CB: Well, it’s really who I’ve always been, but I haven’t been able to claim it as well.

In Carl’s case, one external measurement, funding, has been trumped by his daily experience of practicing, arranging, and performing, which has resulted in an internal experience of mastery. And that feeling of mastery has allowed him to let go of the career narrative that has eluded him. In fact, like Regina, he has used comparisons with other musicians to contextualize his career:

CB: The classical music world was dying and it really has died. As a living kind of world of cultural activity it’s dead and that process was very bad for people who

were involved in it. And, so, in a way I was lucky that I was not really impacted. I was kind of in exile for 20 years so that when I came back to it, I hadn't lost my soul and all the people that I knew who had stayed were in bad shape.

While he openly admits the devastating disappointment he experienced as a young prodigy expecting a welcoming world to open up for him, he contextualizes his experience by noting the struggles of the other musicians he started out with. Such comparisons allow him to more easily accept his lost years and even to suggest that he may have been fortunate not to have followed the accepted career path; he may have suffered like those others. Instead, he had a good career as a scientist that eventually allowed him to subsidize his return to the musical world and to reclaim his identity. In fact, if he had stayed *inside* the dying classical music world, he believes he would have not had the freedom to pursue his artistic vision. Like Regina, Carl revises his life story in a way that allows him to make sense of the ups and downs he's experienced.

Finally, Maritza's take on the second stage of mid-life follows this pattern: although her vision of New York success followed by a third and final Puerto Rican homecoming has fallen through, she finds ways of revising or reinterpreting her experience so it is useable and satisfying. On the artistic front, she has determined to be more accepting of the local poetry scene (like my other informants, she references New York as a cultural standard) and has decided to turn to cataloguing her work (by now, thousands of poems) in preparation for a new book. Finally, she has returned to a first love, forbidden by her father--dance.

And as she becomes more satisfied on a personal level, she seems less anxious about her artistic identity—her marriage to a fellow artist has validated her way of seeing

things on an everyday basis; in work, she has finally stepped away from the corporate world into a public sector job that seems to integrate many of her cultural traditions. She looks at her children and counts them a success and seems to have accepted that her journey through poetry has brought her other satisfactions. In this second stage of mid-life she feels she has less to prove: “I’m no longer running from reading to reading. I’m no longer so worked up about submitting poems for publication—I’m sending some in, and keeping others. Some are still my babies and I don’t want to send them out there.” Finally, her New York experiment becomes recast as fulfillment of an incomplete part of her childhood, which, indeed, it may be.

Each of my informants had a sense of the kind of artist they wanted to be, culled from notions of the artist culturally available to them, as well as their own creative responses to this cultural material. In each case, they took they took steps to make this real at mid-life. Each experienced a mix of success and disappointment. Each then took stock, made comparisons that helped recontextualize their experience, or employed other explanatory systems to make the experience useable and at some level satisfying.

As researcher, I, too, have gone through the two mid-life stages. In my twenties and thirties, as noted earlier, I pursued creative careers in comedy and music. Entering mid-life, I abandoned these careers for something I was also drawn to and that I perceived as more practical; I returned to graduate school. My vision of graduate school and a teaching career has not manifested itself quite as I envisioned. I took longer to finish the doctorate than I had expected; there are far fewer jobs than I realized. And I am not willing to uproot my family for some far-flung search for tenure—we have settled in Maryland. But I, too, revise—this is far better than the series of unfulfilling

administrative jobs I held before. I have a solid and enjoyable adjunct job—not everyone is able to teach at just one school, as stories of multiple jobs and long distance commutes attest. I get to talk about things that matter to me. And my flexible schedule has given me time for my new legacy—my young daughter. In fact, I find myself wanting to fashion a new legacy just for her: I want her to have a father who follows through, and this has been a big motivator in finishing this project. I also want to expose her to art and for her to know me as an artist. No doubt that desire will propel me to pursue future music and writing projects.

Meanwhile, I suppose I am creating my own legacy through her. Few three-year olds go to comedy school, but it would seem that my young daughter has already absorbed my talents for wordplay and deadpan delivery. The musical gifts my mother's side of the family have passed on seem to be present: she has been able to keep time since the age of two and has already started singing. Time will tell how our creative traditions will play out in little Natalie. At fifty, I am finally accepting adulthood and legacy:

A Father Looks to Winter

*I've finally come to winter
Here, in this old house long since left by its builders
This is my long white stand
No longer against the years, I pray them come to me
Etch their knowing around my eyes, let me borrow from them*

*And in this space of growing old, I come late to fatherhood
Leave a clearing for her dances
Wear a cloak made of baby sounds
Dressing in strong, rough hands
Learning to guard a baby's weak neck
Or her staggering grace*

*Down in the winter fields, squirrels toss away dirt
Dig out pieces of foil, stolen peanuts*

*Climb a tree carrying our abandoned jars
They scramble, forage for life
Yet are always ready to surrender
Let the next line come into its spring*

*With no child in our nest, I held on too long to summer
Neglected fall
But now I look long through the brown leaves to my white future
With relief, I look to winter²⁶*

Mike Hummel

Negotiating Identity: Art As A “Transcendent” Frame

Each of my informants negotiated multiple cultural identities. Carl’s struggle to fit into two different but equally rigid career paradigms had the arc of a novel; he used Marxist and shamanistic ways of thinking to deal with the business and artistic side of music, respectively. Maritza’s life had multiple cultural frames—her American and Puerto Rican identities which she was encouraged to keep separate by family and Catholic school, her turn to military culture for a structured means of escape from her father’s rule, and her use of psychological and artistic traditions to make sense of her life experience. Regina embraced an American tradition of commercial writing, modified on occasion by her own creative tastes, incorporated African-American content, stylistic and rhetorical devices into much of her art, made use of a family tradition of storytelling for one of her books, and, abandoning the religious background of her youth, reached out to the explanatory systems employed in 12-Step programs to deal with important personal and career issues. Despite such great variation in their experience of personal identity, each also asserted one core identity—that of being an “artist.”

Another emergent theme of this study is that of the claim by these artists of art as a transcendent identity. Each of my informants has laid claim, at one point or another in our interviews to an artistic identity, a way of seeing things that seemingly transcends all cultural traditions, all outside influences. Minnick has suggested that our culture's excessive "attention to *self* may represent a shift in the site where Americans feel anxious and in need of help. Identity may represent the modern realm of liminality."²⁷ This feeling of liminality prompts individuals to seek some consistent identity—something that cannot be questioned or taken from them:

By adding an element of transcendence to identity, the 'ground one establishes' becomes more stable and more secure, enabling individuals and groups to better cope with life. However, . . . a balance must be struck between stability and flexibility. . . religions and identities must be responsive to their surroundings.²⁸

Transcendence creates stability, and hence continuity and lasting identity over time.

My informants seem to claim that "artist" is one such transcendent identity which fits Minnick's notion of stability *and* flexibility. As a way of seeing and of being the identity of artist may be more stable than traditional identities related to geography, gender, and career which are now so unstable. And since the raw material of art is often one's own life experience, it is also open to new influences and cultural traditions.

Maritza interpreted her fear of a picture window, at the age of four, as a precognition of an apartment fire. She had "vision," and this way of seeing would be with her as a burden and later a gift. Although she remembers an aunt who encouraged her to write, there is also a suggestion that Maritza believes this mode of perception is inborn, not learned. And for her, the world of poetry and art was a place where all of her belonged—her Puerto Rican heritage, the Spanish she was taught was never to be used

in public settings nor mixed with English even at home, her difficult relationship with her father, her loss of her sister, her struggles with single motherhood, her whole history and way of looking at the world:

M: The artistic world is that world that allows for idiosyncrasies, that says those idiosyncrasies aren't something bad. It's called "talent," it's called sensitivity.

Though the world (in the person of the nuns at Catholic school) once banned her from mixing English and Spanish, now she can write about it in a poem; her experimentation now extends to integrating key ideas into English-language poems through Spanish vocabulary. And although growing up, she thought she was "nuts" to see things the way she did, now she can write about art as a way of seeing. Attempts to see her life through other cultural traditions like psychology had not fully satisfied her:

*Prescription drugs and therapy
haven't cured me
so I married an artist
now nothing seems strange*

Maritza Rivera, *RAW SHOCK* ²⁹

As an artist, now married to another artist, her identity, rooted deep in her past, has been validated. Art, as a way of seeing, seems to encompass all experience and integrate all other cultural traditions for her.

Carl and Regina made similar claims for art's transcendence of other cultural traditions. For Carl, it enabled him to list as his top three creative influences such dissimilar artists as Bob Dylan, Johann Brahms, and the great "Satchmo," Louis Armstrong. When pressed on how they influenced him, he was at first vague, but finally came across with the declaration that each of them was authentic and "operating from the deepest place we can work from." To him, each of them was truly authentic, and the way they influenced his own musical performance was that he sought to achieve similar authenticity in each rendering of a piece. Indeed, when he e-mailed me shortly after he attended my own coffeehouse gig, what he spoke of was my passion and authenticity.

The most meaningful identity in Carl's life has been that of musician or artist. In our early interviews he consistently referred to himself as a "true musician," an identity rooted in an internal sense so strong that it persisted even when external measurements refuted it. With such an inner drive to be a musician, it was painful *not* to be seen as one, hence his struggle to create an outer validation of his identity to match the inner experience.

My cultural studies training led me to press Regina more than once to reflect upon her identity as an “African-American” writer, but she was steadfast in declaring herself a “writer” without adjectives or hyphens, and suggesting that art has universal implications, that God speaks through her when she writes. Although much of her content had African and African-American influences, not all of it did, and she indicated that she thought art about particular people can be related to by a general audience, and that all art has a transformative, healing quality that crosses cultural boundaries.

Bateson might frame this discussion a little differently, suggesting that these individuals are seeking “threads of continuity” in a world of discontinuity:

Much of coping with discontinuity has to do with discovering threads of continuity. You cannot adjust to change unless you can recognize some analogy between your old situation and your new situation. Without that analogy you cannot transfer learning. You cannot apply skills. If you can recognize a problem you’ve solved before, in however different a guise, you have a much greater chance of solving that problem in the new situation... those ... with a sense that they had skills and adaptive patterns that they could use in the new situation... were emphasizing continuity.³⁰

To Bateson, then, art might not be a transcendent form, so much as an adaptive skill that is more easily transferred than others. It might be interesting to study whether artists experience greater or lesser ease in handling life transitions. Does artistic identity bring with it skills especially useful to adapting to a multicultural society where identity is in constant flux?

It is possible that this way of thinking about artistic identity may itself be a peculiarly American cultural frame, although my informants see it as something innate. In a multicultural society, identity is a complicated and shifting concept; some individuals reach for cultural traditions that provide integrative frameworks and artistic identity

may be one of them. In American culture, while many ethnic and racial groups can claim specific artistic traditions, there is extensive borrowing and hybridity; commercial applications of creative texts have led to further cross-identification through mass culture. Though individual artistic traditions may be rigid, art as an American tradition may represent a cultural space where identity has grown more fluid and flexible, allowing some individuals to incorporate multicultural experience without being forced to limit cultural identity. However, it must also be added that while my informants were of different ethnic backgrounds, all three were educated and middle class; there may be differences in the flexibility and choice of identity individuals from other socio-economic backgrounds experience when they declare themselves artists, regardless of ethnicity. And others of similar socioeconomic background may experience the relationship between ethnic and racial identity and artistic identity differently as well. This issue is one I will suggest exploring in future research.

Ideas for Future Research

This study of three artists, of course, cannot claim to be definitive for all American artists, but the life histories of the individuals I interviewed and observed raise key issues of internal and external experience of identity, mid-life reassessment, and the value of art to our society that seem worthy of further exploration. Ethnography and life history each have much to offer the study of artists in terms of representing the meaning, identity, and day-to-day experience of being an American artist.

As noted in the introduction to this study, critics of the arts participation canvasses conducted by the NEA feel that a significant weakness of surveys is their lack

of qualitative data and thus have advocated that an interviewing component be added to the traditional survey strategy.³¹ Arts surveys have tended toward superficial readings of levels of arts involvement. Life history research can be a useful complement to quantitative methods, and may be particularly useful in the study of artists. It is hoped that this study can be a partial fulfillment of Peterson's desire to learn more about the *meaning* art has in people's lives, and lead to more qualitative studies like it.

Ethnographies and biographies of artists have too long celebrated either folk culture, fame or "genius." To truly understand the meaning of art in the daily lives of millions of Americans, we need more qualitative studies like this one to expand the picture of how art creates meaning in American lives. Further studies of other artists negotiating the space around professional and amateur status will shed more light on the limitations and benefits of each status, and how American cultural traditions (like funding) modify them. A study of an individual who is determined *not* to move into professional status, though he or she may have the opportunity to do so would be one good addition to the literature—how do they see the difference between amateur and professional status? Why do they avoid professionalism?

And what is the difference between experience of the government-funded artist and the make-it-on-your-own freelancer? What is the difference in how they view their status and function in society, their work, their audience? How do they define success? How do they maintain artistic identity, and how does that identity change with success or failure? Another useful study would be of someone, not unlike Carl Banner, but after they have achieved stable funding—how does that change their self-perception, their experience of their art, the external pressures and rewards?

My informants were all middle-class, educated professionals who pursued an artistic career at mid-life. Further studies might consider how important socioeconomic class is in enabling such a choice. Are there others who see themselves as artists but simply don't have the resources? My informants also did not strongly identify their artistic experience with their ethnic traditions. Is this an influence of social class? Of other processes of assimilation? Or is, as my informants seem to believe, being an artist a transcendent identity? How do other artists experience artistic identity in relationship to ethnic identity? Do they also believe in this notion of transcendence? Or do they modify or reject this notion? Are arts traditions flexible cultural spaces that allow for more fluidity of identity? Additional culturally-based life history work would help our understanding of the complexity of artistic identity across cultural traditions.

That my informants made their attempt at mid-life raises a whole other set of issues. What is it about mid-life that triggered these entrepreneurial steps? More studies of those who stake out such a new identity at mid-life would expand our understanding of that life period. And studies over longer periods of time, like mine, would give added depth to the understanding of different parts of the life course—to watch an individual meet with middle age and decide this is the time to act, then follow her through till the results of those actions are apparent gives us a series of takes on a life—as I said, not a snapshot, but an album.

I noted earlier that there seemed to be two distinct stages of mid-life experienced by all three of my informants, vision and then revision, the second informed by the lived reality of the vision. Each had a vision of their artistic future and moved toward it. Each met with some success and persevered against some setbacks. Each then had time to step

back and reevaluate their progress in terms of both their past and their future. A second wave of mid-life seemed to be an emergent theme in this study—further study, spread over a period of years, could observe whether this is a common phenomenon.

The breakdown of an “art world” was another interesting theme that emerged from the chapter on Carl Banner. While his story was very much about the narrative arc that took him from training as a prodigy, quitting music, and eventually struggling to reestablish a music career with relative success in middle-age, it was also about rebuilding a broken art world. While I noted its subjective limitations, Becker’s venerable “art worlds” concept still has utility, and could be a useful concept in conjunction with life history work on, say, a half-dozen participants in a certain art world. Clearly two of my three informants were “hubs” for a corner of an art world. Life history research might give us a clearer picture of how individuals in an art world experience their level of participation, why they make the choices they do, and what things make it easier or harder to participate. Also, more research on how scenes like these are constructed, how individual, community and government resources weaken or strengthen them, how they interact with other scenes (at different levels—from amateur to professional, for example, or across different artistic milieus) would be valuable.

And since much of what’s “wrong” with the artistic world seems to revolve around funding, any study of an art world with a life history or ethnographic component should include the funders, should they be willing to participate. We need to understand the world of the funders—one could do a life history study of three or four key players at major funding institutions. Or imagine a book called *Anatomy of a Grant* that follows a handful of individuals involved in applying for, evaluating and awarding a grant, and then

appreciating or participating in the resulting art. Explaining the funding world to artists from the point of view of the actual people doing the funding and explaining the grants process to the funders from the point of view of both artists and audience might open new lines of communication.

Additionally, we must study how new technologies (the internet, broadband, digital recording equipment) impact artists on the margins. Do they enable them to build audience and art worlds on a shoestring? Do they make it easier to produce and distribute new works? Are these technologies affordable to artists on tight budgets? Or do the power dynamics that exist in the struggle between the marketplace and the public sector also exist in the applications of new technologies?

New technologies also affect art worlds and artists, changing conventions of production and distribution—and modes of distribution also affect content and form.³² As noted earlier, the advent of recording changed audience expectations for classical music performers (mistakes were no longer permitted³³), but also allowed their works to be more widely disseminated. Although recordings initially boosted live attendance of concerts in the first half of the twentieth century (while simultaneously discouraging individuals from attempting their own music-making³⁴), the long range effects of mass mediated culture have been devastating for live performances of all kinds. It has been well-documented that many Americans find it much easier to receive their “art” and “culture” via electronic media.³⁵ Technology, then, can have multiple effects on artists and their respective art worlds, some of which would seem to support the health of those worlds, some of which do not.

Each artist in this study has made use of technology at some point to increase distribution, reach audience, and as a means of publicity. Two of the three artists I interviewed had fully developed and regularly updated websites by the end of the study, and the third made regular use of e-mail lists as a way of publicizing events. This was not surprising in the case of Carl who long ago had been inspired by the ease with which his punk rocker son used the new technologies to record, burn, and distribute his own CD recordings. Carl has issued a pair of CDs as of this writing. Meanwhile his Washington Musica Viva website is regularly upgraded and now contains MP3 files of live recordings of Carl and his quartet and quintet in performance. It also has links to reviews of performances, an MP3 sound file of Carl being interviewed on local radio, fundraising pitches, as well as performance schedules and directions.³⁶

Regina has also begun to take advantage of new technology to publicize her many professional projects—books, lectures, articles, etc.—with an impressive-looking website.³⁷ She is also able to keep her audience informed of events like the performance of a short play off-off Broadway, the incorporation of a scene from her earlier play, *Searching For a Signal* into a workshop by a local psychiatric institute, and additional public and media appearances related to her many books and articles. Her article, “Marriage is for White People,” in part made a splash because of the Washington Post’s decision to feature it in one of their Monday on-line chats; the result was over one thousand e-mails! Clearly, the new technologies have advantages for those with limited resources who want to get their message and works out there.

Even Maritza, who since the closing of Mariposa, has not had as much of a public profile, has made use of technology to self-publish in the past, and kept Mariposa’s many

constituents up-to-date about events there and elsewhere via e-mail. Now that the poetry salon is gone, she still remains a key player in the local poetry scene, and is one of a few of the leading poets who regularly passes on calls for submissions to journals and competitions, as well as invitations to attend or read at poetry gatherings in which she is participating. It will be interesting to watch each of these three artists make use of cutting edge technologies as a way of getting around American cultural traditions that privilege the cutthroat ways of the marketplace and marginalize artists who attempt to stay true to certain intellectual or aesthetic principles.

Reflections on the Life History Project

As Caughey notes, “any two supposedly typical individuals are likely to seem quite different when we shift our focus to the level of the individual case.”³⁸ My informants were chosen because each had taken entrepreneurial steps in the support of their artistic identity and because each was interested in establishing some level of professional identity in their chosen field. But there were as many similarities as differences in their lives leading up to that entrepreneurial moment and, subsequently, how their efforts played out. They displayed great variation in terms of the cultural traditions they negotiated and how they managed those traditions as they struggled to make their external experience of artistic identity match their internal experience.

Hardly “typical” or even similar to each other, then, my informants were certainly interesting. Examining “atypical” individuals like my informants who rebel or undertake an unusual course of action brings into sharp focus the traditions from which they are deviating: “we are likely to be just as interested in—and to learn as much or more

about cultures and individuals—from people who are unusual, atypical, rebellious, or deviant.”³⁹ Carl’s rebellion against the musical establishment highlights rigid aspects of that cultural tradition; we see his agency in relationship to the inflexibility of a shrinking cultural tradition and a national culture unsupportive of innovation in the arts. Maritza’s innovative and successful attempt to break away from the limitations of chain bookstore or academic poetry readings also illustrates the rules of the poetry world in a commercialized culture; her struggle to achieve the status she wants in the poetry world also shows the professionalization (via the academy) of American poetry.

And Regina’s departure from her school system job for the unpredictable world of the freelancer makes the differences between the nine-to-five world and her new set-your-own-schedule market-your-own goods world a little clearer. As she negotiates between a commercial identity and an artistic one, we see the opportunities offered by and the limitations imposed by the arts marketplace. Each time one of my informants bumps up against a cultural tradition into which some aspect of their identity and vision doesn’t fit, the intricacies of that cultural tradition, its rigidities and its flexibilities, both apparent and hidden, are revealed to us, as is the power of individual agency in relationship to that tradition.

Though this is admittedly a small study, it is one step in the fulfillment of the project called for by McCall and Wittner in “The Good News About Life History” more than a decade ago. As they noted then, life history research can help us “incorporate more actors into our models and generate more inclusive concepts for understanding the actual complexities of social institutions and the processes of social change.”⁴⁰ Artists are clearly a group working on the margins (with the occasional commercially successful

exception), without a strong voice in the cultural narrative; life history, therefore, “is an essential tool for groups” on the margins.⁴¹ As they changed their own lives and became “hubs” in two different art worlds, both Carl and Maritza had an impact on many other lives. As Watson and Watson-Franke have noted:

In life history we see the individual’s self-perceived impact on his social environment. . . Life histories offer us precise documentation about how individuals in the process of changing their lives for themselves also alter the environment for other and thus act as significant agents of social change.⁴²

It is important to study individual artists negotiating the boundary between amateurism and professionalism because that is precisely where a host of issues arise. Issues concerning our national culture’s relationship to the arts can be identified through the efforts of those struggling to negotiate personal and professional identity through the arts. Person-centered life history is an especially valuable way of explicating these intersections. My informants’ complex cultural negotiations and their ties to the larger artistic world serve to raise important issues that I believe worthy of further exploration through both qualitative and quantitative research.

The Writing Process—Writing the New Life History

Goodall sees life history as “an emerging, alternative style of qualitative writing . . . that combines the personal and the professional (for example autoethnography, autobiography), as well as work that may be rendered as a story (for example, fiction or nonfiction), or an account that derives rhetorical force from a blurring or blending of literary genres.”⁴³ Behar, Caughey, Ellis and Bochner, Goodall, and other leading proponents of new ethnographic and life history research all advocate that writers of

life histories borrow from non-scientific and non-academic genres and also that they appropriately write themselves into the research.⁴⁴ This study offered me the challenge of exploring this new form while simultaneously pursuing a scholarly inquiry.

Writing about creative artists in a manner that is simultaneously authentic and scholarly has been a great challenge. I could not abandon the touchstones of traditional scholarly discourse and organization, nor could I write an entirely “straight” dissertation. I was reticent to “indulge” in self-reflection. Indeed, in my first draft of the chapter on Carl Banner, I left self-reflexive writing out entirely. Yet I was well aware that I had my own reasons for doing this study which would add useful personal context, and that I shared some experiences and attitudes with my informants. Discussing where we converged or diverged as artists and how I came (or failed) to understand those differences helped propel our conversations and my depiction of their lives. And showing how the interview-observation-writing process had changed me would also be of value; what I learned from my co-researchers as an artist and as a person, not just as a scholar, could serve to illustrate their meanings in a real life context, one more likely to be of utility to non-academic readers. “Our work as life history researchers, also, ought to be written for audiences other than just academics. This may be especially so if our researching is driven by moral concerns.”⁴⁵ I have tried to sprinkle useful bits of my own experience as an aspiring artist and my informants’ relationships to me as mentor-peers and co-researchers throughout the text, but in such a way as to maintain my informants and their cultural reality as the focus. I hope I have succeeded.

Meanwhile, how could I write about Carl’s almost-beatnik chamber music “happenings” or Maritza’s poetry salon without trying to convey the atmosphere? The

transcripts of my conversations with Carl and Maritza make clear that they are attempting to create an experience informed by spiritual and artistic traditions that lie beyond the world of the academy and certain professional music and poetry traditions. They often spoke in figurative language; how could I not meet them halfway by occasionally reaching out to other genres for imagery and metaphor? And how else could I tell about my visit with Regina to the bowels of the Forensics Ward without writing myself into the scene? My experience of the worlds my informants created was subjective, but a witness was needed, and I was that witness. As a participant observer throughout this study, I had something else to share—playing a song, nervously reading a poem, or trading rhymes in the Forensics Ward at St. Elizabeth’s with a man committed for life.

But of what particular rhetorical tools would I avail myself? Borrowing from non-fiction and fiction, I tried to convey the rich ambience I encountered at each scene. I was aware, however, that the rise of new literary techniques like the “New Journalism” or “Literary Journalism” offers ethnographers both opportunity and peril. Vignettes are often more effective at conveying “scenes” than careful, supposedly neutral, “scientific” recordings. But we must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of privileging style over content. American Studies Ph.D., journalist, and novelist Tom Wolfe was fond of extolling the revolution of “manners and morals” heralded by the New Journalism,⁴⁶ but his writing makes too much of an effort to call attention to itself, often at the expense of its subject matter. And his “witness” is sometimes too busy recording the scene to analyze it or admit his part in it. As Behar notes in the opening pages of *The Vulnerable Observer*, it is sometimes inappropriate “to watch silently from behind the camera.”⁴⁷ Perhaps there

is no better way to summarize the crisis of representation in ethnography than to say it is revolves around the fiction of the innocent bystander.⁴⁸

I believe ethnographers still approach their work with a moral component—we seek to give voice to someone or some group which is still learning to speak. Some practitioners of Literary Journalism also exercise such social conscience, but some suffer from “the intrinsic limitation of the ‘breakthrough’ conceived entirely in terms of subject matter...without benefit of new discoveries about life.”⁴⁹ For Wolfe, that subject matter was largely a matter of style. When it lacks the cultural analysis and social conscience of the ethnographer or life historian, literary journalism becomes mere entertainment.

Finally, the literary tropes of non-fiction can be one tool in a larger life history study, but that study must still take its place in a body of knowledge. As Neumann notes, Literary Journalism tends to “lack citations to previous work on the same topic” and can be overly consumed with “innovative representational techniques.”⁵⁰ My artistic impressions may add to the human dimension of this study, but this study would be incomplete without reference to scholarly work on child prodigies, the collapse of the classical music world, entrepreneurship, 12-Step explanatory systems, amateurs and professionals, Puerto Rican returned migration, women, work, and motherhood, and life history theory. Without the underpinnings of previous scholarly research, this study could not become part of a larger conversation about the lives of American artists, American cultural values, and academic research into each of those.

Despite these dangers, there is still much to learn from literary journalism—

it offers examples of cultural observation and criticism that seem consistent with the goals of those seeking new forms of ethnographic expression and self-expression. While new journalists often study everyday life and culture in ways

that resemble participant-observation, they also tend to preserve the subjectivity of the observer.⁵¹

And borrowing from New Journalism allows ethnographers and life historians to explore “confrontation with authoritative conventions that have typically been aimed toward consensual views of accuracy, truth, and objectivist notions of cultural reality.”⁵² Even as ethnography and life history remain grounded in a larger body of knowledge, they may continue to converge with New Journalism as modes of representation grounded in real life *outside the academy*. “What New Journalism models, and the current debates in ethnography mirror, is a renewed appreciation for constructing reports about the concrete details and confusing practices of historically specific conditions in which people live out their days.”⁵³

My goal, then, was to represent each life, explain how who I was influenced the process, and, in the American Studies way, connect the individual life and its day to day experience with larger issues in American culture. To me, writing each of these life stories had the feel and scope of a novel—the early formative experiences, the aspirations, the struggles, great perseverance and occasional disappointment, unexpected and sudden changes, loss, and rebirth. When my informants imposed a chronology in telling me their lives, I tended to use a more linear framework, but in many cases, the cultural traditions they were negotiating and the accompanying emergent themes recurred throughout their lives, and I struggled with finding a way to tell that kind of story, often resorting to sections on cultural traditions in addition to the chronological sections.

And while none of my informants was exactly where he or she had hoped to be at the end of this study, each life story seems to end with some sort of negotiated

acceptance. I actually think that all three of them were involved in genuine ongoing negotiation, though there is always the possibility that they also preferred to present a narrative to me, the researcher, that integrated their latest ups and downs in a positive, life-affirming way. I tried to paint balanced portraits of each of them and how they were assessing their progress, while managing their disappointment in a way that allowed their artistic identity to persevere.

And though I resisted it, I had to write about my own academic biases and personal blindspots. As a white male, few question my American cultural membership. I wondered whether the two women of color in this study had always had the same privileges. It was interesting and awkward to watch myself as I followed what I thought was cultural studies protocol to coax some sort of statement out of these two informants about their ethnic identity vis-à-vis their artistic experience. Although as an artist myself, I long have shared my informants' view that being an artist is an internal state, as a member of the academy I found myself inclined to impose an external cultural frame, rather than report which frames they *themselves* used. While these two informants did offer certain responses to me that hinted at the complexity of their multicultural identity in relationship to art, they also maintained a broader view of their cultural traditions—or at least not an *either-or* view.

Traditionally, there has been an “assumption that the individual has one single culture.^{54”} Perhaps we can extend this idea to suggest a secondary assumption—that we in contemporary cultural studies have tended to think that individuals have multiple cultural identities, but that they shift back and forth between them *one at a time*. It would seem to me that my informants operated under and acted upon multiple cultural traditions

simultaneously. Though one or the other might dominate in terms of *meaning* at a given moment, they were well aware of each system that might be present in a situation. One notion I took away from this study is that identity is even more complex and overlapping than I had thought. These individuals were able to juggle multiple meaning systems concurrently in real time.

Finally, it wasn't enough to situate myself for the reader as I started out—I needed to let the reader know where I ended up. The only way I knew to report what I learned about myself *as a researcher* and *a person* was to incorporate that learning into the text through self-reflexive segments throughout the text. I would be remiss if I were to fail to do that now.

Like my informants, I have come to this point after a long journey. And, like my informants, I have farther to go. In a way, this achievement, such as it is, has become my Mariposa, my Washington Musica Viva, and I now look upon my informant-mentors as peers. I came to this project with two conflicting identities—the creative artist and the scholarly academic. As I entered into this work, I struggled with the impossibility of separating the creative from the academic, the subjective from the objective. As an artist, I found myself wandering down one path, as an academic, another. This dissertation, as a creative response to the life histories of three creative artists brings together two very different, sometimes incompatible traditions, and is offered as a bridge between two worlds that are usually considered separate, but which are much in need of a liaison.

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Epstein, "Culture and Capitalism," *Commentary*, 1993 in Ault, 1999, 164.
- ² R.O. Gardner, 2004, 234.
- ³ Cole and Knowles, *Lives*, 64.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Bateson, *Willing*; Minnick, 1997; Caughey, *Negotiating*.
- ⁶ Linde, *Life*, 163-191; Agar, 130; Caughey, *Negotiating*, 14. See note 53, Chapter 1.
- ⁷ Hyde, 254.
- ⁸ Ibid., 254-256.
- ⁹ Ibid., 253.
- ¹⁰ http://www.americanartsalliance.org/americanartsalliance/nea_issue_center.html.
- ¹¹ Hyde, 254; Yenawine, 11.
- ¹² Morgenstern, 159.
- ¹³ Yenawine, 16.
- ¹⁴ Miner, 9-11.
- ¹⁵ Stebbins, 1992.
- ¹⁶ Becker, 1982.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 77-81.
- ¹⁸ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 14.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 4.
- ²⁰ Kathleen Gerson, *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) 37.
- ²¹ Stebbins, *Amateurs, Professionals*, 16.
- ²² O'Connor and Chamberlain, 465.
- ²³ Bateson, *Willing*, 149.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity*. (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1985) 259.

²⁶ Mike Hummel, "A Father Looks to Winter," in *Echoes*, ed. Forestine Bynum (Upper Marlboro, MD: Prince George's County Arts Council, 2006) 31.

²⁷ Minnick, 125.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁹ Maritza Rivera, "Raw Shock," unpublished poem, 2006.

³⁰ Bateson, Willing, 70.

³¹ McCarthy and Jinnat, xi; Peterson, et al. 117.

³² Becker, 94.

³³ Horowitz, 387.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 397-398.

³⁵ Peterson, et al., 46-64.

³⁶ <http://www.dcmusicaviva.org> is the website address as of this writing.

³⁷ <http://joyjonesonline.com> is the website address as of this writing.

³⁸ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 8-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ McCall and Wittner, 46-47.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Watson, L. and Watson-Franke, M.B., 170.

⁴³ Goodall, 190.

⁴⁴ Behar; Caughey, *Negotiating*; Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Creative Writing* (London: Alta Mira Press, 1996); Goodall.

⁴⁵ Knowles and Cole, 67.

⁴⁶ Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 29.

⁴⁷ Behar, 1.

⁴⁸ Goodall, 12; Behar 1-2.

⁴⁹ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden* (Cambridge, MA: 1997) 101.

⁵⁰ Mark Neumann, "Collecting Ourselves at the End of the Century," in *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Creative Writing*, ed. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (London: Alta Mira Press, 1996) 194.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 195.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Caughey, *Negotiating*, 9.

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