FIRST GENERATION LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

TALES OF SHAME AND PRIVILEGE

A Thesis

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Sheryl Marie Prouse, candidate for the degree of Master of Social Work, has presented a thesis titled, *First Generation Learners in Higher Education: Tales of Shame and Privilege*, in an oral examination held on March 24, 2017. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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Abstract

I am a first generation learner (FGL) in higher education (HE). A FGL is a student who is the first person in their family to attend HE. Academia presents FGLs as students who are defective. FGLs are often defined in the literature as students that lack cultural capital and fail in academia due to their personal, cultural and social deficits. The underlying and insidious message in much of the research around FGLs is that they do not belong in academia. FGLs are depicted as the square peg and the academy as the round hole. In order for FGLs to ‘fit into’ HE, we must submit to a shaving off of our values, beliefs and cultural norms. HE’s propensity to view FGL students in a deficit model has fortified HE’s ability to maintain the systemic barriers and privilege that surrounds HE. This thesis will explore HE’s systemic barriers and the academic culture of privilege by connecting HE’s oppressive practises to an institutional sense of cultural privilege, classist approaches and marginalization of FGLs. As an FGL, I am situated within this narrative. As a result of my situated perspective, ontology and knowledge production, this thesis is written in the first person. By the same token, in order to honour my positionality as researcher and subject, this thesis is written from an evocative autoethnographic methodology. Evocative autoethnography recognises the researcher as an insider and primary participant. This methodology inspires me to bare my soul and share my experiences in the hope that you catch a glimpse of yourself or those you know. I invite you to journey with me and explore my traumas and triumphs this FGL has experienced in HE.
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Chapter 1 Introduction: My Story

My Experiences, My Reflections, My Way of Meaning Making

Welcome to my story, my insider journey as a First Generation Learner (FGL) in Higher Education (HE). As with most stories, mine has a beginning, middle and end. This story depicts the beginning and middle of my story and hints at a conclusion. Though there is no clear conclusion to this story, there are many disclosures made, problems identified and an abundance of inequities uncovered. Although this is my story, I hope you see yourself in it. This story is built upon text and images, representations of my story as it is contextualized within a larger sociological story. The scenarios, stories and pictures are purposefully situated within my ways of meaning making. Alternatively, they are also created to leave you, the reader, wondering, speculating and reflecting on your space and place within HE. You are being invited into my story as an active participant; I hope to evoke responses, questions and speculation as part of the reflective element contained within evocative autoethnography methodology. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Spry, 2001). I cannot offer you a linear, quantitative record, this is not who I am. I need you to draw conclusions, find yourself in the stories, pictures and narratives. I want you to feel the pain of being a square peg that has been ground down to fit into a round hole. My hope is you find yourself lost, uncomfortable, and unsure of what to think. This is how my story will evoke responses and reflections of the readers’ space, place and privilege within HE. I understand the world in circular events, contextualized by experiences, space, place and spirit. I seek to find common ground with the reader, however I will not sacrifice my ontological understanding in order to create concrete conclusions for you. Seek to see yourself in this story, engage in reflection and allow
yourself to feel the pain. Maybe you are also a FGL, an outsider, confused by HE’s middle class norms, competitive pedagogy and classist systems that privilege those who are situated within the white walls of HE’s. On the other hand, you may be someone who participates in (HE) with privilege. Alternatively you may have experienced all sides of HE; facing inequities, engaged in privileged processes, confused by all sides of HE. Regardless of your current space and place within HE, you have participated in and been affected by HE’s dominant culture, privileged systems and deceptions. My story as a FGL exposes socioeconomic and cultural privilege as a means to exclude FGL’s from the privileged dominant classes that maintain a powerful grip over HE. This story, my story, cuts through the discomfort and deceptiveness that is used to cover up the inequities that are perpetuated within HE. Within this story I face my marginalized space, bare my shame, fears and tears by including my data, stories that are taken from my personal journals, academic papers, messages and communications. My story of HE begins in childhood; my developmental understanding of education, identity and lack of privileged spaces contextualize my experiences. With this in mind, I explore the systemic birth of a FGL, marginalized spaces that prepared me to be a FGL and oppressive circumstances that left me believing my place in society was as a poor female, with no future brighter than achieving grade 12. That is to say, my socioeconomic status, my understanding of gender roles, sociological and cultural lessons pointed me to the spaces that I could occupy, as well as detailed for me the spaces that I did not belong in. As I strove to survive in a chaotic environment, I became very adept at picking up subtle and not so subtle messages regarding my space and place within society and particularly within the school systems.
It is the first day of grade 1 I am so excited! I didn't finish Kindergarten and have been looking forward to school for so long. I run around the house with my older cousins, laughing and singing, what a great day. My cousins do not seem to be as excited as I am, but I shake off the worry this produces. I can’t wait to see all kids, I can’t wait to meet my teacher, I am going to learn so many things! My auntie is preparing a big pot of oatmeal with raisins and cinnamon, the delicious and warm smells fill the air. I jump up and down on the couch; I am so excited I can’t contain my energy. The big kids grab their stuff and head out the door, I run after them, singing and skipping the whole way. The school is in sight so I take off, running full speed. I burst into the doors and find the grade 1 room. The first thing I notice is how pretty my teacher is. She is all dressed up and has the most magnificent hairdo. I rush into the room; most of the desks are taken already and people are staring at me. I start to feel uncomfortable, the worry comes back, snaking its way up my spine. No one is saying anything; there is no singing or laughter fortifying these four walls. The teacher walks over and asks my name and I mumble a response. She is looking at me strangely, lets out a big sigh, looks me up and down and loudly says, “You have no shoes on, you have to wear shoes in school.” I am horrified. Why do I have to wear shoes? Do shoes help me learn? The worry continues to creep itself across my body, I don’t belong here.

There have been many times in my life when I have felt or been told outright that I should not bother seeking the privilege that comes with education. There have been many times I have been denied access to the privilege that sits within education’s fortified walls. As a child I had no way to frame these messages and experiences. As an
adult I see the systemic barriers of privilege; I can taste the betrayal of identity and self
every time an academic declares there is only one way to understand their discipline and
that is their way. The message has been loud and clear, I, a FGL, must succumb and
emulate the classist ways of academia. The consequences of refusing to ‘shift my shape’
have been harsh. I, a FGL, should seek opportunities elsewhere because I do not belong
in HE. The problem with this message is pretty clear to me. I do not like being forced
into a triangle and by the way, I will no longer put the shoes on.

I woke up in the middle of the night sweating, scared, with tears rolling down my
face. I had just moved to another new city, another new neighbourhood, and was
preparing myself to attend another new school. I felt very small, scared, under
prepared for facing another new experience. I remember the smells of my new
home. The hallways of the building were filled with the scent of spices and the
walls rang with languages that sounded like music to my ears. I wished with all my
heart that I could just stay here, warm in my bed and enjoy my surrounding. For
now, it was quiet and felt safe. I got up and started preparing myself for the day,
paying special attention to how I dressed, my lunch, the items I needed for school.
I dreaded the multitude of first days I had in new schools scattered across Western
Canada. I just wanted to make sure that my first day at another new school would
go smoothly, and not place me in the social category of OTHER. As I had been
yanked out of my sleep due to a deep fear of being late on my first day, I had
several hours at my disposable to prepare myself; camouflaging anything I thought
might set me apart.
I watched the clock intently and when I thought it was time I set off in the general direction of the school. I knew there were a few bends in the road and a street to cross. At the time I was too young to understand the distance, it was just over a mile to the school and I had miscalculated the time needed to walk to my first day of grade 3. I walked for what felt like forever and then began to panic because I thought I was lost. I sit down on the curb and start to cry.

A child’s lifetime experiences of being shamed for her socio economic status, her glaring differences from the privileged norms have created a sense of otherness. The messages were plentiful; being questioned by parents and teachers regarding the whereabouts of my father, financial demands being made by an educational system that would not see poverty as a condition of society, not a personal failure, demands to understand and participate in educational pursuits I had never heard of. These conditions created and nourished my sense of other and the older I got, the bigger the ‘other’ divide became.
Figure 1: Illusions of belonging breaks down and other is born
My identity cannot be separated from the contextualised self formed within an educational system that increasingly provided outcomes based on privilege and the ability to conceptualize and enact middle class norms (Stephens, Fryberg Markus Johnson, Covarrubias & Simpson, 2012). Socio economic resources are required for people to arrive on time, participate in a meaningful way and understand what is expected of them. Had I had reliable assistance in waking up, I would have had no fear of sleeping in. An alarm clock or other device would have also sufficed in insuring I woke early enough to fulfill my obligations to education’s understanding of timeliness. I had been shamed enough in the past to know that arriving late would result in further shaming and alienation. Access to transportation would have also made this journey a little easier, but that was not available to me at the time. My experiences within education formed my understanding of the consequences of existing as other. There was nowhere for me to examine, reflect or deconstruct my socio economic status (SES), cultural understandings and personal experiences, therefore I brought them all with me as I entered HE. Everything I touched within HE was informed by my marginalized space and place within the world and subsequently within HE. Moreover, these experiences have led me to write this evocative autoethnography narrative, seeking to expose the socio economic inequities, privilege and systemic barriers that impact FGLs when they attempt to create space for themselves within HE. With this in mind, it becomes imperative for me to reveal my own biases, meaning making and perceptions in order to produce this evocative autoethnography.
Situating Myself or My Situation?

Creswell (2007) discusses the merits of quantitative research and encourages researchers to explore their own biases, perceptions and meaning making within the contextualized space of the research question(s). As I approach this thesis within a qualitative methodological framework I have spent many hours reflecting on my ‘space and place’ within the research questions. I am what the literature refers to as a FGL (Shepler & Woosley, 2011). Neither of my biological parents nor my stepparent had completed post-secondary education and we moved back and forth within our SES bonds, moving from poverty to lower middle class and back again into poverty. My family’s SES impacted my sense of what was possible for someone ‘like me’. I thought going back to high school and finishing grade 12 was a great achievement. I had no one in my immediate or extended social circle that had successfully completed high school and getting my grade 12 diploma felt like a big deal at the time. My extended and immediate family offered congratulations, encouragement and messages that told me graduating from high school was a big deal. People in the neighbourhood patted me on the back, shook my hand and told me I was lucky, I could get a better job with a grade 12. My educational experience had shifted between attending a multitude of elementary and high schools, to dropping out of high school to work full time, and then going back to complete grade 12 while continuing to work full time. The fact that I managed to work forty hours a week, double up on my mandatory course load and assist at home with the children was not seen as a big deal within my familial circle. The ‘big deal’ was simply the completion of the high school diploma. Consequently, my foundational experience as a child and then teenager within the Canadian educational system framed my
expectations of what was, and was not possible within the walls of HE. Andres, Adamuti-Trache, Yoon, Pidgeon, and Thomsen (2007) confirm, “those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to achieve the lowest levels of education” (p. 156). Drawing upon Andres et al (2007) longitudinal study, students who enjoy a middle class or higher SES are more likely to expect to attend HE and are more likely to have parents who have achieved HE education as compared to FGLs who do not expect to attend HE as a result of lower SES and lack of social privilege. Moreover, FGLs do not identify HE attainment as something they ever thought was within their reach to achieve.

The picture of HE was not a part of my future picture for a long time. I didn’t even think I would graduate from high school as my family was fairly transient; school was not high enough on the survival scale to make much of an impact on my plans for the future. Likewise, the continuous change of school locations often interrupted learning, impressing upon my young sense of self that I was not the ‘type’ of student teachers were looking for:

Panic was rising, I could feel it creep from the tips of my toe, snaking its way throughout my body to land in my voice box. I felt like I couldn’t speak. “Please answer the question, what is 6x7?” Standing there, frozen to the spot, while my classmates’ stare and snicker. I hear one of them whisper, “gawd, she’s dumb.” I am 9 years old and this is my fourth school I’ve attended while trying to complete 3. My last school was only on the 4 times table and I have no idea what 6x7 is but I could tell you what 9x7 is because the school before that was on the 9 times table when I arrived. I look down at the floor in shame and whisper, “I don’t know”. The
teacher responds with “Please have a seat, you will have to put some effort in so you can catch up with the rest of the class.” I have failed, in the eyes of my grade 3 class teacher, I am OTHER.
I am a Canadian who grew up in a single parent home, living between poverty and a working class socio-economic status. The experience of not having enough, to having just enough is framed within a Canadian perspective. At no time in life was I in danger of starving to death, however there were times in life I was hungry and there was simply no more food or resources to purchase more in the short term. Life was spent surviving; thriving was a secondary concern and became easier when my mother remarried. I was just finishing grade 5 and found a new status within the group of working class families.
We moved to a house and I prepared to start another new school. Although this status of child within a two parent home to a single parent home continued to change throughout the rest of my dependent years, I had now experienced a lifetime record of three and half years with the same peers, in the same neighbourhood. Accordingly I started my adult life with a dream that my own children would surpass my lifetime record and have a stable, secure middle class home so that they would enjoy the benefits of a stable education experience and hopefully the support of long-term peer relationships.

At the age of 14 my family moved again, this time to another province. I completed grade 9 and a term of grade 10 in Alberta. We had relocated to a small city that only had two high schools. I was enrolled in the smaller high school and found all of my peers had gone to school together since grade 3. Although I found the curriculum easy and had formed a supportive peer environment, my situation at home was not desirable. I decided to quit school and move out on my own at the age of 15. I had a full time job waitressing and my employer, part of a large hotel complex, offered basic rooms for $2 a day to staff. I felt that some distance from my family might help me to get on with life, to survive. I missed my siblings terribly and tried to keep a close watch on them during our separation. My decision to separate myself from the family came with consequences that I wasn't sure I could continue to live with. I wasn't able to see my siblings on a regular basis and I missed out on some significant events within their lives. I was separated from my neighbourhood and all of the informal supports I had within that network of friends. I ached to be with my family again, within a network of people that understood me, understood my worldview and ways of meaning making. I needed to work in order to support myself and I didn't have anyone that was able to help me out.
financially. My life was not about planning or dreaming of education, financial success or security. My life was about finding ways to survive. I worked diligently so I could have enough to eat, secure a safe, warm place to live and be with people who understood me, shared my values and way of knowing. These things were far more important to me than achieving a grade 12. On the other hand, my employment options were being narrowed due to health concerns. A physician recommended I stay away from employment that involved open grills or any kind of poor air quality so consequently I had to open up space within my worldview and start to consider alternative employment options. I noticed that many job ads wanted you to have a completed grade 12, so I decided to go back to school and equip myself with a grade 12 diploma in order to seek out employment in areas that wouldn't damage my health.
Figure 3: Survival is more important
Within five months of my moving out, my family decided to relocate back to Saskatchewan. During this period of time I fell ill and was not able to continue working in an open kitchen. Consequently, two months later I followed the family back to Saskatchewan and with limited employment options decided I should re-enrol in high school. I completed high school at the same time my peers did by doubling up on requirements each term. During my graduating year I also held a full time job, Monday to Friday, working four p.m. to midnight in a convenience store. My family and work commitments were the subject of many teacher conversations and I was often chastised by school administrators for not attending class regularly. I didn't really understand what the big deal was with my schooling. I finished my assignments, got decent grades and had formed a significant peer group. I needed to work and wanted to finish high school at the same time my peers did, so I didn't indulge in any extra curricular activities or study any electives like typing. At the time, I did not understand that the teacher’s concerns were framed within a standard middle class norm and that this worldview would carry forward into the realms of HE, causing me shame and panic. Moreover, Stephens, Markus and Phillips (2014) discuss the inequities of institutional middle class norms as well as access to middle class norms and how these norms… “can generate and perpetuate inequality” (p. 627). Subsequently, my worldview, ways of meaning making and knowledge production did not include an understanding, or belief that supported the notion that I should give up my interdependent lifestyle which included staying home occasionally to help with the other children, and working to assist with finances. I perceived no benefit in not being able to assist at home. I managed to complete the requirements for grade 12. As mentioned above, I needed a grade 12 in order to secure
employment that was fulltime and wouldn't negatively impact my health. There were very few places a young, under-educated female could gain fulltime employment that was safe and offered a fair wage. The events that drove me back to school were coincidental; my health, a physician’s recommendation and my family moving away. These events all left me with a sense of insecurity, an unknowing that terrified me. The circumstances, experiences and events leading up to this period in my life are significant, they create a sense of how formal learning was contextualised within my life realities.

Education was a means to an end. I carried forward my realities into my HE pursuits and this worldview remains a part of my value and belief system at the age of 52. I graduated grade 12, on time and was the first member of my family to achieve an educational credential. I didn't see this as an achievement, nor did my family or community. We understood this educational credential to be a means to an end, a doorway that allowed additional job prospects. Therefore my survival continued, I was able to produce the piece of paper required to continue to work and survive; survival continued.
Figure 4: First to graduate High School, survival continues
As I continued to survive within the context of my life, my worldview, my ways of knowing, the experience of achieving a grade 12 diploma opened up a bit more space within my understanding of who I was, my place within the world of education. I began to entertain the possibility that I could get a post secondary credential that would enable me to secure a job that paid well above minimum wage. I decided to forge ahead and applied to University to take the Certificate of Social Work. My choice in HE is a significant signpost to understanding who I thought I was in relation to HE and how I fit into HE. Social Work was something I understood. I had interaction with Social Workers as a child and teenager and was convinced I could do a better job than they had in intervening in my life. Unlike those professionals, I understood the client’s lifestyle, perspective and struggles, because I had been the client! I thought going to university would be the same as finishing my grade 12. I would show up as often as possible, do the work and get to graduate. I saw the pursuit of a post secondary education as another means to an end and a chance to gain better employment opportunities. I had no idea that HE would present barrier after barrier and eventually drain me emotionally, shake my confidence in my abilities and define me further as other.

All papers must be typed. But I don't know how to type, did not take typing in high school and have no ready access to a typewriter. I note to myself that admission to the university did not say anything about being able to type! The Certificate of Social Work was supposed to be accessible to ‘mature students’. I thought the learning should fit into my life as an adult with many other responsibilities. Crap, now I have to find a typewriter, pay for cartridges and paper and try to figure out how to use the darn thing. I fret about this new expectation. Familiar feelings of
shame and embarrassment begin to eat at the fringes of my consciousness. Maybe people like me just shouldn't bother. I should have taken typing in high school but couldn’t fit it into my schedule, another thing I did wrong! I don't belong in these classes…..should I quit? I push the distance course package to the side, someone’s crying and I need to get supper made before I go to work.

The feelings of frustration, alienation and otherness grew bigger and bigger with each class I attempted. It was not that I couldn't do the work, or understand the material. The reality was as a FGL I didn't hold space within HE. I existed in a space that required my attention as a wife, parent, extended family member and employee. In addition, I didn't understand the unwritten rules and expectations that HE is built upon. I kept encountering systemic barriers that clearly told me I was a FGL and therefore I was other. Moreover, my worldview held little space to understand the competitive worldview and unwritten expectations that HE holds up as the golden standard for success and achievement.

Some Things Change, Some Stay the Same

I am a 52 year old, married, mother of three and grandmother of six. I am a wife, sister, aunty, cousin, niece and daughter. I take all of these roles seriously; they define what I believe in, which influences my actions, behaviours and choices. My roles, space, place and contextualised experiences have framed my worldview. Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, Covarrubias and Simpson (2012) consider my worldview an interdependent position that is attempting to exist alongside the independent, middle class norms of HE. I am ‘programmed’ to work collaboratively while my colleagues who identify with the middle class norm approach studies more competitively than I do.
Perhaps even preferring competitive independent study. My interdependent worldview did not help me in my HE pursuits. It hindered my progress by prioritizing familial responsibilities over any student needs I encountered. In the beginning of my role as a HE student, I was focused in completing my program as efficiently as possible in order to get a job that hopefully paid more than minimum wage so I could support my family. I had no knowledge of scholarships, bursaries or other funding mechanisms. I just knew I had to complete the program with as little consumer debt as possible. I saw HE as an opportunity to better my economic status, adding large amounts of debt would be a counter intuitive action. As such, my drive to complete the program as efficiently as possible was viewed by some of my professors as a wanting to ‘grab the credential’ and not engage in all the activities that would have made me, in their eyes, a true social worker.

I feel sick to my stomach. I thought I was done, how would this affect my job applications? He said he thinks I finished the Certificate of Social Work too quickly, that I shouldn't be completed yet. He thinks I jumped through the program too hastily. Can he hold me back? I don't understand. I finished everything they told me I had to finish. I am too scared to ask anyone. With help from a friend I apply to graduate, I try to keep it quiet because I am afraid he will target me, hurt me, and hold me back. My experience with powerful privileged men has not been positive. They take what they want, they set the rules and I feel powerless. My lived experience tells me this man can hurt me. If he destroys this for me I will never come back. I am terrified of his power, his desire for me to be something I don’t even understand. I try to disappear; I want to be invisible so that he can’t see
me, hurt me. In the end, my soft steps pay off. I have my Certificate, I can move forward.

After gaining my first HE credentials, a little more space opened up within my worldview, my sense of self. I found employment as a professional, which in turn started a thought, rather than just being a member of those that survived, could I move up economically to begin to thrive? It’s important to realize how crazy this thought was. I didn’t belong to the people that thrived, could meet all of their basic needs and then some. On the other hand, I didn't see all of the pitfalls I would face by trying to find a space and place among the privileged class of Canadians. I had no way to understand or measure the emotional toll this venture would take. The reality is I didn't belong in HE, not because I wasn’t smart enough, but because the Canadian school systems, including HE, are built on an image of middle class norms, knowledge production and meaning making. Furthermore, these middle class values contradict my own ways of knowing and meaning making. The tensions between these worldviews began to tear me apart in ways I could never have imagined.
Figure 5: Surviving with a hint of thriving
The conflicting worldviews I encountered as a student in the Canadian education system were amplified as I attended HE. The gulf that exists between privilege and all others was more transparent in HE. As a child, finding a space and place within a variety of schools was not as burdensome as trying to find a space and place within HE. Many children within the neighbourhood schools I attended also existed on the fringes of poverty. Within these elementary and high schools there was a clear cohort of peer support, those that understand the world in a similar way as I did. We did not compete with each other for resources, time or attention. On the contrary there were many times we would work collaboratively to meet our needs.

It was a regular after school ritual. Some of the kids had a little more than others, so the first stop would be at their house to eat something. Other kids homes offered a safe, welcoming space to be in, so our next stop would be at their house. Within our elementary school cohort group we knew which houses to avoid, and we avoided them together. We understood each other, we stuck together and we survived.

Upon entering HE, I had no idea my ways of meaning making and knowledge production would hinder my progress. I did not understand that my family’s SES, my parent’s lower level educational attainment and subsequently my status, as a FGL, would impact my ability to thrive within HE. I had a difficult time identifying a cohort group that was not competitive. I did not understand the students’ unending comparison of grades and goals. I grew up understanding collaboration as a way to survive, yet HE’s middle class norm promoted and supported a knowledge production system that relied on competitiveness. The HE environments were filled with intense competition to make the
grades, win the awards and achieve first place in everything! The success a student achieves within HE is seen as an individual result. HE frames the successful students as quality students. There is little thought given to the advantages and/or disadvantages students must face in order to compete within HE. Moreover, Milner (2013) describes this competitive advantage as a benchmark that exposes HE’s middle class privileged norms:

Yet many educators believe that their own success is merited because they have worked hard, followed the law, had the ability and skill, and made the right choices and decisions. They have little or no conception of how class and socioeconomic privilege and opportunity manifest. (p. 35)

I have achieved some successes in HE, but none of those successes were competitive in nature. I struggled with belonging and my sense of identity within HE. I was not confident in my ability to succeed, nor have I ever been able to shake the feeling that I just don't belong in HE. As a result of attending HE as a FGL, I was disadvantaged. I had no one around me that would tell the truth about the privilege, and social or cultural expectations within HE. For example, I did not comprehend the implications of not engaging in extra curricular activities. My priorities included HE, but my family obligations were my first priority therefore I could not participate in many of the Faculty extra curricular activities that were available to students. Moreover, I was unjustly labelled as a student who was just not engaged in the Faculty. I could not attend rallies, potlucks and study groups. I had three small children to care for, a full time job to attend to and extended community responsibilities. There were many times I wished I had more time to get involved in student activities. I often felt inadequate, not connecting my lack
of time to a lack of privilege. I often internalised my lack of privilege as a personal failing and struggled with my sense of self. In reality, I felt like *I*, and therefore everything *I* understood, believed in, and knew, didn't belong in HE, but I just couldn't figure out why? Unlike my student experience within HE I have found myself occupying a privileged position within HE as an Administrator. Due to my intimate understanding of student cohorts that were seen as *Other*, I quickly found myself becoming the ‘go to’ person whenever my colleagues found themselves confused by FGL issues.

**The Upside**

While my worldview did not help me as a student within HE, it has created a space and place for me as a professional within HE.

“I just don't understand why ‘those’ students are failing, we do so much for them.”

“What else can we do to turn them into ‘good’ students? They are just so underprepared!”

As I sit in yet another meeting, I try to contain my anger at the statements, ‘those’ students and ‘good’ students, I was, and continue to be, one of ‘those’ students and I don’t feel as though I ever understood how to be a ‘good’ student. I take a deep breath and begin to talk about positionality, andragogy and the institution’s approach to ‘those’ students. I wonder out loud what we define as a ‘good student’ and is that the same label we give to a successful student? I suggest we look at the resources being provided with a critical lens. From whose perspective do we conclude ‘we are doing so much for them?’ As far as I can tell this issue has not been presented to ‘those’ students, neither have they been approached for input. I suggest we start with asking the students what they need in order to meet the norms of the school. Within my statement is an implicit declaration that
the norms of the program need to be more transparent and I will provide this information to the students. There is a visible sigh within the room. People seem relieved that ‘she’ understands ‘those’ students and will take care of this problem that the university doesn't appear to want to deal with.

I have worked within HE as an instructor, curriculum developer, coordinator, counsellor, advisor and administrator. My career in HE has spanned over sixteen years within a variety of institutions: colleges, polytechnics and university. I struggle daily with the fact that I am part of a system that discriminates and oppresses people. The language, policies and practices within the institution are formed to assimilate people into the middle class norm of ‘good’ student. Yet the tension is clear, ‘good’ student is seen through one lens, one worldview and as Llamas (2002) aptly describes,

Good student is an expression historically linked to specific systems of thought which differentiate and set apart learners, providing an imaginary space, eventually as real as the geographical one, from which to watch and consider the university students” (p. 671).

As a result of not fitting the ‘good’ student label I have accepted a place as outsider. This sense of Other, outsider, has created tensions for me and although my professional ways of knowing and meaning making are seen as valuable within HE, I struggle with my space and place within the institution. On the outside it appears I am regarded as a valued employee, past performance feedback and professional accomplishments would situate me within a space that indicates a robust professional life within HE, yet my identification with other places me outside of those indicators, continuing to exist in an incongruent state, on the fringe.
I am Situated within Social Work

“We don’t want ‘those students’ in that course, that’s for good students”.

It is 2014, I thought the education system was farther along in their ideologies surrounding diversity, but I am continually disappointed by the privileged discourse that envelops all aspects of higher education. I try to choke down the angry response rising in my throat, occasionally I lose control of my tongue and it is never a positive experience for me. A stream of curse words goes through my mind. Taking a deep breath, I remind my colleague that ‘those students’, given the support and opportunity to engage in innovative learning andragogy, can perform very well.

The room is silent until he speaks again, “Well I guess if it’s the only way to get this course going let’s do it.”

As a professional trained first in social work, second in education, I find myself falling into the role of advocate as often as I find myself engaging in teaching methodologies. When I entered the field of HE as a professional, I never thought I would be doing as much advocacy work as I did when I worked in corrections and health. In reality, because the barriers in HE are so insidious, I feel as though I spend more time advocating than I did when I worked in more traditional social work roles. As a result of my insider role as a FGL, my training in social work and my current role as a HE administrator, I am often conflicted about the determinants that HE presents as the norm for decision making. I am to use determinants founded in privileged, classist norms to make decisions regarding appeals, admissions and student conduct. I struggle with the middle class standards these norms are founded on and continue to support. There are many institutional and systemic barriers that I believe create conditions that oppress and
discriminate against students who fall outside of the middle class norm. My presence within HE is filled with trepidation and I struggle to clearly identify my role. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005) discusses the role of social workers to oppose oppression and discrimination. My contextualised understanding of who I am as a professional is founded within the CASW’s Code of Ethics. This is how I was trained as a professional, this is professionally who I am. In addition, Watkinson (2001) reminds us that social work can be defined as advocating for equal access to… “resources, services and opportunities for all persons” (p. 267). Within this contextualized space, I struggle with my identity, purpose and ability to uphold an ethical stance in my professional role. While I situate myself within Social Work I worry that I am unable to effect change on a historical HE system that is infested with overt and covert systemic barriers. Am I part of the solution or part of the problem? Truth be known, I feel as though I am both problem and solution as I engage in a constant struggle to situate myself within HE. I have been kept in my place by the oppressive system HE presents as a normalized standard to FGL. I have fought against these systemic barriers, sometimes successfully, at other times being crushed by the weight of HE. In reality, after all of these years, I still feel like HE continues to push me into a defined space as a FGL, as a female, as someone who doesn't belong.
Chapter 2 Methodology

Finding a methodology that won’t silence me

As a result of experiencing HE as a space that kept me in my ‘place’, I have struggled to identify a methodology that honoured my position as both an insider and outsider to the class barriers that prevent inclusive academia. Ethnography initially appeared to offer a way to engage in research as an insider. Correspondingly, Martin, Litchfield, Mandefro, Parvez, Holmes, Lindemann, and Hansen (2013) describe the benefits of ethnography:

It can help identify and fully explore barriers, facilitators, and unanticipated outcomes of policies and programs and lead to the development of new approaches not discovered using quantitative methods (p. 207).

I thought I had found a way to honour my experiences and at the same time conduct research that was meaningful to a larger group of citizens. In reality, my search for an inclusive method of research was not over.

In spite of the hopes I had to use ethnography as a research methodology that was open to my insider experiences, I soon discovered that ethnography rejects insider as ‘expert’. Brown and Dobrin (2004), explains that,

Ethnography has always recognized the importance of drawing on the knowledge of community members, but has stopped short of truly valuing this expertise. Instead ethnographers have insisted that only with their interpretation, their intervention, that this raw material could be manufactured into some useful product (p. 247).

In light of my trepidation concerning HE, I committed myself to finding a methodology that wouldn't seek to silence me. Therefore I looked beyond ethnography
and continued my search for a research method that would highlight my experiences as well as provide a valuable piece of research that others involved in HE could use as a mirror, seeing their space, place and reflection within HE.

**Why Evocative Autoethnography?**

Phenomenology methodology would provide a good framework to further explore the common experience of FGLs. The literature (Evans, 2009; Goldrick-Rab & Han 2011) supports a common phenomenon that FGL’s experience in HE as a trait that situates research within a phenomenological methodology (Creswell, 2007). However, as I began to review the current literature regarding FGLs, it became apparent that my personal narrative, experience and concerns as a FGL would not work within a phenomenological methodology. In fact, I couldn’t stop myself from being immersed in the literature as memories of my experiences as a FGL came flooding back to me. Not only was I fully engrossed with the FGL literature, I was finding it impossible to step outside my own experience.

As has been noted, I needed to find a research methodology that would honour my position within the research. For this reason I decided to use an evocative autoethnography methodology. Autoethnography is the method I am compelled to use so that I may immerse myself within the issue because as Chevaz (2012) says, “…autoethnography challenges the role of objectivity in research since it underscores the positionality of the researcher in this investigation”, and is my only way to, “…attempt to reclaim representational space” (p. 342).
Moreover, in order for this research to be meaningful, it must act as a catalyst to represent my position within HE as well as provide a framework to name the structural barriers that exist within HE.

In the hope that I would find a way to tell my story in a meaningful and powerful way I continued to seek out a way to include ‘I’ in my research methodology. When I was exposed to autoethnography I felt like I had finally found a way to include my narrative in the research. As a matter of fact, autoethnography originates from a space that acknowledges the importance of our own reflections and transformative processes within qualitative research. According to Creswell (2007), autoethnography originated from ethnography. As ethnographers became immersed in the communities they were studying, it became more and more difficult to separate themselves as observers. Autoethnography offered a solution to this problem, as it is a narrative, reflexive methodology that makes room for the voice, space and place of the researcher as insider.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe autoethnography as an “…autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). I am the autoethnographer and my experiences, some imposed, some activated by self, results in an adult learner who questions the validity of systems that systemically exclude generations of learners from their ranks. For this reason, any research I engage in must have room for my story, my narrative, and my emotional response to being dominated within a classist system.

**Autoethnography, Defining My Purpose**

As I continue to define and refine my purpose for researching FGLs in HE’s hegemonic systems I realize that I not only want to identify and analyse this social
phenomena, I want to expose the abuse of privilege within HE. The dominant class has ruled HE long enough and I feel driven to engage in narratives that are evocative, daring, and open up spaces that expose the inequities within HE. As a result of refining my research purpose, I began to explore evocative autoethnography. Autoethnography provides the space and place for me to situate myself within the research question; evocative autoethnography provides the path for me to offer my story as a way to evoke powerful reactions to this research question.

I wake up in the middle of the night, worried that I do not understand what is expected of me. I am a middle-aged grandmother, what do I know about being evocative? I can tell you my story; I am a first generation attender, a student of life. I love learning and yet I yearn with every fibre of my body to push against the linear Eurocentric system I’ve been subjected to my whole life. I have asked myself over and over again, why do you keep going, keep engaging in a system that causes so much emotional pain? I don’t know the answer, but suspect it is motivated by worthiness and the need to feel validated by the mainstream system. I couldn't shake the feeling that middle class norms were the correct way to be and I fell outside of the norm. As a little girl I was mocked and teased by children who had a mother and a father, a home, brand new clothing and food available to quell their hunger. I began to understand myself as the “other”. Far away from my community, my family, my sameness, my other grew and grew. Evocative autoethnography allows me to step inside myself; safely away from the judgments mainstream pictures impose upon me. At the same time I am driven to expose HE’s systemic barriers and attempts at exterminating ‘other’ ways of meaning
making and knowledge production. I have a graduate degree; I don't need another one. What am I doing here again?

I continue to struggle with positionality, privilege and the middle class norms HE imposes on students. Moreover, as I work within HE’s walls, I endeavour to stay true to myself, my ways of knowing and meaning making while opening up space so that I might see myself as insider and advocate, championing change from the inside out.
HE is long overdue for change and I am desperate to be a part of that change. It is important as researcher and subject that I position myself within the question and clearly identify my worldview, way of meaning making and knowledge production; this allows for transparency and provides a space for me to impact change within the walls of HE.
My ways are significant, important and produce data that is relevant in the search to understand HE’s impact on FGLs. Elligson (1998) states that:

By reclaiming contaminated organic process of knowledge production grounded in (not abstracted from) human experience, autoethnographers resist those who seek to clean up or confine the mess rather than revelling in it (p. 511).

Education is messy; it is full of human interactions that are subjective, full of hurt, shame and judgements. Alternatively, education can be transformative, providing space to question privilege, societal positions roles and gender. As we walk the path within HE, it is apparent that our prior experiences, knowledge and attitudes inform research.

Likewise, evocative autoethnography supports research that recognises the chaotic ontology and epistemological ways of knowing that are diverse and informed by human flaws.

**My Ontology**

I do not believe it is possible to generate objective research. Research is full of worldviews, meaning making, filters, language, interpretation and human participation. I revel in the messiness of questions that make people shake their heads, jump up and down and scream. Correspondingly, Adams, Jones and Ellis (2015) describe the formation of autoethnography as originating with qualitative researchers’ concern about the limits of scientific knowledge. How is knowledge represented? How do diverse worldviews and dogmatic agendas impact research? As researchers became more reflexive in their thought process, they began to uncover the impact of meaning making and social identity on all research practices. As a result, autoethnography provided a voice for the researcher’s voice within the narrative. Granted the formation of
autoethnography provides a place for the researcher’s voice within the narrative of first
generation attenders in HE, however, I feel compelled to go beyond analysis of this
phenomenon. HE has silenced my voice, therefore I must use HE to regain what was
taken from me. Throughout this text are stories of my experience of education as classist
system. I have paid special attention to my voice. The text that is indented and appears in
a different font is purposeful. HE has tried over and over again to silence my voice;
accordingly, my voice within this text is dominant, strong and will not be ignored or
silenced.

As I continued to delve into the research around FGLs I felt like my voice was
being silenced over and over again. The current body of research has many narratives
that describe FGLs as lacking social and educational capital. Stories like Jeffrey Selingo
(2013) author of College Unbound depict FGLs as other, lacking the skill and suave to
be academically successful. Selingo (2013) narrates a story that hides classist barriers
under piles and piles of arguments. His novel purports lack of rigour, students who are
more consumers than learners, institutions that are more interested in marketing and
bums in seats than academic pursuits. While these claims may be true, they fall short of
some ugly truths. If we continue to grieve the ‘death’ of traditional academia and seek to
reinstate that environment, we are guilty of producing a universal cone of silence under
which privileged acts hide and classist barriers are maintained. However, there are some
researchers that break the ‘cone of silence’ like Brown (1995) and Delgado (2009) who
acknowledge the existence of privilege within HE that create barriers and exclusionary
environments for ‘other’ within mainstream HE institutions.
As an autoethnographer I sit within this exclusionary environment. I face the barriers on a daily basis and feel dismayed and exhausted. Kanuha (2008) explains the tensions autoethnographers face as they engage in insider research:

Therefore, the native researcher chooses not only a project in which she is deeply situated, whether by geography, tradition, or simply “inside” experience, but also one in which she is invested in those factors and others as they inform the “act” of research (p. 441).

The experience of being a first generation learner is my experience, it informs all of my personal and professional academic interactions. As a result of my lived experience in HE, the research is informed by my experiences, my insecurities, real and imagined. “I got my paper back and the professor commented that the postmark was not readable. I am not sure what the relevance of the comment was? It doesn't appear I lost any marks, and yet the comment is there, on my paper. Is this another hidden message, does it mean I am supposed to somehow make sure the post office makes a discernible postmark? I am lost in the covert messages found throughout this place. I just hope I can finish my BSW- why did I come back here?

A theme that has run throughout my efforts in HE as a FGL is “why did I come back here?” Every time I have taken a risk, opened up enough space within myself to get involved with HE again, I end up asking myself, why? I struggle with the unconscious messages thrown at me, informing me I am not enough, therefore I do not belong in HE. I do not believe them just enough that I keep on keeping on, and keep on torturing myself as I keep on making enough space to go to HE. The truth is I resent the fact that they lure
you in, pretend you are welcome, and then insidiously work to inculcate you with their meaning making and worldviews. I keep going back because I have the right to HE, I have the right to create a space that is not informed by poverty and so do all other FGLs.

**My Epistemology**

Daly (2007) encourages researchers to consider how meaning making, knowledge production and diverse worldviews affect their research. The way in which I make meaning, produce knowledge or understand reality, may not be the same as my classmates. How do you know what you know? What is real, what is not? As a result of Daly’s observations, researchers can connect their ways of knowing to the practical applications of everyday language and meaning making. Consequently, my meaning making is as important in this process as the research question.

I was lost, now I am found. I approach with trepidation, my experience in the undergraduate program was not very positive, I mean I survived, but some days it felt like I just got out with my sense of self intact. What was I doing here, again, sucker for self-punishment? I want to make a difference in my workplace and I feel like I am lacking the knowledge that educators have. I want to transform programs and environments so learners have spaces that feel safe. I want to feel safe; maybe I can do something for all of us? I want to understand how to transform processes and spaces so that we can identify what our students need, how to increase their persistence in a very difficult place. I guess I want to save someone some of the shame I still carry.

I walk into the classroom, everyone seems very pleasant. My first day, in my first graduate program. Whoa, I can’t believe I got in…. Our first discussion begins
and I know right away I am going to have trouble, what is discourse again? I can’t remember the difference between epistemology and ontology. Crap. Oh well, I am not shy anymore; I try to own my shame and be vulnerable in this place that has been unsafe for me in the past. I raise my hand, “excuse me, it’s been awhile since I’ve studied and my experience in HE has been a bit scattered. Would it be OK if we slowed down a bit, I don’t understand some of the concepts we are already covering.” The professor looks at me, “No problem, lets all agree to jump in whenever there is something we are not sure of.” I sigh a big sigh of relief, “Ok, can we start with discourse, I forgot what it refers to.” The young woman across from me smiles, “Thanks”, she mouths, “I was lost”

The longer I spent in HE, the more immune I became to fear. Fear to speak because an instructor or faculty member might feel like embarrassing me, fear to ask questions because my fellow students might think I’m stupid, fear that I just don’t belong. The older I got, the more I saw other students, other FGLs experiencing the same kinds of systemic barriers that I did, the braver I became. I come from a place that sticks together, no matter what. It is not okay for me to sit back and watch others struggle through the same shame, embarrassment and fear I experienced in HE. I knew I had to make space, to be the person who took risks, spoke up, and challenged norms, so that other FGLs might have a fighting chance of being heard, validated and respected. In light of my socialization, my understanding of learning as collaborative, I need to take a stance, it is important.

Guba and Lincoln (2008) investigate meaning making as they explore their understanding of important. They study language as a tool for understanding diverse
knowledge production. As a result the tensions Guba and Lincoln (2008) point to are very clear; what I understand as important, may be trivial to you. Moreover, you may not acknowledge what is important to me. Everyone has an epistemological stance that is unique to him or her. This tension creates limitations; the results are tainted by my ways of knowing and understanding of the research question. As a matter of fact, I needed a methodology that would embrace my epistemological stance, would make space for the importance of my research, and would honour my experience as a FGL.

**Methodology**

As a method, evocative autoethnography recognizes the diverse and unique way that individual and collective meaning making impacts perspectives and worldviews (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In order to understand how researchers participate in evocative autoethnography it is imperative to understand this methodology as one way to conduct qualitative research. Qualitative research supports a methodology that appreciates the need to identify the researchers worldview, knowledge production and meaning making in order to be clear about the research results (Creswell, 2007). Within an evocative autoethnography methodology the researcher’s position within the research question is central in understanding the outcomes implied within the research results (Ellis, 2007). As a result of situating the researcher’s meaning making within the research question the foundation of this methodology may be understood as a process of continuous self-reflexivity (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Evocative autoethnography, as an act of self-reflexive practices and is performed in the context of larger sociological concerns. It is a research methodology that demands I, the researcher, take ownership of the research question(s) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).
Furthermore, this research methodology is grounded in the researcher’s epistemology requiring the researcher to explore how we know what we know within the research. As a result of the implicit “I” in every methodological step in evocative autoethnography it becomes an imperative action to reflect on the researcher’s current and past experiences within HE, therefore personal diaries, communications and notes that contain reflections, narratives and experiences will be used as sources of data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). These personal communications will provide a foundation of personal experiences necessary in the methodology of evocative autoethnography and supports the observations of Ellis (2007):

As a genre of writing and research, autoethnography starts with personal experiences and studies “us” in relationships and situations. Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience (p.13).

Consequently, the “I” within this research will be prominent and represented by the researchers’ unique and individual voice.

The Data

The “I” represented in this evocative autoethnography is distinct and although evocative autoethnography employs a narrative approach; using stories throughout the text to delineate and highlight experiences, meaning making and knowledge production, the depth of “I” intertwined in the research distinguishes this evocative autoethnography from a narrative methodology. As Hamilton, Smith and Worthington (2008) explain, “Distinctions among methodological approaches rest in the depth of the reflexive
exploration and whether social and cultural issues emerge and, if so, how this takes place” (p. 22). Therefore the data in autoethnography are my stories. My stories live in my memories and often originate from Personal Journals (PJ) Comments on Academic Papers (CAP), Personal Communications including conversations, email, notes, letter (PC) and Official Messages like HE publications and letters (OM). I examined my contextualized, lived experience and found specific themes that emerged. These themes are related to privilege in HE, FGL identity and experiences within HE.
Chart 1: As an autoethnography my data is found within my stories. This charts depicts the source of some of my stories, my lived experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School (71-83)</th>
<th>First HE experience (84W)</th>
<th>CSW(88-90)</th>
<th>BSW (91-04)</th>
<th>M.Ed (06-08)</th>
<th>MSW Qualifying (201309)</th>
<th>MSW Qualified (201301)</th>
<th>Career (2000-present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PJ1</td>
<td>Personal Journals- PJ</td>
<td>Personal Communications- PC</td>
<td>BSc (91-04)</td>
<td>PJ4 First time for me</td>
<td>OM4 Policy class-have to repeat</td>
<td>PJ9 Other creating other</td>
<td>OM5 First academic appointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving again</td>
<td>1st class, smoking, talking big</td>
<td>PC1 Networking</td>
<td>PC2 Networking</td>
<td>PC4 I was lost, now I'm found</td>
<td>PC7 No credit for prior credit. You shouldn't have graduated</td>
<td>PC8 Assessment of students before they begin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PJ3 The neighbourhoods</th>
<th>PJ1 1st class, smoking, talking big</th>
<th>PC2 Networking</th>
<th>PC4 I was lost, now I'm found</th>
<th>PJ7 Orientation, purpose of</th>
<th>PJ10 The magic of being qualified</th>
<th>PC8 Assessment of students before they begin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Times Table</td>
<td>PJ3 Everybody has to line up</td>
<td>PC2 Networking</td>
<td>PC4 I was lost, now I'm found</td>
<td>PJ7 Orientation, purpose of</td>
<td>PJ10 The magic of being qualified</td>
<td>PC8 Assessment of students before they begin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ0 Moving out</td>
<td>OM2 Practicum Review- Am I finished?</td>
<td>PC3 You don't seem very engaged</td>
<td>PC6 I found myself_ Critical Theory</td>
<td>PC8 Becoming part of the hegemonic system</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gr.10 re-entry</td>
<td>CAP1- Not an academic paper, just an opinion 20%</td>
<td>PC5- Transformative learning and learning through trauma-life changing</td>
<td>PC6 I’m outta here- Colleague ready to quit</td>
<td>PC9- Who gets to belong? G vs me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not question the teaching</td>
<td>PJ13 No Invitation</td>
<td>OM3-job opportunity, need to complete the degree, tight timelines</td>
<td>CAP3- The comparison had I come a long way or was I just assimilated?</td>
<td>PJ10 Assimilation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grad Experience the classism</td>
<td>PJ14 Can’t Play the game</td>
<td>PJ12 Taking Care of Business</td>
<td>PC11 She will take care of it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OM0-Gr 12</th>
<th>PC12 Those students</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can’t Play the game</td>
<td>PC13 The exclusion of inclusion</td>
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</table>

**Key:**
- Personal Journals- PJ
- Comments on Academic Papers-CAP
- Personal Communications- PC
- Official Messages (publications, letters)-OM
Ellis (2007) comments “Auto-ethnographers tend to embed a story within a story, thereby providing a meta-narrative” (p. 26). Within the context of a meta-narrative this research explores my FGL experiences, represented by I in the text. The I story is expressed and written as first person reflections, memories and recollections. These thematic connections to the larger story regarding FGLs and their experiences in HE provide a critical reflection on the current literature in this research topic. As we undertake research it is important to consider where the researcher exists within the methodology and ontology of the research question. Pitts (2012) describes space, place and action within research:

This is the account of an experience that resulted in an understanding of the doing (the methodology) and the being (the ontology) of ethnography. Simply, we become ethnographers by doing ethnography (p. 1).

Furthermore, Pitts (2012) observations provide a framework to understand the auto in ethnographic pursuits. As autoethnographers engage in the confines of the research methodology, it is imperative that they find themselves within the actions of the research. Just as many researchers work to separate themselves from the research question and methodology, autoethnographers seek to fully place themselves within the research; therefore they become a pertinent piece of the methodology. Accordingly, the text within this evocative autoethnography:

uses an ethnographic wide-angle lens with a focus on the social and cultural aspects of the personal. This work reveals multiple layers of consciousness to understand self or some aspect of life lived in context. But there is always a look inward at the vulnerable self that is moved, refracted, and resisted during the
process. Researchers take different approaches within auto-ethnographies using short stories, fiction, narrative and more. (Hamilton, Smith & Worthington, 2008, p.24)

As a result of the breadth of approaches available within the methodology, the text includes current and past reflections on self as noted below.

Today we discussed transformative learning. It reminds me of the principles of Social Work. Teaching not just for content, teaching to provide people alternative ways to interpret and understand their situations. Covering a fellow named Paulo Freire-I have a feeling he is going to be very important to me, in trying to figure out why this place is so frustrating for me, while it leaves me feeling tired and at times pissed off. There seems to be shame in everything I attempt in HE. A lifetime of trying to fit in, trying to understand the social rules within worlds I know little about works to increase my sense of worthlessness and anxiety. It is difficult to understand the rules of this very privileged game. I fight the urge to just walk away and succumb to surroundings that I am familiar with. I think Paulo Freire would understand my struggle, what would he tell me as I struggle to keep going? Each day I encounter new ways that institutional and personal privilege screw other students and staff around. I feel like I’ve come through a war zone only to be walking in a minefield….I am tired of fighting a fight that consumes my days at work and my nights as a student. The journey into the Masters of Education program will be interesting, but I am scared.

Evocative autoethnography builds on the traditions and methodological approaches of ethnography and autoethnography yet it is distinctive in its purpose. The evocative
approach is purposeful, using language, symbols and narratives that work to evoke a response from the reader. As this evocative autoethnography delves into the world of privilege, power and systems that exclude groups of people from attaining HE, it is my hope that you will be brought to a space of reflexivity in determining your roles within this hegemonic system.

I send up a silent prayer, surely if people understood their roles in undermining learners they would find ways to change this power hungry system…wouldn’t they?

Moreover, as I attempt to understand my dual role within HE, survivor and oppressor, I use my unique way of meaning making to create a broader understanding of commonalities within my experience and those of other first generation attenders.

**Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

As a FGL I have experienced commonality and kinship with other FGLs in HE. It is easy for us to recognize each other, like an unseen beacon we reach out to each other as attempt to navigate HE. Alternatively, these commonalities must be put to the test. I must acknowledge my diverse ways of meaning making, my unique way of knowledge production, as I seek to understand and name the limitations of an evocative autoethnographic approach. Accordingly, autoethnography is limited by my way of knowing. I taint the results, just as the results have tainted me. This approach is painful and necessary. It is the only way I can conceptualize approaching this research question. I am a walking, living, breathing example of a first generation attender. My scars are real, born of oppressive practises that have negatively impacted my participation in HE for thirty years.
Engaging in oppression is not the goal of evocative autoethnographers. The limitations to this methodology and epistemology are the same factors that make it the only pathway I can engage in. It is messy, polluted with the researcher’s imagery, ontology and ways of knowing. Creswell, (2007) describes a variety of other methodologies that understand research as a process that removes most of the researcher from the research. My ontological knowing does not support empirical findings or research that has attempted to remove me from my insider, reflexive position. I understand my circular way of knowing creates tensions in a Eurocentric linear model of meaning making, and I am alright with that reality. However, evocative autoethnography is guilty of compromising the empirical understandings that have informed research methodologies since the beginning of time, just as I seek to compromise the story HE has fed citizens for decades. As a result of naming privilege within HE, I put myself on display, I am a FGL, I am ‘other’.

Beatty (2010) describes the difficult position ethnographers encounter when faced with their own meaning making:

But there is another reason for sounding this sceptical note, and it has less to do with how we report than how we feel. In the field, one of the last things we come to understand is other people’s emotion, and it takes a good deal of experience to begin to relate to our hosts in an emotionally sophisticated way. This is not just because it takes time to learn the idiom of emotion but also because our knowledge of characters and interwoven histories is very slowly constructed. More than this, we ourselves have undergone a transformation. (p. 440)

As autoethnographers represent the main participant within their research question,
the divide between what is true and what is tainted by perception becomes blurred. Furthermore, my story, researcher as central subject, is hampered by the confines of confidentiality. My story is not just my story. The characters involved are identifiable, called out to central stage by every experience I share. If I was engaged in a different methodology I might believe that the exploration of the research question could happen in a sterile environment, not influenced by the researcher and therefore my story’s characters would be safe from prying eyes. The need to acknowledge and protect the identities of those that share my history hampers my ability to present relevant data that originates within my micro system. I contemplated interviewing myself, answering and coding my own interview. Perhaps this would lead to a transformative experience in my understanding and knowledge production, however my story is shared by many and their meaning making, memory and knowledge production could be very different from mine. Moreover, Ellis (2007) encourages caution as she notes:

An important element in writing autoethnography then is considering the ethical responses to one’s own story by readers. A second is considering the people in your life who might be distressed by your revelations (p.22).

Consequently, I strived to keep the narratives within my research as anonymous as possible and written purely in the I.

I understand the narratives that are produced within this research are uniquely tied to my own meaning making. As participant and professional within HE I have stood on both sides of the tracks that separate the have from the have nots. Within this text I have primarily experienced HE as other, yet I have experienced privilege and power in HE as well.
I remember the event with horror and shame. We were sitting in class and sharing what our research question was. I took my turn and intently listened to the others. This was my pattern; I picked up relational clues from the other participants, trying to come to a better understanding of what was expected of me. After I shared my research questions, the woman next to me looked at me and asked the professor if this was the level she was expected to be at? At first I didn’t understand her comment, was I too simple? And then it slowly dawned on me; I had spoken in the language I reserved for my work place at a University. She was having a difficult time understanding the concepts I had just put forward. My second graduate degree, have I forgotten who I am, I am afraid I will lose my ways of knowing. I felt sick to my stomach as I realised I had unconsciously created a relationship barrier. Did I speak these words unknowingly? Or was I using language to create a distinction between myself and the rest of the class? I thought I might throw-up. Knowledge seeker had just become an other.

If I am a FGL and I work at a university, does this magically solve any difficulty I might have in understanding HE’s environment, unspoken expectations, privileged language or traditions? There are so many painful and difficult questions to seek answers for in HE. On the other hand, I am a person who enjoys identifying problems and generating solutions. But the barriers and problems within HE seem too big to tackle.

What is the experience of FGLs in HE? What relationship exists between privilege and FGLs’ experience in HE? How is the relationship framed? Sustained? What are the implications for practise? These questions seem intimate, connected to not only systems...
but my way of knowing and meaning making, my identity. Does my experience and belief in the merits of education change my identity as a FGL? I have been situated at this University for almost five years, prior to that, I worked within higher education for over ten years, these positions did not provide an escape from my otherness. There are many things I still grapple with. Perhaps I am just too dense to really understand what the purpose of HE is? I worry that HE is actually a separate universe in which I do not belong, have accidently been granted access to and will any day be found out and escorted off of. Furthermore, I am beginning to think that my identification as problem and solution is an identity that many FGLs contend with as they wait to be escorted back to their own universe.
Chapter 3 What Do I Know?

Identity

Within HE exists a secret society. Those learners who have the key understand the way to dress, participate, compete, and have resources that support their educational pursuits. FGLs land in HE on a mother ship that does not provide any instructions, interpretations or ways to engage in education that is not Eurocentric, privileged and linear. HE is a clear characterization of a place and space that identifies with middle class norms and promotes privilege as the standard. FGLs are seen as students who need to ‘attain’ cultural capital, who struggle to find their identity within HE due to their own deficits and low SES standing. As FGLs navigate the systemic barriers and divide between those ‘who have’ and those ‘have not’. they are forced to make a decision, fake it and fit in or remain as other. As FGLs attempt to understand their identity within HE the tension between what is important and what is not becomes stronger. Yosso (2005) describes these tensions and norms as:

White, middle class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of ‘culture’ are judged in comparison to this ‘norm’. In other words, cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society difficulties (p.75).

As a result of HE’s normalised standard of middle class culture as the benchmark for success within HE, I have struggled with my identity, my sense of self and worthiness. I was certain that any failure, perceived or real, was entirely my fault. I just wasn't enough.

I’m having a hard time catching my breath. Today we get our papers back. I am excited. My first opinion paper in university, a discussion in writing. I really
enjoyed writing the paper, the topic was very interesting and writing it made me just think harder about what I want to do, how this is the step that will help us make a better life. We line up to get them, I grab mine and as much as my pregnant belly allows, run out the door, I want to see the comments, see the mark!

I find a bench to sit on and start to go through the pages. The first thing I see is: 20%, with a comment, “It is obvious you do not understand the structure of an academic paper. You have only provided your opinion, no reference to any research. You can consider weighting your final exam to exclude this paper, let me know so I can make a note of your decision.” I just want to throw up. My first university class experience is a glaring example of my otherness.

After I received my first post-secondary academic paper back I called the admission office to ask about withdrawing. They explained that it was too late in the term and I should finish the class or receive a fail. I did not really understand the feedback on the paper or what I did wrong. I read the instructions for the paper over and over again. I still cannot figure out where I went wrong. I feel ashamed and stupid. Three weeks go by and I finally approach another student and ask her if she has time for a coffee, I will buy! We go to a local coffee shop and make small talk for a while. I note she appears comfortable in the class and wonder how she was doing? My suspicions are confirmed. She is doing well. I swallow my pride and ask her if she would help me? I could pay her for her time, like a tutor. She agrees and I show her my paper. She explains what I did wrong and tells me all papers will require attachment to research. I ask if she understands what the professor wants me to do. She recommends I write him a note and leave it in his
mailbox telling him I want all of my marks to be weighted on my final exam. I thank her and hand her $10. She tries to refuse, but I insist. We part ways and I NEVER speak to her again. She is just too big of a reminder that I don't belong here. I am embarrassed and ashamed; I’ve just started my university journey and have already failed.

As I travel into the foreign lands of HE I become a good observer. I note how others dress and present themselves. I can, on the outside, fit in. I am good at observing and avoiding detection if need be, HE has provided many opportunities for me to practise this false self. However, I cannot and will not leave behind who I really am. I may be stuck in the middle, looking like I belong, but I will never give up my ways of meaning making and knowledge production, this worldview defines my identity, it is who I am.
Figure 7: Stuck in the middle, looking like I belong, knowing I don’t belong
As a result of the systemic expectation of students to know what the academic and social norms are in HE, I, as an FGL, am left with a shifting identity. I used to think I was resilient, hard working and intelligent. HE has repeatedly provided me with another picture, one that speaks of my work ethic as not enough and my intelligence as deficient. I have learned to avoid rather than to engage in HE. Accordingly, Clegg (2011) advances this argument as she theorizes that first generation students compete against capitals (i.e. economic, cultural, social) that are used to provide access for epistemic curriculum knowledge based on privileged norms. Furthermore, this hidden epistemic knowledge clearly situates those that live outside of privileged norms as other.

**Other**

There are many ways in which HE is structured to position FGLs as other. HE’s norms, practises and culture privilege students who already exist within a privileged space. Full time studies, that primarily occur within daylight hours, during the workweek is one example of how HE invests resources structurally. Timetabling this way assumes students can study full time, throughout the work week. As a FGL this was not my reality. I often felt different, on the fringe. I worked full time and took classes in the evening, on weekends and by distance. My course selections were limited as the offerings were limited outside of ‘regular hours’. I sought out alternative ways, like distance courses, to complete my requirements. HE instructors and administrators often framed my academic choices as an attempt to avoid getting fully involved within the Faculty, when in reality, I was just trying to survive. I was pregnant at eighteen and although I probably was not the only pregnant person in the institution, I felt like I was. I could not afford to buy any extra texts or resources recommended by professors, I didn't
have access to technology and was very unsure of the processes of the university. The few times I tried to study in the library I had to take my children with me which rarely turned out well. I often encountered faculty and student opinions that clearly told me the university was not a place for children, yet my options were limited; I could either bring my children with me or forfeit going to HE. As a matter of fact, Naidoo’s (2004) research portrays this experience as “a `relay' in that it reproduces the principles of social class and other forms of domination under the cloak of academic neutrality” (p. 460). As I worked toward trying to find enough space within myself as well as a safe space within the system to achieve post secondary credentials, I kept bumping up against policies, structures and methodologies that made it more and more difficult to succeed. I did not have the resources HE demanded of me. That is to say, I was not born into the dominant class for which HE was built.

Poverty is a circumstance that primarily targets citizens who exist outside of the dominant groups’ normative framework. It is noteworthy to call attention to the purposeful use of the phrase, ‘poverty is a circumstance’. I did not ask to be born into a family that existed within the walls of poverty, nor did I choose to live in poverty. Poverty is insidious in its grip. There are never enough resources to sustain a healthy lifestyle. Food, medicine, appropriate clothing, safe housing, education all cost money; the result of poverty is marginalization as we struggle to pull ourselves out of a cyclic and dangerous place. As a result of the effects of poverty there are citizens that have been side-lined and placed in the category of ‘other’. Dominant worldviews have created and sustained identities of those that fit within the margins of society and those that do not. The insistence of dominant groups to create and sustain the place and identity of
‘other’ has resulted in a lack of equitable access to privilege within HE. Frank (2005) discusses the consequences of normative identity production:

Two pieces of information about the not-margin majority can be inferred. First there is a definitional set relative to itself of persons or groups who are on the margin, which allows recognition by those within the margin of those outside the margin, and this is information that can be sought out and consulted. Second, those who are within the margin have as a group a shared view that one can be outside the margin. It could be argued that both of these pieces of information already tell us more about the “them” than the “not them,” informing us little about those who are marginalized, unless we are willing to understand a great deal more about those who are not. (p.41)

Similarly, my status as ‘not them’ as depicted by Frank (2005) has left me in a place where I have always felt that my otherness was apparent to those privileged people and systems that surrounded me. As a student, my ways of meaning making and knowledge production have been discounted in HE. It was only when I discovered how to use my lower SES experiences, my experience as an FGL and cultural understanding of ‘other’ within my meaning making did HE begin to see me as a commodity. My ‘otherness’ as a professional within HE was framed as a form of expertise within a venue that not many academics understood. I understood how to deal with those programs, curriculums and students that fell outside of the middle class norms that sustained HE’s systemic place and space. I became the person within HE that could deal with the day-to-day realities of FGLs, as they experienced marginalization and were kept on the fringe of HE. In particular, I have tried to become the voice of FGLs, not allowing privilege and
classist systems to be the only influences in HE.

**Privilege**

Evans (2007) notes the white privilege prevalent within HE:

In Academe— as in other labor arenas— women, poor people, and people of color have generated institutional wealth enjoyed by those (white and male) who don’t recognize their unearned privilege and status (p.133).

Further to Evans’ observations, I see HE as a modern day system of oppression as it perpetuates a system that was built to privilege students who enjoy an upper class socio economic status. Even though I had found ways to infiltrate HE, I knew I remained on HE’s dominant fringe. Furthermore, my world was different from the dominant class, and I had no intention of shifting my identity into someone or something I wasn’t.

Excellent analysis, 87%. My first paper in the Masters of Education program.

Imagine, me in graduate studies. It was a far cry from the 20% I received on my first university paper. My attempts to infiltrate HE were working. I no longer had to scrounge nickels to photocopy articles in the library. My kids were old enough that I could go to the university at night and access the library and I had become better at talking to professors, although I still felt very uncomfortable if they called on me rather than giving me a chance to volunteer an observation. I was not into competing or debating. MY FAMILY WAS THRIVING and this gave me more confidence to stay in this foreign world of HE. Funny though, I still didn't feel like I was a part of HE. Despite HE’s attempt to shift my priorities I still had family and community responsibilities that took precedence before studies. I still existed on the fringe, but because my own economic status had slowly increased it wasn't
as apparent. HE felt like a luxury. I’m not sure if I am truly a part of HE, have been assimilated or am I just pretending…for today I’m just relieved I’m doing OK.

Equally important to my experiences within HE is my connection to the field of social work. As I move forward in my professional and educational pursuits I continue to try to identify, understand and unravel the systemic barriers that exist within HE.

**Barriers**

In order for social workers to move ahead with a social justice agenda that addresses systemic barriers, they must be able to address barriers that exist because of inequitable access to society’s resources. As evidenced throughout this inquiry, HE is a system that is built on privilege, exists within privilege and supports the advancement of privilege.

I received a letter telling me I had to complete a policy class in order for the rest of my application to be processed for the MSW. But I took a policy class already…I remember it clearly because it changed the way I understood consumer choices and the relation to larger social policy. It was even one of the times I got to participate in informal advocacy as we organised an event for one of the governmental ministers to hear our concerns. I checked out my options, inquiring with the Faculty as to why this class was no longer accepted. The answer: sorry this class was not even on the books anymore. I am confused, the classes that make up my Certificate all count towards my Baccalaureate, including the policy class. I have a paper, course outline and will readily discuss the class content, but the answer remains no. Another barrier. Now I must take another class, pay another fee, spend extra time in order to enter into the MSW. I am left wondering once again, what’s
the purpose of this requirement in the face of prior work and credit received? Why am I being financially and personally penalized in order to participate in this program? The start of my Masters of Social Work is not looking like it supports non sequential learners…I wonder how many other students in my cohort come from marginalized backgrounds? Are still struggling to fit in, catch up, understand opportunities and respond to them? I am discouraged before I even get to officially start the program.

As I advanced through HE I was forced to take time off as I looked after financial and family duties. The inability to sequentially progress from one level of HE to another created systemic barriers resulting in additional time and effort to complete changing program requirements. Consequently, barriers are imbedded within all levels of HE. I recognize that programs change, accreditation standards shift and if programs do not carefully think out procedural biases or provide an appeal system to address inequities then privileged students will, once again, be privileged. As students are able to attend school sequentially, complete programs within a defined parameter and are more likely to not have to complete additional requirements, they increase their privilege. The absence of a clearly defined appeal system leaves FGL students at a disadvantage. As Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke (2011) examine FGLs and their understanding of HE’s unwritten curriculum, otherwise known as middle class norms, it is apparent that FGLs are less likely to challenge HE academic decisions. The lack of a formal system to appeal transfer credit, prerequisites and curricula decisions results in retaking a policy class that cost time and money. Furthermore, because I had taken a policy class through the Faculty of Social Work before, and had spent several years working with policy in
professional settings, the additional requirement did little in furthering my preparation for graduate studies. Also, after completing the policy class requirement, which moved my application into the ‘qualified’ category for the MSW program, I was informed that because I had graduated from my previous graduate program I would not be able to use any of my courses within the MSW program. As each course taken requires time and economic resources to participate in, the additional requirements produce a systemic barrier that impacts all students. I was having a hard time understanding what graduating from one program had to do with meeting the learning outcomes from another. In essence, if I had not applied to graduate from my first program and went into the MSW program, I would have been granted credit and saved money and time. Once again, I was left with a sense that I would never understand HE. The policy made no sense to me and I was having a hard time justifying to myself and my family the extra resources required to participate in this program. Once again, as a FGL, HE’s barriers make a significant impact on my sense of place, belonging and ability to participate in HE. I was continually placed in the role of ‘other’. Accordingly, Thomas (2002) suggests that HE should step up and consider the negative impact institutional processes and policies have on FGL’s ability to be successful and as a call to action queries, “In what ways can institutions support non-traditional students to succeed?” (p.425)
Chapter 4 First Generation Attenders in Higher Education

As a professional within HE I have questioned HE’s processes, policies, values and judgements. I understand HE as a potential opportunity to engage in formal learning that may result in acquiring post secondary credentials. I also acknowledge that HE creates and sustains a system that “acts as the primary institution through which class order is maintained” (Thomas, 2002 p. 431). Conceptually, HE is a way for citizens from all economic classes to achieve formal credentials. A university degree should provide an unbiased opportunity for students to achieve a better way of life for themselves, their families and communities. As such, HE ought to support a place and space for all students to safely participate in knowledge production that yields economic and cultural prospects. In reality, some students are rewarded with access to HE and supported to achieve within HE, this is not the experience of many others.

Privilege, a Tool for Shaming

Firstly, I believed the only way I could change the future for my family was to enter HE. A university credential led to the only jobs I could identify that paid more than minimum wage. I kept coming back to HE because I wanted my family and community to thrive. I didn't believe privileged norms were necessary to share meaning making and cultivate knowledge. However, I am growing tired of these tensions, what should I trust?

Unfortunately, the people I knew that had participated in HE (teachers and social workers) were not people I trusted. I returned to high school at the age of 16, hoping that my future could hold something other than poverty. My experience within the education system continued to provide a foundation of shame and embarrassment as I was
questioned, punished and shamed for my lifestyle, responsibilities, ways of meaning making and ontological understandings.

The interesting truth here is the way these people think they know everything. As I prepare to re enter high school I am subjected to another firing squad of questions. Ratatatatat, it never stops. They go to school for a little bit and now they know everything about my family, about me. Who do they think they are judging us as they sit in their houses full of stuff we can only imagine? They know nothing of my reality.

I found no solace or hope in the way professional people treated me (or those I knew) as a young person. Furthermore, my teachers and social workers described me as bright but disruptive, often shaming me for my ways of meaning making. But, in spite of my misgivings I applied to and was accepted into the University of Regina in the winter of 1984.

In the hope that HE would provide a way to improve my life, I made a commitment to take risks and work hard. I was pregnant with my first child, working full time and had registered for a university course. I had never been to a university and I didn't have a personal relationship with anyone that had completed university courses. I thought HE would be different from secondary school in that I would be as valued and wanted as any other student. I dreamt HE would be a great equalizer, like a golden staircase leading me to the land of opportunity. Correspondingly, Black, Devereaux and Salvanes (2005) indicate, “One of the key roles of publicly provided education in our society is to increase equity of opportunity”(p.437).
I wanted a different life for my children. I wanted better living conditions; I wanted them to feel proud; I wanted them to have every opportunity that life could offer. The birth of my first child drove home further feelings of living on the fringe. I wanted to enact a story that would make my family appear as though we belonged in the ranks of the middle class. Moreover, I saw HE as a way to achieve a place within this privileged society while gaining a higher economic status, but I soon found out that the culture and systems of HE would not make that easy for me.
It’s a boy

Kelly and Sheryl are pleased to announce the arrival of their first born, a boy. James William Prouse, on April 17, 1984. James weighed 8 lbs. and 6 oz. and was 21” long. Many thanks to the maternity staff at the General Hospital.

Figure 8: The need to belong becomes stronger
The challenges for FGLs in HE can be subtle and insidious. Firstly, HE sustains hegemonic systems that endorse dominant classism. The culture of HE and academia often acts as a cloak that suffocates the peoples’ voice. Secondly, many HE institutions are steeped in traditions that were founded to reward and honour the upper classes. This is problematic for first generation attenders as Martin (2012) discloses, “Due to an imperfect relationship between the distribution of cultural and economic capital, schools can reward dominant class origins and still appear to uphold meritocratic values” (p. 430). Thirdly, my fear, lack of support and inexperience with dominant class environments silenced my academic voice. Consequently, I felt like an outsider and struggled to find a place in HE that felt productive, worthwhile and safe.

**Otherness Amplified**

Prior to attending HE I almost always felt like I fit within my peer groups. My family of origin was very transient and I moved many times throughout childhood. Although I experienced many environmental changes I suffered no damaging lasting effects. The majority of my friends and classmates were from low to working class socio economic backgrounds. I was always fairly resilient and found ways to thrive in the midst of change and chaos. This resiliency created a veil through which I struggled to understand that my knowledge production and meaning making were worlds away from the privileged, Eurocentric thoughts of HE. The incongruences of my experiences left me exhausted.

My new persona of ‘other’ began to solidify the more I participated in HE. I experienced isolation and alienation while trying to comprehend the structure and culture of HE. My ‘otherness’ began to harden and I started to wonder about the true function of
HE. I began to see this once golden stairway to economic prosperity, as a way to shackle me to my lower class beginnings. As a result of these negative experiences I approached HE with trepidation and anxiety and continued to relive experiences of shame, isolation and ‘otherness’.

By and large, I have lost count of my tears and remain unsure of what to do next in this foreign world of academia. As a result of trying to understand my own value within HE I have chosen to use a methodology that requires reliving shame, embarrassment and otherness. Consequently, my experiences within HE have amplified my otherness within my contextualised ideologies and epistemologies of what is valid within autoethnography. I have identified my space and place within HE as other. Using autoethnography as my research methodology has increased my sense of otherness and amplified my sense of being on the fringe. Pearce (2008) discusses the label of autoethnography, the actions of bearing your personal story for research and the subsequent consequences:

The demands of this label were becoming an overwhelming burden that led to feelings of inadequacy, compounded by the struggle I had in reconciling the growing gulf between the reality of my feelings and behaviours and the resilient self through which I would engage with others outside. The feeling of guilt and shame I felt inhibited me further from speaking out about my true feelings. In truth I was falling apart; I wanted to give up (p.15).

As I explore my identity as an FGL, it is becoming clear that many people experience the metamorphosis into ‘otherness’. As a result of constantly feeling
misplaced, an imposter within the institution, I became terrified of being called on by my professors.

They call you out, a continuous stream of questions; poking, probing, reminds me of a machine gun. I am under fire, ratatatatat, each shot increases my anxiety, displaces my soul and energy. I do not want to lead here. I do not want to be singled out. I had hoped a graduate program full of helping professional, full of my Social Work peers, would be kinder, softer and more open to other ways of knowing, meaning making. My shame is obvious. I don’t belong here. I want to fade into the drywall. I am afraid, once again it is clear, I am ‘other’.

Higher Education, Opportunity or Oppression?

My personal experience entering University was as an FGL. The parental educational attainment in our household was less than a complete grade 12. The ‘Ivory Tower’ (Miranda, 2003) as universities are often referred to, felt more like an open stage where my ignorance, class, and uninformed approaches were on display for all to see and judge. Notably, the feelings of displacement I experienced in HE have also been described by Barry, Cho, Hudley, and Kelly (2009), Braswell, (2010) and Dumais and Ward (2010) as a common experience for FGLs. The perception of displacement FGLs experience has been theorised to originate from identification with a social class that has been traditionally excluded from HE (Evans, 2009; Wilson & Kittleson, 2013). As a result, the privileged classes continue to be provided with advantages that support HE’s classist approach.

According to Giroux (2014) there have been historical tensions between the dominant class in HE and other citizens who have sought participation within HE since
the beginning of HE. Academia, as a system, is poised to provide access to a formalized pathway of knowledge production. In our current space of neoliberalism, outcome and economic based systems of privilege exclude other ways of meaning making, effectively shutting out citizens that have no connection to the dominant class. Accordingly, Giroux (2014) notes,

Instead they voice their support for what may be called gated or border pedagogy—one that establishes those populations considered disposable, and renders invisible young people, especially poor youth of color, along with others marginalised by class and race (p.89)

For the purpose of justifying HE’s failure to engage in diverse ways of meaning making and knowledge production HE has created an understanding of citizens who are other.

**Cultural Capital, Another Way to Create Other**

Today I started a university class. It was scary, I wasn't sure were to go, what to do. Everyone seemed so strange to me, like walking into another land of which I had no knowledge. At first several people stood around smoking, in the building! And when the professor showed up, he also smoked, while he discussed the class with us. I felt like there was an unspoken language, which I didn't have a key to. They spoke in ways I didn't understand, referred to things I am unsure about. I hope I can learn these things; I will try hard to fit in baby, to make something of myself so you have all the things a child should have.

My first formative experience with HE was in a large psychology course. The professor addressed us in a way that implied familiarity with processes, regulations and a
unified sense of meaning making. There were intimations of the right and wrong ways to complete assignments, participate in discussions and study for exams, yet these ways of knowing were never made explicit. At the time I had no idea what was going on. I listened intently, read all of my materials and faithfully attended lectures. I didn't understand that adjacent to my attempts at HE existed a classist system that privileged some and denied others. Consequently, HE frames these other citizens as being deficient, lacking in economic privilege and knowledge of academia’s cultural practices. This deficit framing of other has been justified within academia by the creation and support of a concept known as cultural or social capital. For the purposes of this discussion cultural and social will be used interchangeably as it appears in the literature as similar concepts. Cultural or social capital, as promoted by academics like Mehta et al (2011) intimates that citizens who enter HE with diverse ways of knowing and meaning making must be assimilated to the ways of HE in order to be academically successful. Examples of social capital found in Mehta et al (2011) and Tonkaboni, Yousefy, and Keshtiaray (2013) support the notion of social capital as something first generation attenders are deficient in and therefore need to strive towards. I did not enter HE with the understanding of middle class norms; HE and a higher SES was a dream, not an expectation. I had no idea that you should speak to your professors. In my worldview they were knowledge keepers and should be listened to, not challenged. My speech patterns, clothing and lifestyle all provided clues to my ‘outsider’ status; I did not have the resources to participate in extra curricular activities. These signposts spotlighted me within an HE as an outsider. The idea of social capital supports and informs HE, acting as a disguise for the inherent systemic and institutional barriers found in HE. This
culture of privilege is found throughout HE and is ensconced in the ways knowledge is produced which in turn promotes and supports classism and sustains inequities. With this in mind, HE’s framing and understanding of social and cultural capital requires further investigation.

**Lived Experience: Privilege, Barriers and Identity**

As a consequence of my lived experience within HE, I have fought against tensions that threaten my ability to participate within HE systems that are built for students who have been raised in a privileged higher socio economic culture. That is to say, autoethnography supports inquiry into HE classist practices that work towards the exclusion of diverse ways of knowing and knowledge production. My lived experience should not be a barrier to participating in HE, to success within HE, yet after a certificate, a degree, a graduate degree and completing a second graduate degree I find myself still questioning my space and place within the HE. I seek a way to belong within the confines of HE’s systems. As I write, reflect and complete this work I too feel as though I have bared enough of my story, shared enough of my soul. I want others to shout with me, to validate my experience, pain and struggles within HE. Evocative autoethnography provides the space for discourse that evokes an emotional response (Ellis, 1997). I want you to respond to my stories, research and critique of HE. I want you to see my story, my memories and pictures as a representation of my experiences that transcends me and pulls you, the reader, into this story. See yourself here; what is your place, position, and role? By offering an evocative response you honour my work, by making the time and effort required to evoke an emotional reaction to my action you
validate my story. In order to engage in this research methodology I am open to self-reflectivity, opening up old wounds and picking at the scabs that cover my shame, fear and ‘otherness’.
Figure 9: Transparencies, my otherness revealed
Mykhalovskiy, Armstrong, Armstrong, Bourgeault, Choiniere, Lexchin and White (2008) describe the necessity of developing an immanent critique of one’s approach. In engaging in autoethnography, I am committing myself to a self-reflexive approach (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and have taken steps to challenge HE’s systemic barriers that are founded on white privilege. This approach includes revealing the false story of who belongs in HE, who will succeed in HE, and what comprises a quality student. This critique is central to the discourse that attempts to reveal and fight against classist barriers in HE:

Disrupting dominant structures of knowledge is a practice typically associated with poststructuralism/postmodernism. Drawing on a different relationship to truth telling, our work suggests how the critique of authoritative claims can broaden public debate (p. 202).

As the result of a growing, collective voice that is dissatisfied with the biased and privileged culture HE operates within, some institutions have introduced reform initiatives. The University of Saskatchewan Transition Program (University of Saskatchewan, 2015) offers students who do not meet admission averages a chance to attend university as long as they adhere to an attendance policy and attend mandatory academic coaching sessions. Similarly, the University of Winnipeg (University of Winnipeg, 2015) has holistic programs that try to help Aboriginal Students align their knowledge and meaning making with HE in order to increase their chances of success. These initiatives include processes and programs meant to provide access to students who would not have traditionally gained access to HE. The processes and services are designed to increase the ‘social capital’ of students who do not ‘fit in’ to mainstream
academia. Many, if not all of these programs do not address the systemic barriers within HE such as an emphasis on full time, day time study that informs staff and professor availability, class, and exam schedules, and therefore works towards supporting a system that is already pungent with racism, classism and gender biases. In the long run, any attempt to open up HE to all citizens must include a transparent examination of the inherent injustices and inequities that exist within HE. Furthermore, Mykhalovskiy et al (2008) encourage society, administrators, educators and policy makers to acknowledge the foundational claims that influence and sustain the current systems of privilege in HE. In order to truly begin to name the systems of privilege that HE creates and sustains we must first challenge the voice that defends these systems. The HE norms that inform policies, regulations, curricular efforts, teaching methodologies, evaluation processes, essentially the right and wrong way to do academia are steeped in privilege. If you expect to go to HE, have the resources that make that possible, understand education as a competitive process and yourself as a member of the institution you enact middle class norms. Programs are built to inculcate students to understand and follow those middle class norms.

As noted above, HE’s reform to include other classes and cultures of people that exist outside of the dominant space are based on a model of assimilation to the norms of the institution (University of Winnipeg, 2015). There is no effort to explore the true nature of the problem; HE supports and defends a classist system that ‘other’ must find a way to fit into. I constantly felt like someone was trying to meld me into something different. Under those circumstances, I began to name my academic space and place and found that mainstream academia used my positionality as a way to exclude and isolate
me. My student experience within HE was informed by my socio economic and community status. I was a mother with extended familial responsibilities, working full time and attempting to take classes. I did not fit the institution’s strategic enrolment goals as a ‘good’ student and as a result found myself an outsider within my faculty of study. I started university over thirty years ago and I have noted that the conversation surrounding diversity and education has become more vocal, I hear academics discuss the need for opening up HE’s doors to other types of students because it is the right thing to do, however, the underlying barriers remain. There is no examination of the middle class norms, classist approaches and hegemonic pedagogies that inform all aspects of HE. Moreover the systemic barriers created through HE’s norms creates a system that not only discourages FGLs, it builds a wall of unanswered pleas for equity within HE. With this in mind, FGL forge ahead, trying to find enough space so that they may occupy meaningful space within HE

**Higher Education, Another World?**

There were many sacrifices my family had to make in order for me to attend HE. In as much as Canadian universities are financially subsidized, tuition is still expensive. To attend HE I needed to save enough money for tuition and books. I also required time to attend class, go to the library, read and write papers. I could not afford to pay for full time study and it was not culturally acceptable for me to leave my children with babysitters to attend HE. As a result of my space and place I struggled to find the time, financial resources and emotional support to attend HE.

I started HE eager to learn about social work. Although I had to struggle to put sufficient resources in place in order to attend class, I was excited to begin this new
chapter of my life. Unfortunately, I didn't understand the influence privilege within academia would have on my studies and HE experiences. Almost everything in the university environment was different than my previous involvement with education. Although I diligently attended classes, listened to my professors, took copious amounts of notes, read the texts and did my assignments, I struggled with some of the attitudes, conversations, language and symbolism I encountered in HE. I started HE thinking I was going to be trained to provide professional human services. In reality, I found barriers and judgements. More than one professor told me I needed to find more time for my studies, reminded me that I worked too much and suggested I take a break from school until my children were older. Consequently, I watched myself slide into ‘other’, quickly recognising the foundation of HE that was singularly supportive of students who were privileged enough to attend studies without other distractions.

I made the grades, I passed the classes, I worked my butt off to feed my family, study, research, and learn. At the end of the day they didn't want me to stay, told me I just didn't know how to play. As I completed my Certificate of Social Work I had no idea I would come back to HE. I just wanted to be out, to be finished, I felt alienated from the entire system and my Otherness is solidly burned in my brain.

Just as HE preserves advantages for a dominant, privileged class, the hegemonic HE system also promotes and sustains a stigmatised identity in lower economic status students. Johnson, Richeson and Finkel (2011) along with Milner (2013) note how it is, “…imperative to understand how the influence of social identities persists after individuals arrive in these environments” (p. 850). In the final analysis, the importance of understanding HE’s culture and identity is just as important as understanding the
student’s social identity. Consequently, naming HE’s privilege is the only way to gauge the negative impact HE imposes on the FGL’s social identity.

Another Side of the Story

There are scholars that hypothesize that FGL failures in HE are a direct result of the FGL’s lack of social engagement within HE. Pike and Kuk (2005) studied the failure of FGL within HE and discounted HE’s systemic barriers, positing that first generation attenders need to get more actively involved in the college experiences. Instead of social capital or systemic barriers, Pike and Kuk (2005) conclude that first generation attenders are not engaged in the overall cultural experience of HE:

Specifically, first-generation students were less engaged overall and less likely to successfully integrate diverse college experiences; they perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development (p. 290).

Although Pike and Kuk’s (2005) observations may ring true, it is important to realize this rationalization offers no examination of HE’s institutional processes that are built and sustained on privilege. HE’s foundation creates and maintains discriminatory practises that favour students who have financial resources, institutional support, education capital and academic social connections (Stephens et al, 2012). Within this context Abeles (2005) expresses concern that:

A multicultural perspective, which tries to build a balanced worldview, represents a significantly different concept than what the intellectual ecology was in the past. In fact, it alters, in many cases the purpose of the university (p. 196).
Accordingly, if HE begins to name and challenge all HE systems that sustain privilege, a cultural shift towards the purpose of HE, can begin. As a result of this examination, the pedagogy of education and HE’s connections to social and political systems would all be exposed, open to analysis.

In light of the current literature that identifies systemic barriers FGLs face within HE the discourse should conclude that an overhaul of HE’s hegemonic systems is in order. Unfortunately, this is not the conclusion drawn by much of the first generation attender literature. The discourse centers on first generation attenders’ lack of social capital, as evidenced by the writings of Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004), Shepler and Woosley (2011) and Gaston, Wolinsky, and Bohleber (1976). These scholars frame first generation attenders’ lack of success as a symptom of their need for social capital. To that end, much of the current research fails to address the effect systemic barriers have on FGLs’ ability to participate in HE. The issues affecting retention rates and academic success for first generation attenders are seen as a lack of academic acculturation for these students. HE’s system and practises disguise barriers as parts of academia’s ‘culture’. Furthermore, these systemic barriers disguised as culture, construct an image that depicts first generation attenders as being deficient and at fault for failures. In essence, HE provides programs for first generation attenders that attempts to shift their meaning making and knowledge production in order to accommodate HE’s Eurocentric classist approach. (Martin, 2012; Milner, 2013 & Naidoo 2004)

The tensions created by knowledge production within differing worldviews, i.e. “academic culture ” and those that fall outside of this norm, is recognised by Rubin (2012), “In particular, this approach should inform discussions about whether the
integration of working-class students should occur by assimilating individuals, transforming institutions, or both” (p. 32).

As such, HE must be willing to endorse and participate in a significant change process before any claims of inclusivity can be made. A genuine commitment that acknowledges and names the privileged, classist approaches to academia would provide a foundation to build regulations, processes, policies and pedagogies that support diverse way of meaning making and knowledge production. Challenging HE’s privileged norms requires champions that will sustain a consistent conversation that evolves into a historical narrative and new normative culture of learning. This work cannot be a light brushing off of the surface. As an example, I recently participated in a discussion about diversity and inclusion within HE. One of the illustrations shared was by a faculty member who claimed that their classroom was always centred on challenging the norms and inviting equity. The faculty member explained that they allowed other types of assignments and alternative evaluations within their courses. When asked if these other types of assignments and evaluation measures held the same value as a written paper and exam, the faculty answered, “Of course not!” A true commitment and deep understanding of biases, privilege and hegemonic practices is needed before genuine change can be enacted.
Chapter 5 Outcomes and Implications

This thesis has given me much to think about. Some of the literature (Mehta, 2011) supports an ideology that FGLs lack social or cultural capital. It fails to account for HE’s system of privilege and as evidenced by Drick’s (2008) writing on white privilege, the accepted principles of HE’s writing and research methodology perpetuates a perspective that is Eurocentric and privileged. There exist spaces and places within HE that have been built on privilege. This privilege, disguised as harmless concepts named social or cultural capital, work to keep first generation attenders at a distance, always trying to catch up while they fix their deficits. Consequently, social capital or the lack of privilege works to keep first generation attenders at a disadvantage. We are always running to try and find our way through the privileged world of HE. As a consequence of privilege being the ‘doorway’ to success, it is difficult to ignore the shiny lights and promises of inclusion. As a FGL I entered into HE as professional in the Saskatchewan Regional College system. I encountered many students who were also FGLs, who had experienced a lack of economic and social resources and were so frightened that they wouldn't succeed, wouldn't find their place, and wouldn’t ever fit in. As I moved along in my career I found myself in professional spaces that were more and more privileged as evidenced by collegial conservations I had throughout my career.

I always knew I belonged here and I couldn't wait to get here.

Wow, this guy was really confident.

What did I have to fear, NOTHING, this was my place, my family’s place. I came here to stand out, to achieve, to be recognised. I knew it would happen and here I am.
What about everyone that feels like they don’t belong? Like this place isn’t for them? What should they do to get by?

There is no getting by- either they have it or they don’t. It is sad that we allow so many of *them* to come here when *they* don’t know what *they* are doing. I see them in the hallways, eyes wide, looking like they would rather be anywhere else. *They* are not prepared to be here, *they* don’t seem to understand the simple steps of achievement,

What if they didn't come here to ‘achieve’, to stand apart in the way you understand how people achieve?

Well, Academia has its own culture, you know, we can’t change what is right so others can just slip in and slip out of here with a degree.

I excuse myself and go back to my office and spend a few minutes writing and crying. I don't belong here.

As an FGL who works within HE, I am often subjected to conversations, debates and institutional processes that are biased, based on a privileged sense of what is right and what is wrong. There are clear undertones of privilege everywhere. When I attempt to challenge privilege within the institution I work at, I am often corrected.

You might not understand this, but this is the way we do things, this is what we stand for, this is our culture within our specialties, this is academia.

It is an interesting space to exist within. I could stop advocating for FGLs. I could stop bringing up inequities, challenging policy and ways of being within HE. I could attempt to become just another administrator, fade into the woodwork. Yet every time I tell myself to keep my mouth shut I feel anxiety rising, I feel sick to my stomach. It isn’t
right to sit by and watch other human beings get screwed over. So I open my mouth again, and again, I loudly declare, “I am other, I have the right to be here, I have the right to be heard, I have the right to space, place and opportunity within these walls.” On the negative side, I only have so much emotional energy, so much fight left. I am tired and spent and do not know how much longer I can hold this position.

**Resisting Privilege**

Resisting privilege is not easy. Privilege calls to you, beckoning and promising an easier way of life. Accept this membership and you no longer have to sit within the tension that oppression causes. Privilege provides a plethora of excuses to join in: this is the way it’s always been; this is our culture of learning, others need to learn our ways; our programs have to be rigorous, otherwise everyone would have a degree. I cannot give in to privilege; the oppressive state it causes deeply troubles my community, family and friends.
Chapter 6 Conclusion

This thesis focuses on the barriers privilege and classism creates for first generation attenders in HE. It uses an evocative autoethnography methodology and frequently relies on my own sense of critical theory, oppression, privilege and understanding of systemic barriers. First generation attenders do not drop out or fade away from HE due to a lack of social or cultural capital. Rather, they are pushing back at an oppressive system. They are kept at bay by a wall of privilege; HE credentials are kept out of reach for many first generation attenders. Consequently, if we unveil the inequities within HE, the singular way of knowing HE promotes, perhaps HE would lose its grip on this elitist form of knowledge production. Moreover, in order to name and address the systemic barriers that exist within HE, the role of privilege within HE must become explicit and transparent.

Unequal access to economic resources primarily affects citizens that reside outside of the dominant groups’ normative framework. As a result of the effects of privilege, there are citizens that have been marginalized and placed in the category of ‘other’. Dominant worldviews have created and sustained identities of those that fit within the margins of society and those that do not. The insistence of dominant groups to create and sustain the place and identity of other has resulted in a lack of authentic access to HE. Frank (2005) examines the consequences of normative identity production as:

Two pieces of information about the not-margin majority can be inferred. First there is a definitional set relative to itself of persons or groups who are on the margin, which allows recognition by those within the margin of those outside the
margin, and this is information that can be sought out and consulted. Second, those who are within the margin have as a group a shared view that one can be outside the margin. It could be argued that both of these pieces of information already tell us more about the “them” than the “not them,” informing us little about those who are marginalized, unless we are willing to understand a great deal more about those who are not. (p.41)

Normative identity production supports neo liberal idealism and continues to subject other citizens to a system that denies access to fully engage in their ways of knowing and meaning making within education. With this in mind, the discourse to understand privilege as a systemic barrier that exists within HE can be advanced.

**Let’s Be Explicit About Systemic Barriers**

Systemic barriers can be understood as processes, regulations and policies that support the norms of some citizens at the expense of other citizens. Furthermore, institutions, policies and governance models are created, defined and contextualized within particular worldviews. This creates a system of inequities based on values and beliefs that support specific citizens in their accrual of social, educational and economic capital. Rather than creating systems that support the notion that first generation students come into HE with social or cultural deficits, it is time that HE, as a system, examines the context within which it exists.

Out of desperation, today I participated in a part of the HE system that highlights my privilege. I used the words, “maybe they are not ready to be here” when I really wanted to say, “If poverty did not exist, if everyone got to ride their cars here, pay for parking, buy their lunch, had a full grade 12 with all the bells and whistles, if,
if, if. But I get so tired of fighting this fight. I get so tired of urging people to situate themselves, think about their own position before making judgements and sanctioning policies, I get so tired of urging them to explain WHY an independent approach is preferable to an interdependent approach-WHY, WHY, WHY, to what end, to whose benefit? Some days I just get so tired.

**What Can I Do?**

Although I feel like I’ve been advocating for equity and inclusion within HE my whole life, I’ve only seen small changes occur. In reality, HE’s systems are securely ensconced in the Eurocentric, white privilege worldviews it was built upon. An excellent example of this is my own experience as a student of Social Work; I truly believed my educational training would reflect the principles outlined in the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (2005) but it fell far short. The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) suggests,

> The social work profession is dedicated to the welfare and self-realization of all people; the development and disciplined use of scientific and professional knowledge; the development of resources and skills to meet individual, group, national and international changing needs and aspirations; and the achievement of social justice for all. The profession has a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and/or living in poverty (p. 3).

Unfortunately, the ideals held within the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) are not enacted within the HE institutions that train social workers. This autoethnography is another step in sharing the struggle and inequities that FGLs face as they attempt to find
a space in HE. As a professional trained in Social Work, I have a vested interest in advocating for change, speaking up when I see systemic barriers and attempting to secure social justice for all students. These are the very things I said I would do when I received my Certificate of Social Work. Consequently, it is very difficult for me to understand how Social Work Faculties abide by the practices set out within HE that continue to privilege the dominant class. As a professional working in HE, my worst nightmare is that I lose my sense of self, that I become more of the dominant system than the FGL as I began this journey. My professional commitment as a FGL trained in Social Work is to never lose focus on systemic and individual environments that perpetuate marginalization and oppression. Furthermore, this commitment expands into the practical realm of professional self-reflexivity. I do not want to be a part of the environment that suppress and produces identities of other within HE. Similarly, as O’Brien (2011) suggests, we must become conscious of our place and space within these oppressive practices:

It is those statuses and practices, which by language and behavior are critical in defining some people as citizens (full members of the society) and others as not. A brief reflection on the experiences and treatment of indigenous peoples, of refugees and migrants, of disabled people, of women and of children provides clear examples of these discriminations of status and practice. In brief, the included are citizens; the excluded are not. (p.144)

Henceforth, in order to preserve my professional and personal integrity, I must continue to find the energy and space to advocate for awareness in order to impact change within the systemic inequities and privileged pedagogies that oppress and
marginalize FGLs within HE.

**What Can HE and Social Work Do?**

If an agenda for full participation in HE is to be advanced, practitioners, administrators, and those influencing policy must be encouraged to look at the issues in a transparent manner, away from the veils that frame FGL as deficit. With this intention in mind, Social Work Faculties should begin to examine their HE practices in order to invade spaces of privilege. The principles outlined in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) should be used as a framework to evaluate Faculty of Social Work policies, practices and protocols. This is the way forward for Social Work to uncover systemic barriers in HE and to begin to address the experiences of FGLs in HE. In the meantime, Faculties of Social Work can begin to remove themselves from HE practices that continue to produce FGL identities as other within their systems.

In order for social worker to advance an agenda that addresses barriers FGLs encounter in HE, they must first be able to address the mapped identities of citizens (Razack, 2000). HE and subsequently Social Work Faculties are ripe with systemic barriers that have historically denied access to others and the system currently frames other as deficit in social and cultural capital. HE’s systems do not provide equal opportunity or access to the resources and learning happening within the spaces and places of HE. The current neo liberal agenda that HE is built on prevents groups of citizens from participating in HE. Each and every time HE discourses are present, the conversation needs to include an awareness of, and opposition to, systemic barriers. With this intention in mind, O’Brien (2011) notes, “…social work needs to become the practice of social policy understood as social citizenship” (p. 144). The social work
profession is tasked with working towards social justice for all citizens. Within this paradigm, social workers must strive for social justice for themselves and for others, regardless of the space and place it is happening within.

I used to want to transform, saw myself as a caterpillar, turning into a butterfly. I understood my identity, my way of meaning making as less than. I spent many hours dreaming, wishing and hoping that I was worthy enough to be transformed into a full butterfly. Once the transformation was complete I was sure I would feel better. But this never happened. Because it wasn't transformation I was seeing, it was assimilation and I wasn't very interested in that.
Figure 10: Assimilation or transformation?
Faculties of Social Work, as members of HE, must consciously step away from attempts to assimilate FGLs into a system that produces and sustains white privilege as the normative standard. With this thought in mind, Social Work is called to action to evaluate, assess, identify and undertake a social justice agenda for all students whose meaning making, knowledge production and worldviews place them in the class of other. In order to begin this pursuit, the purpose of HE must be made transparent. If the purpose of entering into institutions like the University of Regina (2016) is to participate in “high quality and accessible education, influential research, creative endeavours, and meaningful scholarly experiences in pursuit of local and global contributions to knowledge”, then an evaluation of the current dynamics of the institution, faculty, methodologies and practices of the institution must be undertaken. With this in mind, it is recommended that if HE, including Faculties of Social Work, want to fulfill the mission of providing education that is accessible and meaningful, the very values and practises that HE is built on and sustained by, must be examined. The production of oppressive states within HE are reproduced through teaching methodologies, messages of identity, HE’s white privilege cultural norms and subsequently, the unwillingness to look beyond middle class expectations of what constitutes academia. In as much that HE as a system reproduces FGL identity as other, the transmission of values within the classroom also play a fundamental part in creating other.

The classrooms within the walls of HE are spaces that provide a way to transmit messages of higher learning to students. If these messages are founded in pedagogies that are created to sustain a white privileged, normative cultural standard, then FGLs will continue to exist on the fringe of HE. In order for faculty to become more aware of their
space and place in oppressive acts, they need to be aware of the ways in which they reproduce the white privilege of HE within the classroom. With this in mind, Miller (2013) describes the need for faculty to engage in transparency within their own value system, “If students develop their relationship to social work values more particularly in the classroom, the classroom should then be understood as a critical seat of values acquisition (p. 382). Consequently, if FGLs are to become full members of HE, with all the rights, privileges and opportunities of the dominant class, then a transparent examination of the systemic barriers, classist pedagogical approaches and exclusionary tactics within HE and subsequently Faculties of Social Work need to be performed.

I am sitting at another HE sponsored inclusivity event. I have been asked to be a record keeper; my role is to just take notes regarding the table’s discussion. As I introduce myself I can’t help but notice that the tables are filled with Faculty and Administrators, people who have some power within the walls of HE. The fringes of the room hold front line staff, students and other. I wonder out loud if we can’t make room for everyone? The suggestion is dismissed; there isn’t room for everyone. We continue on and it becomes increasingly more difficult for me to be just the recorder. I have been observed and have observed this type of BS my whole life. A rush towards doing something that looks good, maybe even feels good for some, is in reality another way to hold space for other. The topic at my table turns to pedagogical approaches in the classroom. Someone declares they are all about inclusivity and always have alternative assignments for people to choose from. I can’t take it anymore, so recorder becomes activist.
“I am wondering why you would name them ‘alternative’ assignments? “Well, you know, they are things that are outside of the regular” “Oh, so the effort at inclusion is to offer an alternative assignment outside of the norm?” “Yes,” she replies. “Interesting, do you feel the alternative assignments hold the same academic rigor and meaning as the regular assignments?” “Well not really, but I make them available to be more inclusive.” “I wonder what inclusive would look like if we challenged our way of understanding regular and alternative? Or thought about why we see the alternative academia as less rigorous? Like, I mean, actually examined what is the assumption of normal academia is?”

I am met with a blank stare and the conversation is turned to another question posed by the organizers. Right, remember your place, you are just the recorder.

Research note: Ellis and Bochner (2000) recognize and validate the autoethnographer’s attempts at visual evocation through the use of bizarre phrasing, italicized words, pictures and symbols strewn throughout their work. There is a contextualised sense of separating some concepts, words, and images in the hopes of producing an emotional reaction. Within this paper words like other and ways have purposefully been italicised to promote their importance as concepts and ideations.
The pictures within this thesis represent my contextualised sense of time, space and place. These concepts come together as part of my identity, represent my way of meaning making and offer a way of understanding who I am.
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Appendix A

Chart 2: Making Sense of the Literature and My Contextualized Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
<th>Privilege</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ways of Knowing</td>
<td>Represented</td>
<td>Me vs WE</td>
<td>Hegemonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental responsibilities. Could not afford classes nor did it fit understanding of family</td>
<td>“class and culture”</td>
<td>Scholarships-fit study, gpa</td>
<td>NS class -20%, opinion paper (96-97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1984-first class, - Pregnant- imposter syndrome</td>
<td>“Knowledge Seeker”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• CRT would demand that the curriculum be seen as a form of property to help students understand and examine the relationships between and among language and literacy, poverty and race, not only poverty and language arts. Such opportunities can allow students to examine their own lives, make connections, draw conjectures about inconsistencies, and think about the direction of their current or future lives as they interact with others.</td>
<td>Brown, E. M. (1995). The tower of babel: Bridging the divide between critical race theory and “mainstream” civil rights scholarship.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic ‘Culture’</td>
<td>Contextualized Space and Place</td>
<td>Institution processes that support privilege</td>
<td>Oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lacks andragogy that acknowledges diverse ways of knowing and meaning making Milner, R. H. I. (2013). Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens.</td>
<td>• The Academy Interdependence vs independence</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• CRT would demand that the curriculum be seen as a form of property to help students understand and examine the relationships between and among language and literacy, poverty and race, not only poverty and language arts. Such opportunities can allow students to examine their own lives, make connections, draw conjectures about inconsistencies, and think about the direction of their current or future lives as they interact with others.</td>
<td>o It is deemed ‘other’ to approach learning from an interdependent stance</td>
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<td>• ‘Good student’ is an expression historically linked to specific systems of thought which differentiate and set apart learners, providing an imaginary space, eventually as real as the geographical one, from which to watch and consider the university students. (Llamas, 2002, p.671)</td>
<td>Martin, N. (2012) The privilege of ease: Social class and campus life at highly selective, private universities.</td>
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<td>• It is not customary to ‘speak’ about what is considered normal: it is assumed and, consequently, everything considered abnormal is also incorporated</td>
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<td>• Blames FG students and positions them as ‘OTHER’ that lack the necessary cultural and social skills to succeed</td>
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<td>• Educational institutions control the access of individuals to the different types of discourse, and it is necessary to question which discourses are used, what they are about and what they hide. (Hey, 2002 p.670)</td>
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<td>Dad 1990: I had no idea there were exceptions to the rule, no extensions, no allowances, until I had spent an entire week working on my paper with little to no sleep. An acquaintance I worked with casually said to me, “Oh, why didn’t you ask for an extension?” Because I had no idea it was a possibility.</td>
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Mehta, S. S., Newbold, J. J., & O’Rourke, M. (2011). Why do first generation students fail? • Finally, professors must be aware of students in their classes who are FGS. These professors must work to establish relationships with these students, encourage them to get involved on campus, and ensure that the students are at the very least involved with other students in the class and interactions outside of the class with the professor. This can take the form of group projects, before or after class interactions, office hour visits, and in-class discussions that require students to interact with each other. Conversely, CGS in their class is more likely to come equipped to succeed. They are more likely to
they have worked hard, followed the law, had the ability and skill, and made the right choices and decisions. They have little or no conception of how class and socioeconomic privilege and opportunity manifest. (p.35)

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Appendix B

Definitions

The following terms were used throughout my study and provide a contextualised understanding of the worldview that this study is framed by.

Collaborative. Simpson (2012) describes the differences between interdependent learners and independent learners. As someone who was raised understanding the family and community as more important as the individual my worldview has guided my HE experience and decisions. I am an interdependent learner; I crave collaboration and am guided by my collective experience within my family unit and community.

Competitive. Simpson (2012) describes the competitive learner as one who has experienced the privilege attached to middle class norms. A competitive learner has been socialized to be independent, seeking first place within the world of HE. HE is built on middle class norms; the system rewards competitive, independent learners. The systems and structures are created to assist these learners achieve their goals.

Evocative Autoethnography. Ellis and Bochner (2000) depict Evocative Autoethnography as methodology that uses meaning making, worldviews and knowledge production as the beginning of the research and data collection. My stories and experiences form the data sets, likewise within my unique stories and experiences many collective experiences can be found. This methodology encourages and validates those experiences, approaching issues of equity, norms and structural barriers through an evocative lens. If this story has touched you in anyway, made you think of your own positionality, space and place within HE, then this work has fulfilled the goals of Evocative Autoethnography.
First Generation Learner. Shepler and Woosley (2011) describe a FGL as someone who enters HE and is the first in their family to go to HE. While I fit this description of a FGL I would like to propose a definition that is broader. As Shepler and Woosley (2011) discuss, FGLs face difficulty within HE as a result of HE’s privileged normative standards, structures and institutional privilege. For learners who may have had a parent attend HE (potentially as a part time or distance, off campus learner or were not successful in completing their academic goals) the middle class norms may remain a solid barrier to their full participation within HE.

Other. I chose to use the word Other to describe the sense of self I experienced as a FGL who was raised outside of middle class norms. As I tried to physically exist within these HE structures stained by middle class norms, my sense of Otherness continued to grow. Yolo (2005) does a good job of explaining middle class norms and the effect those norms have on anyone that exists outside of them.