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Being a Low-Income and/or First-Generation Philosopher

‘...there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. That was the price of the ticket. Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality...Students from nonprivileged backgrounds who did not want to forget often had nervous breakdowns. They could not bear the weight of all the contradictions they had to confront. They were crushed. More often than not they dropped out with no trace of their inner anguish recorded, no institutional record of the myriad ways their take on the world was assaulted by an elite vision of class and privilege.’  
--bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, Routledge, 2000, 36-7

## I. Introduction

In this paper, I explore some of the contradictions exposed in my experience pursuing a philosophy Ph.D., in light of scholarship highlighting challenges for low socio-economic status (SES) undergraduate students. I evaluate the proposal from the philosopher Jennifer M. Morton (2019) that low-SES students need ‘clear-eyed ethical narratives’ to navigate higher education. I argue that, in order to develop these narratives, low-SES graduate students must self-conceive in a way that incorporates ‘oppositional consciousness’.

## II. Higher Education and SES

In the last few decades, higher education has sought to foster diversity through recruitment and financial support for low-SES undergraduates,<sup>1</sup> but it has struggled to achieve genuine inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony A. Jack, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, Harvard University Press, 2019, 6-7 [*Privileged Poor*].

Low-SES undergraduates often strain to navigate the ‘hidden curriculum’, such as the norms governing networking, classroom behaviors, the use of office hours, or student groups.<sup>2</sup> They can also be confronted with their comparative disadvantage through common displays of expensive clothing, being unable to afford participation in student clubs, or being hired to clean up after wealthier students.<sup>3</sup> They may be forced to choose between school and caring for an ill relative, or face hunger in light of the need to stay on campus over a break.<sup>4</sup> Although many social forces (e.g., race, citizenship) structure these challenges, the problems represent a broad failure to take account of SES as a factor in a student’s ability to participate in higher education.

Morton focuses on how low-SES students are burdened with special ‘ethical costs’ that arise from the combination of their backgrounds and the norms of higher education.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, where they are from—their neighborhoods, families, friends—are parts of who they are and often present demands on them while they are in school. On the other hand, in order to escape the socio-economic conditions that are the pretext for seeking a degree, they are pressured to forgo these ties. For example, Morton describes a student who feels that ‘one of the more difficult aspects of his path upward had been not allowing himself to be “dragged” back down by those who mattered most to him—family and friends...strivers trying to move upward can be held back and pulled on

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chapters 1, 3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 3

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer M. Morton, *Moving up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* Princeton University Press, 2019. Cf. Morton, ‘The Miseducation of the Elite’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2019.

by those whom they love.<sup>6</sup> Social alienation from their homes is one dimension of the challenges low-SES students face, but others may be more straightforwardly economic, for example, being compromised by obligations to support a family member who cannot afford medical care or faces chronic food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> In this way, low-SES students must make personal sacrifices to satisfy norms that reflect the middle- and upper-class culture of higher education. Yet, this dynamic undermines traditional narratives of higher education as a straightforward path of upward mobility, in which students bear only the costs of tuition and hard work.<sup>8</sup> Any attempt to correct this situation requires new, more informed narratives.<sup>9</sup>

One reason I am interested in this issue, and Morton's work, is that it captures aspects of my experience as an undergraduate. I grew up in a gentrifying small town in New York, where my father had grown up in working poverty. He earned the sole income for our family of four as a self-employed house painter; renting run-down old homes that he tried to make safer allowed us to hide

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 47

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-42.

<sup>9</sup> Morton has arguably identified a 'hermeneutical' epistemic injustice: the collectively available epistemic resources have a gap (evident in the traditional narrative's inadequacies), due to the inability of low-SES students to participate in constructing those resources, thereby depriving them of the conceptual tools to name and make sense of their experiences. See Miranda Fricker 2007, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, 153-4. Cf. Kristie Dotson 2011, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing', in *Hypatia*, 26: 2, 236-257—other forms of epistemic injustice, such as 'testimonial smothering', also plausibly arise in contexts of upward mobility.

in a white area above our SES.<sup>10</sup> Around the time I left, my father became unable to paint due to work-related illness, my mother became the sole income earner as a housekeeper, and my only sibling dropped out of high school. I strongly considered going to work as a painter full-time, but I settled for taking my sibling in, and offering my parents, who relocated to a poorer area, limited support as a student. In order to succeed as a student, I often felt that I needed distance from my family's habits and ways of thinking, which I saw as trapped in cycles of desperation. Yet, I was also alienated from my student peers, whom I perceived to be better educated, more adept in classrooms, more financially secure, and generally happier. I was conscious of the fact that I cooked them breakfast in the morning and burgers at night and listened to their conversations as I drove them to the movies so that I could secure basic necessities. I felt caught between my obligations to my family, my attempt to transcend the conditions of our lives, and the sense that this part of my identity created a barrier between me and my learning community.

Hence, I am interested in Morton's alternative to the traditional 'ethical narrative' about upward mobility in higher education: the 'clear-eyed ethical narrative'.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the traditional narrative of higher education as a straightforward path of upward mobility, Morton proposes that low-SES students develop narrative self-conceptions that foreground how, as a condition of mobility, they will have to make personal, compromising sacrifices—'ethical costs'. On the other hand, a clear-eyed ethical narrative connects these costs to hope for improvement of the social conditions that create them through the resources of mobility.<sup>12</sup> This commitment is an important

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<sup>10</sup> See Reardon, Fox, and Townsend, 'Neighborhood Income Composition by Household Race and Income, 1990–2009', *Annals*, AAPSS, 660, July 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Morton, *Moving Up*, 120-149

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94

domain for a low-SES student to consider in order to avoid one of the ethical costs they will encounter: complicity.<sup>13</sup> By reflecting on the needs brought to light in their personal experiences, and by using the resources they acquire once they have graduated to try to meet those needs, a low-SES student can work to undo the social conditions that created their own struggles, rather than perpetuate them.

While Morton focuses on undergraduate education, her account offers a useful frame of inquiry into similar issues in graduate education, which will be my focus for the rest of the paper.<sup>14</sup> When a low-SES student moves from undergraduate to graduate education, their pre-college communities will likely suffer from similar problems. Moreover, barriers to undergraduate inclusion persist in graduate school, and may even be intensified—for instance, graduate education is likely to increase high-SES representation; universities frequently offer less resources for low-SES graduate students than they do for undergraduates (e.g., grant and loan programs, student unions, and support offices); graduate professionalization is often personally costly and, for example, a disabled low-SES graduate student may struggle to meet their own needs on a low-paying stipend and university health insurance. In the next section, I argue that the threats of complicity in graduate school offer resources to critique Morton’s model of an ethical narrative.

### III. Extending the Narrative

When I went to college, I sometimes confronted more hunger than I could afford to feed. At some of the lowest points, I survived on the cheapest grocery food and meals that I took through my job in the cafeteria. Even then, I lost weight.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-141

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 101-104, 108-115

Being a graduate student has meant facing conflicts with my relationship to food. The first time I attended a department-paid dinner at a fancy restaurant, I was overjoyed—but this feeling eventually turned into an uncomfortable acknowledgement about academic food culture. I once organized a workshop involving many well-regarded scholars. For the final night, I planned, delivered, and set up the catered dinner from one of the local faculty-favorites. I was somewhat uncomfortable from the behind-the-scenes look I had been given into the dinner, particularly how expensive and lavish it felt. Yet, what troubled me more was that this dinner went largely uneaten by the end of the night. Cleaning up afterward, I was overwhelmed by anger, sadness, and a feeling of guilt. I remembered the way my father would take leftover or expiring food and cook it into scrambled eggs; the bowls of pasta that got me through the worst times as a student; how SNAP benefits were feeding my infant nephew. This contrast made me feel that the use of departmental resources for feeding academics acknowledges no moral limiting conditions stemming from the material realities of poverty. Yet, I had attended the same workshop with the same catering in previous years and never cared to think about the food. Now I had helped provide it.

In my experience, this example reflects the fact that attitudes toward material scarcity and plenty in academia are rooted in middle- and upper-class culture. Common professional norms governing food and drink reflect the dominant, high-SES perspective. As a result, low-SES graduate students risk being complicit in practices that perpetuate the inequalities that harmed us, may still harm family and friends, and for many graduate students without outside financial support, us, too.

To underscore how threatening this can be to one's sense of integrity, I will relay another story. In my second year in graduate school, barely a year after earning a B.A., I received several teaching related assignments that made me extremely uncomfortable. I was in a program that supported many of its students and faculty through a private think-tank attached to the University (the 'Center'), which focused on libertarian political philosophy and economics. I was given a TA

assignment for a class organized by the Center on ethics and economics. Throughout the semester, students were taught that markets are good, governments are inept and corrupt, and the best way to help poor people is to deregulate the economy. The little attention paid to alternative views made them into caricatures. A survey at the start and end of the term asked the students a series of questions about regulation and markets in order to measure how much the course shifted their beliefs—it was rumored that this was for attracting donors. At the same time, I was asked to participate in a program that involved teaching versions of these lessons to high school students.

I felt that I was being called on to participate in upholding class hierarchies through teaching a harmful ideology. Moreover, these were my official assignments in exchange for my stipend, health insurance, tuition waiver, and status as a Ph.D. student. At that point in my life, my stipend was around what my family earned, and I had been uninsured before. I saw the relationship I was being asked to enter as reflecting, personally, the social inequality it would perpetuate in the classroom.

I suggest that Morton's 'clear-eyed ethical narrative' runs into two families of problems when applied to situations like these. First, her strategy for identifying ethical costs fails to account for the ways that low-SES graduate students are pressured to conceptualize their challenges in ways that erase the moral framing necessary to identify them as injustices. She suggests that constructing a clear-eyed ethical narrative is a personal, reflective process, but it should also be cultivated through a community, including spaces for sharing experiences.<sup>15</sup> Yet, for example, while I spoke to other graduate students about my teaching assignments, the common reaction was to sympathize with my discomfort but offer some excuse: this is part of the price of graduate school, which is a privilege, and it is O.K. to take 'dirty money' as an already marginal graduate student. I felt that similar barriers prevented me from sharing my discomfort about the food. Hence, being 'clear-eyed' requires that

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 141-145

one be able to navigate the ways that peers, mentors, and norms in higher education exert pressure on a low-SES graduate student's own self-conception in ways that implicitly or explicitly obscure the class hierarchy such a student confronts. (And there may be intersectional issues that further winnow a student's socio-economic community, such as an LGBTQ+ student who is isolated from their home community due to their sexuality.) This is a missing factor in Morton's proposal. Yet, it is plausible that this pressure must be made explicit in a student's self-conception in order for the student to be able to develop clear-eyed sight of their situation.

Second, Morton's suggestion for avoiding complicity is inadequately long-term and focused on individual action. For example, using Morton's model, I could address the costs I bear in both cases by hoping to use an eventual position as a faculty member to influence food norms in my (future) department, defend left-wing political philosophy, and avoid putting TAs in compromising positions. While I would value these goals as part of my long-term identity as an academic, I still find this a disempowering response. The food is expiring; the ask to teach is present. On Morton's model, the ability to mitigate these costs lives in an uncertain future requiring my own ingenuity and access to elite goods. But this provides no concrete guidance in the immediate present. Moreover, it assumes successful acquisition of access to elite goods in the future, which is far from certain, especially for a low-SES graduate student whose mobility is itself in question (and could be disrupted, for instance, by an unstable economic situation). Finally, Morton's model places the burden on individual students. Of course, individuals must think about what they can do, but as I hope to show below, there are alternatives that center the collective nature of both the problems and the solutions. Insofar as the purpose of Morton's model is ameliorative, these issues suggest that the clear-eyed ethical narrative must be able to do more than center what an individual can do for long-term reform.



#### IV. Oppositional Consciousness

In response to these challenges, I claim that an adequate clear-eyed ethical narrative for a low-SES graduate student incorporates ‘oppositional consciousness’, an adversarial self-conception in which one sees oneself as a member of a subordinated group in an unjust hierarchy that calls for resistance and displacement with new, non-hierarchical relations. Sociologists Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine offer the following definition:

An oppositional consciousness is an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination. Minimally, that mental state includes identifying with a subordinate group, concluding that the mechanisms that have produced at least some of the group inequalities are unjust, opposing the injustice, and seeing a common interest within the subordinate group in eliminating the injustice...A more full-fledged oppositional consciousness includes seeing some actions of the dominant group as forming in some way a “system”.<sup>16</sup>

Oppositional consciousness, as a form of subjectivity, is a way of making sense of reality. The core idea is for members of a group demarcated by shared injustice to develop an awareness of their situation as an oppression by undermining the dominant practices and concepts obscuring it, for

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<sup>16</sup> Morris and Braine 2001, ‘Social Movements and Oppositional Consciousness’, in *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, University of Chicago Press, eds. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, 20-37. See also Chela Sandoval, ‘Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World: U.S. Third World Feminism, Semiotics, and the Methodology of the Oppressed’, University Microfilms International: A Bell & Howell Information Company, 1993.

example, through creatively formed conceptual tools for naming and making sense of the injustice.<sup>17</sup> Oppositional consciousness allows members of the group to vindicate their shared experience by bringing it to light in its capacity as unjust, including the various grassroots forms of resistance that might otherwise seem mundane. As political scientist Jane Mansbridge puts it, oppositional consciousness provides an ‘injustice frame’ for making sense of oppression, often first felt as a ‘gut refusal to be subordinated’.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of SES in graduate education, oppositional consciousness means recognizing one’s subordinated place in the SES hierarchy in higher education, identifying the network of factors perpetuating that hierarchy, and aspiring to transform the power relations among members of the institution to end the hierarchy. In this way, a low-SES graduate student can turn their experiences of injustice, which are likely otherwise only damaging to them, into an important, proactive part of their identity. This can obviously take a number of different forms, and I do not suggest that every low-SES graduate student must see the SES hierarchies they confront in the same way. However, I will offer some ideas about how oppositional consciousness might manifest for a low-SES graduate student and what benefits it could provide.

For example, in my leftover food story, I felt anger, hurt, and guilt, through a connection to those in *my* socio-economic class, in *opposition* to the class around me. This provided the moral framework for evaluating possible courses of action. Out of a sense of duty to myself and to people in my life, I decided to take the leftovers home, package them, and give them away to graduate students and staff. Similarly, feeling connected to beneficiaries of tax-funded social programs, I

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Sandoval (1993: 60-64) on making a ‘third gender category’.

<sup>18</sup> Mansbridge 2001, pg. 5, ‘The Making of Oppositional Consciousness’, in Mansbridge and Morris, *Subjective Roots*.

refused to participate in the high school teaching program, and as a TA, I spent the semester trying to convince the students in my three discussion sections to resist the ideas presented in class; when I had the opportunity to teach the class the next summer, I focused it on socialist and egalitarian political philosophies. These were not necessarily the right responses, but, for me, the ability to find a response that met my immediate needs in any way was possible only by creating group-based distance between myself and the community in which I lived and worked. If my experience can be generalized, it suggests that oppositional consciousness, and the *collective* nature of its division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, is needed for this clearing of space in which to articulate values and other moral commitments and identify actions that reflect them.

Moreover, oppositional consciousness can address the problems I articulated above. First, it calls for students to find a way to draw a firm boundary between themselves and the elite culture and practices of higher education, because this is necessary for acquiring the moral clarity to identify a socio-economic injustice as such. This partially addresses the lack of recognition of the conceptual pressures a low-SES graduate student faces in Morton’s original model. While there is no simple recipe, oppositional consciousness implies that the kinds of audiences that will be receptive must reject usual ways of thinking and acting as aspects of the existing system of domination. In my experience, departmental or professional advocacy groups, graduate worker unions, and other (often marginalized) graduate spaces can provide this audience. Once a graduate student has practiced oppositional consciousness, they will be more inoculated against the conceptual pressures I outlined above: a network of beliefs, concepts, and practices will help to name and make sense of SES hierarchies, often or ideally in a way that connects them to other interlocking forms of injustice.

Second, the goal of oppositional consciousness is to end the source of opposition, that is, the existing system of domination. This is a *collective* conflict between two social groups. From this perspective, upward mobility is a form of infiltration: one moves closer to the resources of the

dominant group in order to disrupt the existing system. This is an important perspective to inhabit, as it speaks to one of the concerns that an upwardly mobile student might have, namely, that their mobility is ultimately only a further form of domination, by taking them away from their communities and assimilating them into the elite. While Morton highlights the importance of individuals seeking long-term reform to resist this form of complicity, oppositional consciousness allows an individual to see their efforts as part of a larger struggle requiring solidarity. Moreover, it locates that struggle in the immediate present, which can allow a low-SES graduate student to see how they presently occupy unjust relations (e.g., earning poverty wages). Relatedly, oppositional consciousness can provide the psychological fortitude to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in order to identify actions that have immediate effect. As I outlined above, to decide on certain courses of action and to maintain conviction, I thought about how I could express my loyalty to people from my class background who weren't there with me precisely because of class, with less regard to how this would be received by my peers and supervisors.

Indeed, oppositional consciousness can cultivate a durable sense of hope for improvement grounded in a radical honesty. It arises out of the realization that the only path to well-being comes from confrontation and solidarity. In this way, oppositional consciousness is an aspect of being 'clear-eyed' about the sources of the costs of mobility. Moreover, as I suggested above, Morton's assumption that the sources of these costs are capable of being changed in a fundamental way, and that a low-SES student will find durable mobility, can be undermined by the same system they seek to inhabit and transform. The long-term vision of oppositional consciousness can help mitigate these forces by providing a larger picture in which to embed individual sources of ethical costs, and an expectation of resistance to change as part of its analysis of power struggle. Even if the pathway upward is thwarted, oppositional consciousness provides a framework for understanding why, and

for maintaining resolve in a long-term struggle. Thus, the radical honesty of oppositional consciousness creates a foundation for renewing hope.

Yet, I recommend oppositional consciousness as one area of the space comprising a clear-eyed ethical narrative. This is important, for example, because oppositional consciousness is risky—e.g., being adversarial could risk losing the favor of an advisor who can provide access to professional opportunities. Low-SES students are inherently more economically vulnerable and often more socially isolated; and many low-SES students face multiple oppressions and sources of vulnerability. These challenges require being able to evaluate oppositional consciousness itself, as one factor in a low-SES graduate student's attempt to make sense of their mobility. Still, upwardly mobile individuals have a broad matrix of reasoning that is capable of taking into view competing personal considerations regarding their mobility like these. As the feminist writer bell hooks writes, in a similar context:

When I finished my doctorate I felt too much uncertainty about who I had become.

Uncertain about whether I had managed to make it through without giving up the best of myself, the best of the values I had been raised to believe in—hard work, honesty, and respect for everyone no matter their class—I finished my education with my allegiance to the working class intact. Even so, I had planted my feet on the path leading in the direction of class privilege. There would always be contradictions to face. There would always be confrontations around the issue of class. I would always have to reexamine where I stand.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> bell hooks, 2000, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, Routledge, 37.

My suggestion is that oppositional consciousness is an essential moral goal for giving shape to this reexamination; it can help graduate students from non-privileged backgrounds orient themselves as they undergo the continued transformation arising from their mobility.

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