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Introduction



POSING THE PROBLEM

Farida: See, I consider myself Algerian, but I don't have the mentality, I don't have . . . For me it's freedom first. For me studies come first, employment comes first. And I'm definitely not getting married now.

Alexandra: I don't see myself as a homemaker, not at all. I am not someone who'll stay at home and raise my kids. I see myself dynamic—with a profession I like.

Farida is eighteen. She was born in France of Algerian parents. She has maintained a dual nationality. Her father came to work in France 33 years ago. A few years later his wife and his two children came to join him. They had four more children born on French soil. Farida's mother never worked outside the home; her father is a welder in the auto industry. The whole family lives in a large housing project heavily populated by North Africans.

Alexandra is also eighteen. She is French of French ancestry. Her father is a house painter and her mother a clerical worker. Her parents are now divorced and she lives with her mother and younger brother in a small housing project.

In the fall of 1989 both young women were enrolled in their second and last year of a short vocational training program. They had been geared toward this clerical track at the outset of junior high school. At the end of the academic year—depending on their performance and the results of a final examination—they would either enter the labor force or transfer to a longer track that might lead them to a vocational *baccalauréat* and, perhaps for a lucky few, beyond.¹

This book is about these young working-class women and their classmates, who, at the junior high school level, have been allocated to short vocational tracks and for whom upward mobility in the future is seriously limited.² How do they, given their social class, their educational records, their racial/ethnic³ and gender locations, understand their present and future positions in society? What are their hopes and visions of themselves in that future? How do they negotiate and construct possibilities for themselves and what importance do they give to education and schooling? Are there differences between Alexandra's and Farida's experiences, and if so where do those differences come from? And more generally, what can this case study tell us about our theoretical understandings of women's relationship to schooling and education?

WHY FOCUS ON FARIDA AND ALEXANDRA?

In 1982 a black feminist anthology was published under the title *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of us Are Brave* (Hull, Scott, Smith). In the decade that followed the publication of *But Some of us Are Brave*, feminists of color⁴ have been the leading theorists around the claim that women experience their gender and class locations—among other things—differently depending on their particular racial/ethnic background.⁵ The title of the groundbreaking anthology pointed to two things: (1) the silencing that had occurred in both (white and black) male-centered and (white) feminist accounts of the particular experiences of black women; and (2) the emergence of brave black female voices disrupting dominant narratives. To this day we are still struggling with the empirical and theoretical implications of this basic challenge.

I will discuss this further in chapter 2, but it is important to note here that in the educational research literature, by and large, schoolgirls are still white, working-class students are still boys, and “minorities” in school are still male. What happens then to the particular experiences of working-class female students of color in the school? How are these experiences similar and/or different from that of white working-class female students? What would a particular focus on women tell us about the making of class, gender, and racial/ethnic identities in the school?

As a white/French female researcher, I find these questions fascinating and feel the political urgency to pose them in the context of an increasingly racist and xenophobic French society, where “gender” is still for “L'homme de la rue” (The *man* in the street) a mere grammatical characteristic of the language that gives foreigners trying to learn it headaches. While it would have been extremely interesting to investigate these questions among female and male populations in order to seriously address the *relational* component of gender (Thomas, 1990), and while it would have been as interesting to con-

duct this research across various social classes, it became clear fairly early that with a research team of one and institutional demands to finish my research within a reasonable amount of time, I would have to choose and narrow down my focus. These constraints also partially explain the category “of Algerian descent” rather than the broader one “of North African descent.” While there are obvious similarities between the experiences of Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian communities in France, one should not a priori assume that they can be lumped together in one monolithic group sharing similar experiences. The specificity of the colonial relationship between France and Algeria and the reality of a ferocious war that ended that relationship have, among other things, shaped the particular experiences of Algerian migrants and their children in the context of a postcolonial French society.

With such considerations in mind, and looking at the existing literature, it appeared that a comparative qualitative analysis of two groups of French working-class girls along racial/ethnic lines (French/Algerian in this case) could greatly contribute to the field. In the next section, I briefly discuss some of the existing ethnographic research on schooling and suggest how this book addresses particular gaps in the literature.

While there is now a substantial body of ethnographic studies exploring the ways in which certain subgroups construct their social and personal identities within educational settings, it is striking to the feminist reader how few and far between are the studies that present a gendered analysis of these processes.⁶ In fact, many of these ethnographies have focused on the role of schooling in the re/production of class asymmetries (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990), and fifteen years after the publication of Willis’s *Learning to Labour* (1977)—a landmark in the genre—it is amazing to see how little we do know about how young *women* produce themselves as classed, raced, and gendered subjects in the context of the school.

Learning to Labour analyzed the “lived culture” of a group of working-class boys in an all-male British comprehensive school. In spite of the interesting theoretical claims Willis makes about social class, schooling and cultural reproduction, his analysis presents gender and racial dynamics as peripheral to the more central category of social class, even after he made revisions in response to feminist criticisms of his work (McRobbie, 1980; Weiler, 1988; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

Similar criticisms can be levelled against Philip Wexler’s *Becoming Somebody*, published in 1992. Here again, social class emerges as “the overriding organizing code of social life” (p. 9) that distinguishes one school from another and frames the particular identities that are being constructed within each school. While Wexler underlines “social class as the main frame for coding school differences,” he also recognizes that “there are further differences that highlight the differential importance of broader issues of race, class and

gender *within* the schools/classes” (p. 117). But Wexler’s analysis presents race and gender as marginal dynamics influencing the larger processes of class-based identity work and compensatory responses against what the author describes as the destruction of the social in a postmodern, postindustrial U.S. context. Interestingly enough, in both studies, one on a British all-male group and the other in a U.S. coeducational setting, women’s specific realities are lacking. While this lack, to borrow Wexler’s term, this silencing of women’s experiences, is a hallmark of “malestream” educational research (Spender, 1982; Smith, 1987b; Thomas, 1990), a small but growing body of empirical studies has tried to uncover the specificity of gender dynamics in the schools and has also suggested that we need “to see the schools as involved, to a degree, in the very constitution of gender relations” (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett, 1982).

Early qualitative studies document how white working-class girls, like their male counterparts, form (oppositional) subcultures in the school. They clearly point out that female identities are constructed differently than male identities within similar social class groupings (McRobbie, 1978; Davies, 1984; Griffin, 1985; Riley, 1985).⁷ Such studies also suggest that young women actively *negotiate* their feminine identities within a set of varied and often conflicting scenarios available to them (Davies, 1984a & b; Griffin, 1985). However, as they engage in the process of constructing identities and subcultures, these women are often portrayed as embracing traditional notions of femininity and domesticity (McRobbie, 1978; Griffin, 1985; Lees, 1986; Valli, 1986; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

A dissonant account in this tradition is Lois Weis’s *Working Class Without Work* (1990), which documents how, in the context of a deindustrializing U.S. economy, a group of white working-class girls reject the dominant patriarchal code and develop positive attitudes toward schooling. There is no consensus, however, on whether these feminine cultures of romance and domesticity are symptoms of or resistances to (or a mixture of both) patriarchal oppression.⁸

The lack of uniformity in the conclusions drawn is a clear indicator that women form different types of identities and subcultures in different settings. It also points in the direction suggested by Nancy Lesko, “that girls’ school and social identities are crafted from more complex stuffs than a simple choice between academic achievement and romance” (1988, p. 32). This body of scholarship also suggests that dominant (male) explanatory models of working-class antischool resistance—the formation of large street-bound gangs of “lads” and shop-floor oppositional subcultures—have to be dropped to develop more sophisticated understandings of women and schooling (Griffin, 1985; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

As the inclusion of women in ethnographic studies of schools has shifted the focus of the research and challenged dominant paradigms, a handful of

studies of students from oppressed racial, ethnic, and migrant communities has pushed these challenges even further. These ethnographies suggest that the intersection of class, race/ethnicity, and gender does not always work in a simple linear cumulative form but rather often generates complementary and contradictory effects (Fuller, 1983; Brah and Minhas, 1985).

Black working-class youth in the United States, unlike Willis's lads, do not reject education (Ogbu, 1974; Weis, 1985a). On the contrary, black students express their respect and desire for education. However, in the schools, their behavior contradicts this verbal assessment and prevents them from doing well. Certain "minority" groups adopt an oppositional subculture that lingers on "even after economic and other instrumental barriers have been removed" (Ogbu, 1987, p. 269). Depending on the relationship of the subgroup vis-à-vis the dominant culture and the structural forces of exclusion and subordination, this oppositional process will take different forms and intensities (Ogbu, 1992).

Similarly, West Indian girls in Great Britain, in Fuller's ethnographic study, exhibit a strong belief in the value of education. In this particular case study, the girls are clearly aware of their double subordination as black and female, and as a result they develop positive strategies for present and future survival. Although quite aware of discrimination, critical of school as an institution, and often behaving in an antischool manner, Fuller's girls manage to be successful in their studies and strongly believe that schooling is *the way* to overcome their subordination (1983).

In another British qualitative study, a group of Asian girls uses school as a way to escape the types of activities in which their mothers are engaged. The girls' clear perceptions of their mothers' double burden as low-skilled, low-paid wage laborers and primary caretakers of the home and the family, seems to be at the source of their desire to use education to better their lives (Miles, 1984).

Very few studies comparatively look at women's experiences of schooling across racial/ethnic lines. When they do, however, they point in the direction of differential responses to schooling and processes of identity formation across racial and ethnic groups. Both Fuller (1983) and Griffin (1985) in Great Britain, and Holland and Eisenhart (1990) in the United States, comment on the fact that female students of color are more likely to be critical of the dominant ideology of romance, love, and domesticity than their white counterparts.

Where do these differentials come from? How does race/ethnicity frame the ways in which a young woman experiences and constructs her own gendered and classed identity? What about the contradictory findings generated by Lois Weis on white working-class girls (1987, 1990)? Don't we need to pay greater attention to the particular contexts within which identities and cul-

tures are being formed? How can we get to “the more complex stuff” from which female identities are crafted? These are questions that emerge from a growing tradition of feminist ethnographies of schools. This book hopes to pursue some of them by focusing on the ways in which young women experience their class *and* gender *and* racial/ethnic locations within the context of a particular vocational school.

My focus on Farida, Alexandra, and their schoolmates must also be understood in relation to certain epistemological challenges that have been generated within the vast field of feminist research. The next section will briefly address these challenges.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In her introduction to *Feminism and Methodology*, Sandra Harding differentiates issues of method, methodology, and epistemology when discussing various feminist approaches to inquiry. Harding defines method as the “techniques of gathering evidence,” methodology as “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed,” and epistemology as “a theory of knowledge.” Most discussions about research methods, she argues, tend to conflate the three terms and make it difficult to stress what is specific about feminist research. Chapter 2 deals with questions of methodology—as defined by Harding (1987, p. 3)—in that it delineates how theoretical frameworks find their application in the present study. I describe the techniques and procedures I used in the research in an appendix. Here, I will concentrate only on issues of epistemology.

Feminist, Third World, and postcolonial epistemologies have contributed to the legitimation of women and native people/people of color as agents and producers of knowledge. First, the recovery of the contributions of these “Others” in various fields of knowledge and then the analyses of the ways in which dominant discourse has silenced them have seriously challenged some of the working assumptions of traditional social scientific inquiries.

Studies that simply include (add) women and other Others in their analyses have made some important contributions but have proved to be fairly limited.⁹ More interesting are the studies that have displaced traditional categories of inquiry and developed new questions as well as new ways of answering them.

The most promising of these studies (1) have started from the lived experiences of the people (women, gays, ethnic minorities, African Americans, native peoples, etc.); (2) have developed research *for* the people themselves; and (3) have put the researcher and the research process under the same plane of scrutiny as the professed subject of inquiry (Harding, 1987, pp. 8–9).

I agree with Harding when she argues “for the scientific and epistemolog-

ical advantage of starting from the lives of those who have been devalued, neglected, excluded from the center of the social order; who generate less interest in ignorance about how the social order works; who provide perspectives from the other side of racial struggles; who enable a different perspective, one from everyday life; who in some cases provide 'outsider within' perspectives, who mediate relations between nature and culture in ways different from those of European American wo[men]; and whose activities provide particularly illuminating understandings at this moment in history" (Harding, 1991, pp. 211–12). It is crucial, however, to further discuss the import and limits of a research starting from everyday experiences. People's experiences must be seen as the starting point of scientific inquiry but must go beyond the microscopic and the anecdotal. Indeed, we must be aware that people's lived experiences are dialectically linked to the social relations of the society in which these people are located and that no one—the researcher included—is ever totally outside of these relations (Smith, 1987a & b; Roman and Apple, 1990). The difficult task of the social scientist then, is to explain "the social organization of the everyday world" (p. 91) by starting from the people's location within it. Smith argues that "locating the knower in the everyday world and constituting our inquiry in terms of the problematic arising from how it is actually organized in a social process enable us to see the 'micro' and the 'macro' sociological levels in a determinate relation" (p. 99).

This last point is particularly relevant when we consider critiques of ethnographical research which claim that it is nongeneralizable. When we use our case studies and people's lived experiences as starting points of larger structural analyses, then the link between the particular and the general becomes part and parcel of our inquiries. Smith makes this point quite clearly in her thought-provoking book *The Everyday World as Problematic*, the particular case "presents itself to us rather as a point of entry, the locus of an experiencing subject or subjects, into a larger social and economic process" (Smith, 1987b, p. 157).

Before placing the case study in this larger context, we need to understand the immediate parameters of the present research. It is to a brief description of these parameters that I now turn.

THE STUDY

This book is based on a year-long field-based case study of two classes of young women following a basic secretarial training curriculum in a French working-class vocational high school. These young women are preparing for a Vocational School Certificate (Brevet d' Etudes Professionnelles, BEP) which can be obtained by taking a national examination at the end of a two-year program after the junior high school cycle. I conducted the study over the acade-

mic year 1989–1990. During that time I spent several days a week in the vocational lycée Lurçat.¹⁰ The school is located in a working-class suburb of Paris and offers primarily short tertiary training programs to working-class students, the great majority of which are female. At the time of the study, approximately half of them were of migrant descent or were migrants themselves, and above 25 percent were of North African parentage.

Among the two classes (forty-eight students) I “followed,” eleven students were of Algerian descent, twenty of French descent, and the rest of other migrant parentage.¹¹ I spent the first quarter doing observation of classroom processes and the last two quarters doing semidirective interviews (individual and collective) of students, as well as intermittent classroom observations. I also interviewed school officials and informally talked to teachers.

In France, a class is a specific group of twenty-five to thirty-five students who follow the same curriculum, except for electives, and spend the school day together. Students are grouped in classes according to their track and often stay together for the duration of their study cycle (two or three years). This particular type of grouping provides a definite cohesion to the group, and the *classe* often takes on a specific identity depending on its position within the school map, its particular history, and the individuals who belong to it.

“What if you don’t find ten girls of Algerian descent in one vocational class?” I was asked by a feminist scholar when I told her of my research proposal. I don’t quite remember my answer now, but the question had seemed quite far-fetched at the time. Little did I know then that this very problem would delay my research until the following academic year.

The Algerian community is the largest migrant community in France and many Algerian families live in Paris and its suburbs. In the Paris area, in 1985, 34 percent of all Algerian students enrolled in public secondary education were found in the combined three school districts of Paris, Creteil, and Versailles. With these figures in mind, I was confident that I would find a research site in no time. However, it proved extremely difficult to locate ten female students of Algerian descent following the same vocational curriculum. I spent almost the entire academic year 1988–89 contacting vocational lycées in Paris and its suburbs in my quest for ten girls of Algerian descent. The Ministry of Education had provided me with a list of all vocational schools in the Paris area and had told me that I should first contact the *Inspecteur d’Académie* (Superintendent) of the various Paris school districts with large Algerian communities.¹² The office of the Superintendent gave me a list of the lycées most likely to enroll girls of Algerian descent and helped me contact the principal of each school.

Interestingly enough, very often I was told on the phone or through the mail that the school did have the population I was looking for. However, when I actually went to the lycée and talked to teachers or met students I found that

“Algerian” had been translated into “North African” or even into the larger “African diaspora” (African, North African, Caribbean, etc.).

The difficulty of this quest was further compounded by the fact that school officials have no records of the ethnic origin of their students. Often names and “looks” seemed to be the primary indicators used by principals and vice-principals to determine whether their school had the population I was seeking. After having contacted all the Paris vocational schools that were likely to have female students of Algerian descent, I extended my search to the suburbs. If we consider that as early as the seventh grade students in France are dispersed in different tracks, it becomes easier to understand why it might be so difficult to find high concentrations of specific ethnic populations in particular tracks even in areas densely populated by these very populations. When I explained my difficulties to French educators, I was told that I would not have had any problems had I chosen to study sixth or seventh graders. At that level, they added, I would have found “classes full of Algerians.”¹³ In the particular case of girls of Algerian descent the difficulty might have been compounded by the fact that some of these girls could have exited the school system as soon as it was no longer mandatory (at age sixteen), but there is no empirical backing for this suggestion.

Finally, in the *Lycée Polyvalent Lurçat* of Claiçy—a Northern working-class suburb of Paris—I found two classes of second year BEPs which, combined, had twelve students of Algerian descent (eleven girls and one boy). Most of these female students lived in a nearby community, Gilliers, and commuted every day to come to school at Lurçat. I was told about the Lycée Lurçat by a team of teachers working for the Versailles CEFISEM (Centre de Formation et d’Information pour la Scolarisation des Enfants de Migrants). These educators, specialized in the schooling of children of migrant descent, thought that many girls from Gilliers might go to Lurçat since it was the only tertiary vocational lycée in the area. They were right. After nearly nine months of fruitless inquiries, in May 1988 I met some of the young women with whom I would soon spend a full academic year.

After negotiating a written permission from the Versailles School Board,¹⁴ I met with the principal of Lurçat. Mr. Fouhet took me around the lycée, introduced me to several teachers and did an impromptu survey (without asking me if it would be appropriate) in several classes in order to find out if there were enough girls of Algerian descent in some of the classes. Indeed, during the tour of the building, we stopped in several classrooms in which Mr. Fouhet introduced me as a sociologist doing a study for a U.S. university, and proceeded to ask for a show of hands from the girls of Algerian descent. While it was certainly a quick and efficient way of finding out whether or not I could conduct my research at Lurçat, I was annoyed by the fact that girls of Algerian descent were put on the spot at the very onset of my presence in the school. My

annoyance then was not totally unjustified since it would take me several weeks to dispel the rumor that I was in the lycée solely to study girls of Algerian descent. At the end of my first visit at Lurçat, Mr. Fouhet and I agreed that I would start the actual research the following fall.

In September 1989 I started my fieldwork at Lurçat. The site and particular track were chosen simply because they had the specific population I had been searching for several months. I started my observations on September 20th after a couple of weeks spent on setting up my fieldwork "contract." I talked to all administrative personnel and teachers involved in order to determine the conditions and the limits of my presence at Lurçat and clarify the boundaries of my role and position as an observer in the classrooms. I selected the two classes I would follow during the academic year. I wrote a letter to all teachers involved asking them permission to observe their classes and explaining very succinctly the object of my study. Only one teacher refused to accept me in her class.

Finally, I met alone with the students, briefly explained the reason for my presence in the school and in the classrooms, and asked them if they would agree to participate in the study—a condition posed by one of the French teachers. Not a single student expressed reservation or hostility toward the study and the presence of an observer among them. In this first meeting I tried to convey the idea that I was interested in *all* the students and that I would be working with each of them provided that she agreed to cooperate. While most students developed some interest in the project as they grew accustomed to my presence in the lycée, a handful of students—usually those who refused to grant me an interview—totally ignored me throughout the whole academic year.

While most of the observations happened within classrooms, I also tried to stay with the girls when they had lunch in the cafeteria or elsewhere and when they went to the library, study hall, and other areas within the lycée. Even though it would have been fascinating to follow them outside the school setting—in their communities, their families, etc.—I chose, for the purpose of the study, to limit my inquiry to the physical limits of the lycée and its immediate surroundings.

ANALYSIS AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Since the French educational system differentiates its curriculum after the second and fourth grade of junior high school (in the United States, seventh and ninth grade), this particular group of students had already been selected and tracked in a vocational stream. Short vocational cycles are filled with students who have not met the requirements of "adequate" academic performances and who have experienced failure at many different levels of the highly selective French educational ladder.

This analysis does not intend, therefore, to address the complex mechanisms of selection and allocation along class, gender, and racial/ethnic lines in the French school system as a whole. Rather, this book focuses on the ways in which class, gender, and racial/ethnic identities develop among school girls who have already been allocated to a certain future. The study explores how the school defines such futures and how the girls interpret and remodel such definitions.

In the context of a particular school, I argue that two groups of students are developing identities through a process where dominant (hegemonic) values and meanings are interpreted, modified, and constructed. Far from being the mere recipients of a shaped (false) consciousness through school “socialization,” these young women intuitively understand the dubious promises of modern-day French school/education. However, because of their specific social and historical locations they reject neither schooling nor education and instead use them to varying degrees as tools to further their self-formation. In the process, they at times subvert official and hegemonic educational agendas.

In particular, I argue that working-class girls in this specific school understand and use schooling as a means to acquire “qualifications” sanctioned by diplomas in order to secure for themselves a future as full-time and stable wage earners. By identifying themselves primarily as salaried workers through their serious investment in schooling, they challenge the hegemonic notion that waged labor for women is secondary to domesticity and motherhood.

I also suggest that schooling is sometimes interpreted and manipulated by these female students as a way to acquire autonomy and independence as women in a male-dominated world. By connecting schooling with employment and women’s control over their lives they displace the commonsense idea that women need to be economically and emotionally dependent on men via the institutions of “compulsory heterosexuality,” marriage, family, and the sexual division of labor.

Moreover, I argue that some of these young women see education and abstract school knowledge as powerful tools to understand and potentially change their particular social location. In the context of a racist and postcolonial society where the ignorance of the Other has been constructed and used to keep her/him at the very bottom of the social order, girls of Algerian descent, in particular, intuitively understand the link between power and knowledge. Finally, I suggest that these working-class female students not only look at their own schooling and education with a realistic gaze, but that they also use the school and education—with all their limitations—as tools to position themselves, often with the same critical gaze, vis-à-vis other groups such as their communities, their male counterparts, their female peers, etc.

I am not embracing here a naive liberal vision of education and knowledge as a necessary good for the students. In fact, in many ways I also show

how the school, as a social institution and through the knowledge it distributes, actively contributes to the production of inequalities. This process has been amply documented in many studies of educational structures and processes reviewed later on in the next chapter. However, by seriously focusing on gender and race relations and their intersection with class dynamics, I have also had to pay attention to the ways in which school in particular contexts, for specific groups of students can become, in spite of itself and to a limited extent, liberatory.

This set of arguments challenges the reproduction metaphor that has been predominant in the field, and provides us with the beginning of an understanding of what underprivileged students *themselves* need and want from school/education, which I believe should be at the basis of a concrete critical revision of education and schools.

The school in this analysis emerges as a social site where students actively struggle over hegemonic discourses, values, and practices. The students' work of criticism, redefinition and self-analysis does not take place in a vacuum, but its very terms are determined by the discursive and material boundaries it tries to modify. In order to understand these boundaries, we need to analyze how gender and racial dynamics interlock within our capitalist mode of production in the specific context of the schools. We need to pay attention not only to actual material conditions, but also to discursive/textual forces which more and more mediate our lived realities. Finally, we need to start from the too-long-unheard voices of students who experience on a day-to-day basis multiple forms of domination and faithfully try to start from their points of view to uncover and begin to disrupt the complex web of social relations that maintains their subordinated positions.

It must, however, be noted here that my educational background and my social class in relation to all students in this study as well as my racial/ethnic position in relation to the girls of Algerian descent point in the direction of deep structural disparities between me as a researcher and the students as the researched. In this respect, the reader must realize, along with me, that the story narrated in this book is told from a particular "location" and bears the marks of its privileges and its blind spots. While struggling, throughout the whole research process, with the ethical dilemmas and contradictions of doing feminist qualitative research¹⁵ without ever coming to a satisfying resolve, I remained committed to the basic principle of foregrounding the young women's voices and tried not lose sight of their agency.

These voices are central in the text, but altered through selection, organization, and translation. This foregrounding should not obscure the fact that I, as a white middle-class academic of French descent mostly trained in the United States, did the selecting, organizing, and translating. It must be clear then, that it is from that specific subject position that the analysis and the nar-

rative have developed. To suggest otherwise would be naive and even dishonest. The knowledge claims generated in *Becoming Women/Becoming Workers*, therefore, must be understood as “situated,” partial, and limited.¹⁶

The arguments presented in the book are organized in the following manner: Chapter 2 delineates the theoretical framework upon which the study is based. Chapter 3 defines the background in which the study takes place by analyzing statistics and secondary documents on French schools, women, workers, Algerian immigrants, and their children. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the school (as a social institution and a workplace) and the discourses it promotes to delineate the particular material and discursive boundaries in which the work of identity formation takes place. Chapter 6 discusses everyday practices in the school and the classroom and begins to explore processes of identity formation at Lurçat. Chapter 7 explores the ways in which students understand their location within the school system itself and whether or not they are aware of and critical of the process through which they got there. Chapter 8 analyzes the kinds of lives and futures the students envision for themselves and how they understand school and education in relation to these visions. Chapter 9 concentrates on the girls of Algerian descent and looks at the school as a place where their identities develop in relation to other groups, in particular males from their communities and female schoolmates of French descent. Chapter 10 summarizes my findings, relates them to the theoretical debates explored in chapter 2, discusses the limitations of the present research, and makes suggestions for further studies. Issues of method and procedures are discussed in the Methodological Appendix.

I was able to envision and develop this inquiry because earlier scholarship paved the way for new questions and new ways of answering them. It is to these earlier studies that I now turn to delineate the theoretical boundaries within which the forthcoming analysis has developed.