Review of Jennifer Morton's *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way*

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Poverty is by political design, and it's rooted in a system that has been fractured and corrupt and rotten from its core, from the inception of America, especially over the last several decades. John Cassidy, *The New Yorker*, June 24, 2020.

Four years ago, one of the above reviewers offered a class on public art, architecture and urban design. To her surprise, an accounting major registered for it. When he submitted his final paper, an analysis of how the social practice artist Theater Gates transformed run-down Chicago buildings into sites of community activism and engagement, the reviewer finally understood why he had taken the class. This student, who had lived with his sibling and mother in the family van for an extended period, had to overcome economic and personal difficulties to obtain a college education. He was looking for a role model who had surmounted similar barriers and had become a professional person and community activist. What, the student asked, did successful architects, accountants or designers do to transform impoverished, post-industrial cities? Although the reviewer spoke with the student several times during the semester, he only shared his story because Theater Gates' biographical narrative resonated with his own.

This student's story was quite similar to those described by Jennifer Morton in her important, well-researched text *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* (2019). Morton describes a striver as a first generation or low-income college student. These students rely on higher education as a way out of their current situations. Strivers often face ethical decisions and sometimes must choose between their families or communities and their futures. Currently, institutions do very little to adequately support this vulnerable student population. As Morton states, "many of the ethical costs that strivers experience would be minimized by changing the structural conditions that are largely responsible for them." Those of us who have spent time with Michel Foucault's dense analyses of institutions and power would certainly agree with her conclusion. Unlike Foucault's texts, Morton's book is a carefully chosen series of case studies about the structural impediments and resultant ethical costs economically, educationally and socially disadvantaged students incur before and while attending college.

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In this review, we will discuss why Morton's case studies successfully support her analysis of the structural inadequacies and the ethical costs strivers face when they enter university. Most of our response to *Moving Up*, however, functions as a critique of—a series of questions about—the general structural solutions Morton proposes in chapters five and six. Although she states that specific solutions—including pedagogical—are outside the scope of her text, her continual reference to the structural inequities strivers face, does argue for some concrete solutions. We believe Morton's call to articulate “new narratives” that upend conventional power discourses is an important step in transforming systemic inequities in higher education.

Morton begins her work by situating ethical goods. She details how strivers tend to pay a higher price for the ethical decisions that confront them. Morton expresses that she intends to use her students' stories to problematize the “ethical conflicts and sacrifices” enmeshed in upward mobility (2019). By doing this, Morton hopes to change the dominant narratives which surround mobility and thus to help to dismantle the economic and social barriers that have prevented many strivers from succeeding. She states, “only 21% of low-income, first generation students... will receive a degree compared with 57% of students who are not low-income or first generation” (2019). In the first four chapters, Morton outlines the sociological structural reasons for these dismal statistics. Strivers often fail to complete their education because of the high ethical costs they assume.

In chapter two, the author narrates the story of those who have succeeded. Jeron, who left home in seventh grade to escape a chaotic family life (sleeping on the street or at friends' homes), also had to leave his community in order to pursue a University education. As Morton astutely notes, middle-class students *choose* to attend a University far from home. To succeed, Jeron had *no choice*. Citing Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb, she concludes that family circumstances (Jeron's family had substance abuse problems) and community culture shape the choices less advantaged students make (Morton 2019). Clearly, not all strivers have a history such as Jeron's. Many still maintain strong connections to and are responsible for contributing to their families and communities. Such ties, nonetheless, underscore strivers' sense of being caught between two worlds—with some, such as Jeron, having to choose one world over the other.

Jeron used university to escape an environment that prevented him from securing a more stable future. However, his decision resulted in a cost to his family and community. These costs are often hidden from the teachers and professors who instruct students like Jeron. The other reviewer, an elementary teacher in the Bronx who had to teach students virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, gained a great deal of insight into her students' lives—specifically the difficulties and struggles they faced in order to pursue their studies. Virtual teaching revealed which students live in crowded and cramped environments, which students are often put in charge of younger siblings, and which students have resources—such as technology—to support their learning. During the lock-down in the spring, she became acutely aware that not all parents can fully attend to their children's remote learning needs. A parent's availability and support becomes another resource that students may go without. Some parents who were “essential workers” had to juggle childcare. Others had several jobs and could not supervise their children's on-screen learning activities or had to care for aging family members. That is, not all children had equal access to the learning opportunities mandated by law.

Morton's student portraits demonstrate how these economic and social inequities compound as students age and take on more familial responsibilities. Certainly, universities and colleges cannot make-up for the decades of cultural, social and economic injustices suffered by those who have been marginalized by society. The students, who are able to access

higher education in spite of their circumstance are exceptional, as Morton clearly demonstrates. Those she cites have also been fortunate. Morton refers to her own striver story as one where “luck intervened” financially (2019). Indeed, hers and her students’ narratives reveal just how precarious it is for those with limited resources to enter university. For Jeron, it was by chance that a coach who discovered his situation provided the necessary economic and social support to enable him to attain an education (Morton 2019). Jeron was lucky. While such mentors as his coach exist, a disadvantaged student’s access to higher education should not depend on another person’s goodwill. Rather, we must focus on the specific social and cultural factors—the societal inequities not addressed by the university—that affect a student’s ability to successfully navigate our educational systems.

Morton aptly describes these inequities in chapter two, detailing a pattern that especially affects Latina students. Latina students, she notes, have to “negotiate a tricky territory” between supporting family (one that may need help with elder and child care) and pursuing their studies (Morton 2019). These young women “see their obligations not as a demand but as voluntary and a part of their Latin identity” (Morton 2019). Certainly, as Morton points out, failure to provide a social safety net for those who are struggling is a primary factor in shaping Latina and other strivers’ responses (Morton 2019). As she states, these students pay “ethical costs” that include ruptured relationships with families and friends for our society’s structural failures. Some do of course manage to succeed.

They do so by navigating and adapting to multiple communities, each with its own set of “rules” and languages. In chapter three, Morton points out that strivers “codeswitch” as they move between groups (2019). On the one hand, they learn a new university language in order to succeed in higher education. When strivers return home, however, they switch to their familial languages and to their pre-college selves. Although they become multilingual so to speak, this is not without cost. Morton, in chapter 4, contends that strivers pay a distinct “toll,” which is “exacted first by the absence that the striver leaves behind and then again by the reinforcement of the barriers that, having overcome them, the striver is now in a position to perpetuate” (2019). In other words, a striver’s adherence to the “rules” reinforces the dominant power structures associated with race, class and gender.

Clearly, the educational barriers that block students’ success are consistent with other societal structures that limit their access to knowledge and economic advancement. While Morton does note that race and gender shape strivers’ responses, she does not go into specifics (she states an analysis of race and gender is beyond the scope of her text, 2019). The reviewers believe, however, that Morton should ask more specific questions about how race and gender affect student success. How, for example, does code-switching reinforce the rules that strengthen the dominant white heterosexual discourse? Michel Foucault’s theory of power could provide a useful starting point. Stephen Ball, a theorist who studies Foucault and education writes: “Within the prison, the military barracks, the hospital and the school/University ‘knowledge has been developed about people, and their behaviour, attitudes, and self-knowledge has been developed, defined, and used to shape individuals. These discourses and practices have not only been used to change us in various ways, [but] are also used to legitimate such changes, as the knowledge gained is deemed to be ‘true’” (2013).

But what can universities do to change these discourses, to reframe what is considered “true”? How do they begin to eliminate the structural inequities strivers face? Morton attempts to answer these questions in the final two chapters. She opens chapter five with a conventional understanding of the striver as one who must put forth extraordinary effort (and be quite lucky to find a mentor) to pursue an education: “In this individualistic conception of upward mobility, social structures figure only as challenges to be overcome,

rather than as social arrangements and institutions in which we all participate.” In this chapter, Morton argues we “need a new, honest narrative that help strivers meet the inevitable ethical challenges” ... of upward mobility” (2019). To develop this narrative, she suggests that we must listen to the stories of those, such as Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor, who have chosen a “different path” (Morton 2019).

When considering the far reaches of systemic social and economic inequity, is it enough to focus on a success story such as Justice Sotomayor’s—or even Jeron’s? And is it enough to make strivers’ transition into university equitable before addressing the ways that economic and social structures create these inequities? Moreover, what happens to strivers when they enter college? bell hooks addresses these complex institutional questions in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). She asserts that the university classroom “particularly [ignores]” class difference and makes it necessary for students to “assimilate bourgeois values in order to be deemed acceptable” (hooks 1994). hooks’ work is particularly useful in understanding how faculty and staff shape the experience of strivers in non-quantifiable but significant ways. As she expresses it: “most progressive professors are more comfortable striving to challenge class biases through the material studied than they are with interrogating how class biases shape conduct in the classroom” (hooks 1994).

Inequitable structures also exist beyond the university classroom. One of the reviewer’s close colleagues shared her striver story (J. Aguirre, personal communication, August 30, 2020). This colleague’s harrowing experience with her university’s financial aid office fractured her confidence as a first-generation Latina college student at a predominately white institution. She felt stigmatized by university employees who were unwilling to help. They offered limited assistance in securing the resources she qualified for, and if she hadn’t been persistent, she would have been forced to leave the university. Inequitable university structures cause less advantaged students to question their place in institutions of higher education. Strivers cannot successfully transition to college life when “bourgeois values” actively seek to undermine already weak social supports.

In her final chapter, Morton does not offer many concrete methods for how faculty and administrators might attack structural inequities inside and outside the classroom. She asks faculty to “rethink the classroom environment” and craft in-class student groups that build non-traditional communities (Morton 2019). Administrators and department chairs, she states, could reduce course requirements and expand on-line educational opportunities. Many university teachers, however, already employ collaborative learning techniques. How might they *restructure* these pedagogical strategies to challenge the dominant discourses that codify structural disparities? Similarly, how does the reduction of major requirements change the narrative or alter systemic barriers to learning? This may be an unfair criticism since Morton states that specific pedagogical and curricular suggestions are beyond the scope of *Moving On*. Still, the specific suggestions she does offer do not break any new ground. Nonetheless, her text asks pertinent questions that could open a path to dismantling our rigid societal structures. Morton asks students and faculty to debate the relevance of studying philosophy, the humanities, art and music. She asks how can we make philosophy and history relevant for students confronted with racial injustice, economic challenges and a global pandemic. Her analysis of code-switching compels us to think about how these “alternative” languages sometimes reinforce dominant power discourses and rules—and at other times disrupt them. Therefore, could strivers and their supporters develop/ identify narratives that function as sites of resistance?

Yet, given that class, gender, and racial inequities are deeply engrained into our social structures, is it possible for educational institutions to genuinely attack the structural problems that affect all their students? That is, can structural change within a

university equalize deep injustices that originated outside its walls? This would seem to be possible given that modern education—whose foundations lie in nineteenth century industrialized capitalism—is aligned with and imbricated in other disciplinary systems that shape how individuals exist in and respond to the world around them.

According to Roger Deacon, another theorist who writes about education and Foucault:

Universities, like schools, are multifaceted amalgamations of economic, political, judicial and epistemological relations of power, which still reflect the exclusionary and inclusionary binaries of their origins: university campuses are relatively artificial enclaves where students are expected to absorb socially desirable modes of behaviour and forms of knowledge before being recuperated into society. Foucault predicted that universities will become increasingly important politically, because they multiply and reinforce the power-effects of an expanding stratum of intellectuals and, not least, as a result of new global demands for active, multi-skilled and self-regulated citizens. (2006)

We must, as Deacon suggests, transform the classroom from a space that reinforces a power/knowledge differential into a less regulated place that encourages student reflection and community engagement. To correct what Morton refers to as a “cultural mismatch,” teachers must actively acknowledge and seek to disrupt their own tacitly held beliefs about student engagement, ways of speech, ways of conduct, and disadvantaging dynamics (2019). And they must also change the conventional educational discourse. Employing Foucauldian ideas, how do we use discourse to fight back? That is, how might those in education, develop a counter narrative or strategy to upend institutional “power processes”? (Foucault 1982). For example, perhaps we should no longer penalize students who are absent from face-to-face classes—a penalty that affects many strivers. As we have become acutely aware during this pandemic, faculty could create new platforms and devise new strategies to deliver content and challenge students’ (beyond asynchronous learning).

Perhaps it’s also time for universities to consider a different administrative model. Take, for example, Georgia State University in Atlanta. Georgia State, “a workhorse public institution,” in which 70% of its students are people of color and 60% qualify for federal aid, “has overturned received wisdom about the viability of lower-income, minority, and first-generation students. It has proven that such students do not fail because they are not capable; they fail because, at most universities, the bureaucracy throws obstacles in their way instead of helping them fulfill their potential” (Gumbel 2020). During the pandemic in spring 2019, its graduation rate “hit a record high” and attendance jumped to 98.5% because of the systems Georgia State put in place prior to the onslaught of COVID-19 (Gumbel 2020).

Its administrators, for example, intervene early to rewrite class schedules for students at risk. Academic chairs redesign foundational courses so students can learn at their own pace (self-directed study). Georgia State’s practices, in other words, have successfully equalized student learning and opportunities. Other institutions of higher education should undertake similar strategies, albeit framed by their particular students’ needs. Indeed, unless a university acknowledges structural inequities and seeks to actively implement practices that address them, university life will not change for strivers. Instead, they will be forced to straddle different worlds. Traversing this experience can fracture each of these students sense of self and harm the striver’s familial

relationship. Universities, in turn, will lose the individuals they need to maintain a vibrant campus culture.

Conclusion

If Morton were to write a second volume, the reviewers would ask her the following questions: How, might universities employ strivers' powerful stories—stories that Morton uses so effectively—to develop a new narrative that will effect change at an institutional level? How can these narratives be implemented so they affect systemic educational inequities? How do we ensure that those in power listen?

For this review, we would ask Jennifer Morton to expand on the points she raised in her final chapter. What specifically might educational institutions do to address the ethical costs borne by those least able to bear them? How might we deploy storytelling to change the interconnected systems that have excluded so many?

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