Kaelie Giffel

UNIVERSITY FOR A GOOD WOMAN

Reflections on Gender, Class and Labor in American Higher Education

Gender Studies

Collection Editors
JAN ETIENNE
&
REHAM EL MORALLY

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

UNIVERSITY FOR A GOOD WOMAN

Kaelie Giffel

UNIVERSITY FOR A GOOD WOMAN

Reflections on Gender, Class, and Labor in American Higher Education

The Gender Studies Collection

Collection Editors

Jan Etienne & Reham El Morally

First published in 2024 by Lived Places Publishing
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

The author and editors have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of information contained in this publication, but assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and omissions. Likewise, every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any copyright material has been reproduced unwittingly and without permission the Publisher will gladly receive information enabling them to rectify any error or omission in subsequent editions.

Copyright © 2024 Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781916704978 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781916704992 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781916704985 (ePUB)

The right of Kaelie Giffel to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing UK

Lived Places Publishing
Long Island
New York 11789

www.livedplacespublishing.com

Abstract

Drawing from her own experiences in American universities, author Kaelie Giffel explores the university's role in producing inequality. Exploring the intersections of gender, labor, and class, *University for a Good Woman: Reflections on Gender, Class, and Labor in American Higher Education* follows Kaelie through experiences of harassment, overwork, struggles against voicelessness, union organizing, and navigating silent, classed expectations about professionalism and research. Kaelie argues that feminists can and should engage in remaking the university, analyzing places for intervention and transformation.

Providing an important critique of the university and its "post-feminist" narrative, this book is ideal reading for students of feminism, gender studies, critical university studies, education studies, and sociology, as well as graduate mentors, university administrators, and DEIB offices.

Key words

Education; United States; lived experience; misogyny; patriarchy; inequality; harassment; overwork; voicelessness; union organizing

Acknowledgments

There are so many people to thank for supporting me through writing this book, at all stages. Thank you to Lived Places Publishing, especially Jan Etienne, Reham El Morally, and David Parker. This book wouldn't exist without their kindness and patience as I wrote this, my first book. My mentors, Stephanie Clare and Juliet Shields, made this book possible. Gratitude to Renee Lynch for our weekly accountability meetings and gently crushing our goals. So much appreciation Kathleen Reeves for all our conversations about feminism and the thinking life. Thank you to Reuven Pinnata for so many conversations about this book, graduate school, and what it means to be a thinker. Many thanks to Caitlin Postal for our collaborations, leading me to more critical thinking about the university.

My UAW 4121 siblings, Sam Sumpter and Paige Sechrest, taught me all I know about union organizing, power, and the university. My friends, students, and co-workers at the North Carolina State Women's Center who made my final years in the university feel worthwhile: Fiona Prestemon, Lily Smith, Makenzie Rink, Ruby Hernandez, Antoinette Norton, and Carly Woolard. And to my longest friend from university, Leslie Pearson, you've been with me every step of my intellectual journey.

My parents, Deanna and Nicholas Giffel, valued education for me and my siblings and always encouraged me to do what felt right, even if it looked strange to others. My sisters, Kaira Giffel, Kynlee

Giffel, and Kegyn Jordan, remind me how fun life is when I feel too consumed by work. I also want to thank my mother-in-law, Robin Stephens, for her enthusiasm at every stage of my writing, and for always asking me how the writing is going. My grandparents, Terry and Robert Giffel and Barbara and Craig Williams, who always gave me a place to stay while traveling and cheered me on along my educational journey.

My two dogs also supported me through the emotionally difficult process of graduate school and the writing of this book. Many thanks to Remy, who died as I wrote this manuscript, and Sylvia, who still cuddles and snores. They made sure I didn't forget to go outside and reminded me that working all the time is not a natural phenomenon.

Finally, endless thanks and love to my partner, Zachary Cook, who has supported me since I decided to go to graduate school and has held me to my writing dreams for over a decade. Sometimes I take for granted when you say, "You can do it!" But I know not everyone has that kind of love, belief and encouragement. I could not have done this without you.

Contents

Learning objectives

1. Demonstrate the different dynamics of gender, labor, and class within the university, including how they overlap, diverge, and interact.
2. Analyze the different positions of power within a university and identify how these positions rely on inequality.
3. Understand dominant narratives about education and how they erase the reality of social inequality.
4. Identify places within a university that could be changed by individuals or through collective action.
5. Encourage better culture in universities by raising awareness about individual participation in harmful behaviors such as misogyny, racism, and classism.
6. Challenge hierarchy alongside others by sharing experiences and identifying weaknesses in the power structure.

Preface

“Well,” my committee member said, “graduate school is supposed to be hard.”

Pause. What to say?

“Not this hard,” I said.

I think about this conversation a lot. I think about the failure of my interlocutor. I couldn’t explain why I had a terrible time in graduate school. I wrote a dissertation that railed against its injustices. Unfortunately, the dissertation was a convoluted project. After I finished it, I still had difficulty explaining my experience. My dissertation was an initial attempt to formulate, in the words of other writers, what was wrong. This book attempts to explain that experience in my own voice.

University for a Good Woman: Reflections on Gender, Class, and Labor in American Higher Education is about my experience of higher education. I hope this book is helpful to anyone in the university. Whether you are suffering similar problems or supporting those who are, I hope you find some solace here. I thought of students, faculty, and staff who may have had similar experiences. I detail harassment, misogyny, overwork, and the struggle for a voice. I write about the ways the university failed me. I write about the things I loved about my education, too.

I didn't write this book just to share my experience. I also wrote this book to share strategies for changing the university. I wanted to show the changes we could make for the better. I wanted to show change over long and short timescales. I also wanted to tell my union organizing story. You don't have to have a union to make change, however. Most movements for change start simply: by talking with people you know. Find out if your classmates noticed the terrible aspects of a particular class. Ask coworkers how their managers are treating them. Then decide, together, what you can do about it.

The university is not organized for the benefit of most people. However, we can change things. It just won't be quick. Or pretty. Struggles over how to define a university involve other forces. Take the current attack on DEI and identity-based departments. State legislatures have attacked teaching and talking about identity or oppression. Why? It does not benefit the ruling class to have politically conscious workers. By controlling knowledge production, they can depoliticize us. They can also pit us against one another. Oppression is not having access to the knowledge you need when you need it.

It's important to understand that universities are not just made of classrooms. Universities are a site of power within the market. They produce skilled workers in a variety of ways. They also employ them. They collaborate with the military. Universities are involved in governments in the US and abroad. They fund innovative thinking in disciplines, albeit unevenly. They police their students and suppress their speech. Keeping these things in mind expands what we mean when we say "university." It also provides different avenues for critique.

I use power analysis throughout the book. Power analysis is a way of thinking I learned in union organizing. It begins with individual testimony. Then it considers the structural factors of a problem. Turning toward solutions, it identifies what we need to challenge. Making change is difficult, however. Sometimes knowing who or what to challenge does not mean we know how. It doesn't mean we'll be successful if we try. Universities, like all power structures, do not change willingly. Universities should be accountable to the students and workers that make it possible. Instead, they seem to care more about their respective boards of governors and wealthy alumni. It is wrong that a small group of powerful people exerts influence over a public institution. I have been discouraged witnessing the refusal to change. Universities often tout their social justice commitments as part of their brand. It is ironic as they are hostile environments for marginalized students. There is also little tangible action on issues of inclusion and transformation.

However, powerful stakeholders do not entirely control the culture of a university. That culture is made up of all of us who move through it every day. And we all participate in its competitive, individualistic practices. Sometimes, it seems like we have no choice. Class privilege relies on such competition. Within its bounds, some individuals succeed at the expense of others. Misogyny, racism, and homophobia, for instance, occur between workers in a competitive market. We must challenge these things in classrooms and the workplace. Otherwise, silence maintains hierarchy and violence. Whether silence results from investment in privilege or fear of reprisal, the effect is the same.

In this book, I'm interested in how class, gender, and labor are lived in the university. I'm interested in how these inequalities shape higher education. At a more local level, I'm interested in how these inequalities sabotage our voices. Each concept of my title has its own chapter. The first chapter is about class. In that chapter, I explore class inequality and union experiences. These experiences reveal that education is experienced differently based on class. The second chapter is about gender, more specifically misogyny. I share my difficult experiences to show men are still privileged in the academy. This is despite claims of post-feminism in the US. The third chapter is about labor. I look at labor through the concept of burnout. It helps us see all the things demanded of us in the institution. But it also shows where our work ethics sabotage us. The final chapter is about finding a voice. I review some of the barriers I established in the earlier chapters. I identify the healing potential of an intellectual community as a strength of the university. In my conclusion, I recommend changes to universities based on my experiences.

My work does not exhaust every possible experience within the university. That is not my aim. Instead, I hope that you, the reader, tell your own story. I want you to foster relationships with your peers, colleagues, teachers, and friends. Complain, build an organizing campaign, and create spaces of rest and thoughtfulness. We do not have to fight our battles alone. So this book is from me to you: in solidarity.

1

Class, unions, and contesting the status quo

"I just don't see the problem," the administrator said. She was a well-known faculty member. "We are not bound by the union contract."

"Yes, you are," I told the administrator. "You have to pay workers the set rate. You have to pay them on time when the work is complete. This is wage theft."

She scoffed. "I can't believe we have to deal with something this ridiculous."

I took a deep breath to disguise my disgust and impatience. Years of customer service work helped me hide my feelings.

It wasn't surprising the faculty member thought this was ridiculous. She had tenure, a very large house, relative fame, and, oh, a good salary. She hailed from a class position where wage theft would probably never happen to her.

I didn't say anything. I waited for the silence to get awkward. The accountant of the department spoke up. He asked for records of the students' hourly work.

This case was a difficult one to work on. It exposed the institution's reliance on unpaid student labor. It also showed a lack of care. It was surprising. This, from a department interested in improving the university! The department could drag its feet on reimbursement. They could wait until the student graduated. Or they could wait until the student dropped the case. After all, this professor's wages weren't missing. She was only mildly inconvenienced by this process. Our grievance was an attempt to redress an institutional wrong. But she acted as if it were a personal attack. And perhaps it was personal for her. One faculty's success came at one student's expense. She benefited from this, if indirectly. Our union grievance refused this logic. We challenged the class inequality of the student-faculty relationship. No faculty member's comfort should require a student's impoverishment. Her expressed, classed disdain for speaking about money implied we were being uncouth. Such an attitude created a middle-class taboo. One should never speak about money in public.

In this chapter, I discuss class within the university. I am interested in how some succeed at the expense of others. First, I define the relationship between class and education. Then, I consider middle-class attitudes and behaviors. I briefly discuss my class background in this section. (I'll return to it in the third chapter.) This helps illustrate some assumptions of class and education. These assumptions interfere with students' ability to get their education. To conclude, I describe unions as alternative spaces within the university. I analyze a union grievance to demonstrate avenues for change. I put our struggles as workers in the context of other unions around the world.

Defining class and education

Education occupies a fraught position in the reproduction of class. Education bears some of our heaviest ideologies about improvement and social mobility. We treat education as a cure-all for class inequality. We often look to it for bootstrap stories. Poor kid comes to university, and leaves successful! Getting a college degree has become a necessity for social mobility. The paths for other kinds of life have narrowed.

Education cannot deliver on these promises for everyone. This is because class is a relation. Class operates as a zero-sum logic. Put another way, capitalism distributes resources according to scarcity. One person's success means another person's deprivation. Rather than a personal failing, the system only allows for success or wealth for a limited number. The logic goes like this: there isn't enough for everyone. That could be money, time, food, shelter, or even education. But this is artificial scarcity. Within this system, resources tend to go to those who already have them. The privileged have the means (money) to secure those resources, depriving others of their basic needs. We create things as a society that we do not need. We prefer to enrich the lives of those who are already rich. (A good example is a personal jet.) Education cannot counter this structure entirely. It is one way to secure a place within the hierarchy. In the social mobility story, there are only a few spaces to rise to.

One feature of class is, obviously, money. Class is whether you have money or don't have money. Money can include property or assets that provide a safety net for hard times. For example, say all graduate students in a department make $20,000. That figure means different things for everyone in the department. Some have generational wealth, parental assistance, or other kinds of security. Some have children or crushing debt. In another example, we could look at a university president's salary. She makes hundreds of thousands of dollars (if not more) and owns her home outright. She might be paid less than other university presidents who are men. But she occupies a position of power in the hierarchy. Her salary is dependent on the undergraduate student working a minimum-wage job. (We could do this same example with sports coaches. The inequality is even worse.)

Another aspect of class is whether you control someone else's labor. You might even control your own. A distinction has long been made between the working class and the owners of the means of production. But it's useful to break that down further. Supervisors and teachers, for example, are also workers. They have power over their students (who are or will be workers). Within this dynamic, we see abuse take place. I began with the example of wage theft. This inequality also creates sexual harassment and sexual assault. A male faculty member can threaten a student with a grade or a letter of recommendation. Privilege means you can control others' labor, including sexual labor. Demanding sex in return for a grade is an abuse of power. In this case, both class power and male privilege.

Class inequality is visible in ideology. Usually, it is the ideology of those occupying power. This is a complicated point. Ideology is how we think about our relation to something. In an unequal society like the US, that other perspective distorts our thinking. For example, I was a student of literature. I learned great literature is difficult, esoteric, and not political. Later, some teachers challenged this apolitical reading. But still, literature's politics were difficult, sneaky, and removed from daily life. In other words, literature wasn't something you could **use**. This is a specific, classed vision of literature. It reflects a professional investment in literature as the domain of the privileged. (And here we mean college-educated and wealthy.) It also reflects an investment in one's own position as an interpreter. Such a vision was alienating for me. My relation to literature was broken for a long time because of this education. I felt that, given my background, I could never write. I could never join the ranks of writers. In this brokenness, inequality gets rewritten. I took on the perspective of the field. This field was not created by or for people like me.

My example may be specific to literature. However, each field has its ideologies that relate to inequality. We could also restate "ideology" as "stories we tell ourselves". These stories are sometimes less about truth than about surviving. Let's put it in monetary terms. You are a student. You need a letter of recommendation to earn a fellowship. You need a faculty member to support your career. You have to get to know them for the letter. So you take on their interests and style, ensuring they'll recommend you. This is identification, part of that distortion of perspective I discussed above. Your perspective comes to align with a more powerful person's. Identification, in this case, comes from a place of disempowerment. But the story we tell is that this dynamic is "professionalization". You hope for success by becoming like this other person. You hold onto this hope no matter the pain it causes. This is a stripping away of self.

There are more or less healthy versions of identification. In my example, I'm focusing on its negative aspects. It reproduces inequality by protecting those with privilege. It remakes us into what the powerful need. It makes us adopt their perspective instead of our own. I saw many students defend their advisors against accusations of bad behavior. They did so because they were dependent on that faculty member. They defended them because they wanted the same privilege the faculty had. They did not want to rock the boat and risk losing that privilege. A relation of dependence exerts a force on us. It compels loyalty and immunizes cruel or abusive behavior. Especially as the student may have little control over their situation. We can apply this thinking to different situations like family, politics, and other workplaces.

Class is also evident in our narratives about education. In our stories about education, we can see the threads of identification and wealth. In the US, we treat education as a path (if not *the* path) to individual and social betterment. We don't ignore obstacles to education. Instead, we celebrate the individual who overcomes them. Obstacles include social isolation, poverty, poorly funded public schools, and rising tuition costs at universities. (There are recently popular memoirs about such upward mobility. I will not cite them because I think they're unhelpful.) We participate in class-based ideology when we describe college as a balm for inequality. We ignore that social mobility reveals inequality. It doesn't challenge it. It points to both the impoverished situation and the more ideal one. The individual is responsible for making that journey. Instead of expanding the social safety net, we tell individuals to go get an education. This is not a solution to capitalism or class inequality. It's a way to maintain it.

To say education is a path to a better life is sort of true. It is truer for some than for others. But this truism ignores other motives for education. College is more than job training or a social mobility tool. We reduce our ideas of who we want to be when we accept these narratives. As a result, many students choose majors based on money. I had many conversations with students getting their education for others. They had to please their parents. They had to get a good job. Education was not a way to become themselves. Thus, students go into different forms of study based on funding and promises of work. When we apply market values to education, we adopt the ruling class perspective. Economic thinking precludes visions of education as empowerment or self-discovery. Many assume working-class kids, in particular, select their majors based on money. Often, we do not. Transfer students from community colleges are more likely to choose humanities degrees than their wealthier peers.

In this section, I discussed several aspects of class. I analyzed money, control over labor, and ideology. In the next section, I apply these concepts to my classed experience of education. I discuss all three aspects of class: money, labor, and ideas about education. I describe how inequality manifests in our relationships within the university.

My class story

Class shapes the trajectory of one's life and education. We refuse to see this in America, mostly because we refuse to see class. In this section, I want to talk about my educational journey. I share my personal experience to illustrate the abstract concepts from the last section. It also provides context for the following chapters.

My experience of social mobility has been uneven. In 2010, I got my acceptance letter to college; I didn't know anything about the university. I just knew I wanted to attend. For years, going to college had been my goal. With that letter in my hand, I felt immense pride. My parents did too. I was the first person to go off to college. I was the first to live in a dorm! To support me, my parents took out a burdensome loan. This kindness offset loans I would eventually accumulate. Even with scholarships and going to an in-state, public university, I ended up accumulating about $40,000 worth of loans (this was from both my bachelor's and my master's). I was lucky to be at a state school with low tuition. I also had some scholarships.

When I first got to school, I did not settle on a major right away. I floated between criminology and journalism. I worried about a career and making money, but I disliked my journalism classes, and I wasn't sure I wanted to work in the criminal justice system. An economic rationale made me miserable, so I became an English major. I loved literature. I wanted to write. I thought it would be the most enjoyable way to get a degree. I knew I could make money as I had previously, in customer service. Picking a major based on making money made no sense. I didn't need to learn how to work more. Instead, an English degree would help me develop parts of my life that had nothing to do with work. My desire for education, then, was less about economic gain than personal growth.

My experience of college got less and less enjoyable. English literature was no longer a subject to pass the time, no longer a way to ponder the world. As a master's student, it was something I studied to pay the bills. I started as a teacher's assistant in large non-major courses, making $8,000 a year (no health insurance). The next year, I made $12,000 (still no health insurance). By the time I got to my Ph.D., I was making $24,000 a year (with health insurance, finally). My relationship with literature became less free. It became a way for me to climb the social ladder. I moved on to the next degree because it was a way to make money. I had no idea what I wanted to research (or even how to research, really). I just knew I wanted to be in the university.

I achieved levels of education no one in my family had. However, graduate students occupy a strange class position. We work at lower wages and with less autonomy than faculty. The work I did as a graduate student was not like a professor's. I didn't have control over assignments or the direction of the course. I could sometimes assign texts I enjoyed, but I couldn't design a course from scratch. I only taught a true literature class once, and someone else designed it. I left teaching to become a sexual harassment prevention trainer. Even this job had little room for creativity. My job was the same: train (or teach) as many people as possible. The university certainly got its money's worth.

In addition to the workload, I found the social environment alienating. My peers made frequent references to status. They mentioned their parents' wealth, their private education, and their access to opportunities. They spoke in abstract language that was alien to me. They held opinions that made no sense (until I reckoned with their class position). They often used these things to put others down and signal their own worth. I was surprised by the attention-seeking and need for validation. I didn't want to participate in this. I didn't know how. For a long time, I stayed silent and withheld from social interaction. But then, I began to speak like my peers. I deformed myself to fit in. I became good at what they did. When I spoke, I did not speak to other people; I spoke to valorize myself. I espoused opinions I did not believe just to fit in. I pretended to know more than I did. I never asked for help. I hid behind these classed protocols.

In performing this identification, I became like my peers—except I was different from them. My working-class background meant I had a different view of the world. I had different expectations about friendship and education. I worked part-time or odd jobs constantly. I had debts to pay and costs to cover. While I could perform some social aspects of class, its material gains were elusive. Unlike my peers, I couldn't find jobs that aligned with my interests. I didn't know how. I went back to customer service work. It was what I knew and what I knew how to get.

There was one social practice I never could perform: a particular identification with faculty. One silly practice in many departments is calling professors by their first names. Since we were graduate students, we were allowed to do so. Undergraduates, lowly beings that they are, were not allowed to do this (I'm being sarcastic here). They had to show respect. But I found it a useful distancing tool. To say "Dr. X" meant recognizing differences in power. Calling professors by their first names erased that difference. It caused significant pain for my colleagues. They were sometimes rudely reminded that their identification emerged from their subordination. One student tried to convince her supervisor that she too had expertise in their field. The professor swiftly and cruelly put her down. Other students were surprised to be sexually harassed by a professor who had seemed so cool.

The hierarchical nature of the university means we act out of self-preservation rather than solidarity or community spirit. I found this attitude alienating. A mentor once told me we had to play it safe as she was working with senior colleagues. From her perspective, she had a career on the line. My position as a student made me less important. This was difficult for me. It meant I had no solidarity with the faculty (or perhaps, they had no solidarity with me). Everyone looked out for themselves. I witnessed this need to protect and propagate privilege so many times I don't even know where to start.

An example: in a theory course, a professor held up a thick stack of papers. Then she said, "Look what you've given me this semester." I was horrified. She had stolen our discussion and thoughts for her next book (this is a kind of plagiarism). I was so angry I spoke to my classmates about what she had done. Unfortunately, they did not see things the way I did. My peers told me it was a reasonable price to pay. She was a brilliant professor, they said, and they wanted to study with her. Their response shocked me. Did it occur to them that her "brilliance" may have belonged to her former students? Wasn't it ridiculous that this happened in a course about social justice? We have yet another example of class difference: the person whose work relies on the impoverishment of others. In this case, it was a theft of ideas rather than wages.

Hierarchy transforms us. We prefer to believe we can inhabit the institution unchanged. Nick Mitchell argues that, because of class differences, tenured faculty in social justice fields are not in solidarity with their students. They may share other marginalized identities with their students, but for most, their solidarities lie with themselves and their property. This means they enact class power within and outside the university. Their solidarity with the ruling class might be implicit, but it is solidarity nonetheless. As students, we learn ways of being from our faculty. This is how we learn (in part) self-involved commitment to the preservation of status. We, too, become bound by unconscious solidarities that reify class power rather than interrupt it. I cite this example here to show that there are challenges in creating solidarity, even among people who consider themselves politically aware. I never filed a grievance over the professor's theft. I assumed no one in the department would support my case.

Despite all this, I achieved my doctorate. Unlike some of my peers, I did not follow the middle-class arc of achievement. I did not land a tenured professor position, a lucrative private position, or launch a young and brilliant writing career. The normal interpretation is that I did not try hard enough. If I had worked harder, then I could have had these things. Such an analysis assumes all students are equal. We might believe they are—I do believe this—but there are material differences between students. As I've mentioned, some students have wealthy parents. Some may have gotten private schooling. Some received mentoring and resources they needed from a department without difficulty. And they didn't have to work part-time jobs, so they could dedicate themselves to unpaid professional development. Some had resources to achieve those positions which require considerable risk. A tenure-track position can take years of adjuncting and fellowships to achieve—not everyone can afford this.

I did not have the luxury of seeking a tenure-track position because of different limitations. During school, I didn't have time for networking and conferences. I also struggled with how to ask for help. I didn't know what good mentoring looked like. I didn't know what faculty could help with. I sometimes barely got my reading and writing done. And I certainly didn't have time to perfect my craft. I worked multiple jobs and had other responsibilities. I had to secure a job as soon as my PhD ended. I had bills to pay. Time and money were stretched thin. I couldn't afford to play the lengthy job application game. Instead, I took an available salaried staff job at a university. I started at a pay grade far lower than my peers. I also had to finish my dissertation while I was working. My job was not close to what I wanted to do (write and study literature). I watched my peers take on more opportunities and achieve more visible success. (Carolyn Kay Steedman points to envy as one of the more unattractive class feelings.)

After my doctorate, I feel that my life hasn't significantly changed. Bills are still worrisome. Writing is still a small corner of my life. I still work odd jobs. While I gained important skills, the material change in my life is minimal. I say this not to denigrate my experience. After all, I have refused to apply economic logic to parts of my life. That is a choice I continue to make despite its downsides. Rather, I am making a point about what an education is for. I am still subject to our cultural expectations about education. I reject the narrative that education should only be for improvement or mobility. I want education to mean different things in life. That could be a better sense of color, as Oscar Wilde wrote, or a deeper sense of self. But I can't entirely shake the sense that my life was somehow supposed to get materially better, as if by magic. This cultural wishful thinking takes the place of sustained political effort.

That's why, in the next section, I want to move away from my personal experience. At an individual level, not much change happens. Instead, I want to show how collective struggle can change the landscape of education. I look at how unions target class power on behalf of students and student workers. Unions work to improve worker autonomy and working conditions. They can create an environment where we can work and receive our education free from harm. These battles are key if we want to remake the university.

Organizing for power

"You shouldn't have to be independently wealthy to get an education!"

My organizing mentor spoke passionately into the megaphone. This was my favorite slogan. We were writing a different story about education. Education, we argued, should be affordable for everyone. We argued that students should be adequately paid for their work. We opposed unfair treatment of students based on their identity. We also refused to treat education as solely an economic prospect. Together, as workers, we demanded accountability and material redistribution from the university to the workers it relied on. Our union understood education as a place for individual and collective self-determination. We worked to realize this every day. It wasn't a far-off goal we just talked about.

I talk about my union experience in this chapter because it is part of my class story. My dad was a steward in his union at an automotive plant in Michigan, where I grew up. Unions were directly responsible for my parents' ability to provide for us as kids. Unions,