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Overeducated Achievatrons Unite!

Joan C. Williams[†]

My chief sentiment when I read the pieces submitted for this Colloquy was, “Wow, they actually read my book!” We authors pour our souls into our texts, send them out into the world, and sometimes feel an unsettling silence descend. Let me say at once how grateful I am to Margaret Chon for inviting me to Seattle, to Kurt Kruckeberg for his indefatigable efforts in soliciting contributions, and to each of the authors for spending time reading and responding to my book. Somehow I am certain all had other demands on their time.

Most rewarding was that two of the ten authors—Laura Kessler and Lisa Pruitt—self-identified as class migrants and found my description of the class culture gap resonant.¹ “My experiences with my family reflect a near perfect account of the class culture gap described in Williams’s book,” notes Laura Kessler. “In sum, I found Williams’s account of the way that class is manifested as cultural difference to ring *completely* true.”² As Lisa Pruitt notes, I attempted to synthesize every major ethnography of the white working class in the late twentieth-century United States³—but I was also talking about my own life as part of a white working-class family for the last thirty-four years. I am glad I got it right.

And yet Kessler raises a question also raised by Robert Chang, Richard Delgado, and Jean Stefancic. Here’s how Kessler puts it:

I cannot help thinking that the most salient characteristics that separate me from my manicurist sister are not that she would prefer to eat in predictable chain restaurants or that she disapproves of my permissive parenting style or that she shops at Walmart and I at Costco. Rather, our greatest class differences are found in the fact that she earns approximately fifteen percent of my income in a good

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1. Laura T. Kessler, *Feminism for Everyone*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 679, 697 (2011); Lisa R. Pruitt, *The Geography of the Class Culture Wars*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 767, 769 (2011).

2. Kessler, *supra* note 1, at 698.

3. Pruitt, *supra* note 1, at 770.

year, has no pension, has not consistently had access to employer-subsidized health insurance during her adult life, and has no college degree.⁴

Does a focus on how class is manifested as cultural difference entail overlooking the structuralist-materialist dimensions of class?

Not at all: I am a material girl. But here's the fascinating thing. Since 1970, Republicans have adopted policies that have radically increased inequality of incomes and eviscerated the economic stability of Americans who are neither rich nor poor *with those very Americans' political support*. Thus my description of how class is expressed as cultural difference is designed to answer this question: Why do people like Kessler's sister so often vote Republican?

They do, as my book documents extensively. Richard Delgado notes, "My suspicion is that the reasons why working-class people have not jumped on either Obama's or Professor Williams's bandwagon have little to do with style points. Rather, working-class people have interests that are genuinely adverse to those of upper-class people."⁵ True. But the Americans whom intellectuals traditionally call "working class"—who call themselves "middle class"⁶—also have economic interests that are diametrically opposed to the interests of the business elite. Yet working-class Americans vote for Republicans, whose economic policies chiefly benefit the business elite, again and again. This message comes home to me with particular poignancy today: Republicans in the Wisconsin legislature just voted to gut public-sector unions.⁷

So the question is why the business elite (Republicans) have been able to appeal to working-class voters better than the progressive elite (Democrats). The answer I offer is "cultural voting"—that the business elite has connected by expressing respect for working-class cultural values. Given that *neither* the business elite nor the progressive elite really

4. Kessler, *supra* note 1, at 698.

5. Richard Delgado, *Race, Sex, and the Division of Labor: A Comment on Joan Williams's Reshaping the Work-Family Debate*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 835, 841 (2011).

6. This is why I adopt a new term for describing this group. Following Theda Skocpol, I call them the "Missing Middle": the middle 53% of Americans whose median income is \$64,465. JOAN C. WILLIAMS & HEATHER BOUSHEY, CTR. FOR WORKLIFE LAW & CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS, *THE THREE FACES OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT: THE POOR, THE PROFESSIONALS AND THE MISSING MIDDLE* 7 (2010). Yet I will hereafter call them "working class" because that's the term typically used in the ethnographic literature. It's worth noting two things, though. I do not use "working class" to refer to the bottom third of American families, whose median income is \$19,011. Nor do I use the term "middle class" to refer to the professional-managerial elite, who tend to describe themselves as the "upper middle income," when in fact these are the top 13% of American families, with a median income of \$147,742. *Id.*

7. Monica Davey, *Wisconsin Senate Cuts Bargaining By Public Sector*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 10, 2011, at A1.

deliver for them, many in the working class go with Republicans, who at least express respect for their values (whereas Democrats' social justice agenda focuses on poverty, race, and women—not on class privilege).

This, for me, is an uncomfortable message. I have devoted my life to study, and activism, around gender. Equally awkward is the issue of race. My focus in *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate* on the white working class stems from Michèle Lamont's *The Dignity of Working Men*, which details the cultural differences between working-class whites and same-class blacks.⁸ In describing working-class Americans, Lamont contrasts the "disciplined self" valued by white Americans with the "caring self" valued by black Americans. The disciplined self values responsibility and perseverance and seeks to preserve a world in moral order. White working-class men draw hard boundaries towards the poor, whose poverty they attribute to a lack of self-discipline. African-American working-class men, in contrast, place greater emphasis on solidarity and generosity. Lamont found American working-class blacks were more like the French than they were like their white counterparts. African-American workers, like the French, had a structural view of poverty and of class—more of a "there but for the grace of God go I" perspective than whites' assumption that "anyone who works hard can make it."

I took Lamont's analysis at face value, and I have little doubt that it is true as far as it goes. Yet while on book tour, I began to see things in a different light, given that many of the young people who responded most strongly as class migrants were people of color. They recounted the kinds of class affronts I picked up from the memoirs of class migrants. But mostly they expressed anxiety that their migration into the elite would leave them alienated from the values they grew up with and still hold dear. Asked a young woman of color at Harvard: "How can class migrants who were born into working-class families, and blessed with certain opportunities [that give them access to the elite] . . . but still have the same [working-class] values . . . ingrained in them, . . . how does this affect their ability to move up?"⁹ I tried to reassure her, but another African-American audience member who often works with black professionals stated that, in her view, working-class values sometimes do impede people of color's ability to attain professional success.

These reactions have profound implications: they suggest that if Democrats reach out to working-class voters, Democrats stand to connect better not only with non-elite whites but also with non-elite people of

8. See generally MICHÈLE LAMONT, *THE DIGNITY OF WORKING MEN: MORALITY AND THE BOUNDARIES OF RACE, CLASS, AND IMMIGRATION* (2000).

9. Joan C. Williams, Address at the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government: Sarah Palin Plays Chess: Culture Wars as Class Conflict (Sept. 9, 2010) (audience comments).

color. Bridging the class culture gap can help remedy Democrats' tendency to take African-American and Latino voters for granted. All this only goes to prove what Jean Stefancic said so eloquently: "ignoring racial dynamics diminishes the whole picture."¹⁰ Thanks to her, and to Richard Delgado and Robert Chang, for helping me think this through.

Chang, Delgado, and Stefancic also express the view that any coalitions with white workers are likely to be "shaky and temporary"¹¹ because the interests involved are genuinely adverse,¹² and because white men invest too much in their privileged racial and gender identities.¹³ But remember: Republicans have managed to construct and sustain a long-term coalition that has transformed American politics *with white workers whose economic interests they do not share*.

All this is to say that, although I am a material girl, I recognize that we do not live by bread alone. Dignity and meaning-creation are equally important. So it is possible to connect with people whose economic interests do not sync with yours if you connect with the symbols and the values that give dignity and meaning to their lives. That's what the Republicans have done, and I propose that Democrats follow the same path. But it won't be easy, as illustrated by the following story:

The first time I gave a talk on this book, in San Francisco, I met a thoughtful and progressive colleague as we were going out the door and asked her what she thought. "It's hard," she said, "to think of myself as part of an elite."

Hard, but necessary. She is a successful lawyer. My book aims not only to describe working-class culture, but also to defamiliarize our own cultural givens, and those of the "upper-middle class" among whom I have lived my entire life. "Williams does not assume that the upper-middle class are 'class-less' or that theirs is the default culture," notes Lisa Pruitt.¹⁴ "She thus does with regard to class one of the things critical race and feminist scholars have done for race and gender respectively: challenge the notion that whites don't have race and that men don't have gender."¹⁵ My goal is not only to show that we professional-managerial progressives have our own folkways, but also that our folkways can be pretty odd, and sometimes downright unhealthy. I propose that we learn from the working class how not to mistake our jobs for a life, and how

10. Jean Stefancic, *Talk the Talk, but Walk the Walk: A Comment on Joan Williams's Reshaping the Work-Family Debate*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 815, 823 (2011).

11. *Id.* at 822.

12. Delgado, *supra* note 5, at 841.

13. Robert S. Chang, *Joan Williams, Coalitions, and Getting Beyond the Wages of Whiteness and the Wages of Maleness*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 825, 828-30 (2011).

14. Pruitt, *supra* note 1, at 771.

15. *Id.*

not to place our children under hydraulic performance pressure in the name of “making sure they live up to their potential.”

This leads me to a further discussion of Pruitt’s pathbreaking work on class dynamics in the United States.¹⁶ Her leadership in this arena makes me particularly grateful for the close attention she has paid to my book. In a challenging essay, Pruitt argues that “the culture wars are now largely being fought—at least rhetorically—across the rural–urban divide.”¹⁷

No doubt she is on to something. Pruitt provides ample evidence that Sarah Palin and others have begun to talk about the class culture gap as a clash between urban and rural. We “coastal elites” talk of “flyover states”—just the kind of cultural insult I uncovered in the memoirs of class migrants with respect to the white working class.

Yet I resist redefining class conflict in the United States completely as an urban-versus-rural issue for several reasons. First, some rural places are bright blue: my family is from Vermont, which is as blue as a sunny sky and as rural as they come. Second, the coasts do have a lot of “overeducated Achievatrons” (to quote David Brooks’s term for the Ivy-encrusted glamoratti surrounding the Obamas).¹⁸ But the coasts also are home to a lot of truck drivers, manicurists, bank tellers, and government clerks—solid folk who are neither rich nor poor. The *association* of the coasts with metrosexual Achievatrons is strong but, ultimately, metaphorical. After all, San Diego, a coastal city, is staunchly conservative, and Oberlin and Santa Cruz are rural but bright blue.

At a deeper level, I resist conflating class with geography because this is one way Americans have evaded facing social hierarchy head on. I say this as a former city planner, who was interested in “urban issues” in the 1970s and 1980s, until I came to the conclusion that talking about “urban” problems simply served to distract attention from the key issues affecting cities, which were racial hierarchy and racial disadvantage. We need to talk about problems of class as problems of social hierarchy, not problems of geography. Perhaps it is not so much that working-class people are rural, but that professional-managerial progressives tend to be

16. See, e.g., Lisa R. Pruitt, *Missing the Mark: Welfare Reform and Rural Poverty*, 10 J. GENDER, RACE & JUST. 439 (2007); Lisa R. Pruitt, *Rural Rhetoric*, 39 CONN. L. REV. 159 (2006); Lisa R. Pruitt, *Spatial Inequality as Constitutional Infirmity: Equal Protection, Child Poverty and Place*, 71 MONT. L. REV. 1 (2010); Lisa R. Pruitt, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the Rural*, 2007 UTAH L. REV. 421.

17. Pruitt, *supra* note 1, at 772.

18. See David Brooks, *The Insider’s Crusade*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 21, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/21/opinion/21brooks.html>; see also Pruitt, *supra* note 1, at 781 (also quoting this phrase).

either coastal or in college towns. This intuition might be worth checking out.

Beyond this, Pruitt makes several other important points that complicate my class categories. She points out that the tension between “hard-living” and “settled-living” families is a tension *within* the working class.¹⁹ She also points out that professional-managerial folks who live in rural areas tend not to be progressives; they tend to be small-town Rotary Club types who vote Republican with the rest of the business elite.²⁰

I also am intrigued by, but have some reservations about, Pruitt’s suggestion that work might serve as a common ground around which the white working class and professional-managerial progressives could rally.²¹ An interesting idea. Yet white workers are insistent that work obsession among the elite is unbalanced—they see it as part and parcel of the elite’s willingness to sacrifice the good of the family in the name of personal ambition. Lamont found that white workers, while definitely proud of their hard work, tend to value that work as a way to draw boundaries against slackers—hard-living whites and blacks (for whom they make an unjustly global association with hard living). In contrast, working-class whites distinguish between their hard work and that of professionals. Thus a pipe fitter criticized “shirt and tie types”: “They are jockeying for jobs and worrying about whether they are making the right moves and stuff. I feel I don’t have to get involved in that stuff.”²² An electronics technician criticized overly ambitious people, “so self-assured, so self-intense that they really don’t care about anyone else. . . . It’s me, me, me, me, me.”²³ The “selfishness of the overly ambitious” he finds shocking—a viewpoint worth taking seriously.²⁴ One of the class migrants quoted above noted that people of color told her:

I am not these people and these are not my values. . . . These people are saying “work comes first” is the most important thing. They’re looking at you seriously and you’re saying, “You have got to be kidding.” I mean, do you truly believe work is the most important thing? . . . I will never buy that because, in my cultural upbringing, my obligations are so extensive towards my family, and that family is so extensive. . . . I’m not an individualist, so I won’t ultimately

19. Pruitt, *supra* note 1, at 794–95.

20. *Id.* at 803–04.

21. *Id.* at 812.

22. LAMONT, *supra* note 8, at 108.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* at 110.

be able to make the sacrifices you need me to make in order to be a good “team player.”²⁵

Moving from class themes to gender, I wanted first to respond to Gowri Ramachandran’s worry that workplace flexibility will serve to transfer wealth from social nonconformists (without children) to social-conformist mommies.²⁶ Sometimes things work out that way in some workplaces, but when they do, it is because of bad management. I would never argue that parents should be allowed to leave work to take Billy to ballet, or to coach Suzy’s soccer team, dumping their work responsibilities onto another, already overburdened, employee. This ends up happening when employers leave in place their model of the ever-available worker, making ad hoc “accommodations” when workers—surprise!—have children. The more rational and efficient way to design jobs is around the not-so-heroic assumption that most people have children—and that virtually everyone has a web of intimate relationships or sources of meaning in their lives outside work. If employers follow this logic, they will shift away from the old-fashioned ideal worker (framed in the era of breadwinners married to homemakers) towards the model of a balanced worker who needs to balance a serious career commitment with other goals, responsibilities, and dreams.

This shift should not have to be “too expensive,” another Ramachandran worry.²⁷ In fact, a quarter-century-old literature has shown, again and again and again,²⁸ that employers *save* money when they match today’s workplace to today’s workforce, rather than insisting on preserving the work structures of 1960 in an era when nearly one third of hourly workers have elder-care responsibilities,²⁹ and 70% of families with children have all adults in the labor force.³⁰

25. Williams, *supra* note 9 (audience comments).

26. Gowri Ramachandran, *Confronting Difference and Finding Common Ground*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 725, 730–31 (2011).

27. *Id.* at 731.

28. See generally JOAN C. WILLIAMS, UNBENDING GENDER: WHY FAMILIES AND WORK CONFLICT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT (2000); CORPORATE VOICES FOR WORKING FAMILIES & WFD CONSULTING, BUSINESS IMPACTS OF FLEXIBILITY: AN IMPERATIVE FOR EXPANSION (2005), available at <http://www.cvworkingfamilies.org/system/files/Business%20Impacts%20of%20Flexibility.pdf>.

29. PETER BERG & ELLEN ERNST KOSSEK, MICH. ST. UNIV. SCH. OF HUMAN RES. & LABOR RELATIONS, THE USE OF WORK-LIFE FLEXIBILITY POLICIES AND PRACTICES BY MIDDLE-CLASS, UNIONIZED WORKERS, SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE, available at <http://www.thesustainableworkforce.org/images/stories/briefs/issue%20brief%204%20newrevised.pdf>.

30. Karen Kornbluh, *The Parent Trap*, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, Jan./Feb. 2003, at 111.

Proceeding on to other gender themes, Ann McGinley and Katharine Silbaugh both focus on masculinity.³¹ I read Ann McGinley's piece with the same excitement and embarrassment with which I read Lisa Pruitt's—excitement because they had found relevant studies I never found, and embarrassment for precisely the same reason. McGinley's insights into why men so often see themselves as powerless are chilling. Manhood, unlike womanhood, is a precarious state that has to be earned over and over, resulting in constant status negotiations among men.³² Consequently, men often find themselves caught in "mine's bigger than yours" dynamics that leave them feeling anxious and vulnerable. The conventional antidote is gender-bonding among men, often by harassing women or mistreating gender-nonconforming men, as McGinley points out.³³ I am grateful and relieved to have feminist colleagues whose work is "an exception to feminist work that sees men as unidimensional,"³⁴ not only because the us-versus-them approach strikes me as leading to flawed strategies for social change, but also because that strategy is shaped by an inaccurate model of the way social privilege operates. Social privilege does not create absolute power. It's more like a force field that gives privileged people a steady assist—so long as they fulfill their assigned role. But, as those in queer studies have so eloquently pointed out, men who do not fulfill their assigned role may well be at literal risk of their lives. *This* is what privilege looks like—which does not mean it is not privilege—but that privilege comes packaged with a straightjacket.³⁵

McGinley's most astute insight is that:

Ironically, it is a performance of masculinity for a working class man to refuse to discuss his child care responsibilities with his male coworkers. The injuries caused by an admission that a man has family care responsibilities may be invisible, but such an admission would undermine his masculinity in his own eyes and in the eyes of his fellow workers.³⁶

This highlights, as Robert Chang reminds us,³⁷ that men's investments in gender privilege make change difficult.

31. Ann C. McGinley, *Work, Caregiving, and Masculinities*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 703 (2011); Katharine B. Silbaugh, *Deliverable Male*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 733 (2011).

32. Joseph A. Vandello et al., *Precarious Manhood*, 95 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 1325 (2008).

33. McGinley, *supra* note 31, at 708.

34. *Id.* at 709.

35. Another important contribution of McGinley is her formulation of questions social scientists could usefully study; I will pass these along posthaste! *See id.* at 716–18.

36. *Id.* at 716.

37. *See* Chang, *supra* note 13.

For precisely this reason, while Katharine Silbaugh is right that men *should* be willing and able to embrace values, jobs, and styles that are coded feminine,³⁸ I don't think the best way to persuade them to do so is to tell them to man up and get femmy. I keep remembering the stay-at-home dad I quoted in *Unbending Gender*:

A day of cooking, cleaning, child care and household management is not unlike climbing a mountain. Some of it is sweaty, grueling work, but the pleasures, such as sunlight through the mist on Mount Washington, or seeing a toddler learn a new game, are constant enough to make it worth it.³⁹

My reaction: a guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do. I feel the same way when young women lawyers flock to high heels. If that's what it takes for them to be hard-driving professionals, who am I to judge? They may well need a foot operation by the time they are my age,⁴⁰ but my solutions were hardly perfect either. Each of us must do what we must to make ourselves feel safe and whole. I sometimes *wish* that didn't mean that most men have to describe counter-gender activity in hypermasculine terms—but, well, we didn't make the world. We're all just trying to get by in it. And if that's what it takes for people to embrace counter-gender behavior, so be it. I would rather men feel safe enough to take femmy jobs, do child care, and develop people skills, even if the only way they can bring themselves to do so is to convince themselves that doing those things makes them ever-so-manly. And, besides, did you ever think of child care as a hard, sweaty, dirty job? Even false hegemonizing fuels gender flux.

I also note in passing Silbaugh's skewering of the rationale for single-sex education.⁴¹ I knew nothing about the change to Title IX and am as troubled as Silbaugh is by its indefensible embrace of outdated gender stereotypes. The insistence that boys who do not conform to the mandates of conventional masculinity "should be firmly disciplined, required to spend more time with 'normal males,' and made to play sports" is downright shocking.⁴² Sounds like federally financed homophobia to me.

38. Silbaugh, *supra* note 31, at 748–49.

39. WILLIAMS, *supra* note 28, at 194.

40. See DEBORAH L. RHODE, *THE BEAUTY BIAS: THE INJUSTICE OF APPEARANCE IN LIFE AND LAW* 4 ("Women account for about 80 percent of all foot surgery, much of it related to high heels.").

41. Silbaugh, *supra* note 31, at 739–40, 743–46.

42. Silbaugh is quoting from an ACLU factsheet; I am assuming that is an accurate representation of the ideas of Leonard Sax, a physician associated with the brain science single-sex education movement. *Id.* at 745 (quoting AM. CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION, *BOYS' BRAINS VS. GIRLS' BRAINS: WHAT SEX SEGREGATION TEACHES STUDENTS* (2008), available at <http://www.aclu.org/womens-rights/boys-brains-vs-girls-brains-what-sex-segregation-teaches-students-0#5>).

Beth Burkstrand-Reid and Laura Kessler return me to what Kessler correctly identifies as my life's work: deconstructing domesticity.⁴³ Burkstrand-Reid insightfully explores how domesticity's devaluation of care work affects stay-at-home fathers as well as mothers.⁴⁴ Her insight that stay-at-home fathers are seen as altruistically sacrificing their careers, while stay-at-home mothers are seen as sacrificing for their children's welfare (while their poor husbands have to support them), shows clearly how the ideology of domesticity often serves to veil men's gender privilege.⁴⁵ Burkstrand-Reid also picks up on how stay-at-home fathers (like other men) give rationales for their gender-bending behavior that align them with the traditionally masculine: the *Fortune* article, after reassuring us that these men are not "wimps," assures us that they left heftily masculine jobs . . . for the money.⁴⁶ "Opting out," for them, is just another way of providing for the family?

Burkstrand-Reid's important underlying point is that a gender role switch, in which a few men "opt out" to allow their wives to perform as ever-available ideal workers, is as much a step backwards as forwards. On the one hand, this solution does jiggle gender roles by sending the message that the parent at home can be *either* a father *or* a mother. On the other hand, this false gender neutrality often serves as a modern rationale for continuing to define workplace ideals around men and masculinity, and for continuing to devalue caregiving in ways that make anyone who is associated with it—man or woman—economically vulnerable.⁴⁷

I have long admired Laura Kessler's scholarship around care work,⁴⁸ and this piece is no exception. Kessler is right to point out that, while I have shifted away from classic feminist language and the feminist canon, my goal remains to transform the economy to make the world safe for care work and for the men and women who do it. Just today, I was talking with someone who has invited me to speak at a conference for social workers in the child welfare system. She was urging me to repeat my oft-repeated mantra that a society that marginalizes its mothers

43. Joan C. Williams, *Deconstructing Gender*, 87 MICH. L. REV. 797 (1989).

44. Beth A. Burkstrand-Reid, "Trophy Husbands" & "Opt-Out" Moms, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 663 (2011).

45. *Id.* at 671–72.

46. *Id.* at 672 (citing Betsy Morris, *Trophy Husbands*, FORTUNE, Oct. 14, 2002).

47. Joan C. Williams, Mary Blair-Loy & Jennifer Berdahl, *The Flexibility Stigma*, J. SOC. ISSUES (forthcoming 2012).

48. Laura T. Kessler, *Community Parenting*, 24 WASH. U. J.L. & POL'Y 47; Laura T. Kessler, *The Politics of Care*, 23 WIS. J.L. GENDER & SOC'Y 169 (2008); Laura T. Kessler, *Transgressive Caregiving*, 33 FLA. ST. U. L. REV. 1 (2005).

impoverishes its children. I would not call this Marxism, yet Kessler is right that I remain a material girl.

I also appreciate Kessler's understanding of the social role I seek to play. Seeking to make a concrete change in the world *does* involve leaving many otherwise troubling assumptions in place, in order to connect with people and be persuasive. "[B]y trying to appeal to a broad audience, Williams leaves in place some key building blocks of domesticity that many Americans may not be willing to abandon."⁴⁹ I have tried to forge a new model of what it means to be a law professor committed to social change. In place of the existing model of someone who makes grand pronouncements about the way the world should be, or how judges should decide, my focus has been on how to orchestrate different sets of social actors to move us from point A to point B.

This new image of the law professor brings me to Nancy Levit's point about narrative.⁵⁰ Law professors interested in social change, in my view, could contribute a lot by entering the public sphere to change social narratives. I have tried to do this several times, with some success. Levit discusses my effort to convince the media to acknowledge that women often don't opt out; they are pushed out by workplace inflexibility and gender bias against mothers.⁵¹ A related effort has been to convince reporters to write stories about maternal-wall bias against mothers. I was pleased when a male reporter on the business page of the *New York Times*, writing an article pointing out that all three of the women recently nominated to the Supreme Court have no children, interpreted this not as evidence that mommies opt off the fast track but that the labor market is hostile to mothers.⁵²

After publishing a WorkLife Law study using union arbitrations that documented how many working-class families are one sick child away from being fired,⁵³ I received a call from a Bush Administration Undersecretary of Labor who thanked me for the report. The Undersecretary said that when economists argued for the eliminations of that intermittent family and medical leave because workers were just using the

49. Kessler, *supra* note 1, at 693.

50. Nancy Levit, *Reshaping the Narrative Debate*, 34 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 751 (2011).

51. See generally JOAN C. WILLIAMS ET AL., CTR. FOR WORKLIFE LAW, "OPT OUT" OR PUSHED OUT: HOW THE PRESS COVERS WORK/FAMILY CONFLICT (2006), available at <http://www.worklifelaw.org/pubs/OptOutPushedOut.pdf>; Joan Williams, *The Times Opts Out of the "Opt Out Narrative"*, HUFFINGTON POST (Aug. 11, 2010), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joan-williams/the-times-opts-out-of-the_b_677810.html.

52. David Leonhardt, *A Labor Market Punishing to Mothers*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 3, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/04/business/economy/04leonhardt.html>.

53. JOAN C. WILLIAMS, CTR. FOR WORKLIFE LAW, ONE SICK CHILD AWAY FROM BEING FIRED: WHEN "OPTING OUT" IS NOT AN OPTION (2006), available at <http://www.worklifelaw.org/pubs/onesickchild.pdf>.

leave to game the system, people within the Department of Labor used the report's vivid stories to say, "No, look, people claim intermittent FMLA leave because they really need time off." Levit's point about the social power of narrative is very well taken.

In conclusion, a plea: We need to open up a conversation about new roles for law professors as social persuaders. The old model of the law professor pronouncing "The Way Things Should Be" from on high made sense in times gone by, when a liberal professoriate was speaking to liberal courts and legislatures. We're in a very different situation today. The vision remains vitally important: you've got to have a dream; if you don't have a dream, how're you gonna have a dream come true? That said, we also need alternatives. We need to carve out a role for law professors committed to creating concrete cultural, legal, and organizational change within a two-to-five-year time frame. What we need is a new, pragmatic model for those whose goal is to work on a shorter time frame, to nudge the limits of the possible.