Chapter 10. Repertoires of My Life

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Michael Wilson's journey from Chicago youth to university academic career in Dallas, Texas, had many stop and starts. From a challenging childhood and adolescence, he left secondary school without completing his degree. With time and shifting knowledge combined with opportunities, he explored several then "early" and experimental liberal arts colleges. Finding an institution and instructor/advisors to support him at Cornell University, he completed his undergraduate studies and his PhD in modern European cultural history. Following a sessional appointment teaching at Princeton, his career developed as a teacher and program leader at the University of Texas at Dallas in the field of historical gender studies.

Like many of us, I have a repertoire of stories about my life. In these set pieces, I usually cast myself as a clueless outsider, stumbling through situations I don't understand, oblivious to context and subtext. What might be entertaining at a dinner party, though, will not suffice for what Pierre Nora called the "impossible genre" of ego-history. That leaves me with the question of how best to record the tale of how I ended up where I seem to be. I am nearing the end of my professional life, but it's not over yet, which makes the task a bit daunting.

Some friends have suggested that I'm just a banal example of post-War social mobility. My paternal grandparents were tenant farmers in Tennessee who moved to Chicago to work in factories. My father joined them after his two years of naval service and held white-collar jobs the rest of his working life. I acquired a doctorate and work at a research university.

There is a grain of truth in this familiar narrative of the American Dream fulfilled. But it ignores how the opportunities for social and economic advancement were not afforded to my father's five siblings or to my sister and brother. I can claim no special merit: my family contains people who are smarter than I am, more ambitious, and more hard-working. Other factors must have been in play, contingency prominent among them.

I was a shy and bookish child, eager for the approval of authority figures. School seemed made for me, and I have loved it from the day in 1961 that I started kindergarten. My parents, more than I appreciated at the time, tried to support my seemingly eccentric interests. They scrimped so that I could take piano lessons, and they dropped me off regularly at the local branch of the library. Our family vacations often included historic sites and local museums, and my parents later allowed my participation in community theater. I attended a neighborhood public grammar school from kindergarten through the eighth grade, mostly with

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the same group of classmates. The neighborhood was predominantly Polish, and many of friends' parents spoke little or broken English.

My friends and I were educated surprisingly well, in retrospect, by women who would in later decades have taken up jobs with greater social recognition and monetary rewards. The Chicago public school system could then afford to supplement the main curriculum with only music and art classes.

I was particularly encouraged by Ginger Walsh, an energetic and imaginative teacher who somehow managed to hold onto my cohort for both fourth and fifth grades. Miss Walsh, as she was called, had what was acknowledged to be the liveliest and thus the noisiest classroom in the building. She took great satisfaction in finding pleasurable ways to move us through the required materials and prepare us for the standardized tests on the horizon. I was, I must admit, a teacher's pet, and Miss Walsh's approval gave me considerable pleasure and more confidence. By eighth grade, when we all had to fill out a form listing our ambitions for future work, most of my male classmates wrote "tool and die make," and I wanted to be an architect.

My teachers encouraged me to apply to Lane Technical High School, which enrolled students from across Chicago and had the system's highest admissions expectations. Lane Tech had, in the wake of Sputnik, been designated the city's science and math high school. The program that interested me most, architecture, was considered one of the most rigorous because of all the required math classes. I don't recall ever wondering about being selected to attend Lane. My anxieties, as someone just barely entering puberty, were entirely focused on the required swimming class, which I had heard was conducted in the nude. (It was.)

Lane Tech turned out to be a nightmare. The school was huge, with 4,000 students. In 1970 the entire student body was male. Later in the academic year, when the Board of Education decided to make Lane a co-ed school, about 1,500 students walked out in protest, led by my physical education teacher. They assembled downtown at the Board of Education building, condemning an unacceptable "lowering of standards."

As all this would suggest, Lane was a cesspit of toxic masculinity. I was small, soft, and (in the judgment of my classmates) effeminate: a natural target for bullying. I had few friends and took to hiding in the library during lunch and free periods.

My academic courses were not particularly challenging, which left me more time to read my way randomly through the stacks. I had constant conflicts, though, with my drafting teachers, who found my devotion to the aesthetics of Frank Lloyd Wright to be not merely retrograde but perverse.

Woodshop was also a challenge. I was afraid of all the power tools and was markedly maladroit. I think that the only project I finished successfully was a sanding block. The advent of a small number of female classmates in my sophomore year diverted some of the bullies' attention away from me, but I sank deeper and deeper into depression. Neither I nor my parents could recognize, much less address, what my steady disengagement from the world signified.

The opportunity for real change came from an unexpected quarter. My sophomore American literature instructor, Mrs. Matthews, seemed to me the epitome of teacher burn-out. Each day she lectured to us from a set of yellowed notes. We dutifully took notes on her lectures, which were then collected, followed by a quiz on the material.

I quickly realized that I need not do the required reading, which left me much more time to read what I wanted. The only difficulty came with Thoreau's *Walden*, which I had encountered on my own, and felt rather differently about than did Mrs. Matthews. I did very badly on that day's quiz, and she called me out into the hall. When she asked me what had happened, I could only say that I saw different things in the book than she did.

About a week later, Mrs. Matthews called me into the hall again and asked whether I had ever considered taking honors courses. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I took the information she gave me and said I'd think about it. I barely gave the prospect any thought since it seemed to me that honors classes would require much more work from me for the same result. I declined her suggestion, as politely as I could.

The next week, Mrs. Matthews and I had another chat. She asked whether I had considered private school. "We're not Catholic," I replied. She informed me that there were private schools that were not religiously affiliated, and she named three she thought would be of interest: the University of Chicago Laboratory School, the Latin School, and the Francis W. Parker School.

I dutifully went to the library to research and sent off for each school's information packet. I quickly determined that the commute across Chicago to the Lab School would take far too much time. The curriculum at the Latin School seemed very staid to me. Parker, founded by a colleague of John Dewey, was immediately appealing. The school was explicitly student-centered and seemed to offer a varied and flexible set of courses. I decided, based entirely on the promotional materials, that Parker was the right place for me.

I was oddly confident that my enthusiasm for the school meant that my application inevitably would be accepted. I had no doubts and no Plan B.

The problem was how to approach my parents with this new prospect. The admissions process required that they meet with the headmaster at the same time I underwent an admissions interview. Even more daunting, to be considered for financial aid, my parents would have to share their tax records. My father was vehemently opposed to anyone knowing about his finances. I can't recall how I managed to get my parents to agree to writing a check for the application fee or to scheduling our admissions meetings. I suspect it was a relentless campaign of petulance and outright begging. Tears may have been involved.

I remember very little of my interview but the encounter with the headmaster was transformative for my parents. They informed me, with a hint of surprise, that the school was actually very interested in my application; the headmaster convinced my parents that the education Parker offered would be a good fit for

me and would lead to a good future. My father reluctantly handed over the necessary financial records, and the rest of the process seemed to happen very quickly. I was soon able to inform Mrs. Matthews that I would be transferring to Parker, though I doubt that I thanked her as much as I should have for her attention and encouragement.

I often describe my time at Parker as akin to the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when the film shifts from black and white into color. I entered a world I could never have imagined. The school was located in a part of Chicago I had never seen before my interview, and many of my classmates lived in the most exclusive areas of the city.

Indeed, my peers were so much more sophisticated than I was. They had been places I had only read about, and they knew about things far outside my experience. It was more important to me, though, that I finally discovered peers who cared about books, music, films, and art. My interests had always made me feel like an outsider but now I felt less so. I was still painfully shy and socially awkward, but I gradually made friends, and my depression lessened.

My academic skills were weaker than those of my peers, and I had to work much harder at my classes than I ever had before. Two English teachers took a special interest in me and helped me understand what was expected in my written work. One was Frances Paden, who had recently finished a dissertation on W. H. Auden and nurtured my interest in creative writing. The other was Marie Kirchner Stone, a legend at Parker for her exacting standards and devotion to literature.

My history instructor, William Ray, wrote in a trimester evaluation that I had the makings of a good historian if I would apply myself, a prospect I found appalling then. I also spent a good deal of time in the art studios under the tutelage of Roger Gleason and James Mesplay, both very accomplished practitioners. My interest in architecture transmuted into enthusiasm for all the arts, and I dabbled in everything I could. Too excited by exploring so many new experiences, I simply couldn't decide on a focus.

Since my early teens, my parents and I had shared the expectation that I would be the first in our immediate family to attend college. We knew that the University of Illinois had two campuses, and I assumed I would end up at one of them.

Parker, though, had a required no-credit course on the college admissions process and through it I discovered what were in the 1970s called "experimental" colleges. These were institutions that gave students great discretion in what and how they learned; some had minimal distribution requirements and many used evaluations in place of grades.

At the time, many such colleges could be found scattered around the country, and I sensed that attending one of them would be the best way to continue what I liked best about my Parker education. While my classmates applied to Yale and the University of Michigan, I applied to Bennington, Bard, and New College in Florida. I was accepted at the latter and was awarded a financial aid package that would make it possible.

New College and its relationship to Florida's current governor have been in the media quite a bit in recent years, but in the fall of 1974, it was still a private institution and far less newsworthy. During my first trimester at New College, I enjoyed and did well in my classes—I discovered the discipline of art history, for instance—but I struggled to make friends. In the second trimester, I did poorly on both fronts.

I decided that a geographic cure was required, and I applied to Oberlin as a transfer student, a decision that seemed prescient when New College announced that it was closing its doors. About this time, my parents reminded me that upon my nineteenth birthday they would no longer be supporting me financially.

This was only fair, since my sister was getting married and my brother needed supplementary education to help with his learning disabilities. I had managed to repress these realities, though, and was quite sullen with my parents for some time. I informed Oberlin that I needed to defer admission, and I moved back to Chicago.

In the summer of 1975, I moved in with my great-uncle and found work as a bank teller at a local savings and loan. Everything I did felt like a regression, but I told myself it was only for a year. I could now declare myself financially independent of my parents and in less than a year I would simply move to Ohio for college. I tried taking two courses in Northwestern's evening division, but the trip to its downtown campus on public transportation after a day at work was too daunting. I barely passed both classes.

When people inquired what I'd do if Oberlin didn't work out, I glibly replied, "I can always move to Boston." Of course, had I done the slightest bit of investigation, I would have known that establishing independence for the purpose of financial aid requires years, not months, and I would have been better prepared for Oberlin's decisions.

So, in September of 1976 I packed my meagre belongings, and I moved to Boston. The next five years in Boston were crucial to my development as an adult. I lived in a series of communal households, of which there were a surplus in the mid-1970s. I had a string of jobs that were only meant to support me. I worked in a factory and a bookstore, as a temp and a bank teller again, and finally in the business side of publishing.

These jobs taught me something, but at the time the main lesson seemed to me that I did not want to do any of them for very long. I continued to read a great deal, sketch and paint intermittently, and write reams of maudlin poetry. Through friends, I made connections that allowed me to publish some book reviews in local alternative papers. I also took a few classes through Harvard's Extension School. I was more successful at attending and completing these courses, and that prodded me to think again about becoming a full-time student.

Even more than at 18, I knew I wanted to pursue a flexible and self-directed curriculum. I also wanted to stay in proximity to my community in Boston. However, by 1980, many of the experimental colleges, particularly those in New England, had closed.

I concentrated my efforts on Hampshire College in Amherst and, when I visited campus for my interview, the welcome I received felt much like the one I had enjoyed at Parker. I was admitted and awarded sufficient financial aid so I could manage—if I didn't think about the student loans. One very attractive aspect of Hampshire's self-paced degree was that, if I were disciplined, I could graduate in only three years.

I arrived in Amherst without a clear academic plan. My interests spanned the arts, humanities, and social sciences, and my coursework only expanded the possibilities. My time in the work force had helped me develop greater discipline and time-management skills, so I navigated the freedoms of Hampshire's curriculum much more successfully than I had at New College. I felt strongly that I had to take full advantage of my three years of full-time education, and I sometimes over-compensated. In my second semester, a twenty-page paper on the application of video technology to modern dance quickly turned into a seventy-page behemoth. My sense of urgency contrasted with the more relaxed attitudes of many of the younger students. I discovered that the faculty responded to my enthusiasm and willingness to work hard; I developed tutorial relationships that shaped me in important ways.

The most important of these happened by chance. As a work-study student, I was placed in the financial aid office, but they didn't need me for the full twenty hours I was allotted. I then received a supplemental assignment to assist Mary Russo, a professor of comparative literature who had received NEH funding for the Humanities Forum, a public program to introduce the campus to new directions in the humanities.

Working closely with Dr. Russo, I was quickly immersed in critical theory, feminist and gender studies, and post-structuralism, all of which energized me, even if my grasp of them was at first rudimentary.

In addition to the informal education I received from Dr. Russo, I enrolled in a seminar she co-taught with Nancy Fitch, a historian of France and Europe. That class, Europe in 1900: Issues in History and Theory, was my reintroduction to the study of the past. Whether because I was now mature enough to understand the value of history or because the instructors' approach to historical knowledge was more congenial to me, this course was another formative experience.

Indeed, I often think that my academic career has been largely rooted in the materials and methods I encountered that semester. An oral presentation I gave in class on the Paris International Exposition of 1900 became, after many revisions, my first academic publication. The initial courses I taught independently were also grounded in this period and used many of the texts I first read with Drs. Fitch and Russo.

In the fall of my final year at Hampshire, I started working under their supervision on my senior thesis, an analysis of representations of the past in the Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the Lowell Massachusetts Historical Park. Infatuated with my idealized vision of the life of an academic and encouraged

by my instructors, I considered continuing my education in graduate school. I was confronted once again with the problem of how to focus my shifting range of interests, as is demonstrated by the variety of programs to which I applied: departments of history, comparative literature, communications, film studies, and performance studies.

Several programs did not offer me admission and few of them could provide the financial support I would need. Ultimately, I decided that I would have the broadest set of intellectual opportunities and the strongest funding if I attended Cornell University to work with Dominick LaCapra, the eminent modern European intellectual historian.

Graduate school, though, was a shock at first. My sizable cohort was filled with people who possessed much deeper training in history and historical methods than I had. Many of them had been aiming for a doctoral program since at least their early adolescence. The atmosphere was more competitive than I was used to—one of my male colleagues repeatedly referred to me as an "empty-headed semiotician"—and my relationships with faculty were more distant.

I felt unworthy of the two-year fellowship I had been awarded, and I was, to my surprise, also unnerved by not having a job for the first time in 14 years. Every day for those first two years I would wake up and ask myself if I was really doing the best thing.

What actually decided matters for me was starting to work as a teaching assistant in my third year. I still feel guilty that I was set loose on undergraduates knowing as little as I did about the subject matter and about pedagogy. Gradually, though, my footing became firmer, and I grew more confident about my ability to perform my duties. I had, though, over these two years acquired a much more vexed relationship to writing itself and frequently found myself blocked when it came to my own assignments. At one point, I think I had accumulated more grades of "incomplete" than anyone else in the program.

My graduate education, though, accomplished exactly what it was supposed to do. I learned a great deal from my distinguished instructors as well as from my peers. I came eventually to understand the norms of the historical discipline and the conventions of academic labor. When it came time, I travelled to Paris to undertake research for my doctoral dissertation. The manuscript itself emerged very slowly but, under pressure from the constricted job market, I did complete and successfully defend it.

Starting with Cornell, the story of my career follows something close to a standard narrative. In 1992, after working for a year as an instructor in New Jersey, I was hired onto the tenure track in an interdisciplinary school of arts & humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas.

For more than 30 years at UT-Dallas, I have enjoyed great freedom to teach and research as I have pleased, supported by extraordinarily interesting and generous colleagues. I still learn from them and from my students each semester. This, too, sounds like a conventional sentiment, but my desire to understand the

world and its past have never failed me. As best as I can, I try to live up to the examples set by the many, many teachers along the way who saw in me things I could not recognize in myself. Within the many constraints of our culture, they are the ones who ultimately shaped me. I could not feel any less *self*-fashioned.