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I, Joseph Cunningham, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

It is entitled:
Genres of Underemployment: A Marxian and Qualitative Analysis of College Graduate Underemployment

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Genres of Underemployment:
A Marxian and Qualitative Analysis of College Graduate Underemployment

A Dissertation

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Abstract

With more individuals obtaining undergraduate and graduate degrees and the job market still recovering from the 2008 recession, the instances of college graduate underemployment have increased throughout the United States. This study employs a Marxian theoretical analysis and a dialogical qualitative analysis to examine college graduate underemployment (CGU) in order to ascertain what features of capitalism contribute to CGU and what are the dominant modes of experience of those graduates who are currently underemployed.

The Marxian analysis utilizes several fundamental concepts employed originally by Marx (and numerous scholars afterward) to analyze how CGU is the product of capitalism. Through a dialectical investigation, CGU is a byproduct of labor power commodification and manipulation in periods of crisis. In order to extract more surplus value from labor power, capitalists employ measures such as generating a reserve force of labor power as well as de-skilling labor itself. These processes do not apply only to productive labor, but also other labor types typically associated with a college degree such as unproductive, immaterial, and cognitive labor. This analysis also demonstrates how the relationship between higher education and employment functions as an ideological construct that transmits popular ideology that obscures the nature of higher education as it relates to the professions.

This ideological construct is further examined in a qualitative data analysis that investigates twenty in-depth interviews of underemployed college graduates from different academic disciplines. These interviews are analyzed with a dialogical genre analysis developed by Paul Sullivan in which interview responses are categorized and understood as literary genres. In this study, three genre pairs—epic/romance, tragedy/black comedy, and novel/draft—are employed to illustrate the dominant modes of experiences for college graduates, effectively
categorizing the vast range of participant experiences into genre types that—when paired with a Marxian analysis—demonstrate not only what it means to be an underemployed college graduate and how these individuals consider their educational and work experiences, but also, how these experiences illustrate the broader ideological forces indicative of living in a capitalist political economy.
Acknowledgements

The University of Cincinnati has impacted my life in a profound way. I have lived in the Cincinnati area all my life, and through the University of Cincinnati, I have not only earned my Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate degrees, but have also earned my livelihood by coordinating writing tutoring services for the Clermont branch campus and now the Uptown campus. I take great pride in being a longtime student of this university, and I owe a great deal to this institution.

The University of Cincinnati houses the outstanding faculty members that compose my committee: my committee chair, Mary Brydon-Miller, and my committee members, Miriam Raider-Roth, John McEvoy, and Annulla Linders. You all are uniquely inspiring to me in a way I will never forget. Thank you so much for helping me with this project.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Problem of College Graduate Underemployment

The problem of college graduate underemployment (which, for the sake of concision, will be addressed frequently as CGU) begins not with the post-graduation job search, but before college. CGU represents the inversion of numerous expectations, most notably that the college degree is a sound gateway to gainful employment in whatever field of study captivates an individual’s interests and passions. This expectation motivates the majority of the 1.8 million students in the United States who will earn a bachelor’s degree this year, not to mention the 778,000 who will earn Master’s degrees and the 177,000 who will earn doctoral degrees (National Center of Education Statistics, 2013). Indeed, The American Freshmen Survey reports that 88% of participating freshmen stated that getting a better job was a reason they attended college, up nearly 20% since 2006 (“Money Lures,” 2013). With quality employment opportunities scarce, the anticipatory search for employment creates a prevailing ideological imperative that compels many to go to college (Yee, 2012). However, with increasing frequency, many college graduates are finding that their expectations are not being realized, and at least initially, college graduates, across most academic disciplines, are experiencing underemployment—a condition that can persist for months, if not years, after graduation (Schmitt & Boushey, 2012). In “Why did 17 million Students Go to College?” published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Richard Vedder (2010) provides some unsettling numbers regarding the percentage and number of traditionally low-wage jobs that now possess substantial number of college degree holders as summarized in Table 1:
Table 1
Number and Percentages of Degree-holders with Historically Low-paying Jobs (as of 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent with at least Bachelor’s</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer service</td>
<td>21.62</td>
<td>482,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiters and waitresses</td>
<td>13.40</td>
<td>317,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionists</td>
<td>12.89</td>
<td>141,476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartenders</td>
<td>16.00</td>
<td>80,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telemarketers</td>
<td>15.85</td>
<td>54,713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel desk clerks</td>
<td>16.14</td>
<td>37,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking lot attendants</td>
<td>13.74</td>
<td>18,749</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vedder’s chart illustrates how a significant percentage of degree-holders are compelled to take historically low-paying jobs where possessing a degree is not necessary. With the job market constrained as a result of the 2008 economic crisis and the changing landscape of manual and intellectual work, underemployment remains a legitimate possibility for many college graduates. When faced with this possibility, many people shake their heads and point to the problematic nature of the job market as the primary culprit, but this, itself, is problematic because it prevents many from asking difficult questions regarding the relationship between higher education and employment. The most striking of these questions is why perceive higher education as a gateway to a career in the first place. This study will endeavor to examine the complicated nuances of this question, analyzing the problematic ideological relationship between education and employment framed in the larger context of college graduate underemployment.

Initial Thoughts on the Role of Ideology in CGU

Through its etymology, ideology can be understood as the science of ideas. Through theory and different modes of research, we can come to understand ideas at both an individual and collective level, examining how individuals generate certain ideas and how these ideas influence their behavior. In studying ideology, however, we are not discussing ideas in a neutral or general sense, but a particular set of ideas, those which dominate a given population. Ideology
not only dominates, but *obscures* the reality of certain situations. Doyle McCarthy (1994) comments on this gesture towards obscuring truth as well as other crucial features of ideology:

Ideologies are a class’s false conceptions or false consciousness of itself…all ideas, all forms of knowledge and consciousness are in some way—and often in a distorted way—“interwoven with material activity.” By “material activity” is meant that the actual intercourse of people as they exist and as they are condition by the social and productive forces of the social worlds they inhabit. (p.419)

Ideology is a distorted view of reality—mediated by class and the material and social fabric of society—held by a population of individuals. In circumstances of college graduate underemployment, ideology plays a crucial role in that prospective students are compelled to see a bridge from the university to their prospective jobs that may not be as robust as they are led to believe. The reasons for this notion stem from a complicated array of factors, including the prevalence of capitalist and neoliberal ideology proliferating throughout the college experience, which blurs the separation between higher education and employment (Dar 2012; Ohmann, 2012; Saunders 2010; Vincent 2011). Higher education certainly offers more than job preparation; its benefits as a public good lead to a wealth of benefits, including intellectual and social development, greater self-actualization, increased appreciation for diversity, and a more active social consciousness (Engell & Dangerfield, 2007; McMahon, 2009; Oxtoby, 2012). Yet, despite these contentions, ideology, revolving around education and the professions, serves as a contradictory impulse that influences millions of young people to enroll in college.

In investigating this problem, I turned to Karl Marx whose extensive writings on ideology (as it relates to labor) serve as a critical guide. In these writings, Marx tapped into “a long philosophical tradition which sees human thought as struggling against barriers that impede
access to the truth” (Torrance, 1995, p.30). Marx saw ideology as an emanation rising from the material realms of labor and production, realms manipulated by the forces of capital (Morrison, 2006). Since these forces endeavor to control the labor commodity in the name of exerting surplus value, labor represents a primary vehicle for ideology, and it is this form of ideology that is investigated in this study. The ideological construction that links higher education and employment is disrupted when college graduates are underemployed. Through both qualitative and theoretical analysis, I will investigate how capitalism, as a system, generates CGU and what effect this particular employment condition has on individuals. Ultimately, CGU can be linked to the contradictory influences of capitalism that pulse through higher education and work, and the dominant modes of experience—lived by underemployed college graduates—unveil crucial nuances regarding how this ideology is internalized.

**Research Question(s)**

With this study, I endeavor to examine two dimensions of CGU: the theoretical dimension and the qualitative dimension. By doing so, I hope to forge a link between the broader, more theoretical facets of CGU (utilizing Marxian theory) and the concrete, specific experiences of those experiencing it (by employing a qualitative, dialogical model). Through this two-tier progression, I will provide a thorough examination of CGU, one that locates CGU in the broader theoretical contexts of capitalism, but also seeks to illustrate how the ramifications of CGU manifest in the lives of individuals. With this in mind, I offer the following research questions:

- **Theoretical Research Question:** How is college graduate underemployment a product of the prevalent features of a capitalist economy?
• Qualitative Research Question: What dominant modes of experience are exhibited by underemployed college graduates, and what do these modes of experience tell us about the ideologically constructed relationship between higher education and employment?

These two questions capture both the theoretical and qualitative components of CGU. While much of the literature points to CGU as an unfortunate mismatch between the degrees possessed by college graduates and the needs of the labor market, I will seek to locate CGU as a direct manifestation of numerous features of the capitalist economy where several prevailing factors (including the commodification of labor and the very crises that capitalism engenders) create CGU. Moreover, in interviewing underemployed college graduates and analyzing their experiences through a dialogic analytical model, I will illustrate this issue’s dominant modes of experience and uncover experiential nuances of the ideology embedded in these experiences. As previously discussed, the relationship between higher education and employment represents an ideological construct, and through both the theoretical and qualitative character of this study, certain fundamental elements of this construct will be exposed.

**Positionality (A Narrative)**

In the summer of 2007, I had left the University of Cincinnati with a bachelor’s in secondary education, a certificate to teach English (in grades seven through twelve), and ninety percent of a Master’s degree in secondary education completed. With these credentials, I entered the job market, (like most graduates) relatively weary of my own schooling and ready to work and earn, for the first time, a salary that would enable me to support myself. Instead, what I found was a job market relatively light on English teaching positions and somewhat hostile to my credentials without actual teaching experience, the truly valuable currency a novice teacher requires to obtain a job. This, indeed, proves to be a catch-22 for many individuals entering the
workforce, competing with other individuals who have experience in the field: on one hand, you need a job to obtain work experience, but you also need work experience to obtain a job. Many schools, with a large collection of eager English teacher candidates to choose from, could pick a candidate who readily answered their school’s needs, thus marking me—as an inexperienced, unpolished novice low on contacts and connections—as a less-than-ideal candidate. Such is one’s fate in a buyer’s market.

After four months of futility and the public schools now in session, I caught a bit of a break in October of 2007 by being hired by Ombudsman, a private education company that existed due to a loophole in how public schools obtained government funding. When a child is expelled from a school, the school has two options: 1) to exile that student for a year and lose out on the funding paid to the school for educating that student or; 2) hire a private third party, like Ombudsman, to educate that child somewhere offsite, so that the school can still reap the financial reward of providing that child with an education. The Princeton school district decided on the second option, enlisting the help of Ombudsman to educate their expelled students in an office complex, and Ombudsman hired me to be a part-time English teacher to perform the task. Unfortunately, Ombudsman was firmly committed to a computer module form of education, which means that students, expelled for behavioral issues, would have to sit at a computer four hours straight working on modules that I assigned and helped them complete. This was a losing proposition in many respects. First, I was prohibited from actually utilizing my educational knowledge and acumen to provide these students with more legitimate educational experiences because they had to complete the modules. Second, these students, segregated from the school and told to complete these modules stripped of context, were quite rebellious to this system, and every day I would spent much of day quelling uprisings. I left Ombudsman in March of 2008 for
a part-time English tutor position at Clermont College, a branch campus of UC. It was for considerably less money, but I felt that I would obtain more enjoyment from a less frustrating position.

Yet, I was still underemployed and would be for another year. Still unable to obtain a middle/high school teaching position, I worked twenty hours a week for twelve dollars an hour, cobbling those wages with the few adjunct courses that I was able to pick up after finishing my Master’s degree in the summer of 2008. It was a difficult period. At twenty-five years of age with a Master’s degree, I was unable to support myself, still living with my parents as I slowly accumulated my earnings. The following year, I was promoted to full-time status (at the same rate), moving me to semi-underemployed, and the year after that, facilitated largely by the departure of a staff member, I was able to obtain a position that at last afforded me a salary with which I could support myself near the midway point of 2010, three years following graduation.

Of course, I cannot be overly negative regarding this period. The work itself was a good deal less stressful, and although tutoring college freshmen and sophomores in English was somewhat repetitive in nature, the work was pleasant. Moreover, I, like many underemployed graduates, could have been more “aggressive” in finding gainful employment, scouring the scant job postings for hours or embarking on journeys away from Cincinnati to obtain labor elsewhere, but this notion of effort in obtaining a job is a difficult one, not merely composed of the overly simple, yet often expressed idea that you can get a job if you try hard enough. Unless there are mitigating circumstances, nobody wants to be underemployed. The social stigma it carries along with the inability to obtain certain basic facets of adulthood is more than adequate stimulus for wanting a job. However, what is difficult for many Americans to accept is that much of obtaining an employment is beyond our control. We like to think that we, *individually*, possess some
special set of characteristics that allow us to dictate the path of our careers, but the reality is that a variety of forces beyond our control (most notably, how labor is defined and employed in our society) served as the true determiners in many of our careers. While that does not mean we are not good at our jobs (more often than not, we are) or work hard (more often than not, we do), there is an uncomfortable amount of chance guiding our career pathways, and for many individuals, the winds of chance prove, for some periods of time, to be quite unkind.

Currently, some six years after leaving the University of Cincinnati with my initial credentials, I am quite comfortable. Recently, I transitioned to a program coordinator job at UC, coordinating the university’s Academic Writing Center. Looking back on those six years, the majority of which I was underemployed, there are two distinct ways of analyzing them. On the positive note, one can see this period as merely an extended pathway towards the position I currently hold, slowly amassing the experience and momentum necessary to obtain a “good job,” and this certainly makes a great deal of sense. However, on the negative note, there is a sense of lost time, a period of young adulthood where I was in some kind of limbo—professionally, financially, and socially. That is time when the wheels were spinning ruts in the mud. Is it wrong of me to lament this period? Perhaps many will think it so, yet this study is at least in part powered by this lamentation as I both analyzed the theoretical origins of the underemployed condition and talked with individuals struggling with the same difficulties—individuals with experiences, narratives, and reflections that parallel and diverge from my own. Regardless, my positionality undoubtedly influences the interpretive framework presented here. While I have made serious efforts to reduce this influence during pertinent phases of the study, understanding (at least from my own subjectivity) what it means to be underemployed during this period of time steered the direction of the study, conveys a sense of ethos and pathos that would not
necessarily be as prevalent if the study was performed by an individual lacking my particular experiences.

**Rationale for the Study**

The relevance of this study lies primarily in the nature of its problem. College graduate underemployment is an issue with numerous interested parties, most notably former, current, and prospective students; college professors interested in issues of employment regarding their students; researchers interested in the intersection of higher education and professions; and those interested in the value of education. This notion of education’s value is indeed at the heart of the study. For not only does this study seek (at least tangentially) to uncover the value of a college education in a novel manner, but this study also seeks to decipher the rather complicated definition of the term “value,” as it relates to education, for this slippery value ultimately means a variety of things for different people. The increase of CGU leads many to question education’s value, particularly when education is portrayed as a precursor to a career. One important feature of this study is its ability to illustrate that such ideology is not merely a binary proposition (either valuable or valueless), but that education’s value depends largely on the individual’s interpretation of value and what effects—both inside and outside a career—that individual’s experiences with higher education instill in that person’s life.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study lies in the new territory I seek to establish in understanding CGU. As chapter two will discuss, numerous scholars have written about underemployment and college graduate underemployment, but up to this point, there has been no substantial Marxian analysis of the issue. Marxists, themselves, despite writing extensively about several issues regarding employment (underemployment, deskill, unionization, etc.) have not make
substantial strides in locating CGU in a Marxian context. Even Marxist education scholars, who have analyzed the problematic implications of framing education in terms of labor preparation (such Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America*), have not dedicated substantial attention to this issue, and while many Marxists have critiqued the commercialization of higher education (Donoghue, 2008; Washburn, 2005; Bok, 2003; Aronowitz, 2000), this ideological relationship as it relates to employment has not yet been substantially unpacked.

In addition to the theoretical ground covered in this study, the qualitative component utilizes a new mode of qualitative analysis that was authored by Paul Sullivan in 2012. As of the writing of this text, no one has published a study employing Sullivan’s dialogical analysis. This particular form of analysis holds several specific features that more traditional analytical models do not possess, including rendering interview responses as literary genres and exploring how the tropes of these genres are dialogical to the modes of experience exhibited by the research participants. When employing a new methodology to analyze a problem, new understandings emerge. As future chapters will discuss, Sullivan’s model—with an explicit Marxian precursor in its Bakhtinian origins—offer a powerful mode of examining social phenomena qualitatively, establishing not only an innovative literary character to qualitative data, but a powerful spatial temporality in that data’s analysis. Moreover, the treatment of the interview as a genre allows for rather nuanced understandings of ideology, since genres serve as fitting categorizations of ideology as a human experience. Therefore, both in theoretical and qualitative terms, this study provides innovative understandings of CGU that could influence new directions of research.
Chapter Two

A Brief Review of College Graduate Underemployment

This chapter serves two purposes. The first is to provide a brief review of literature concerning college graduate underemployment. Although there is a fairly substantial body of literature regarding underemployment, this chapter is relatively brief due to its focus on the fundamental issues regarding CGU; moreover, there will be a much larger theoretical chapter to follow. This leads to the second purpose, which is pointing to a need in the currently existing body of literature for a Marxian framework. In doing so, I attempt to demonstrate how my dissertation addresses a gap in the literature in which underemployment and CGU have been analyzed through a variety of different lenses, but have not yet been fully explored with Marxian theory, even though such a lens unveils several important facets of the issue. Therefore, it is my ambition that the following discussion establishes a crucial context to understanding CGU before the next chapter delves into the issue in greater detail.

Statistics on CGU

There has been incredible rise in the number of underemployed people, college educated and not college educated, as a result of the 2008 recession. However, as will be discussed, determining the exact number of underemployed or even a solid estimate is difficult due to problems involved in defining what it actually means to be underemployed. Much like how the current numbers measuring unemployment (an easier concept to measure) are not necessarily accurate due to factors like the number of people who have quit looking for work or people who have acquired part-time labor, quantifying underemployment is a difficult venture, so much so in fact that the Bureau of Labor Statistics makes it a point of informing us that it cannot accurately tabulate underemployment. What it instead offers is a monthly report on a wordy statistical
category labeled as “total unemployed plus all persons marginally attached to the labor force, plus total employed part time for economic reasons, as a percent of the civilian labor force plus all persons marginally attached to the labor force,” which currently hovers around fourteen percent. Many other reports, specifically tailored to CGU, have it much higher. A pool of research has placed CGU as high as fifty percent between 2010 and 2012 (Lee, 2010; Roksa & Arum, 2012) while others have it at less foreboding, but still problematic twenty-five percent during the same period (Hobijn, Gardiner, & Wiles, 2011).

Moreover, the structural damage to the economy and the job market as a result of the recession is what has instilled an unfortunate persistence to the general rates of unemployment and underemployment (Jayadev & Konczal, 2011). Ultimately, a key idea to keep in mind when considering underemployment as a lasting problem is not exclusively looking at it from the perspective of the worker, but rather the from perspective of jobs. The problematic reality that the recession (and the reconfiguring of the labor force its wake) has put a substantial restraint on the number of “good” jobs offered to individuals, and these restraints have a frustrating staying power (Krugman 2012; Reich, 2010). As a result, when we analyze CGU, we must consider numerous factors, including the role higher education possesses in constructing CGU, but this role, while important, is largely secondary if the number of jobs remains limited. CGU is as much an employment issue as it is an issue of education, and while some may argue that we can somehow educate our way out of this situation, if there are not enough jobs to meet graduates after graduation, CGU is inevitable (Marsh, 2011).

Underemployment: Objective and Subjective

Unemployment is essentially an all-or-nothing condition. Either a person has a job or that person does not. Underemployment is far more complicated in this regard, for while we can
point to objective criteria such as pay, hours worked, and education-job congruence, there is also an array of subjective factors that are important in defining underemployment (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011).

Before examining these distinctions, a general definition of underemployment is required. Glyde, Davis, and King (1977) provide one of the first and most widely utilized research-based definitions of underemployment:

An involuntary employment condition where workers are in jobs, either part-time or full-time, in which their skills, including formal and work experience training are technically underutilized and thus undervalued relative to those of other individuals who have made equivalent investments in skill development. (p.246)

In this definition, we are already privy to the objective and subjective features of underemployment. The objective features are easier to grasp as they revolve around things like the number of hours worked (full-time vs. part-time), a worker’s salary, and even a basic congruence between a worker’s skills and his or her actual job. However, while we can somewhat objectively look at this congruence and argue that an engineer working as at a Burger King is underemployed, when introducing the concepts of skill utilization, we begin approaching a more complicated subjective territory.

The notion of skill utilization points to a crucial theme in the literature and holds implications for an education-labor relationship (Jensen & Slack, 2003; Livingstone, 2009). If an individual invests in education to acquire a set of skills, but does not use those skills in his or her job, that individual could be considered underemployed. However, in reflecting on the vast amount of skills inherent to every profession and the degree to which an individual uses (or
doesn’t use) his or her skills, we begin to comprehend the complexity of the underemployment concept.

Indeed, underemployment proves to be an inexact science, largely subjective in nature. David Livingstone (2004) defines subjective underemployment with the following criteria: “perception of overqualification for current job; unfilled desire to use work skills that are unrecognized in present job; and a sense of entitlement to a better job” (p.220). Within each of these criteria, there is linkage to the worker’s identity or sense of self, so that subjective underemployment is more of an ontological construct, one through which the worker employs a set of comparisons in order to ascertain correspondence between his or her skills and the actual position. Education is often the primary factor through which these comparisons are made. In what is considered a seminal article in underemployment studies, Daniel Feldman’s (1996) “The Nature, Antecedents, and Consequences of Underemployment,” we see, that definitions of underemployment are created via comparison to an ideal state of employment, a state that often reflects educational experience:

In addition, underemployment is defined relative to some standard. In some cases, underemployment is defined relative to the employment experiences of others with the same education or work history; in other cases, underemployment is defined relative to the person’s own past education or work history. (p.387)

In approaching this relativity, we start to approach the obscure territory that underemployment inhabits. Due to the vast number of jobs a worker can have and the number of facets of each job that could potentially measure underemployment combined with the often incredible degree of variability among individual worker experiences, understanding what underemployment actually means is not a simple determination (Jensen & Slack, 2003). Although not exhaustive in its
scope, McKee-Harvey and Ryan (2011) have identified the majority of factors, objective and subjective, that contribute to an underemployment definition as I have summarized in the Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1.** Objective and subjective underemployment spectrum

McKee-Harvey and Ryan situate the factors regarding underemployment definition on a spectrum going from objective to subjective. Many of these qualities are self explanatory with perhaps the exception of relative deprivation, which means that the worker perceives a disparity between his or her position and a subjective standard that is determined by the worker. Relative deprivation, therefore, proves to be a highly subjective determinant in underemployment since a worker could point to theoretically any number of job aspects (responsibilities, status, prestige, etc.) and argue, based upon these aspects, that he or she is underemployed.

This continuum provides us with a helpful model illustrating the primary elements of underemployment along with their objective/subjective modality. A substantial portion of college graduates are currently experiencing several of these characteristics simultaneously as some features of underemployment imply others. For example, an individual who is objectively underemployed and is working part-time often experiences elements of subjective underemployment such as feeling of being overly qualified for his or her current job. Yet, despite the commonality among these traits that allow us to categorize people as underemployed, once
more it is important to impart that each underemployed person’s perception of his or her situation is quite unique due to underemployment’s largely subjective quality.

**Underemployment: An Education Problem?**

College graduate underemployment is a problem largely located in the fields of labor. The lack of quality job opportunities for graduates to assume (along with a surplus of low-paying jobs that readily absorb many of these individuals) is often characterized as the primary culprit. However, one can look to the other side of the education-labor progression and perhaps find other potential origins. Formerly, one could point to a variety of purposes to education—including obtaining the credential and training to enter the labor force, but also a variety of initiatives like learning how to think, acquiring life skills, and education for its own sake (Spronken-Smith, Bond, Buissink-Smith, & Griggs, 2009). However, now there is a larger trend in regard to the perception of college education as a necessary gateway towards gainful employment, a trend that is not only well-established in the United States, but throughout the world (Kiziltepe, 2010). The reasons for this trend are difficult to pinpoint exactly, but seem to originate from the changing landscape of labor. The reduction in well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree compels more students to attend college in order to receive the training necessary to obtain a well-paying job (Mullen, 2010).

Although this transition is difficult for many individuals, many are quick to argue that this is the result of the growing knowledge economy populated with jobs that require more knowledge and competencies. However, this is not proving to be the case (Livingstone, 1999; Livingstone, 2009; Marsh, 2010). Instead, what we are generally seeing is the steady reduction of well-paying jobs across the board without the influx of intellectual, technologically-enabled, “twenty-first century” jobs replacing them—thus the increased instances of CGU. Moreover, in
addition to the problematic job market, one can also locate the source of CGU in the potential overproduction (in terms of matching graduates to degree opportunities) of degree-holders, generating an overeducated workforce. It is a somewhat common practice to utilize the terms “overeducated” and “underemployed” interchangeably, but these terms actually hold different connotations. Although I have established that underemployment definitions can be largely rooted in workers’ educational attainment, overeducation places more of the onus regarding the underemployed condition on education, and therefore does not account for the array of underemployment factors (Bashshur, Hernandez & Peiro, 2011).

Even though overeducation is more singular in perspective, this does not necessarily mean that analyzing overeducation is not a critical venture. Actually, overeducation confronts higher education in a more aggressive manner, actually commenting on “the social tendency to produce too much education, whether in terms of burdens to state funding or the requirements of the labor market” (Brynin, 2002, p.638). For many individuals, these contentions may be difficult to accept. First, education is, at least to some extent, largely perceived as a public good. Even if funding is cut or public opinion regarding certain aspects of education is low, our society can never have too much education—largely due to the notion that education carries with it a variety of benefits in addition to its connection to professions. Second, these contentions about educational overproduction reflect the interests of capitalism rather than the interests of individuals; therefore, underemployment theorists, such as Livingstone, are less willing to be sympathetic to the overeducation position since individuals are more likely to look to the labor market to fulfill their need for a job rather than consult the labor market—which requires more individuals to fill lower-paying service oriented jobs—to fulfill its needs.
Despite these two counterclaims, overeducation provides two important theoretical pieces to help us frame our discussion, one of practicality and one of essence. While education is valued in our society, it is difficult to refute the practical argument of overeducation, for the creation of jobs will always be the product of the market, and if it is not economically viable to have certain types of jobs populate the marketplace, those jobs will not exist. In the 1970s, when there was a similar recession and a substantial amount of CGU, overeducation theorists made similar claims about the possibility of an overeducated population (Freeman 1976; Smith 1986). Now, we find ourselves in a new recession, with an even greater number of individuals going to college (due in large part to the explosion of student loans) to compete over a shrinking number of jobs (Marsh, 2010). As Paul Barton (2008) argues, “the absolute demand for college educated workers is also overstated when whatever percentage of that workforce that has gone to college is equated with the percentage of jobs that require college-level learning” (p.19). Again, this speaks to the two pivotal factors in the education-employment relationship. The first is the ideological “overstatement” that today’s employers require a surplus of college-educated workers. The second is that this ideology is largely false and the current makeup of employment opportunities consists largely of jobs that may not necessarily need a degree. From the basic viewpoint of the labor market—regardless of the subjective and critical factors at play here—there is a mismatch of needs between college graduates and employers, and thus, we must call into question this perception regarding a connection between higher education and employment.

**Effects of Underemployment**

Now that we have teased out relevant nuances of CGU, we can move onto the effects of underemployment. In one sense, underemployment carries with it a unique set of effects because those affected—obviously unlike the unemployed—do have a job, but the job often generates
discontent. Indeed, job dissatisfaction is high among underemployed people (Khan & Morrow, 1991). In a survey that compared underemployed college graduates to underemployed people without a college degree, Beverly Burris (1983) found that college graduates were twenty-five percent more likely to be extremely dissatisfied with their job than their non-degree holding counterparts. This discontent forms new employment condition terms like “mal-employment” (Fogg & Harrington, 2011). Mal-employment is connected to underemployed college graduates since it is a condition that seeks to measure overeducation. With the increased underemployment created by the Great Recession, mal-employment is on a steep rise at nearly 40% as of 2013, and with it, increased worker dissatisfaction and loss of interest in the job is on the rise as well (Luhby, 2013).

What these studies demonstrate is that regardless of definition or conceptualization, underemployment has real effects for college graduates. When graduates exert the tremendous effort and financial sacrifices required to obtain a degree and then are met with a difficult job market, these individuals must often contend with both the dissatisfying nature of their work and the reality that their ambitions are not coming to fruition (Maynard & Joseph, 2006). In addition to work dissatisfaction, underemployment possesses similar negative psychological effects as unemployment (Wilkins, 2007). Depression has been linked to underemployment (Dooley, Prause, & Ham-Rowbottom, 2001) as have a number of negative attitudes generated by their condition. One such attitude is characterized as the discouraged worker effect (or the notion that underemployment reduces the worker’s desire to seek better employment due to being discouraged), and that is the sentiment that “you just get used to it” (Stofferahn, 2000; van Ham, Mulder, & Hooimeijer, 2001). This sentiment affects workers who have, for the time being,
given up on seeking a more ideal form of employment and have become disheartened to the point of passively accepting their condition.

Another negative attitude created by underemployment is a form of alienation in which the worker struggles with the common perception that one must be flexible and resilient in this situation (Vickers & Parris, 2007). In the wake of the Great Recession, underemployed persons, lamenting their situation, are often told that they should be “happy” to have a job, and they just need to keep working until something better arises. However, while these statements hold a degree of truth, the frustration and depression often intertwined with being underemployed makes such sentiments difficult to accept. In a personal narrative published in *Qualitative Inquiry*, Andrew Herrmann (2012) vents such frustrations regarding his inability to obtain employment in academia:

> When *we* look at ourselves through the lens of the academic success narrative, *we* conclude there is something wrong with us. *We* are not smart enough. *We* aren’t resilient enough. *We* have not tried our best. *We* are bad interviewers. *We* studied the wrong subject. *We* picked the wrong advisor. *We* did not work as hard as we could. (p.254)

This quote speaks not only to the frustration of being underemployed, but also the degree to which graduates blame themselves for their condition. Despite the reality that graduates owe their condition to the problems within the labor market more so than their effort, the ability to earn a degree perhaps instills a sense of autonomy that comes to a sudden stop when they find themselves unemployed or underemployed. For four or more years, graduates have been in charge of their fate, working hard and immediately seeing the fruits of their labors, and even though obtaining a job is less dependent on merit, there is a sense among graduates that they have control over their condition, which fosters this self-deprecation.
Gaps in Understanding CGU

The above discussion of CGU is one that examines it from several perspectives. The most dominant of these perspectives occupy the realms of descriptive data (percentages of underemployed college graduates), definitions, the concept of overeducation, and qualitative studies that categorize the effects of being underemployed. What my study adds to this body of literature is an extensive Marxian analysis of CGU, applying a wide assortment of concepts in order to generate this analysis. In looking back on the research, only David Livingstone’s discussions of CGU utilize Marxian theory to analyze components of underemployment, and in that instance, the utilization is quite cursory, representing a single chapter of Livingstone’s (2004) book, The Education-Jobs Gap. The reasons for the relatively scarce amount of Marxist writing on CGU probably stem from numerous sources. First, Marxism is a critical theory that may not interest any number of scholars, particularly those scholars who are not seeking to critique the processes of capitalism in their studies. Secondly, from the standpoint of Marxists, CGU is not a topic generally drawing the critical focus of Marxist scholars. College graduates, as a population of study, are not necessarily the first population one thinks of when one considers the proletariat, and therefore, CGU may not seem like the most problematic example of capitalist exploitation. Nevertheless, this study will attempt to broaden the investigative scope for both underemployment and Marxist studies, illustrating that CGU is indeed a product of capitalist processes as it relates to employment and work and that the analytical tools provided by Marx and Marxist scholars are indeed quite appropriate for teasing out the origins and problematic nuances of college graduate underemployment.
Chapter Three  
Marxian Analysis Part I: From Method to Labor  

**Dialectics: Remembering Marx’s Method**

To begin with Marxian dialectics is to begin with the very method Marx utilized to explain the external and internal mechanisms of capitalism. Unfortunately, Marx never wrote an extensive investigation of his dialectical method, leaving its actual nuances to all manner of theoretical speculation. However, I argue that it is strangely befitting that Marx left no philosophical treatise on dialectics, for the dialectical method, in all its complexities, is a process that is best understood as a process. Paraphrasing a lecture from leading Marxist theorist, David Harvey (2013), the best understanding of the Marxian dialectics can be acquired via reading *Capital* because it is in that great book that dialectics unfolds before the reader’s eyes—without heavy-handed explanation, but rather as a natural and organic progression.

I am initiating our conversation with a brief commentary on dialectics for a few reasons. First, I believe it is important to have a solid grasp of the Marx’s method in order to truly understand the implications of his theory for our particular problem. Second, the dialectic, from a theoretical standpoint, operates as a process desirous for augmentation and application to new phenomena. Finally, the labor strain of dialectics holds particular interest for us here as a Marxian understanding of labor is crucial to this theoretical framework, and greater understanding of how we can look at labor dialectically holds particular relevance for our conversation.

**Understanding dialectics.** Entire dissertations have been dedicated to dialectics and focus on historical accounts of the method. Indeed, dialectics have a rich history, charting back to Greek philosophy, yet we, as many have done before, will take a convenient shortcut and
briefly discuss Marx’s immediate precursor, G.W.F. Hegel and his dialectical method. Prior to Hegel, dialectics existed in numerous metaphysical and rhetorical forms, all powered by the argument that in uniting opposite ideas or phenomena, something new would emerge. One such intricate dialectic would be the synthesis of two antithetical concepts like the ideal or potential freedom of the spirit and the actual or concrete bondage. In synthesizing these two concepts through Hegelian dialectics, the potential freedom, formerly housed in the mind and spirit, confronts the bondage or oppression of the material realm, appropriating its actuality in order to generate actual, concrete freedom. What was important about Hegel’s conception of the dialectic was that he “articulated dialectics doubly, at the same time subjectively and objectively, in terms of the experience of consciousness and the development of the thing itself” (Haug, 2005, p.243). Combining a mode of logic with an epistemological expression of how perception and knowledge came into being, Hegel rooted the dialectical process in the consciousness of human beings, allowing our understanding of the world to come into being via a continuous process in which our consciousness synthesized contradictory senses and experiences into ideas.

A former student of Hegelianism, well versed in the dialectical process, Marx famously, under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach’s materialist philosophy, in his own often quoted words, “stood Hegel on his head,” resituating the dialectic in the material world instead of in the consciousness, thus adding an empirical dimension, one that not only operated as in the realm of ideas and abstractions, but as a scientific method as well. In Dialectical Materialism, notable Marxist theorist, Henri Lefebvre (1940/2009) writes, “the dialectic, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is real, it precedes the mind, in Being” (p.97). The exact extent to which Marx actually diverges from Hegel in terms of the dialectic is a matter of some contention;
however, Marxian dialectics unveil theoretical, epistemological, and developmental processes that we can employ to understand the focus of this study.

**Dialectics and CGU.** In simultaneously investigating and employing a dialectical method, we touch upon numerous corresponding and competing processes at work. Instead of analyzing CGU as a segment of a totality or the result of a series of causal structures, we can understand it dialectically in the interplay of both material forces and social/political condition (Kain, 1980). Just as David Harvey (2010) describes Marx’s analysis in *Capital* in a dialectical mode in the figure below, we can describe CGU underemployment in similar terms, thus exposing the contradictory facets of higher education’s relationship to labor in which higher education both serves as a channel into the greater labor pool while concurrently frustrating that same purpose (Lowy, 2007).

![Figure 2. Recreation of David Harvey’s interpretation of Marx’s Method in Capital](image)

With this model, one sees how dialectics can be employed to describe a mode of production embarking from the point of commodities, and through a series of dialectical interchanges, more commodities are created, produced, exchanged, and accumulated. Marx’s powerfully dynamic analysis of labor under the banner of a capitalist mode of production—an analysis that serves as a fundamental theoretical influence in this study—should be perceived as an dialectical process, one through which the internal and external characteristics and tendencies
of both labor and laborer are inextricably interconnected and in perpetual flux (Harvey, 2010). This position is present throughout Marx’s theory; for instance, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973/1993) argues “against capital, labor is the merely abstract form, the mere possibility of value-positing activity…but when it is made into a real activity through contact with capital…then it becomes a really value-positing, productive activity” (p.298). Within this quotation, we perceive the contradictory facets of labor, one that holds both real and abstract modalities, operating as a physical activity and, under the influence of capital, an abstracted process rife with possibilities in terms of producing value (Cohen, 1974). The contradictions of the labor process, as we shall soon see, enable greater subservience, on the part of the workers, to capitalist exploitation. Unemployment and underemployment are implications of these contradictions, one through which corporations, in order to maximize profits, manipulate the labor pool and wage rates. In what will also be discussed in a later section, an educated labor force holds a wealth of contradictory forces under the jurisdiction of capitalist production as we analyze the tensions between intellectual labor and new methods of deskilling the workforce.

Analyzing labor dialectically—with a narrowed focus on CGU—produces a panoramic view of the problem in continuous movement. Moreover, dialectic thought creates an inclusive model through which we can incorporate all manner of factors and possibilities otherwise deemed incompatible in more linear, causal forms of analysis. Once again, dialectical methods do not represent problems as totalities or as causal structures, but rather as groups of contradictory processes that generate new phenomena and methods of analysis. Therefore, the material structures that determine the place of college graduates in the labor process influence the symbolic, abstract, and ideological directives internalized by college graduates while
simultaneously being guided, if not manipulated, by those very superstructural, immaterial concepts.

**Problems and Contradictions in the Capitalist Mode of Production**

Marx employed dialectics primarily for the purpose of examining a capitalist mode of production. Born at a crucial period of capitalism, Marx confronted the evolving context in order to expose the internal contradictions of capitalist production (Comnien, 2000), the primary of these contradictions being that while a capitalist economy yields some advantages, mainly profits for the capitalists, these same impulses yield to periods of collapse, or “they lead to a point at which that particular economic organization ceases to be the optimal form of society’s productive activity” (Booth, 1989, p.614).

This fundamental contradiction of capitalism aside, Marx, employing the dialectical method, was able to penetrate the heart of capitalism. Instead of being ruled by basic principles of supply and demand, capitalism possesses a dynamic survivalist potentiality that enables it to evolve perpetually with the times (Padgett, 2007). As Marxist economist, Richard Wolff (2010), argues, “capitalism survives because it can resolve the crisis of one kind of capitalism by a transition to another kind rather than a transition out of capitalism” (p.60). This evolutionary drive to capitalism spreads to, what David Harvey (2010) labels, “seven distinctive activity spheres…of capitalism: technologies and organization forms; social relations; institutional and administrative arrangements; production and labour process; relations to nature; the reproduction of day life; and ‘mental conceptions of the world’” (p.123). Two things are notable about these areas. First, the relations between these areas are not hierarchical, but rather dialectical, meaning that no area holds precedence over another; all are, more or less, equal and in constant relation with one another. Second, in pulling the focus of our study, CGU, into this framework, we see
how our particular topic connects to each of these areas. Figure 3 summarizes these relations below.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3. Model of Harvey’s life spheres and their relation to CGU**

From each area of capitalist proliferation into one’s life sphere, clear connections to CGU can be drawn. More than illustrating the pervasiveness of CGU, this diagram demonstrates the overwhelming prevalence of capitalism and its ability to invade nearly every sphere of human existence. This, ultimately, validates why a Marxian form of analysis is exceedingly relevant in this study, even as Marx did not write extensively about higher education. What Marx did point to was the ever-evolving and pervading form of capitalist domination, one that could easily absorb that which once formerly existed outside the early rule of capital. As Marx (1894/1970) writes in the third volume of *Capital*, “in a social order dominated by capitalist production even the non-capitalist producer is gripped by capitalist conceptions” (p.39). Certainly, an educated
class of workers, often participating in non-productive, immaterial work, falls into this order, an order that perpetuates considerable chaos and alienation on the worker.

Indeed, Marxian theorists, including Marx himself, have attempted to establish the anarchic temper of capitalism. When our conversation turns to crisis theory, the instability and chaotic movements of capitalism effectively bring the world to its knees. However, as we keep in mind the individual victims of capitalism and the growing immiseration of the worker, we see how capitalism generates a form of “social incoherence” (Harvey, 2005, p.80). Returning to the Grundrisse, Marx (1973/1993) argues that “in the money relation, in the developed system of exchange…ties of personal dependence, of distinctions of blood, education, etc. are in fact exploded, ripped up…and individuals seem independent…free to collide with one another and to engage in exchange within this freedom” (p.164). Here Marx points to the dubious autonomy propagated by a free market, yet this supposed freedom serves as an impenetrable boundary imposed by a capitalist system. Nothing escapes it, education included. Not only do we see this tendency in the growing commodification of the educational process, but also in the social relations, now dominated by capital, that college graduates must navigate.

Ideology’s Influence

What makes capitalism such a pervasive and ineluctable system is not exclusively its influence within material conditions of production and daily life, but through ideology, which surrounds the material base and becomes internalized by all classes, capitalist and non-capitalist alike. Ideology has a complicated role in Marxian theory, but an undeniably important one; it serves as crucial anchor that roots Marx in the postmodern age, for even as capitalist ideology is thoroughly the offspring of modernity, it—like capitalism—evolved rapidly to the current milieu, and corresponding with postmodernism’s relativist meanings and definitions, Marxists
have translated ideology to mean a variety of things, thanks in no small part to Marx’s multiple uses of the term (Seliger, 1977); nevertheless, both Marx and Engels, more often than not utilized ideology in a pejorative sense (Mills, 1985). Take, for instance, Marx’s (1984) description in *The German Ideology* where he links ideology to “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is ruling material force of society, is at the same time ruling the intellectual force” (p.64).

Not surprisingly, we have a dialectical account of ideology, one that is not purely immaterial, but rather a process of material and immaterial dynamism. Therefore, ideology can be perceived as an interweaving of false ideas or false consciousness into the material fabric of society (McCarthy, 1994; Kain, 2001). Marx (1984) carefully charts this epistemological deceptiveness when he argues:

> Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (p.47)

What is Marx telling us here? First, he is telling us, against a Hegelian idealism, that material conditions have an irretraceable influence on the formation of the consciousness, but more importantly, that our ability to interpret the physical world and its circumstances is, in part, engineered by the historical conditions rooted in a material framework. As Henri Lefebvre (1968/1982) states, “ideology is not…to be accounted for by a sort of ontological fate that compels consciousness to differ from being. Ideologies have truly historical and sociological foundations, in the division of labor on the one hand, in language on the other” (p.66). The
building blocks of human activity, our social relations and our language, are, in some sense, inherently ideological. Material realms influence human beings who generate ideas—there is nothing innately problematic with this process, obviously. However, under the influence of capital and its capacity for proliferating into the fibers of human existence, this neutral process grows contorted, tilting in the favor of capital—in the favor of maintaining the capitalist production process, the drive towards continuous consumption, and the disciplinary structures that keep the working classes pacified. Labeling it as false consciousness or the product of capitalist hegemony ultimately holds similar endgames, for—despite their respective characteristics, both represent similar ideological imperatives. The working class works ceaselessly towards the benefit of the capitalist class. Indeed, as we shall soon discuss, labor is the preeminent means of ideological transmission. But before we traverse down that difficult pathway, now that our foundation for ideology has been constructed, we should revisit our problem in order to see how CGU rests upon it.

**Ideology’s implications for CGU.** Why is ideology a necessary component of our CGU framework? There exist two crucial ideological implications, one at a localized level and one at a superstructural level. The localized level comes in the form of commodity fetishism that theorists often link with critiques of ideology. Marx (1967/1974) famously describes commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Capital* as a faulty way of perceiving commodities, a mystified sense in which the social relations surrounding the commodity along with the value imparted to the commodity via labor obscures that object’s or service’s use value. This notion of commodity fetishism would take up a life of its own in Marxian theory, spawning a variety of critiques that diverged from Marx. Nevertheless, the basic tenets of the theory hold undeniable power as Richard Lichtman (1993) writes:
Marx treats the mystification of the consciousness as intrinsic to the form of capital production... It is no longer merely the case that economic power confers power over intellectual productions, which is “falsified” social control. The account is much more profound. Ideology is generated out of the mode of production itself. And because the nature of exploitation that is crucial to the mode of production reveals “the hidden basis of the entire social structure” it reveals how and why the capitalist class makes use of its power over intellectual production. (p.16)

Education, as a commodity, is among the most fetishized concepts in our social order. The value of education, which in some sense will always be subjective and personal, is obscured, and its relationship to professions and jobs is exaggerated, so that it may be depicted as the most secure pathway towards gainful employment. However, recent studies have cast light on the fetishized character of education, one that contradicts the portrayal of education as a panacea to society’s ills, particularly the economic problems of the United States and the persistent problems of unemployment and underemployment (Marsh, 2011). Higher education does not guarantee a job; the considerable time and money “investment” that higher education is represented as does not always yield a return. Quite to the contrary, “more education and skills—that is higher productivity—have not been rewarded... with the actual creation of economic opportunities” (Anyon, 2011, p.69). Certainly, education yields a wide variety of benefits, including the critical thinking skills necessary to penetrate the façade of commodity fetishism, yet the labor connection will unequivocally be the benefit lauded by capitalism because (1) there are millions of college graduates that contribute to the capitalist mode of production, increasing its profitability, (2) education as a means of social mobility serves as a fundamental ideological constraint that pacifies the general population, and (3) regardless of whether their skills are
utilized or not, college students are continually needed to finance universities, which have become vital contributors to the current incarnation of the capitalist economy.

The second implication comes from the larger ideological context, that of the superstructure. While ideology can effectively be localized in the individuals as a disciplinary measure or as the commodity when it holds a fetishized quality, the larger, macro-level transmission via societal superstructures completes the dialectical illustration of ideology theory. Ideology is not exclusively an immaterial force of the consciousness, but arises from the material and economic conditions of society (Rehmann, 2007). The superstructures of society interact continually with the “base” or the physical conditions as well as the means of production. Superstructures are those structural facets of society that serve as mechanisms that broadcast the ideology of the capitalist class; such mechanisms could be the media, institutions of the state, and educational organizations. Terry Eagleton (2000) argues why this notion of superstructure is necessary for understanding society through a Marxist lens:

Superstructures are necessary in a Marxist view not because of the kind of bodies we have, but because the productive activity to which these bodies give rise generates certain social contradictions. If we need a superstructure, then, it is because the “base” is self-divided, fissured by certain antagonisms. And the function of a superstructure, by and large, is to help manage these contradictions in the interests of a ruling class. (p.239)

The material base of society is laden with qualities that support and negate the interests of the capitalist class. For example, the general population is full of potential workers that can be appropriated to generate profit; however, those workers must be trained and socialized towards this aim, and if those workers collaborate and operate in their own interests, profits can be jeopardized. Superstructures function as a means to guide society to realize the interests of the
capitalist class, and education serves as a primary superstructure, transmitting capitalist values and socializing potential workers from a very young age until they are ready to assume their function in capitalist production. Louis Althusser (1970) notably labeled educational institutions as an “ideological state apparatus” or a superstructural organization where students learn not only the skills necessary to be integrated in capitalist forms of production, but also the behavioral discipline required to facilitate this integration as smoothly as possible, reducing antagonistic or critical perceptions of the capitalist economy.

One can point to superstructures as a contributing force to CGU in the following manner. Higher education, as a superstructure, is imbued with the interests and directives of capitalism. Evidence of this contention is everywhere: in the corporation-college relationship that dictates internships, co-ops, and research funding; in the increased prevalence of business models dictating the direction of college departments; in the increased pervasiveness of an administrative-management presence; in amendments to college curriculums and admission standards; in the images that sell college to students; and in the increased efforts by departments to make statements regarding the professional viability of their degrees. While one can isolate any of these examples and make specific arguments regarding their purpose, one can also collectively—dialectically—gather all these initiatives together and posit that higher education is a superstructure serving the interests of capitalism.

Of course, an important counterclaim must be issued in that superstructures are not absolute powers, and within the university system, there are moments (like offering courses in critical theory, majoring in fields that have no connection to production, or joining student activist organizations) that openly contradict capitalist interests. Yet, these exceptions do not disprove the ties of capitalism binding universities and college students to reinforce the prevalent
notion—no matter how precarious—that a college degree is a secure pathway to gainful employment. What is equally startling is that these institutions—in a gesture that reflects the concealing nature of ideology—typically do not actively communicate to students this precariousness. Yes, professors and advisors may inform the students of the potentially problematic connections between higher education and securing a job, but these voices are largely drowned out in the ideological wall of sound, one that is negligent of material and economic conditions and fixated on preserving the university’s commercial viability.

**Marxian Labor Theory**

The transition from ideology to labor is a rather smooth one due to the reciprocating relationship between the two concepts. Labor is, among many other things, the primary conduit that transmits ideology, and ideology is an inseparable component to the capitalist conception of labor. As esteemed Marxist economist, Richard Woolf (1981) contends, “Marx is at great pains to make clear the whole superstructure of liberal bourgeois philosophy and political theory and law is introduced to justify the treatment of labor power as a commodity” (p.110). Labor is, in many ways, the centerpiece of Marxian theory, and much of Marx’s extensive writings are dedicated to how labor is appropriated, valorized, manipulated, degraded, and utterly subsumed in the capitalist means of production. Indeed, using labor (and the laborer) as the focal point in the analysis of capitalism was a fairly novel concept in Marx’s time. In a lecture given by David Harvey (2013), he was asked how Marx was able to see this radically different version of the political economy that the vast majority of classical economists and political philosophers neglected; to which Harvey replied that Marx was the first to utilize the position of the laborer as his frame of reference in his analysis and that most, during Marx’s time, merely perceived the worker as an inconsequential beneficiary of capitalism.
**What is labor?** In examining a Marxian theory of labor and its relationship to CGU, we must first acquaint ourselves with a Marxian definition of labor and the implications of that definition within capitalist production. In doing so, two preliminary statements should be made. First, we should reconcile the scope and nature of our study to a popular contention that Marx objectified the laborer and analyzed the laborer’s position from a primarily scientific perspective. In *Limits to Capital*, David Harvey (1982/2006) clarifies this position, stating that while the worker’s position and subjective experiences are indeed valuable, the fact that Marx’s “theory holds up to the workers, as in a mirror, the objective conditions of their own alienation, and exposes the forces that dominate their social existence and their history…was, surely, Marx’s most signal achievement” (p.113). Although the worker that Marx describes in his encyclopedic writings does not read as a worker of flesh and blood, but rather a concept, the logos established in Marx’s position is brought to the forefront. Secondly, it is important to remind ourselves that in discussing any Marxian concept, particularly that of labor, we are not analyzing it as an isolated force, for that would be impossible in a Marxian analysis. Instead, when we discuss labor, we must continually keep in mind that we are describing labor as a process embedded in a complex web of other processes, including physical processes (the conversion of raw materials into commodities), economic processes (utilizing labor power to situate exchange value on commodities), and socio-cultural-historical processes bound in labor (Resnick & Woolf, 1987).

With this in mind, we can now approach the intricate position of labor in the Marxian canon in order to apply it to CGU. Now with many of Marx’s key concepts, labor evolved over the course of Marx’s writing. Early Marx perceived labor in primarily a Hegelian realm of alienation and called for its abolition before revising both his alienation and labor theory in order to call for the *liberation* of labor from capitalist production (Cohen, 1995). The reason for this
liberation comes from the means by which capitalism degrades, exploits, and perhaps most interestingly commodifies the labor process (as labor power) in order to squeeze out as much surplus value as possible. A labor process free of capitalist interference and control was, to Marx, integral to the identity and ontology of individuals (Sparling, 2012); labor was more than a burdensome necessity to society, but rather a socio-historically determined purpose for humankind, an expression of people’s creative properties and a means by which individuals could cooperate towards the collective fulfillment of societal need.

Under the auspices of capitalism, labor is removed from the realm of public good and becomes subsumed into the alloy of capital, thus galvanized under a language, purpose, and complicated network of processes that actively works towards the dehumanization of work. Laborers, labor time, and labor power are all collected together into a fluid commodity utilized to grease the gears of capitalist production, inputting value in commodities and increasing profit for the capitalist class (Gartman, 1999). Much of Marx’s (1975/1992) *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* is dedicated to explaining how the capitalist control over labor power is a process that corrodes the human element of labor:

The demand for men necessarily regulates the production of men, as of every other commodity…The worker has become a commodity, and he is lucky if he can find a buyer. And the demand on which the worker’s life depends is regulated by the whims of the wealthy and the capitalists. If supply exceeds demand one of the elements which go to make up the prices…will be paid below its price…So the worker is sure to lose and to lose most. (p.283)

Marx expounds on this position later in the text:
Production does not produce man only as a commodity, the human commodity, man in the form of a commodity; it also produces him as a mentally and physically dehumanized human being. Immorality, malformation, stupidity of workers and capitalist, its product is the self-conscious and self acting commodity…On one hand, we have the production of human activity as labour…as an activity wholly alien to itself, to man and to nature, and hence to consciousness and vital expression…On the other, the production of the object of human labor as capital, in which all natural and social individuality of the object is extinguished…and the same capital stays the same in the most varied and social circumstances, totally indifferent to its real content. (p.336)

These two passages are quoted at length to provide illustration of Marx’s vision of labor’s degradation via capitalism. Of course, one can question its relevance today and argue that the picture of labor has changed dramatically from Marx’s time, evolving from the Dantean images of the nineteenth century factory to the air conditioned office; however, while the *quality* and *forms* of labor have undeniably changed, the purpose of labor as a value-instilling activity, the commodification of labor under capitalism, the contradictions found in the interests of the capitalist class and workers, the manipulation of the labor supply, and the multiple forms of alienation resonating in a variety of occupations still remain embedded features of the capitalized labor process, and many tenets of Marxian theory still hold a shocking and troubling degree of permanence (Ricoy, 2003; Alder, 2007).

**The commodification of labor and social reproduction.** Marx’s impassioned examinations of labor in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* would serve as the precursor for a more extensive study of labor in the first volume of *Capital*. Indeed, one should always keep in mind that volume one of *Capital* is about the capitalist means of production from
the perspective of the labor process. We look to *Capital* for inspiration about how the commodification of the labor process influences CGU and how the concept of education-as-commodity is anticipated by this discussion.

So how is labor a commodity, and what distinguishes it from other commodities? These two questions are inextricably linked, for labor, specifically labor power, is among the first purchases by a capitalist at the outset of production, and unlike any other commodity, labor power is what largely creates value for the commodity, not only through the physical action of transforming materials into a product, but largely through the exertion of labor power and the encapsulation of labor time, the commodity is imbued with an exchange value (a price) based upon that process. In a classic scene from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, the old prospector, Howard, pontificates that the value of gold is not based upon its use, but rather the labor necessary for finding the gold and mining it. Additionally, this exchange value can be manipulated by the capitalist—via the amount of labor employed, the number of hours and intensity of labor, and the wages paid to the workers—in order to maximize profits.

Although Marx could, like any number of classical economists, continue his analysis of how capitalists produce value, Marx lingers on the worker’s role in this process for several hundred pages in order to determine how the value of labor power is determined and what toll that value imposes on the working class. In doing so, Marx (1967/1974) dialectically approaches labor both materially and abstractly in order to formulate an ontological construct regarding how the *being* of the worker is ultimately the appropriation of the worker’s becoming in the name of transforming it into value: “Labor-power exists only as a capacity, or power of the living individual. Its production consequently presupposes his existence. Given the individual, the production of labor-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance” (p.171).
Throughout Marx, one repeatedly comes across this notion of the workers, via the labor process, reproducing themselves along with the production of commodities and value. What does Marx mean when he speaks of this reproduction? Ultimately, there is a tri-layered reproductive process occurring: the first layer is the physical body of the worker who must return to the production process every day and consistently reproduce the labor power exerted in order to reproduce value; the second layer consists of the reproduction of the human being as a worker in the capitalist conception of labor, an ontological shift that remakes the worker into a cog in the capitalist machine whose life is continually appropriated, with increasing pervasiveness, in the production process; and the third layer is the reproduction of the worker as a class, a larger collection that functions in the greater reproduction of the entire scope of capitalism. As always, we must remind ourselves that capitalism is not a static entity, but rather a dynamic process in continual motion that is always accumulating and increasing, lest it falter into stagnation and crisis. David Harvey (2010) comments on this worker reproduction process:

what the circulation of capital really means [is that] capital circulates through the body of the worker as an active subject who reproduces capital. But the worker not only has to be reproduced as an individual person. ‘The maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.’ (p.251)

Quoting Marx in the last sentence here, Harvey is pointing to how this reproduction does not occur just within the logic of capital, but in its very process, which Marx spends considerable time upon notably in chapter ten of Capital, “The Working Day.” Within this context, the larger realms of capitalism—up to this point approached largely in the abstract—are handled with a great deal more specificity, representing the closest attempt to Marx encroaching upon a micro-
level analysis of the laborer as a historical subject. Within this section, Marx (1967/1974) appears at his most germane to our current times:

Hence it is self-evident that the laborer is nothing else, his life through, than labor power, that therefore all his disposable time is by nature and law labor-time to be devoted to the self expansion of capital. Time for education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilling of social functions and social intercourse, for the free-play of his bodily and mental activity, even rest time for Sunday….But in its blind unrestrainable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus-labor, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even merely the physical maximum bounds of the working day. (p.265)

Again, one could argue against this apparent relevancy and state that Marx is writing about the grueling exploitation of factory workers, but I maintain that there is a spatial-temporal significance in this passage that transcends occupational contexts. In its insatiable need for growth, capital seeks to replicate and disperse the working day into the social world of the worker, so that a great deal of time outside the eight hour shift is working time and this unofficial, yet mandated working time occurs outside of the workplace into several spheres of day to day life.

Implications for CGU. The implications of this tendency are numerous. Most notably, we are witnessing greater productivity—in any number of professions—without proportional compensation. Augmenting professions with an array of technological appendages (from automated production to blackberries), capitalists have ratcheted up the efficiency of jobs with a vicious precision (Cauchi, 2011), so that not only has the amount of labor time per a worker increased, but so, as Marx anticipated, has the intensity by which one performs his or her labor (Ioannides & Marvoudeas, 2010). As we consider these implications, more CGU outcomes via
the capitalist commodification of labor become clear. The first is that by increasing labor intensity and time of current positions, the need for full-time labor decreases. A common label fixated to a large number of professional jobs is that person does the work of two or three other positions. This is not merely someone patting himself or herself on the back. Jobs are assimilating the responsibilities of other positions at an alarming rate, and typically those individuals are not being paid twice as much. The pool of jobs dries up within a company, and if there turns out to be a need for extra labor, temporary, seasonal, and part-time labor can be cheaply acquired. Two part-time employees are cheaper than one full-timer if only so the company or organization does not have to pay insurance. Therein lies a contributing factor to CGU: by perceiving labor as a commodity, the drive towards maximum efficiency, a hallmark of capitalist production, reduces labor opportunities and splinters positions in the name of cutting costs.

Another outcome of this process is the means by which higher education has been included into the context of the working day. The last passage I quoted from Marx can be read as Marx lamenting how capitalist production consumes one’s waking hours to the point where educational opportunities are impossible due to the lack of time. However, the continual expansion of capitalism into the social relations of the general population has led to the assimilation of education into the realm of work. Higher education, in Marx’s time, was primarily linked to the classical notions of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Now, a substantial number of professions require some form of post-secondary education. A great deal of work training has been taken up by colleges and universities from explicit internships and co-ops to specific courses and certificates that directly correspond to the needs of capitalism. College graduates, by and large, are trained for their positions before they actually have the
position, which proves to be a substantial problem because other outcomes of capitalism (structural unemployment and economic crisis) can weaken that relationship between education and employment. As a result, college graduates assume training, largely at their own expense, only for other problems generated by capitalism to reduce the number of full-time positions and create a substantial level of underemployment.

**Alienation and its implication for CGU.** Before we analyze these problems of capitalism more fully, one last element of the capitalist conception of labor requires mention: alienation. Alienation, as a concept, is well-situated within the Marxian canon, primarily because it is a concept that is readily accessible to a layperson and seemingly holds more gravitas than other Marxian concepts. Interpretations of alienation often follow a four-part progression in which the worker is first alienated from the product of labor, then the labor process itself, then from other workers or general humanity, and finally from him or her self (Padgett, 2007). This four stage progression, unlike certain concepts from Marx, can be directly and easily accessed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* where Marx (1975/1992) elaborates on each stage, linking the alienated condition to the ideological directives within capitalism that conceal the relationship between the worker and the mode of production, thus concealing the ontological, relational, and humanistic facets of the labor process. Marx (1967/1974) further elaborates on this process during the first volume of *Capital:*

> Capitalist production, therefore, of itself reproduces the separation between labor-power and the means of labor. It therefore produces and perpetuates the condition for exploiting the laborer. It incessantly forces him to sell his labor-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labor-power in order that he may enrich himself…It is the process itself that incessantly hurls back the laborer on to the market as a vendor of his
labor-power, and incessantly converts his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him. (p.577)

Although the word, “alienation,” is not present in this selection, there is a sense that the commodification of the labor process estranges the worker from the labor process, pointing to an obvious, yet overlooked and crucial element to alienation: that alienation, for Marx, is ostensibly rooted in the labor process. Alienation has, in some circles, acted as a synonym for anomie or a general feeling of isolation or estrangement, but in a Marxian utilization of the term, alienation is symptomatic of the capitalist appropriation of the labor process. Linlin Jiang (2012) discusses the historical significance of this argument, stating:

Labor alienation is not only the original creation of Marx, but also core of his concept of alienation. It is exactly on the basis of alienated labor that Marx sublated the former alienation concepts and brought them into the religious alienation, political alienation, and economic alienation concepts within the scope of philosophy. In the view of Marx, the latter were the derivative forms of labor alienation and labor alienation was the core and ultimate source for all other forms of alienation. (p.101)

In thinking about how alienation is a relevant and worthwhile addition to our growing Marxian framework on CGU, we must further unpack the relationship between the state of alienation and the labor process. We can further clarify alienation as an ideological movement in which capitalism conceals, from the worker, the worker’s own contribution in the labor process (McIntyre, 1992). It is characterized as a series of separations in which the worker is driven into a deeper isolation from the processes of labor, the natural and humanist process inherent in a non-capitalist mode of production (Bellofiore, 1998).
Of course, we can point to the famous examples of such a scenario as a craftsperson making a chair in which cause the act of creation and the positive returns of the act occur before the craftsperson with the utmost clarity. In the case of a factory worker, mass producing chairs on an assembling line, the act of labor is stripped of contextual nuances until all that remains is the labor power-for-wage exchange. Marx would argue that the capitalist treats notions like workers’ investment in the labor process, their creativity, and the entire set of skills existing outside the realm of the work as superfluous—needless distractions that complicate the efficiency of the wage agreement (Sy & Tinker, 2010). The valorizing, or profit-instilling, capacity of labor is maximized when labor replicates a machine-like function (which is why labor is ultimately usurped by machinery), and unless the social relations of the worker (like cooperation) can be ably mobilized as an instrument of capitalism, the remainder of skills and relations are left alienated from the worker during labor time (Musto, 2010).

When we think of the underemployed college graduate, we approach a group of professionals experiencing a modified form of alienation. Granted, more often than not, these individuals, due to the nature of the four-year-degree are not entrenched in the industrial production process to which Marx originally linked alienation. However, the labor of these individuals is perpetually framed by a capitalist mode of thought, one that designates the terms by which skills and labor are employed. Educational theorist, Alexander Sidorkin (2001) cleverly utilizes a Marxian framework when he characterizes learning in education as a productive process in which, in many instances, students are alienated from the very product of their learning. Similar utilizations of alienated labor theory could be applied to CGU. As we shall soon see, capitalists manipulate the labor force, creating a reserve army of employed (and underemployed) workers to be called at moment’s notice, but this disdain for the actual laborer
goes beyond the terms of employment, but also how that labor is employed. Alienation is an expression of capitalist indifference to the human components of the labor force. College graduates carry with them a variety of skills and expertise that is often cast aside by their jobs because it does not fit within the mode of operations, and thus, these graduates are alienated from not only their labor and themselves, but their educational experiences, which they—according to theorists like Sidorkin—exerted a great deal of labor acquiring. This goes beyond a simple mismatch of skill sets (i.e. the Starbucks employee who has a master’s degree in Russian literature), but more appropriately is indicative of a capitalist mode of employment, one that enforces a limiting and alienating narrowness to any number of occupations, thus compelling the college graduate to cast aside the creativity, critical thinking, and array of experiences garnered via the higher education process in favor of an alienated form of labor still as prevalent today as it was in Marx’s time.

Marx’s Reserve Army

There are two primary means through which labor power is controlled, and both have substantial implications for CGU: creating and manipulating a labor surplus and the process of deskilling. The first essentially explains why there are periods of rampant unemployment entrenched in the capitalist mode of production—a problem that has been ingrained in the capitalist labor process since its inception and after over 150 years of progress, has not been alleviated. Unemployment is a social ill. Nearly everyone agrees that periods in which the large percentages of the labor force is unemployed hold a variety of negative effects for the social and economic health of a country, and yet, despite 150 years of social reforms, we are still helpless to combat these seemingly random stretches in which large portions of the working class are unemployed. Why is this case?
**Roots of unemployment.** Unemployment and underemployment are distinct entities; however, both largely stem from the same root: the capitalist creation and manipulation of surplus labor. This is famously referred to, by Marx, as “the industrial reserve army” or a population of workers whose working lives are entirely dictated by the whims and demands of capitalism, people who fluctuate between periods of activity and inactivity in the name of the accumulation of capital and the demand for profit. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx (1977/2000) writes:

> Masses of laborers, crowded into the great factory of the factory, are organized like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overseer, and, above all, the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself…The lower strata of the middle class…sink gradually into the proletariat…partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. Thus the proletariat is recruited from all classes of the population. (p.251)

With the *Manifesto* meant to be a galvanizing document, Marx offers an easily accessible synopsis of his theory. Labor power is merely a commodity to be employed as capitalist production sees fit. Moreover, the continual drive towards accumulation compels the capitalist to seek out means to further integrate and revolutionize the labor process, thus enlisting the middle class into the army, stripping them of their skills, and having them uniformly fall into rank. This is why the army metaphor is particularly apt. For an army to be successful, two things must happen. First, it needs to grow as large as possible. Second, in order to ensure that this growing army acts in the most efficient manner possible, it must be disciplined through a series of
divisions and simplified roles in order to act as one force towards a singular goal. This is the heart of the industrial reserve army, and we shall soon see, while it has evolved, its basic premise remains intact.

Marx would provide more extensive commentary on the industrial reserve army in the first volume of *Capital*. One of the true contradictions regarding a capitalist mode of labor is that the capitalist is not particularly interested in offering full employment for a given population. For the social well-being of a country and its citizenry, full employment is a primary goal because it means that the population is able to reasonably support itself and thus avoids any number of unfortunate alternatives that befall the unemployed. However, the capitalist is largely indifferent to whether or not full employment occurs because labor itself is not the crucial determiner of profit; instead it is the manipulation of labor. Certainly, in ideal circumstances where there is infinite consumption, full employment means a maximum production of goods and services, which means maximum profit, but consumption is not infinite. Therefore, the capitalist must be strategic (another reason why the army metaphor is appropriate) in how limits of production and consumption are approached, and labor directly reflects these stratagems, which does not bode well for labor.

In *Capital*, Marx (1967/1974) describes how labor fits into what he labels as “the general law of capitalist accumulation,” which is a set of conditions by which the capitalist must continually accumulate labor and means of production in order to survive perpetual competition and maximize profits to reinvest into capital. Within this chapter, Marx—in discussing contradictory fluctuations among labor accumulation and repulsion that reflect increased technological dynamism as well as the demands of production—states, “The laboring population therefore produces, along with the accumulation of capital produced by it, the means by which
itself is made relatively superfluous, is turned into relative surplus population; and it does this to an always increasing extent” (p.631). Herein lies a crucial fundamental component of capitalist production. There must be surplus labor on hand at all times for accumulation to take place, ready to be appropriated and cast aside in a continuous process with each iteration of that process generating more accumulation. As David Harvey (2010) summarizes from Marx:

Perpetual accumulation at a compound rate depends on the permanent availability of sufficient accessible reserves of labor power... [which is] a necessary condition for the reproduction and expansion of capital. This reserve army needs to be accessible, socialized, disciplined, and of the requisite qualities (i.e. flexible, docile, manipulable, and skilled when necessary). If these conditions are not met, then capital faces a serious barrier to continuous accumulation. (p.58)

Capitalism is a process of ongoing growth and expansion, but this growth cannot occur without a labor force that is flexible to very specific needs—including the cost of that labor, the hours that labor is employed, and the skills that labor force possesses. All must be at certain acceptable levels for accumulation to take place. Furthermore, this process of accumulation—while perpetually occurring and evolving—is not necessarily a fluid process, but can be rather violent. Like the myth about sharks, if capitalism stops moving, it dies, yet there are many limits to growth that capitalism must contend with like the availability of resources, the consumerist potential of a population, and the technology in place. Even competition, the primary force powering capitalism’s insatiable need for growth acts as a limit, for overspending or over accumulating may leave a capitalist in a weakened position against his or her competitors.

Labor power represents a limit in numerous ways—such as the supply, skill set, and efficiency of a given labor force. Labor also functions as a more powerful limit when it operates
in its own interests, which typically falls outside the interest of capital, thus creating another fundamental contradiction. Yet, as we have already discussed, the cruel ability with which capitalism has commodified the labor process not only corrodes the potential limits labor represents, but also mobilizes labor as a means of transcending other limits. In *Capital*, Marx (1967/1974) writes that in the face of the 

changing needs of the self-expansion of capital, a mass of human material [is] always ready for exploitation…The mass of social wealth, overflowing with the advance of accumulation, and transferable into additional capital, thrusts itself frantically into old branches of production, whose market suddenly expands, or into newly formed branches…In such cases, there must be the possibility of throwing great masses of men suddenly on the decisive points without injury to the scale of production in other spheres (p.632)

We have now established that capitalist accumulation requires a flexible labor force in order to function. However, more needs to be said about the specific place of unemployment and underemployment in this process. With the labor process now powered by the motivations of capitalism where accumulation and profit serve as the principal ends, not only is unemployment possible, it is essential (Magdoff & Magdoff, 2004). As William Darity (1999) argues:

The central point that Marx makes is that permanent degree of unemployment is associated with capitalism due to the nature of technical progress and due to the functionality of unemployment due to capitalist dynamics. Unemployment serves two objectives. First, it disciplines those who work; they are continuously faced with living images of the consequences of pauperization…Second, the reservoirs of jobless
persons…always is available to be put to work, so that the cost to capital moving large numbers of persons into new emerging lines of industry is minimal. (p.492)

An elastic labor force with, to some extent, a degree of permanent unemployment operates as one of the more anti-human initiatives of capitalism (Ceruti, 2010). Capitalism perceives workers largely as means to ends; the larger social ills of unemployment mean little to the capitalist search for profit, exemplified by this current economic crisis where unemployment and underemployment are persistently high as are the profits reaped by any number of corporations. Degrading the labor force and exploiting it in numerous ways are necessary tendencies for capitalist accumulation.

**Marxian unemployment theory and CGU.** With these darker reflections on the capitalist process in mind, we now place this portion of our framework on CGU. Underemployment is yet another manifestation of capitalist labor manipulation. In some sense, the underemployed represent an idealized form of Marx’s unemployment theories due to the specificity of employment status in relation to the demands of capital. While underemployment is a complex concept with an array of factors, let us focus on three primary ones: hours worked, wage, and skill utilization—which are all, in the case of underemployment, low compared to full-time employment. The first two are cost-saving measures for capitalists in which a more specific amount of labor power is expropriated from the worker at often a substantially reduced cost. Instead of an all or nothing proposition, the underemployed operate in an advantageous limbo for capital—flexible and expendable. This represents a new form of proletarianization, one in which the reserve, surplus force is not stagnant, but easily manipulated for capitalist purposes (Gindin, 2012).
The underemployed now represent a new division in the reserve army of labor, overcoming the former limitation of extracting a specific amount of labor power from the worker. However, in the case of CGU, one could argue that college graduates, due to their skills and credentials, are immune from this condition which should only affect the lower strata of the working class who lack the knowledge and social capital a degree bestows. I would argue that such is a contention is largely false for a few reasons. First, capitalists only have an interest in skills that directly contribute to the accumulation process. This basic fundamental principle does not only make the majority of a college graduate’s skill superfluous to the labor process, but the entire scope of the education unnecessary. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, there exists a growing disparity between the education graduates receive and the actual jobs they perform, jobs that often do not remotely require the education graduates attain. This reality could be linked to the subsumption of the educated class into a capitalist labor process that rarely seeks a complex set of skills as it requires a set of simple skills and thrives upon a flexible and disposable population of workers based upon the current demands of production (Hudson, 2001). College graduates are not immune to this reality. In terms of subjective underemployment, the lack of jobs that relate to any number of degrees forces graduates to accept jobs that do not coincide with their skill sets (Blanchflower, 2010). This is, indeed, unfortunate, but perhaps these individuals can still earn a living. But when objective underemployment also comes into play, and the hours worked and wages are also tilted away from their favor towards the interest of capitalists, things become doubly problematic. Of course, in focusing on college graduates, we neglect the fact that they are competing with non-college graduates who are at even greater disadvantage, but when one considers the current perception of education as a pathway to gainful employment in addition to the considerable costs of education despite the ideological compulsion
towards going to college, we are in the presence of a new formulation of Marx’s reserve army, one that is educated, but whose university credentials are concealed by the uniform of capitalism.

**The Deskilling Thesis**

The topic of skills brings us to another important point in our framework: the notion of deskilling and how it relates to CGU. In doing so, we incorporate another canonical text in our conversation, Harry Braverman’s (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. Braverman’s book stands as one of the most fluid and accessible reconceptualizations of Marxian theory, taking fundamental aspects of Marxian labor theory and expanding and reshaping them to examine what he perceived to be the degradation of skilled labor occurring in several spheres of the American workplace. For our purposes, Braverman’s deskilling theory is important in that a non-utilization of skills serves as a determiner of underemployment and the disregard, by capital, of education, as a set of skills, possibly functions as a new form of 21st century deskilling.

**Braverman and Marx.** Braverman’s account should be familiar to us in that he takes similar avenues in his analysis as represented here. For instance, his reflections on unemployment echo Marx:

> The mass of employment cannot be separated from its associated mass of unemployment. Under the conditions of capitalism, unemployment is not an aberration be a necessary part of the working mechanism of the capitalist mode of production. It is continuously produced and absorbed by the energy of the accumulation process itself…This relative surplus population, the industrial reserve army, takes a variety of forms in modern society, including the unemployed; the sporadically employed; the part-time employed. (p.386)
The intensely labor-focused Marxian analysis of unemployment and its essential role in capitalist accumulation represents the most explicit and time-tested mode of labor manipulation; however, Braverman takes it a step forward, investigating how capitalism through a variety of mechanisms manipulates the very act of labor for its own purposes, reducing the skills required to perform an assortment of jobs in order to increase efficiency (and profit), discipline the workforce, and ultimately make those workers superfluous to the process. This is one reason why employment is inseparable from unemployment for Braverman. The process of deskilling is a progression that weakens the strength of a profession—gradually stripping it of its expertise, autonomy, creativity, and status—until it becomes automated and the number of workers required for performing that job is reduced.

While Braverman’s analysis differs from Marx in terms of scope and focus, he utilizes two fundamental discussions in Capital to frame the majority of his argument: Marx’s analysis of machinery and the division of labor. I bring up this line of succession for two reasons: (1) to properly frame Braverman in a Marxian context and (2) to demonstrate the substantial applicative potential of Marx. In regard to the second point, Marx and Braverman, in both focusing on factory labor primarily, have a stronger connection than our conversation with Marx, yet the ability to apply Marx (and by extension, Braverman) to our problem proves quite possible, specifically due to the breadth of Marx’s theory. Braverman is only employing a handful of Marxian components to his particular problem, casting aside other aspects of Marx. Moreover, David Harvey (2013) in a lecture mentioned how he expanded only “shards” of Marxian spatial analysis found in the unfinished second volume of Capital to analyze his own geographical interest. This is the applicative power in Marx’s theory. The dialectical
comprehensiveness allows us to narrow our sights on practically any aspect of society, for all is interrelated in the Marxian economic and political worldview.

In regard to the first point, the line of theoretical succession from Marx to Braverman can primarily be found on the expansive chapter on machinery in volume one of Capital. Within this chapter, we have the kernel of Braverman’s entire book as Marx (1967/1974) writes

The machine, which is the starting-point of the industrial revolution, supersedes the workman, who handles a single tool, by a mechanism operating with a number of similar tools, and set in motion by a singular motive power…Increase in the size of the machine, and in the number of its working tools, calls for a more massive mechanism to drive it; and this mechanism requires, in order to overcome its resistance, a mightier moving power than that of man, apart from the fact that man is a very imperfect instrument for producing uniform continued motion. (p.376)

Nowhere is Marx as powerfully predictive as in his discussion of technology’s ever-evolving role in the capitalist labor process. Capitalists fetishize machines, instilling them with tropes of capitalism (primarily those tropes that maximize profits) in order to serve as one of the primary forces toward accumulation. Braverman, in analyzing how the skill of crafts people and industrial workers were continually degraded in the name of worker obsolescence, understood the appropriation of technological dynamism as a weapon against worker; the dialectical relation between worker and machine in which the machine and worker essentially trade characteristics, synthesizing to the point that the capitalist production process becomes more perfected, machines have a more prominent place, and the worker is the expendable remainder, cast out from process—his or her expropriated skills all that remains in production (Magdoff, 2006).
The division of labor, in one regard, is the processual embodiment of this technological dynamism. Initially, one could perceive the division of labor as the capitalist regulation of the natural process of human cooperation, but when humans cooperate with machines, the division of labor becomes less humanist and more mechanical (Ware, 1982). Marx (1968/1974) comments on this process:

The one-sidedness and the deficiencies of the detail laborer become perfections when he is part of the collective laborer. The habit of doing only one thing converts him into a never failing instrument, while his connection with the whole mechanism compels him to work with the regularity of the parts of a machine. (p.349)

Again, we see the connection, in Marx, between the division of labor and technology where humans become machine-like in order to, in the present, maximize profit, and in the future, according to Braverman (1974), as “a necessary consequence of management and technology…[there becomes] a reduction in the demand for labor” (p.236). In Braverman’s analysis, the veil of production is lifted and what is exposed is the logic of capitalism, which reduces the human qualities of labor (Yates, 1999). In a particularly timely and passionate passage from Labor and Monopoly Capital, Braverman (1974) discusses this dehumanizing process with considerable clarity:

The transformation of working humanity into a “labor force,” a “factor of production,” an instrument of capital is an incessant and unending process. The condition is repugnant to the victims, whether tier pay is high or low, because it violates human conditions of work; and since the workers are not destroyed as human beings but are simply utilized in inhuman ways, their critical, intelligent, conceptual faculties, no matter how deadened or diminished, always remain in some degree a threat to capital. (p.139)
In the 21st century, it is not uncommon to hear terms like “labor force” and “human capital” being tossed about, but in doing so, we mask the dehumanizing terminology and ideology at the heart of capitalism. Moreover, within this passage, we focus on yet another contradiction, this time between education and capital, where we hold education in this empowering light—where knowledge and skills are acquired with greater social capital and understanding of larger societal contexts—that directly conflicts with the interests of capital. Again, if we conclude that the “knowledge economy” is more an ideological ploy rather than indicative of the actual material labor demands, then we see a diverse array of intricate skills, acquired via higher education, as superfluous to the capitalist labor process, or, if they are indeed valued by capital, these skills may become expropriated from college graduates via technology and organizational management.

The notions described above are integral to understanding Braverman’s deskillling thesis. Drawing on Marx’s reflection on machinery and the division of labor, Braverman argues that “broad knowledge of the production process was taken from the working class and embodied in a management organization dedicated to capitalist efficiency, in an institutionalized science subordinate to capital” (Stark, 1980, p.90). This description represents the key divergence Braverman makes from Marx: not only is a worker’s time and labor power taken by capital, but also the ontological foundations on what composes “a worker” is also subsumed, stripping away knowledge and identity to further render the worker as an indistinguishable cog in the machine. As Vicki Smith (1994) summarizes, “stripping each task down to its simplest components, reducing discretion, routinizing work activities, and habituating the worker all constituted the deskillling of work. Such deskillling processes would sweep across industries and occupational sectors” (p.405).
To some, this may seem somewhat counterintuitive. If a worker has an array of skills and knowledge that he or she is willing to contribute to a profession, shouldn’t capitalists utilize these skills to perhaps make more profit instead of deskill the work force? While there is credence to this counterargument and some organizations do seek to maximize the utilization of their workforce’s skills, Braverman points to three advantages that compel capitalists to disregard additional skills: it reduces worker power and the ability to influence the production process; it enables a fall in wages; and by deskilling workers, a form of alienation within the workforce divests workers from the production process, thus severely reducing labor conflicts that were at their peak during the first half of the twentieth century (Jaros, 2005). What one can extract from this list is that Braverman sees deskilling not only from economic terms (costing wages and increasing profits), but offers an analysis of power relations, from almost a Foucauldian perspective, where the ability to control knowledge operates as a disciplinary mechanism, and workers alienated from their own labor are unable to thoroughly engage with the crucial decisions involved in their work.

**Counterarguments.** Before I discuss how Braverman’s theory is relevant to CGU, I also think it necessary to add that Braverman’s theories are by no means universally accepted, and since the publication of *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, a variety of counterarguments have risen up against the deskilling thesis. Most notable among these counterarguments is that Braverman seems to take deskilling as a foregone conclusion and does not consider counter-deskilling or reskilling initiatives seem quite valid (Lewis, 1995; Tinker, 2002). In looking at CGU, college graduates often possess considerable social capital, and thus they are not as helpless as Braverman’s depiction of workers in the deskilling process. In some sense, these criticisms follow somewhat typical critiques of Marxian frameworks where the considerable power of
capitalism is taken as an absolute, totalitarian, and nearly unstoppable force, and therefore, serious considerations about how individuals actually contend with these forces are often neglected.

This argument is true to an extent, but it is a concession that I suggest we take with some qualification. Marx, Braverman, and any number of Marxian theorists are speaking to the pervasiveness of capitalist logic at the heart of the labor process, and this logic and subsequent exploitation are so vast that counter-capitalist movements are severely muted. Technological innovation and entrenchment in the labor process is considerably higher than it was during Braverman’s time, and the power of a labor movement is at near all-time lows and whatever union power exists dwindles due to neoliberal deregulation. Braverman was writing before the Reagan administration, which historically proves quite crucial in that this was a period in which the power within labor movements was substantially reduced (Harvey, 2013). Therefore, with some exceptions like the changing face of labor and other contextual factors, Braverman’s book, like many of Marx’s ideas, proves quite prophetic and appropriate for our times.

**The implications of deskilling for CGU.** This brings us to what we can learn from Braverman in terms of CGU, and in doing so, we can uncover three interrelated implications: (1) the subsumption of contemporary forms of labor into capital, (2) the commodification of skills, and (3) deskilling as a means of disciplining knowledge. Let us discuss each implication in some detail.

Although the majority of Braverman’s book is concerned with factory workers, towards the end, he discusses how deskilling holds implications for office work and other forms of intellectual labor. Moving away from the typical Marxian focus on productive labor, Braverman (1974) argues:
Labor may thus be unproductive simply because it takes place outside the capitalist mode of production, or because while taking place within it, it is used by the capitalist, in his drive for accumulation, for unproductive rather than productive functions. And it is now clear that *while unproductive labor has declined outside of the grasp of capital, it has increased within its ambit.* (p.415)

This proposition should not be surprising—even as Braverman is writing near a pinnacle of American manufacturing—for one merely needs to return to his thesis to see where the argument is born. Capitalism produces deskillling in one sector of the labor force, renders workers redundant, and transitions to the next sector where workers are populated. Indeed, deskillling is very much like a plague following workers from labor site to labor site, gradually making that site no longer viable, and exiling labor elsewhere. For Braverman, this next place is the office, the site of more intellectual labor, where, just like Marx, he perceived the middle class to be absorbed into the ranks of the proletariat. Notable theorist, Stanley Aronowitz (1978) writes, shortly after Braverman, that capitalist logic will penetrate any number of professions, for similar reasons as Braverman, instilling a Marcusean “single dimension” (p.129) to professions in order disempower labor and empower capital. In the case of underemployed college graduates, we see formerly “protected” forms of labor, once shrouded in a cloak of expertise, being gradually deskillled, automated, and rendered nonexistent—therefore limiting the amount of jobs and increasing unemployment and underemployment for once skilled positions. We will discuss this more when we transition our discussion to cognitive capitalism, but for now, let us ruminate on the second implication: the commodification of skills.

What is a skill exactly? We know that through the lens of underemployment, the lack of utilizing certain skills is a key identifier when labeling the underemployed. Braverman (1974)
links skill to the idea of “craft mastery” or “the combination of knowledge of materials and processes with practiced manual dexterities required to carry on a specific branch of production” (p.443). Since all jobs carry a set of skills, we can generalize and simplify that definition to a combination of knowledge and processes required to perform a certain job—thus including forms of unproductive and/or intellectual labor as well. In either formulation, skills are rich concepts composed of knowledge and experience; they are difficult to easily qualify, which is why when we ask people in any number of professions “What do you do?” the answer is rarely succinct or in a neat little package. However, under the influence of capitalism, the commodification of skills leads to a gross simplification (Sattel, 1978). We previously touched upon how the commodification of labor, a crucial imperative of capitalism, leads to its dehumanization; the commodification of skills is no different. Commodification in the workplace is the pathway to employment degradation and eventual elimination. As soon as the value-instilling properties of labor transcend all other aspects and deskilling gradually reduces labor skill and expertise, that profession, already assailed by other factors like outsourcing and greater technological influence, may fade away.

Let us look at an example in education. Educators possess a wide variety of skills—knowledge and experience—in any number of areas, including content and pedagogy. Despite this occupational richness, an educator’s skill set can be reduced to any number of basic skills, essentially repackaged in easily accessible and reproducible entities. Content knowledge becomes a curriculum. Pedagogy can be reconfigured as simple information transmission and assessment. Both of these skill sets can, with the help of technology, be automated and replicated, so that the educator, in the eyes of many a capitalist, becomes superfluous. In the industry of education, online classes are creating more unemployed and underemployed teachers
Noble, 2001). This form of education typically does not possess the quality of traditional educational models, but the capitalist is not concerned with quality. The capitalist is concerned with profit, and online classes have greater profit producing potential due to demand and the ability, through deskilling and labor manipulation, to invest increasingly little for an increasingly large return. This is not meant to serve as an attack on online education, which also has a wealth of potential for quality educational experiences, but under the control of capitalism, these potentialities will more than likely not be realized due to the third implication: deskilling as a means of controlling knowledge.

Despite higher education’s apparent professional turn, if we look at college education from a knowledge or skill standpoint, we have a means of empowerment through knowledge. Although mythicized, there is credence in perceiving education as a means of social mobility in which an individual obtains knowledge and expertise valued by society (valued by capitalism) that he or she can further utilize for personal benefit. However, deskilling appropriates the empowering potentiality the degree bestows to its holder. But it does more than that. One can look at CGU as a means through which the college-educated are, in a sense, disempowered through the de-skilling process—thus becoming oriented in such a way that the decisions inherent to the labor process are no longer theirs. Remember that at the heart of Braverman’s argument is “that the knowledge and control of the labor process is inseparable from dominant class relations. Breaking up craft skills and increasing work efficiency leads to control by management under the conditions of monopoly capitalism” (Nuwer, 1979, p.58). This tendency is not only apparent in the factory, but in other professional forms of labor as well (Hutchinson, 2008). Through the deskillling process, knowledge, acquired through higher education or other forms of work training, becomes gradually absorbed into the capitalist labor process, and the
knowledge of individuals is gradually disregarded. More than that, through this disdain, educated or skilled labors have less power in the labor process, and one of the outcomes of this lack of power is underemployment.

If we return to our example of online education, not only are we witnessing the commodification of skill in the educational process, but simultaneously we are witnessing the general weakening of faculty power. Along with the dissolution of unions, tenured positions are decreasing as adjunct labor is sharply rising. To consider the two unrelated or to consider this example as not applicable to other professions would be a mistake. CGU is, at least in part, a product of deskilling in intellectual labor professions where the once complex array of skills garnered by four plus years of education is subsumed in the capitalist labor process, commodified, and degraded. In the short-term, this process increases profit as investments in labor decrease. In the long-term, profits are maximized at the expense of a disempowered professional labor force unable to utilize their skills as the primary means to maintain job security. With positions now requiring less skill and time to be productive, all that is required is an underemployed labor force, embodying capitalism’s interpretation of what was formerly a profession full of intellectual and creative rigor.
Chapter Four

Marxian Analysis Part II: From Labor to Crisis

Alternate Labor: Unproductive Labor, Immaterial Labor, and Cognitive Capitalism

In discussing Marxian theory and its relation to CGU, we admit to ourselves that regardless of the theoretical construct—labor, unemployment, deskilling, etc.—we are discussing a labor market that differed distinctly from Marx’s time. Multiple times in the previous chapter, I discussed that regardless of these new forms, Marx’s theories are still appropriate because much of the time we are still concerned with capitalist control over the labor process, a manner of control that is still relevant. Nevertheless, in focusing on how a particular kind of labor, a labor that is connected to four years of higher education, we should widen our lens again and discuss what kind of labor is being manipulated here—an often immaterial, intellectual labor that is quite different from Marx’s favorite form of labor, that of the industry and production.

Unproductive labor. Even though more theorists after Marx have written about these labor forms far more extensively, we can, like deskilling, find inklings of immaterial or cognitive labor theory in Marx’s own writings, particularly those regarding unproductive labor. Within this argument, it is important to keep in mind what Marx means by “unproductive,” for he is not writing about it in a pejorative sense. Instead, he primarily means labor that falls outside the means of production or labor not connected to the creation of commodities. Marx (2000) writes that certain forms of labor:

leave no tangible result existing apart from the person themselves who perform them; in other words, their result is not a vendible commodity…These services themselves…may be necessary or may only seem necessary—for example, the service of a soldier or
physician, or lawyer; or they may be service which give me pleasure. But this makes no
difference to their economic character. (p.431)

With this passage in mind, unproductive labor seems to be a rather simple concept. We can
distinguish it from productive labor not only in its disconnection to commodities, but the fact that
unproductive labor is not under the direct supervision of the capitalist. Unfortunately, this
concept proves to be quite complicated—to the point that many theorists are still arguing about
its definition in the Marxian canon. Even Marx, in the same text, complicates unproductive labor,
focusing on (interestingly, for our purposes) education as a process that somewhat straddles the
productive-unproductive demarcation:

If I buy the service of a teacher not to develop my faculties but to acquire some skill with
which I can earn money…and if I really learn something (which itself is quite
independent of the payment for the service), then these costs of education, just as the
costs of my maintenance, belong to the costs of production of my labor power. But the
particular utility of this service alters nothing in the economic relation; it is not a relation
in which I transform money into capital, or by which the supplier of this service, the
teacher, transforms me into his capitalist, his master. (p.431)

What is Marx trying to tell us here? Ultimately, I see this passage as Marx teasing out the
contradictions linking education as unproductive labor and its relation to capital. On one hand,
knowledge is to some degree independent of the money used to procure that knowledge;
therefore, Marx does not perceive this transaction as a productive transaction where money is
utilized to buy commodities. Yet, Marx also points out that education is, like basic sustenance
(and probably more so), in some sense integrated into one’s labor power, which, in turn, can be
commodified by the capitalist means of production. Yet again, Marx argues that education is
ultimately unproductive due to its irrelevance to economic relations and its dissimilarity to the classic money-commodity-money progression of capital. Thus, we see education shift from unproductive to productive and back again, foreshadowing the complicated place education and the unproductive forms of labor hold in Marxian theory.

For Marx, the differences between productive and unproductive labor formulate two branching pathways, each interacting with capital in different fashions and often crossing pathways with one another (O’Connor, 1975; Leadbeater, 1985). The key question, for the purposes of our discussion, is as follows: is unproductive labor governed by different rules than productive labor? For under the current labor landscape of the United States, occupations requiring college degrees are largely emphasized, and new theoretical imaginings regarding labor can be introduced. It is important to consider these forms of labor for the purposes of studying CGU, for regardless of how we conceptualize unproductive labor (and its conceptual progeny: immaterial labor and cognitive capitalism), there should be greater discourse on how this form of work has now fallen into a more perfect capitalist subsumption.

A good place to start this examination is Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff’s (1987) *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of the Political Economy*. Within this text, Resnick and Wolff dedicate a portion of the work investigating the nuances of unproductive labor, coming to an accessible conclusion: “the terms productive and unproductive labor serve Marx to distinguish the different social roles of two kinds of laborers. The terms carry no implication of ranking: productive is no more important—in any sense—than unproductive labor for the reproduction of the social totality in which they both occur” (p.134). Unlike other authors we will discuss, who hold different perceptions regarding what unproductive labor means for a capitalist economy, Resnick and Wolff do not offer much distinction between the two forms in
terms of implication. Instead, they argue that since both are absorbed into the capitalist economy, both hold similar implications, even if they represent two distinct entry points of analysis. For Resnick and Wolff, unproductive labor ultimately represents a different labor dynamic, but still is rooted in class processes surrounding that labor form just like productive labor.

**Immaterial labor.** We can transition from this preliminary discussion where the distinction between productive and unproductive labor is not pronounced to a contrasting formulation offered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their books, *Empire* and *Multitude*. These texts, while discussing a variety of concepts, largely concern how capitalism is reimagining itself towards greater subjugation of the working class. One form through which this oppressive force is being realized is through the control of immaterial labor, which represents a blending of productive and unproductive labor types. Hardt and Negri (2004) describe immaterial labor that “creates immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response. Conventional terms such as service work, intellectual, and cognitive labor all refer to aspects of immaterial labor, but none of them captures its generality” (p.109).

Let’s take a moment to understand what Hardt and Negri are proposing here. There is a clear unproductive strain in the immaterial labor theory; service work and forms of labor that produce an emotional response do little, as Marx would argue, to influence the economic relations of production, yet within immaterial labor, there is a clear productive characteristic if we perceive information and knowledge to be a commodity. College graduates are performing acts of immaterial labor now more than ever, particularly if they are operating in jobs that generate information or communication. However, even if they are not, more college graduates, specifically the underemployed ones, are absorbed in our growing service economy, which falls
under the jurisdiction of immaterial labor (Sennett, 1997). Indeed, Michael Hardt (1999) argues that “immaterial labor is not isolated to a certain population of workers…Rather immaterial labor in its various guises…tends toward being spread throughout the entire workforce and throughout all laboring tasks as a component, larger or small, of all laboring process” (p.97). Hardt’s quotation adds a crucial wrinkle to our framework in that, accurately or inaccurately, it inflates immaterial labor to a more pervasive concept, attributing it to a variety of labor forms and processes, thus invading both macro and micro levels. In some sense, this follows a Marxian theory regarding labor fragmentation in which the division of labor, under capitalist influence, is manifested throughout the social spheres of the worker (Shapiro, 2009). We can point to the contemporary service economy as embodying this notion, incorporating “customers into its own processes of production. Offering a service and getting a service have increasingly becoming one and the same thing. Customers must not only pay for the service, but must also offer their collaboration as free labor” (Illas, 2011, p.68).

Immaterial labor not only penetrates fields of service labor and consumption, but also those of leisure (Palm, 2011). As described by David Camfield (2007):

The rise of immaterial labor has profound consequences. One is the breaking down of the division of time between work and non-work or leisure. The split was clear-cut in the age of the factory, but under the hegemony of immaterial labor, ‘an idea or image comes to you not only in the office but also in the shower or in your dreams.’ (p.26)

What we have, in discussing immaterial labor, is an intrusive and all-encompassing force that coalesces an individual’s time into a singular moment for capital. Capital’s mobilizing processes of generating new forms of labor, via technology and socialization, have transformed previously “safe” forms of activity (e.g. leisure, services, etc.) into means of generating profit (Sayers,
We can transmit this theory to CGU in two fashions. First, immaterial labor is embedded in the college experience through a variety processes, including the reality that students have to purchase credit hours to perform free labor in terms of internships, co-ops, and graduate assistantships. Also, one could point to the mere act of being a student as one of the first instances of immaterial labor in which unproductive work was transformed into a commodity that students purchased.

Secondly, outside of the classroom, into the labor process, college graduates are continually engaged in forms of immaterial labor. Again, we mentioned how more graduates are employed in the service industry where jobs hold an underemployed status. However, delving deeper into the actual implications of immaterial labor, one can argue that through its immaterial state and its pervasiveness into the social spheres, immaterial labor forms decrease the need of actual concrete, full-time labor positions. Immaterial labor refers not only to the actual processes of labor, but its actual conception. Through fragmentation and actualization in numerous forms and fields, immaterial labor functions as a means of doing more with less. Going beyond mechanization and automation, immaterial labor appropriates labor in different manners. The most obvious example of this concept would be a company like Facebook that is a multi-billion dollar industry and represents a huge portion of internet usage for the world’s population. Despite this substantial consumption, the actual paid humanpower to operate Facebook is quite minimal in proportion to the number of consumers. This is not only a result of the labor saving internet technology, but also the notion that the labor that goes into “making” Facebook is generated primarily by the users. Free labor masquerades as leisure time, and actual concrete positions are lost in the miasma of immaterial labor forms.
Cognitive capitalism. A final important offshoot of our unproductive/immaterial labor formulation is the concept of cognitive capitalism, which is a more specific brand of immaterial labor, focused around knowledge work. As has been mentioned numerous times, the degree to which knowledge work is a pervasive form of labor is debatable, but since a large quantity of recent college graduates desire to work in knowledge fields, it warrants some discussion.

Cognitive capitalism can be characterized in the following manner:

Following mercantile and industrial capitalism, this new phase is based on new forms of labor—intellectual, immaterial, and digital—developed by new technologies that spring from the concept of intellectual property and are enforced through intellectual property. Digital and web-based materials have enhanced productive capacities that are now based on the human intellectual rather than natural raw materials…in the new regime of labor process, knowledge and skills occupy the central place with an accent on education, training, and retraining. (Peters & Bulut, 2011, pp.xxxi-xxxii)

For the purposes of this framework, knowledge as commodity and the emphasis on education in the cognitive capitalist society hold keen interest. Carlo Vercellone (2007) is the theorist who introduced the term “cognitive capitalism” into the discourse and offered his own hypothesis regarding it:

The hypothesis of cognitive capitalism develops from a critique of the political economy of the new liberal theories of the knowledge-based economy. An understanding of the meaning at stake in the current mutation of capitalism cannot be reduced to a mere constitution of an economy founded on knowledge, but in the formation of a knowledge-based economy framed and subsumed by the laws of capital accumulation. (p.14)
What makes cognitive capitalism a special theory is the role knowledge possesses in the system. Formerly, knowledge held a less important role in the Marxian critique of the political economy because knowledge was merely a contributor to labor power, which was the true creator of surplus value. Even Braverman’s deskilling thesis—in which knowledge plays a crucial role—does not elevate knowledge to the levels that theorists in the cognitive capitalism do, primarily because Braverman was writing in the 1970s prior to the birth of the knowledge market.

Vercellone clarifies the position of knowledge in this theoretical framework, arguing:

“knowledge cannot be assimilated either to capital (as in the theory of human capital), or constituted in a supplementary factor of production…Knowledge and education are nothing but the means of expression and creation of labor” (p.32). Knowledge is no longer an antecedent to labor, but in the knowledge market, it is fundamentally intertwined in the labor process—representing the origins of labor, the means of labor, and the product of labor, all of which, through a system of measures, are accumulated for capitalism (Kennedy, 2010; Leonardi, 2010).

Cognitive capitalism, like other forms of Neo-Marxism, finds its kernel in passages from Marx who had some preliminary investigations in the role of knowledge in capital. Vincent Mosco (2012) summarizes these investigations: “the process of ever more deeply commodifying labor, including both intelligence and affect, demonstrates the need to expand these very human capacities. Capital no longer needed just the laborer as appendage to a machine; it needed then and needs now the full ‘social body’ of the individual” (p.573). In our discussion on immaterial labor, we mentioned how the socialization process, as a conveyer of knowledge, has been appropriated by capitalism, and indeed, cognitive capitalism also incorporates the social modality of knowledge into its framework. As Christian Fuchs (2011) argues:
If one considers knowledge not as a narrow but as a broad social category, then it becomes clear that it is not an economic category specific for a sector but also lies at the heart of class formation in informational capitalism. Knowledge forms part of the commons of society, it is a social product produced and consumed by all. All humans produce, reproduce, and consume the commons, but only the capitalist class exploits the commons economically. (p.113)

This exploitation is most keenly realized in the commodification of knowledge, which serves as an important precursor to the commodification of labor that serves as the lifeblood of capitalist accumulation. Like labor, knowledge is a very unique commodity as “it is never lost upon sale or purchase. Each (non) market transaction only increases it, leading to increasing returns…To achieve increasing returns on knowledge, the broader social inclusion of an individual in the organization is needed” (Keseljevic & Cvijanovic, 2011, p.43). Before dissecting the implications of this concept, we should first reconcile a potential contradiction between this theory and Braverman’s deskilling thesis in which the former calls for the total integration of the individual into the capitalist productive process while the latter calls for the gradually disassociation of the individual from the productive process with only his or her skills left behind.

Despite this apparent conflict, my argument is that both operate as means of actually reducing labor and thus serving as contributors to CGU. The connection between deskilling and labor reduction is quite apparent, but cognitive capitalism, via the socialization process, reduces the need for labor in two ways. The first is through a means of technological integration into the daily lives of workers and consumers in which through technology, capitalists can, in knowledge industries, extract greater productivity from their workers, compelling them to work more hours.
Also, through similar means, fragmentation of labor responsibilities throughout the public and through a reserve army of part-time workers also assists in decreasing labor costs. The second means is through a modified deskilling approach where the worker is first subsumed into the capitalist process intensely, so that his or her knowledge or expertise is separated and skimmed off the top (e.g. as in an online class where lectures and research can be compartmentalized in an online environment (Noble, 2001)). Both means exploit the social functions of knowledge in a manner that produces greater productivity for those in the knowledge market. The internet, as both an environment for socialization as well as an immense storage house of knowledge, serves as the primary avenue where this expropriation occurs (Walby 2007; Henning & Hebblewhite, 2012). Therefore, proponents of cognitive capitalism theory have issued an evolved form of labor decentralization in which technological dynamism coupled with the commodification of skills/knowledge leaves labor weakened and floating in the immaterial realm of digitization.

**Counterargument to alternative modes of labor.** Before we conclude our discussion on alternative modes of labor and their implications for CGU, I would like to draw attention to the fact that cognitive capitalism is a controversial theory in Marxian camps who hesitate in evaluating unproductive, immaterial, and cognitive labor to a more privileged theoretical position. Among those theorists is Guglielmo Carchedi (2011) who launches a pointed critique of cognitive capitalism on two grounds:

First, capitalism is still capitalism. Its essence, the ownership of the means of production by capitalists, and thus ensuing division between capital and labor, is unchanged…What has changed and is changing is the forms of appearance of the capitalist ownership-relations…Contrary to notions such as the ‘new economy’ and the ‘information society,’ which are based on supposedly generalized ‘empowerment’ along with so called creative
mental work, most laborers are not self-employed but subjected to the rule of capital. (pp.187-188)

Carchedi’s second point is that while mental work is increasing in technologically advanced countries, the majority of the globe is still dominated by the traditional forms of industrial exploitation, but the first point is what interests us here. The degree to which educated work, mental work, or labor that entails substantial digital or informational components falls outside the reigns of capital is open to debate. Some see the internet as an uncharted frontier full of possibility for autonomous interactions that are imbued with the knowledge and expertise of individuals, and this independence empowers individuals to work without being exploited by capital, yet many cognitive capitalism theorists do not support this argument. The internet has long been settled by capitalism, and the vast majority of individuals who work or interact online do so under capitalist mediation (Foster & McChesney, 2011). I don’t necessarily see Carchedi’s argument as an argument against those theorists in the cognitive capital vein, but rather as a supplement to the crucial point of their argument. Capitalism is indeed still capitalism. Its ability to branch out into new markets and exploit new forms of labor is just as strong in immaterial realms as it is in material ones, and although we are often left in awe of the internet’s capabilities, it is still anchored in the material world where much of its content, and the labor employed to generate that content, takes place.

Alternate modes of labor analysis and CGU. In concluding this section on alternate modes of labor, I would like to offer three summarizing points. The first point is Table 2, which should serve as a helpful means of charting the differences and progressions of the three labor types discussed here: unproductive labor, immaterial labor, and cognitive capitalism.
Table 2
*Summation of Alternative Labor Theories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorists</th>
<th>Unproductive Labor</th>
<th>Immaterial Labor</th>
<th>Cognitive Capitalism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marxism, Engels, Traditional Marxists, Resnick &amp; Wolff</td>
<td>Marx, Engels, Traditional Marxists, Resnick &amp; Wolff</td>
<td>Hardt and Negri</td>
<td>Vercellone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Characteristics</td>
<td>A form of labor that does not create commodities, value, or influence economic relations.</td>
<td>A form of labor that primarily includes service labor and knowledge labor.</td>
<td>A form of labor that is primarily concerned with knowledge production where knowledge is commodified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place in Capitalism</td>
<td>Representative of a different form of the capitalist manipulation of labor.</td>
<td>One of growing prominence due to more substantial capitalist appropriation of service labor.</td>
<td>One of growing prominence due to the increases in technological labor forms and college graduates.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second point has been made on a couple of occasions during this conversation. The relevance of these alternate modes of labor to CGU is twofold: (1) with an increasing number of college degree holders and the growing proliferation of internet technologies, the number of workers employed in intellectual labor should be rising as well; (2) however, due to the nature of immaterial or digital labor and its intense involvement in the capitalist economies, there is greater potential for full-time labor positions to decrease due to material conditions, moments of economic crisis, labor-saving technologies and methodologies, and the utilization of the internet to fragment labor into many different places, which is cheaper than concentrating it into a singular worker. By extension of this argument, these implications lead to higher instances of CGU as well as the decreased possibility that the knowledge market or information society will be the new frontier for jobs just as soon as we have enough degree-holding members of the
population to assume them. We have already delegitimized that ideological myth, and the dot.com bubble burst a long time ago.

The final theoretical argument that an analysis of these modes of labor offers us is regarding the commodification of knowledge as skills. Emma Dowling (2011) provides a powerful reflection on how the commodification of knowledge influences the educational process:

When I ask my students why they are at university, most of them answer they are studying so they can get a better job than they otherwise would have done without a degree…Whilst this kind of instrumentalized approach to university education is more prominent in certain subject areas than others…this is a tendency across the board and will only increase in light of the new wave of restructuring that will see the cost of going to university increase for the individual student, thus raising the stakes in terms of the need to maximize employability…It is important to be aware of how the emphasis is not on the skills the students hope to earn but on the degree qualification they come out with at the end. (p.199)

The commodification of knowledge, via the new inroads ushered in by cognitive capitalist ventures, helps produce the perception of higher education as job training, which is, in some sense, rendered somewhat problematic by the existence of CGU. Thus, the commodification of knowledge, like that of labor, is an ideologically constructed veil that holds clear benefits for capitalists (as well as educational institutions), but the outlook is far less stable for the actual graduates who purchase this knowledge and then, in turn, sell their knowledge to their employers. I have argued that commodification leads to degradation, and this is no exception. Not only is the actual knowledge garnered by graduates potentially corroded if it is exclusively
framed within the lens of labor, but more importantly the power that the knowledge holds is corroded as college graduates find themselves often unable to leverage their degrees toward the obtainment of well-paying jobs. The old saying that education can never be taken away is proving to be more precarious every day, for the ability to use that education, at least in the form of a career, is becoming increasingly tenuous.

**Marxian Crisis Theory**

Throughout our entire discussion of CGU, there should be a context coloring our analysis, for we discuss CGU in a time of economic crisis, and in turn, crisis serves as the primary origins of this current incarnation of CGU. Therefore, we should situate a Marxian theory of crisis within our framework in order to understand what Marxian implications crisis possesses for our topic. Of the numerous frameworks one could employ in analyzing the relationship between crisis and CGU, Marxian theory holds a crucial advantage since it is an economic theory as well as a social theory. Moreover, as a critical theory that analyzes the problematic features of capitalism, a Marxian interpretation of crisis holds unique features that neo-classical and neo-liberal economists largely neglect. Although an analysis of Marx’s theory of crisis could fill dozens of dissertations and books, we will keep our focus narrowed on the three dominant theories of Marxian crisis: overproduction/underconsumption, the falling rate of profit, and the problems of over-accumulation and how they related to our current crisis, issues regarding employment, and ultimately CGU.

Now one may question why there are different versions of Marxian crisis theory instead of a singular cohesive theoretical analysis, and indeed, each theory proves to be quite different and has its contingent of proponents. The primary reason is that while Marx was keenly interested in crisis (potentially as a catalyst towards revolution) and wrote fairly extensively
about the issue, he did not compose an actual crisis theory. There are passages analyzing
different features of crisis from different vantage points strewn throughout Marx’s finished and
unfinished texts, but the lack of a definitive vision left theorists after Marx postulating what a
Marxian theory of crisis would actually look like. Howard and King (2002) review this issue:

Marx correctly traces oscillations in output to the volatility of investment, itself explained
by fluctuations in profitability. He sees the collapse of profits which induces a crisis
resulting from increases in capital-output relation, or a rapid rise in wages, or insufficient
consumption demand. Random shocks are always a threat to expanded reproduction, and
monetary institutions can intensify the depth of any downturn starving the economy of
liquidity, thereby exacerbating contradictory forces. However, none of this is formulated
into a system and logically coherent account of crisis. (p.329)

This quote is doubly prophetic. First, written in 2002, we see several facets of the 2007 crisis on
display: the problems revolving around the finance market, the collapsing of monetary
institutions, and the random shocks or bubbles bursting that would momentarily peek their heads
in 2001 before wreaking a more sustained havoc in 2007. However, the fact that these
components were first identified in Marx’s writings composed in the 1860s makes this system all
the more remarkable. The beginnings of Marx’s crisis theory can be located in the Grundrisse
where Marx (1973) writes:

Capital undertakes only advantageous undertakings, advantageous in its sense. True, it
also speculates unsoundly, and, as we shall see, must do. It then undertakes investments
which do not pay, which pay only as soon as they have become a certain degree
devalued. Hence the many undertakings where the first investment is sunk and lost, the
first entrepreneurs go bankrupt—and begin to realize themselves only at second or third hand, where the invested capital has become small owing to devaluation. (p.531)

This is a depiction of what Marx and Engels famously call “the anarchy of capitalism.” What is important to recognize in this designation is that it is not necessarily the chaos of the capitalism that creates crisis, but rather the self inflicted wounds rendered by capital’s own hand like a hydra hacking off its own head so two may grow in its place. In its insatiable hunger for growth, capital must enact a variety of devastating measures such as “increases in length and intensity of the workday, the driving down of real wages, increases in productivity, and increases in the number of workers it exploits. There is no other way for capital to grow” (Lebowitz, 2009, p.206). As John Elliott (1979) writes: “Thus capitalism’s contradictory mode of development leads to explosions, cataclysms, crises. But succeeding depressions while they consist of hard times prepare the way for the renewal of expansion on an enlarged scale” (p.153). Unlike classical economists who point to extenuating circumstances or temporary downturns in business cycles as the cause of economic crisis, Marx and those following in his footsteps point to the increasing frequency of crisis as something endemic in capitalism. There is an irresponsible harshness entrenched within the capitalist economy that fosters implosion. The intricate web of factors that compose capitalism is taut with “the competitive threat that another enterprise will be able to offer an alternative product of higher quality, lower price or both. The uncertainties of changing tastes and preferences, changing interest rates for loans, changing prices for necessary inputs, and so on confront enterprises with a vast array of threats to survival” (Wolff, 2012, p.92). The contradictions of capitalism transform this fight for survival into a simultaneous death drive, and while capitalism implodes only to rise up again like a phoenix, human lives—ruined
by the loss of employment and homes going into foreclosure—are reduced to cold ash as capitalism rebuilds itself in preparation of the next crisis.

**Overproduction.** At the center of a Marxian analysis of crisis is the aforementioned belief that crises are inherent to the contradictory forces within the capitalist economy. This is especially apparent in the first theory of crisis: overproduction and underconsumption, which are actually two different theories even as they represent the two initial forays into our theory of crisis. Although distinct, the two theories are interrelated in that they point out two fundamental weak points in the capitalist economy. In overproduction, capitalists essentially outpace consumer demand, thus creating an overabundance of unsold commodities, which creates a logjam and causes the economy to stagnate. In underconsumption, consumers are more of the focal point as their demand for commodities declines due to an array of factors, which creates a similar logjam and a similar crisis. Let’s analyze these two theories in greater detail before providing important counterarguments and discussing their implications for CGU.

Overproduction stems from capitalism’s frenzied and uncontrollable desire for growth. In the continuous need to expand to new markets, garner more profit, and exploit greater amounts of labor, capital finds itself approaching limits not with caution, but rather with reckless abandon (Norton, 2012). In volume three of *Capital*, Marx (1967) clearly describes the problems linked to overproduction:

Overproduction of capital is never anything more than overproduction of means of production—of means of labor and necessities of life—which may serve as capital…a fall in the intensity of exploitation below a certain point, however, calls forth disturbances, and stoppages in the capitalist production process, crises and destruction of capital…The circumstances which increased the productiveness of labor, augmented the
mass of produced commodities, expanded markets, accelerated accumulation of capital both in terms of its mass and its value, and lowered the rate of profit—these same circumstances have also created, and continuously create, a relative overpopulation, an overpopulation of laborers not employed by the surplus-capital… (p.255)

Herein lies the core for theories of overproduction. Overproduction, as Marx argues, is the overproduction of the means of production. Capitalism must perpetually reproduce itself and must continue to do so at a growing rate; however, since this drive towards growth is often unchecked by internal or external measures, capital smashes through these limits with great violence, and in doing so, it drives prices downward, re-creates itself, and approaches the limit again with the hope of surpassing it. What Marx also points to—and we will discuss this point as a crucial facet of all crisis theory—is that labor needs fluctuate dramatically when capitalism enters a crisis, thus generating periods of substantial unemployment (and underemployment).

Analyzing this tendency through the lens of overproduction, we see clear roots and implications. The two essential commodities that capitalists need for starting production are (1) the means of production and (2) labor power. The capitalist, in order to maximize profit, continually assumes more of each commodity to increase production and growth only to crash into a limit—overspend and overproduce—and thus cut back on the number of employed workers in order to regain stability. Through this process, capitalism recovers. Industry and corporations endure. Workers are not as fortunate.

**Underconsumption.** From the original account of overproduction from Marx, a correlating discussion arises: that of underconsumption, which Marx did not discuss with as much intensity, but has subsequently become a crucial focus in Marxian crisis theory for other Marxists. Due to similar factors revolving around overproduction, most notably that the
screeching halt of production generates unemployment and wage stagnation, crisis is aggravated by the inability for the working population to purchase commodities at the rate they are produced. As Bill Dunn (2011) writes, “Poor pay limits the market for consumption of goods relative to capital’s inexorable need to expand. This shifts the explanation from labor’s subjectivity to capitalism’s contradictory structure and the opposing laws that determine production and consumption” (p.532). Underconsumption is a popular theory of crisis for two reasons. First, the theory bestows more power into the hands of the worker, for the inability (and in some cases, the unwillingness) for the worker to consume generates crisis. Second and more importantly, there is a clear linkage between the exploitation of the worker to larger economic crisis, which many Marxists find attractive. Underconsumption theories attempt to point to a particularly powerful contradiction in the capitalist economy that on one hand seeks to exploit the worker by driving down wages, yet is somewhat dependent on the worker to purchase the commodities to sustain the production process. Other proponents of this theory, such as Rosa Luxemburg, have further linked underconsumption to particularly odious features of capitalism, primarily imperialism, where the drive for new consumers leads to colonization (Clarke, 1994).

**Counterarguments.** Despite the rational arguments posited by overproduction/underconsumption theorists, these theories of crisis are not without critics.

Guglielmo Carchedi (2011) deconstructs the theory on both practical and theoretical grounds:

- First, if lower wages were indeed the cause of crises, in principle the economy could exit the crisis through higher wages…Second, if the economy could exit the crisis through higher wages, crises would be due to harmful distributional policies, and could thus, in principle, be avoided. If crises can be avoided, the economic system does not tend towards depressions and crises, as Marx holds, but towards recovery and booms and
prosperity…Labor is deprived of the theoretical basis upon which to base its struggle. This is the class-content of underconsumptionism. Underconsumptionism is not only irreconcilable with Marxism, it is also deeply inimical to labor. (p.136)

The practical side of Carchedi’s argument is that if capitalism could stave off crises by merely increasing workers’ wages, then capitalists would probably do so if only to avoid the structurally negative implications of crises. Moreover, although wages are stagnating or decreasing currently, periods of rising wages can also lead to crisis. More problematically, Carchedi also lodges a significant counterclaim, stating that underconsumptionism is, at least in some sense, irreconcilable with Marxism in that it contradicts one of the fundamental elements of Marxian critique: that capitalism is an irrational economic system. Ultimately, the logic of overproduction/underconsumption is incongruous with the illogical nature of capitalism. The anarchy of the market cannot be alleviated merely by raising workers’ wages, and the nature of capitalist exploitation should not be reduced to wages, even if it is particularly timely now.

Underconsumptionism places a false power in the hands of the worker while neglecting important components of Marxian critique. Capitalism is too irrational and too powerful a system for underconsumptionism to be a fully tenable theory regarding the origins of crisis. As we shall soon discuss, there are other factors at play.

Implications for CGU. Nevertheless, there is credence within the overproduction/underconsumption framework, which is why it is viable today as a contributor to crisis while not being the singular cause. Furthermore, we can find two implications for CGU within this framework. The first is one of the primary themes embedded in underconsumption: wage stagnation. In his book, Carchedi (2011) attempts to disprove the validity of underconsumptionism by showing how wages have risen over time and crisis still persists, but
that is not entirely accurate. Wages have increased over the decades, but have done so at nearly half the rate of productivity. This trend has been magnified since the 1970s when corporate profits rapidly outpaced the rise in wages (Wolff, 2010). Again, stagnating wages are not the only cause for crisis, but they certainly do not help. CGU represents an offshoot of this phenomenon. College graduates, due to their underemployed status as well as the stagnating wages of their chosen profession, are not earning what they used to. This reality, coupled with increases in living expenses not to mention the considerable debt many graduates find themselves burdened with, severely hampers their ability to consume, which, in turn, limits production, enabling the current crisis to persist and the odds of recent graduates obtaining a well-paying job to be substantially lower than in past decades. Indeed, this vicious cycle revolving around graduates is why some are pointing to student debt and the inability to pay it back as the next potential bubble on the cusp of bursting, causing a backslide back into crisis.

A second, more interesting, implication is analyzing higher education’s production of workers through the lens of overproduction/underconsumption. One could make an argument that colleges are essentially overproducing college graduates for the labor market (which is the basic argument behind overeducation), and since capitalism treats human capital/labor power as a commodity (an expensive commodity that capitalism manipulates in order to maximize profit), the labor market is, in a sense, under-consuming this labor power, which leads to CGU. Following the economic crisis, the word, “job-creation,” began swarming within the political rhetoric, and one can certainly perceive job-creation initiatives as incentivized or constructed maneuvers for the job market to consume the overproduced/under-utilized labor force. Ideologically speaking, education is often entwined in these initiatives, but if we assess the framework and see that colleges are producing graduates at an ever-increasing rate that outpaces
the demand for college-educated labor, we must question if education is a solution to crisis since based on a well-established theory of crisis, it may not be the case.

**The falling rate of profit.** The second popular Marxian theory of crisis is known as the falling rate of profit. Where overproduction/underconsumption is located in the production and consumption process of capital and commodities, the falling rate of profit is situated within the context of labor and labor’s declining capacity to create surplus value and profit. A layperson can intuitively point to a fall in profits having negative implications for a business or economy and potentially serving as the basis for crisis, so the question is how does Marx see these profits of virtually any productive institution as destined to decrease when the capitalist imperative dictates that, above all else, profits must rise? Again, the answer lies in labor.

The common theme uniting all Marxian theories of crisis is limits. There are limits to capitalism, which inherently is cast as a limitless entity. In overproduction/underconsumption, there were limits to what society could produce, particularly when much of that society’s consuming power is limited. In the falling rate of profit, the limits inherent to the labor process lead to profits falling since labor power is the primary contributor to value and profit. What are these limits to labor? Although this can be meditated on far more extensively, the basic limit to labor is that a capitalist can only extract so much value from the labor force within production. The capitalist can exact all types of measures and can exploit the laborer to the fullest extent, but at some point, the bodily limitations of the worker coupled with the temporal limit of the working day hinder the growth of surplus value, which, in turn, is further restricted by increased spending in other less limited productive forces like machinery, causing the rate of profit to gradually fall and in time generating crisis (Harvey 1982/2006; Lebowitz 2009).
**Counterargument.** The interesting notion within this theory, and perhaps a weakness within it, is the role of technology or other forms of constant capital. One of the crucial contradictions in the falling rate of profit theory is that as surplus value extracted from labor hits the ceiling, spending in technology and materials increases. This assumption lies within capital’s growth fetish. With the potential of increased productivity and increased profits only a series of purchases away, capital cannot resist the temptation to over-consume these productive forces even as labor power hits its limit. Of course, the capitalist can procure more laborers and manipulate the rates of exploitation in order to somehow match the other side of the profit equation, but in the end, according to Marx, it is never enough. This view of capitalism, to some, may overemphasize the irrational facets of capitalism, which can be checked by other measures within industry. After all, even as the economy stagnates in crisis, profits, for many corporations, have been increasing. Does this not disprove Marx’s theory?

There are two important things to keep in mind here. First, the fall rate of profit represents only one dimension of crisis, and although some may cast it as the primary origin, we should resist that temptation in order to look at crisis dialectically. Second, capitalism has an uncanny way of evolving and transcending (albeit temporarily) its limits. Globalization functions as a keen way of exploiting labor to the point that capital has not fully realized the exploitive potential of these developmental markets. More importantly, even though capital has, in some sense, staved off the falling rate of profit, there are a couple of significant examples where economic crisis can be linked to this fundamental theory. Economist Vladmirio Giacche (2011) has statistically shown that the falling rate of profit among countries is indeed occurring:

The most complete research in this field shows a general downward trend in the rate of profit in the past few decades, reaching similar levels in the main countries of the
industrialized West despite following different paths of development…if we consider the
average profits of American firms before taxes since 1940, we see constant reduction: the
rate of profit from 1941 to 1956 was 28.2 percent; from 1958 to 1980 it was 20.3 percent;
and from 1981 to 2004, it was 14.3 percent. (p.21)

In addition to these startling figures, Nick Potts (2011) has investigated how the falling rate of
profit through production compels capitalists to seek out other means of generating profit,
primarily through “unproductive speculative activities, creating bubbles” (p.464), and as we have
seen in the dot.com and housing bubbles, they have a tendency to burst, causing a great deal of
economic havoc and further contributing to crisis. Both of these arguments demonstrate the
legitimacy of Marx’s argument and its relevance today. No matter how much capitalism
revolutionizes the production process, value will always be dependent on labor, and as much as
capital seeks to delude itself, as much as it tries to transcend it, labor has its limits and the
dehumanizing modality within capital proves to be its undoing.

**Implications for CGU.** In regard to the falling rate of profit and its implication to CGU,
we can draw one clear connection in considering how both are labor-focused in their scope. The
falling rate of profit has been portrayed as a “law” in some Marxian circles, and while it would
be foolhardy to ascribe any absolute certainty to any particular theory, theorists like Giacche
have indeed demonstrated that there is a tendency within capital for profits to decrease, which
serves as a severe limitation to capitalism and a contributor to crisis. Two ways capital can delay
this tendency is to manipulate labor in such a way that surplus value remains high, and those
delays are “depression of wages below the value of labor power; and an increase in the industrial
reserve army” (Harvey, 1982/2006, p.178). Both of these measures effectively cut the costs of
labor, and as we have already demonstrated, both wage stagnation and the creation of a reserve
army have clear implications for CGU. In the first instance, salary is the first measure of objective underemployment, and many graduates are making less than in the past. In the second instance, we are seeing more graduates being absorbed into the reserve labor army. This is ultimately a crucial problem within the capitalist economy. If capitalism is doing poorly and profits are falling, the labor force is doing poorly as well, their fates hopelessly connected to an irrational and chaotic capitalist system in which the worker bears the brunt of the backlash created by the falling rate of profit.

Over-accumulation. The final Marxian theory of crisis pertaining to our analysis is problems regarding capitalist accumulation or over-accumulation. As we have previously discussed, the capitalist drive towards accumulation is an innate imperative to capitalism, one powered by the incessant dash towards maximizing profit. In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx (1967/1970) relates accumulation to the falling rate of profit:

> A fall in the rate of profit and accelerated accumulation are different expressions of the same process only in so far as both reflect the development of productiveness. Accumulation, in turn, hastens the fall of the rate of profit, inasmuch as it implies concentration of labor on a large scale, and thus a higher composition of capital. (p.241)

This argument should not come as a surprise since we already established that increasing force of production and capital (in comparison to a declining rate of surplus value ushered by labor) contributes to a fall in profit. However, as Marx also states here, accelerated accumulation is a different means of crisis, one that requires further explication. Accumulation’s role in Marxian discourse is vital, yet unlike exploitation, class struggle, and even alienation, it is a term and concept that is not as accessible to the layperson. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx (1967/1974) describes what is known as “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation.” In this
chapter, Marx provides a historical account of how accumulation formulated the mode of production:

A certain accumulation of capital, in the hands of individual producers of commodities, forms therefore the necessary preliminary of the specifically capitalist mode of production…It may be called primitive accumulation because it is the historic basis, instead of the historic result of specifically capitalist production. (p.624)

Marx charts the beginning of the capitalist mode of production to a single movement, one of mass acquisition and centralization of the means of production that would serve as the basis of production. However, the important aspect to recognize here is that this movement, as a dynamic process even its primitive form, never stops. Accumulation must perpetually continue even in the light of limits and contradictions that arise in capitalism. A page later, Marx draws critical focus to a key contradiction to accumulation:

Accumulation and the concentration accompanying it are, therefore, not only scattered over many points, but increase of each functioning capital is thwarted by the formation of new and the sub-division of old capitals. Accumulation, therefore, represents itself on one hand as increasing concentration of the means of production, and of the command over labor; on the others, as repulsion of many individual capitals from one another. (p.625)

From one page to the next, we see accumulation shifting from a rather simple matter to an incredibly complicated one. Initially, it starts out as merely a movement towards gathering resources (labor power and the means of production), but when several capitalists participate in the same movement, conflicts, generated by the coercive law of competition, arise as accumulation occurs in multiple locations and the web of the capitalist economy takes shape. A crucial side effect of these conflicts is the tendency towards over-accumulation, which

Many of these implications should be familiar to us now, particularly overproduction, surpluses of labor power, and falling rates of return (profit). The novel implications that over-accumulation provides us are twofold. First, in discussing the problems regarding accumulation, unlike the other two theories, we are focusing on a fundamental building block of capitalist production and saying *here* is where crisis is located; therefore, arguing that capitalism is fundamentally flawed and possessing an inherent propensity towards crisis. Second, over-accumulation is a more dialectical view towards crisis. Where the other two theories were focused on one or two elements, over-accumulation concerns itself with nearly every facet of capital: production, consumption, labor, materials, profits, commodities, and variable and fixed forms of capital. Therefore, within this viewpoint, we can get a more panoramic view of capital and crisis, which is why I tend to favor over-accumulation as the most viable form of crisis theory, and why it is difficult to argue against over-accumulation as one of the primary contributors to economic crisis. We could manufacture a counterargument similar to overproduction and underconsumption where a simple solution presents itself: if over-accumulation leads to crisis why don’t capitalists just accumulate less? The problem is that they can’t. If a capitalist is not perpetually accumulating, seeking out ways to revolutionize production and maximize profit, and discovering and exploiting new markets—if a capitalist is
not doing these things and risking over-accumulation, his or her competitors are. Competition is essentially the policing force that enforces the law of accumulation. As much of a cliché as it is to associate capitalism with competition, one cannot overstate the problematic, yet utterly entrenched, nature of competition in relation to capitalism. Every capitalist must run the risk of over-accumulating or face extermination.

**Implications for CGU.** In analyzing CGU through the lens of over-accumulation, we encounter similar implications to the other two theories since over-accumulation incorporates strands over overproduction/underconsumption and the falling rate of profit (as well as some additional nuances). What I would like to draw particular attention to here is the relationship between over-accumulation and the current crisis as it applies to labor. We already mentioned that the reserve army of labor can be integrated into the falling rate of profit, but over-accumulation holds a different connection, namely that of the purging of jobs as result of crisis. Throughout this analysis and the literature review, we have discussed how the economic crisis creates an underemployed condition for workers, but we have only mentioned in passing the millions of people who lost their jobs as a result of the crisis. One can link this reality to the problems revolving around over-accumulation where capitalists accumulate surpluses of labor power, and in times of crisis, contractions occur and people lose their jobs. From 2007-2009, “15.4 million U.S. workers (twenty and older) were permanently displaced from their jobs” (Sum, Trubskyy, & MacLaughlin, 2011, p.19). Many of these individuals were college graduates, and in the following three years, the United States has not created 15 million jobs. Therefore, many of those individuals were compelled to take a job in which they were underemployed, and the nearly two million college graduates who enter the labor force every year upon graduation must now compete with these people, which only breeds more
unemployment and underemployment. Once can trace the roots of this problem to over-accumulation, and both the crisis and the substantial job loss surrounding crisis (as we will soon see) follow one of the most foreboding contradictions in the capitalist economy.

**Conclusions on Marxian crisis theory.** Table 3 summarizes our discussions on the three Marxian theories of crisis and their implications for CGU. What is important to recognize here is that we have been primarily discussing *theoretical* facets of crisis and not the actual material nuances of the current crisis. Certainly, in investigating the 2007 crisis, we see facets of each theory of crisis present, but every crisis holds contextual features relevant to the time it occurred. Moreover, we can draw out further reflections regarding employment’s relation to crisis, which we can include in our CGU framework.

Table 3

*Summary of Marxian Crisis Theory*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorists</th>
<th>Overproduction/Underconsumption</th>
<th>Falling Rate of Profit</th>
<th>Over-Accumulation</th>
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<td>Kautsky &amp; Luxemburg</td>
<td>Marx</td>
<td>Harvey</td>
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<td>Capitalist</td>
<td>Capitalists overproduce</td>
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<td>the commodities they produce.</td>
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<td>Implications for</td>
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<td>Capitalists over-</td>
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<td>CGU</td>
<td>is determined by wages. Colleges</td>
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<td>overproduce graduates that</td>
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In *Rebel Cities*, David Harvey (2012) comments on the challenges of situating a specific crisis in a particular framework while also speaking to the appropriateness of a Marxian theory:

Marx makes clear that the analysis of an actually existing capitalist society/situation requires a dialectical integration of the universal, the general, the particular, and the singular aspects of a society construed as a working, organic totality. We cannot hope, therefore, to explain actual events (such as the crisis of 2007-09) simply in terms of the general motion of capital…But, conversely, we cannot attempt to explain such an explanation without reference to the general laws of motion. (p.37)

Harvey provides important reservations for us to consider here. Marx, though he utilized some forms of historical and empirical analysis, primarily analyzed the political economy through the lens of the universal or in abstraction. The dialectic network that incorporates countless material aspects cannot be comprehended in such a way that we can point to something like an economic crisis and argue that “this is exactly what is going on here.” Nevertheless, we can point to the general laws regarding the motions of capital, tease out contradictions, and contend that these are the primary components at play here.

This current crisis possesses elements that separate it from any other crisis. Furthermore, compared to the crisis of the 1970s and 1980s, we are seeing emerging themes particular to this crisis that will become even more prevalent in future crises: internet technology, globalization, and environmental concerns (Shapiro 2010; Tabb, 2010). All of these new elements have been integrated into the capitalist mode of production, exploited to a maximum extent, and along with the conventional tropes of capital, now act as characters in our current crisis narrative, expertly told by Richard Wolff (2010) in his article, “In Capitalist Crisis, Rediscovering Marx.” In this
piece, Wolff brings together both contextual and theoretical facets of the crisis to craft a powerful narrative:

Producing, installing, maintaining, and refining technological changes became extremely profitable investment opportunities…Most important was combining global capitalism with vast new sources of relatively cheap labor…Technological changes driving up the productivity of labor combined with new supplies of labor power to keep real wages from rising. That made capitalist surpluses soar. The 30 years before 2008 thus saw one of the greatest profit booms in capitalist history. (p.131)

Notice that integration of the contextual (technological change and globalism) and the theoretical (elements of underconsumption in stagnating wages and the falling rate of profit) here. Indeed, Wolff’s narrative is one that employs aspects of all three capitalist theories of crisis while charting a historical narrative that saw profits and productivity increasing as worker wages increased more slowly and eventually stagnated. Wolff places a great deal of credence on contradictions of capital creating this particular crisis, concluding on what he perceives as its two primary sources:

(1) That the end of rising real wages was the hard reality underlying a debt-dependent prosperity since the 1970s, and (2) that the capitalists’ gains were the workers’ losses…Only when mass worker exhaustion, stress and debt, coupled with capitalists’ poor investments and financial speculations, drove the system to collapse did capitalist triumphalism crumble. (p.142)

Wolff’s emphasis on the worker is worth note here. We have seen in each theory of Marxian crisis that labor plays a crucial role, particularly in limitations either against or enforced by capital. Despite the evolving economic sphere with its ever-evolving accompaniment of changes
and augmentations, labor remains an integral entry point to understanding crisis. Additionally, once crisis occurs, labor is particularly devastated as capitalism smashes against its own limitations and workers are purged as the economy recovers. As previously mentioned, over 15 million jobs were abruptly cast away during the crisis, but not only is the initial purge necessary for capital to regain stability, but labor must wade in the icy waters of unemployment for substantial period of time before reintegration can happen, and even then, labor finds itself in a difficult position. This is ultimately why some form of revolution does not occur in periods of crisis. Even when capitalism appears at its weakest point, labor—as hopelessly tied to capital—finds itself at an even more substantial disadvantaged position, for as capitalism attempts to reconstruct itself from its own self-inflicted wounds, it now has its pick from a pool of jobless workers that it can hire at a lower wage. This is a truly odious feature of capitalist crisis.

Although crisis can be perceived as a “failure” of capitalism, it actually becomes an advantage, in a sense, for now it can employ its downtrodden state as an excuse for even more severely undercutting the power of labor (Ramirez, 2007; Foster & McChesney, 2012).

Issues concerning employment are inevitable consequences of crisis. Michael Heinrich (2004) summarizes the relationship in the following manner:

Commodity capital can no longer be completely transformed into money capital, so advance capital is poorly valorized and accumulation decreases. The demand on the part of capitalist enterprises for the elements of productive capital...also decreases. Mass unemployment and a decline in the consumption of the working class are the consequences, thus leading to a further decline in demand that further intensifies crisis. (p.169)
We have discussed different implications crisis holds for labor (and by extension, CGU), each variant undoubtedly problematic. Naturally, there is an obvious connection between a dire economic state and unemployment, but what people often do not recognize is that it is through a capitalist labor process that crisis occurs. College graduates, as part of the labor force, are no exception to submitting to the irrational and exploitive directives of a capitalist labor process, nor are they safe from the aftershocks crisis creates. In prelude to crisis, labor is over-accumulated, commodities are overproduced, wages stagnate, and the rate of profit starts to fall. During and after crisis, labor is purged, wages are further reduced, the consumptive power of the population is restricted, and jobs remain scarce. Underemployment is directly involved in both of these processes, but what about the other side of the CGU relationship: higher education?

The 2007 economic crisis influenced higher education in numerous, often conflicting, ways. For some colleges, enrollment increased due to factors like unemployed/underemployed people seeking training for new jobs as well as a general ideological imperative that in order to “compete” in a difficult labor market, a college degree was necessary. In other schools, college enrollment decreased primarily due to the high cost of education, which along with other economic hardships, also increased the rate of attrition (Wolf, 2009; Stuart, 2010). Not only are individuals operating under the belief that higher education is a safe haven from the problems created by the crisis, but state governments are as well. In a problematic example described by Richard Wolff (2013), Florida is looking into instituting a program where state colleges will provide tuition discounts to those students who enroll in majors that correspond with the needs of employers. Other states, such as North Carolina, are following suit. From both an education and labor standpoint, this is an unfortunate occurrence in that by funneling students into select majors, colleges will be over-populating the market with certain types of degree-holders that...
either (a) will not find jobs or (b) will find a job in the field, but will most likely be paid a lower wage due to the plentiful source of labor. This is a powerful example of what crisis does to education. The heavy shadow of crisis colors the population’s perception of any number of concepts, so that the glimmer of obtaining a career shines from education. However, as schools, government, the media, and other intuitions foster this impression, the actual reality is crisis constricts the ends (labor) far more than the means (education). Higher rates of CGU are essentially inevitable in times of crisis, and capitalists employ crisis’ near unquestionable ethos for its own ends, driving up the demand for the vast sea of commodities surrounding the corporate university and producing a labor force capable of satisfying its needs—in terms of amount, type, intensity, and investment.

**Conclusions**

In concluding this chapter on the Marxian framework of CGU, we find ourselves ruminating on a variety of Marxian concepts and their relation to this problem. As we do so, it would do us well to remember the dialectic and the processes as it play here and the tensions, primarily between labor and capitalism, that are continually coming together and pulling apart. For the remainder of this chapter, Figure 4 below will be our guide, for it serves as my interpretation of a Marxian framework for CGU.

![Figure 4. Marxian framework for CGU](image-url)
**Education-labor commodity.** At the center of the diagram, we start with a relationship expressed in terms of a commodity, and it is not any ordinary one, but that of a fused construction of labor and education. We have already discussed how labor power itself is the most important of commodities, not only because it leads to the creation of all other products and instills value within them, but also because the commodification of labor serves as a cornerstone of capitalism, through which capitalists can manipulate labor to disempower workers. But how does education fit into the equation?

The phrase “commodification of education” has become a popular, yet controversial descriptor that has assumed a variety of guises and meanings. Many link it to the growing commercialized influence pervading all manners of education while others link it to the explicitly “corporate” university that trades education for profit with little regard for its public good (Shukching Poon, 2006; Walker, 2010). Still others, like David Noble (2002), characterize commodification of education as capitalist-driven degradation of the educational process that “requires the interruption of fundamental education process and the disintegration and distillation of the education experience into discrete, reified, and ultimately saleable things or packages of things” (p.28). For Noble and others, this gesture is best realized through distance courses, resembling our discussion of online education as it relates to Braverman’s deskilling thesis (Taylor, 2011). While I am sympathetic to all these descriptions (since many are informed by Marxian theory), I have a different perspective on this commodification, and instead see education as a pre-commodity integrated into the commodity of labor. Within this point, I see an intriguing entryway into CGU.
In proceeding this way, we should take caution. Marx was fairly adamant about labor power (and labor power alone) being the only commodity that could instill value into all other commodities. Not even machines and the gradual usurpation of the production process could replicate human labor in this regard. Moreover, in our conversation on unproductive labor, Marx aligned education as a non-productive process even if it contributed to production. Yet, an argument can be made that buried within the commodity of labor power—buried to the point that is nearly unrecognizable—a pre-commodity rests in the center enabling production to take place, which is the education of the laborer. This is more relevant today than in Marx’s time. For although Marx perceived education as an institution bent towards serving the interests of capital, his sparse writings on education reduce its apparent significance (Greaves, Hill, & Maisuria, 2007). Nevertheless, with an overabundance of college graduates and a substantial number of jobs requiring a college degree, education as a commodity linked to labor and production formulates a crucial starting point for CGU. In some sense, education *anticipates* production as the embryonic state of future production lies in education, and therefore, capital has a keen interest in the manipulation of the education-labor commodity, seeking through a variety of measures to influence higher education to function in capital’s interests.

However, despite the strong capitalist inclinations resonating in the education-labor commodity, I would contend that it, like all commodities, is imperfect. Labor power, too, can be perceived as an imperfect commodity under the view of capital in that labor, while acting as a fundamental origin of profit also, as we have previously described, acts as a limit to capital. If there was an absolutely fluid transference of the education-labor commodity, we would see students funneled into majors that directly suit capital’s needs, and while this is somewhat happening through ideology and other initiatives (like what Richard Wolff described in Florida),
the autonomy of individuals in choosing their field of study instills friction in this relationship. Thus, education functions as an imperfect commodity in that the “anarchy of education” often conflicts with the anarchy of capital as millions of individuals attempt to establish their own will in the marketplace, studying what they wish with little consideration to the capital’s desires. This usually, in terms of employment, does not work out ideally for the student who purchases education, but cannot sell himself or herself as an educated worker and is compelled to assume a job incongruent to his or her education, thus generating CGU.

Therefore, we can examine the education-labor commodity as generating CGU from two conflicting perspectives. From capitalism’s perspective CGU is the manifestation of friction between the outcome of higher education and the needs of capitalism in which graduates obtain degrees superfluous to the requirements of capitalism. This redirects individuals to jobs that do need to be filled, thus enforcing an underemployed condition on the graduate. From the graduates’ perspective, CGU is the condition rendered by a lack of fluidity between their educational choices and the demands of capital, the fetishized commodity of the college degree that once appeared as an ideologically-constructed gateway into the upper echelon of capitalist labor dissipating, leaving graduates, often burdened with tremendous debt, to plummet into underemployment.

Marxian theories of labor. This is where the labor facet of the dialectic comes into play. The education-labor commodity holds all the capitalist-directed initiatives that our discussion of labor included: commodification, degradation, and alienation in addition to forms of productive labor, which involves the Marxian analyses of labor power and the working day, and forms of unproductive labor, which relate to our analysis of immaterial labor and cognitive capitalism. All of these labor imperatives interact with the education-labor commodity, purchased by college
students, so they, themselves, can be purchased by capital, their labor power—in productive and unproductive fields—appropriated, so that capitalist profits are maximized and capitalism grows.

As we have discussed, each form of labor represents a different vision for capital. Productive labor is the time-tested labor form for capitalist exploitation. For the past couple of centuries, production has been the value-instilling process that gives commodities life and functions as the blood for capital. In the United States, production has decreased, primarily due to the promise of cheap labor in other countries. In doing so, the United States, partially through the education system, has sought to establish skilled forms of unproductive labor. This unproductive labor comes in many forms, including many of the degree-carrying professions: doctors, lawyers, teachers, people in business, engineers, etc. Furthermore, there is the possibility of this form of labor to mutate and become productive when we consider cognitive capitalism and the birth of the knowledge economy. While I have been skeptical throughout this analysis about the pervasiveness of this economy, there are jobs in which knowledge and web-content (and the computer code creating it) are commodities that are produced. Nevertheless, these jobs are not in as great abundance as college graduates are led to believe, which is why even college graduates in fields such as computer science are struggling to find work. Instead, we are currently seeing more graduates entering a different form of immaterial labor—that being the service field. Retail jobs, call center work, and service labor in the healthcare fields all represent larger pools of labor due to the current demands of capital. These jobs are often low-paying and carry facets of subjective and objective underemployment within them, but more problematic is that these some of these jobs, due to capitalism’s favorite forms of labor decentralization: technology and job exportation, are going to become scarce as well. Ultimately, all these forms of labor, even those with college degrees serving as selective credentials, operate under the
umbrella of capitalism. Granted, capital has a different vision for each, but they come together in a rather unfortunate mosaic in which worker power is largely disestablished in the name of profit and growth.

**Ideology.** Ideology adds another dimension of complexity to our model, for unlike labor, which is readily measured by all forms of quantitative mechanisms, ideology exists as a superstructural level beyond the level of appearance. However, labor and ideology are inextricably linked in that labor serves as the primary conduit for ideology as workers function often in a manipulated and alienated manner all in the service of capital. The second, and growing, conduit for ideology is education, which should not come as a surprise due to its relation to labor. Both conduits come together to help fashion a worker who is disciplined, flexible, and acquiescent to the demands of capital. The underemployed worker is not only fashioned through the material conditions of the market, but also the ideological imperatives that continually reinforce that in the wake of economic crisis, individuals should be “lucky” to have a job, even if that job is low-paying and does not correspond to the worker’s interest or extensive training. Of course, ideology is not an absolute system. People are not sheep, blind to their own exploitation. Educated people, in particular, are more likely better-equipped to see past the ideological veil placed in front of them. However, resistance against the ideological measures of capital are exceedingly difficult due to the dialectical reinforcement from the material conditions, which dictate that laborers can be aware of exploitation, but the power, realized by people or not, will always be in the hands of capitalists.

**Crisis.** This power is best realized when capitalism is at its weakest state, when it is in crisis because even when crisis cripples capitalism’s primary aims of profit and growth, capitalism can leverage the foreboding presence of crisis to weaken the state of labor. The
relationship between crisis and ideology is rather intricate with several implications. The
aforementioned ability of capital to transform crisis into a boon is primarily lodged in ideology.
Many do not blame capitalists or the nature of capitalism when crisis devastates the lives of the
working class. As an irrational economic system built around reckless growth at the cost of
equality and stability, capitalism engenders crisis, and capitalists, with their irresponsible
speculations and business practices, are more to blame for this crisis than anyone else. However,
ideology dictates that capitalism is the “victim.” It is the victim of any number of factors: the
government, the inability of the working class to pay their mortgages, the economic problems
within the European Union, competition from the Chinese, “unforeseeable” swings in the
business cycle, and any number of origins. Ideology masks the true starting point of crisis that
being the capitalist mode of production, which is by nature unstable and unsustainable, propped
up by the continual exploitation of the working class. Moreover, ideology could be linked as a
key contributor to crisis by masking the inherent flaws within this system, explaining them away
until the system falters.

We have discussed the three versions of Marxian crisis theory, three distinct, yet related
conceptualizations about how crisis occurs, and although each has its own flaws, there have been
clear indications that all three explain certain facets of this current crisis. Despite each theory
being incredibly complicated and continually revised, each is fundamentally rooted in the
exploitative relationship between capitalists and laborers. Overproduction/underconsumption, the
falling rate of profit, and over-accumulation, each stems from a different point in this
relationship in which capitalists attempt to squeeze as much surplus value from labor as possible,
sacrificing as much as they can to capital, only to find its insatiable hunger too vast and causing
economic collapse. College graduates serve as both the material for this crisis as well as the
victims. While their degrees provide the possibility to work in a field of their choosing, their relationship to capital will always be an exploitive one, particularly if they enter fields where labor is not particularly strong. In doing so, they will be susceptible to any number of the flaws within the capitalist system that lead to crisis, and the possibility that they will be prone to the three labor issues, which are increased in times of crisis, becomes more and more foreboding.

**Issues regarding employment.** These three labor issues—unemployment, deskilling, and underemployment—represent the final portion of our model, the most unfortunate outcomes of crisis, and the dynamic endpoint of the education-labor commodity. Naturally, in any dialectical model, these labor issues do not represent the ending since they do interact with crisis (further exacerbating it) and ideology (employment issues serve as a motivation for people seeking a higher education), but these problematic labor outcomes (particularly underemployment) serve as the actual focus of this entire discussion and thus function as a fitting conclusion to this chapter.

As discussed earlier, the original theories regarding how capitalism generates unemployment came from Marx, himself. In its nascent state, capitalism operated primarily in an all-or-nothing relationship to labor. In times of building and profit, capitalists would readily accumulate labor. In times of crisis and bust, capitalists would purge it, creating widespread unemployment. This still holds true today as the United States and other countries struggle with persistently high unemployment. This is due to the utterly essential role unemployment has in the capitalist mode of production. For numerous reasons (saving money, building efficiency, and disciplining the labor force) there must continually be a reserved army of labor that the capitalist can either integrate into production or cast to the sidelines. College graduates, in both productive and unproductive fields, by either losing their jobs or not being able to find a job, often fall into
this reserve army, and its stagnant position compelled many to accept any job, even ones that would leave them underemployed.

Indeed, deskilling and underemployment represent two more updated features of capitalist labor manipulation since Marx’s time where capital transitioned to the all-or-nothing stakes of employment and underemployment to more precise ways of expropriating labor from workers. Harry Braverman’s deskilling thesis incorporates technology and management into the labor weakening process as workers are gradually stripped of their skills, the cost of their labor power reduced along the way. The end result is capital acquiring greater labor power at a cheaper cost while the worker is left unemployed or underemployed. I attempted to discuss how deskilling could also work in college educated fields as well, not just manual labor, which is the primary focus for Braverman. What is more unfortunate about this current time is that technological dynamism, powered by the internet, has substantially sped up, so that the deskilling process that occurred over the decades that Braverman discussed is now occurring within the span of a few years with the pliable internet easily assimilating the commodified skills of educated positions in order to become more efficient means of producing goods and services for capitalism. This process, while faster and potentially more pervasive than in Braverman’s time, still has the same outcome for the worker who finds his or her power inversely correlated to the rising technological infiltration in their workplace: fewer opportunities for full employment.

This brings us to underemployment, which is a more prevalent feature of the capitalist labor process than before. Underemployment serves capital on several fronts: (1) it enables capital to obtain a more precise amount of labor from the worker, so instead of paying a worker for a guaranteed 40 hours of labor a week, a capitalist can pay workers on a sliding scale, dependent on what is more profitable; (2) it enables capital to obtain domestic labor more
cheaply since one full-time worker typically costs more than two part-time workers; (3) it adds more flexibility to the labor force, allowing capitalists to either add or shed labor more specifically to their needs; (4) it acts as a disciplinary mechanism since part-time workers have little power within the labor process due to their often transient nature, typically poor compensation, and the fact that they just do not have as much working time. All of these factors represent the benefits of objective underemployment for capital. Underemployed workers cost less and provide fewer obstacles to capitalists’ absolute control of labor. Indeed, it is due to the power in labor that largely dictates whether or not positions are full or part time. If it were up to capitalists, many more full-time positions would be part-time positions than the other way around.

These implications largely concern objective underemployment. Subjective underemployment (underemployment determined largely on overqualification or the incongruence between a worker’s skills and the skills required by a position) hold different implications, primarily ideological in nature and largely concerning college graduates. In this model, the education-labor commodity can function as a fluid process in which education leads to acquiring and performing a job, the labor of which contributes to capital. However, this function is not always fluid, and in terms of underemployment, the relationship proves quite weak. Despite the ideological value of education and the continuous calls that a highly educated workforce can strengthen the economy, only certain types of education are valued by capitalism, primarily those corresponding to production or those unproductive labor positions that directly fulfill capitalist needs.

Unfortunately, for both capitalist and college graduates seeking a specific job, these needs do not always register in the education process. College graduates, motivated by other
measures, study what they wish, or if they do study in a certain field with employment as a primary motivator, they do so often unaware of capital needs for corresponding positions. Therefore, when a graduate earns a degree in a field where capital or the job market has few positions, that graduate, if he or she wants to work, must seek employment in another field, often becoming subjectively underemployed. Thus, like any other commodity, the education-labor commodity is an imperfect one, and its flaws, like the flaws apparent in the capitalist utilization of the labor commodity, become apparent when graduates attempt to “sell” this commodity to employers who do not need it. However, capitalism is always quick to transform a weakness into a strength and will accept graduates into professions it does need, often low-paying, often with little worker power. Thus, the education-labor commodity, which ideologically is cast as an empowering mechanism for graduates, can become a weapon against the educated worker when he or she is integrated into a capitalist labor process that seeks to commodify that individual’s labor power and is prone to periods of prolonged crisis.
Chapter Five

Methodology

With the larger theoretical groundwork of the study established, the question of whether or not a qualitative methodology is indeed appropriate should be asked, considering the larger scale concepts of the framework—rife with broad theoretical suppositions regarding capitalism. Can such a framework be reconciled with a far narrower scope focused to the point of individual experience? Marx’s propensity to brandish a wide brush that usually glossed over the individual nature of the proletariat, rendering such individuals as abstractions, certainly compels one to answer the question in the negative, but I maintain that this propensity speaks to the relevancy and appropriateness of my methodological decision.

Qualitative methodology allows us to peer through the philosophical vapor of Marx’s work and endeavors to answer the question: who are these people? Who is Marx (and followers of Marx) talking about when he speaks of the capitalist, the proletariat, the worker, and the bourgeois? Qualitative methodology provides an empirical window into the lives of these people, making them real and providing a different vantage point for analyzing how capitalism pervades social relations. In employing qualitative methodology, I am not exclusively interested in somehow further validating Marx’s theory (or more appropriately, my own theoretical assertions based upon Marx’s theory), but rather, I see this study as an empirical partner to my theoretical contentions, another, more explicitly human, facet to understanding CGU. Theory and qualitative praxis represent a dialogical relationship, both stemming from a singular launching point: a desire to understand what is happening when college graduates enter the workforce. Therefore, it is important to conclude that the appropriateness of this qualitative model is founded upon the
necessity of generating some manner of empirical investigation with which theory can find discourse, thus bolstering our understanding of the problem at hand.

**Seidman’s Model**

The qualitative research model that I chose to utilize in this study was adopted from Irving Seidman’s (2006) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. In this text, Seidman proposes a three stage interview process designed to excavate different layers of the interviewee’s experience. The first stage consists of a focused life history with the primary goal of providing necessary context for the experience. Indeed, Seidman’s model is one firmly rooted in situating experiences in a variety of contexts, allowing for the researcher to acquire greater understanding and locate more substantial meaning from the interview responses. In this first stage, pinpointing prior experiences and reflections enables greater connectivity among subsequent responses. I would find in the interviews that responses regarding the experience of underemployment, the primary focus of the interviews, would be coated with the residual essence of the focused life history responses. Furthermore, this notion of reaching back into the life history of individuals adheres to a Marxian perspective of qualitative research. Marx, himself, was a philosopher of history and perceived history as a crucial basis for current situations—economic, philosophical, and sociological. Although Marx, as usual, was far more interested in larger historical situations, whenever one seeks to understand a situation from a Marxian perspective, it becomes crucial to look at its historical context.

The second stage of Seidman’s interview process is concerned with the details of the experience. Questions in this stage are more specific, typically probing for the day-to-day experience of the interviewee and stories that illustrate the nature of the experience. Seidman puts this interview into perspective: “In an 8-hour day, we are involved in perhaps 30,000 events.
In this second interview, then, our task is to strive, however incompletely to reconstruct the myriad details of our participants’ experiences in the area we are studying” (p.18). Herein lies the power of the qualitative model. A theoretical or statistical analyses approach generalities while more detailed qualitative methods approach the precious details of our experiences, holding them to the light of structured analysis in order to glean, from the data, the very tangible modes of our existence.

The final stage of Seidman’s mode is the reflection on the meaning. This last stage is important for two reasons. First, it adds yet another contextual layer to the experiences cataloged in the second interview, fixing a complexity to the interviewee’s experiences. Seidman sees this as a befitting culmination of the interview process: “the combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details for their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives” (p.19). This leads to the second important aspect of this stage: meaning-making. Within this stage, the interviewee assumes, in some sense, the role of researcher who is also attempting to ascribe meaning to the events contained in the interview. As a result, a richer analysis of events can take place, for not only does the interviewee assist the interviewer in the meaning-making process, but this assistance also serves as an interpretative layer, for both its existence as meta-cognitive material and interview material proper allow for the researcher to maximize his or her ability to interpret and analyze the experiences.

**Seidman’s Model Executed**

With the stages now explained, I would like to discuss modifications I made to Seidman’s model for my project, for while the three categories of interview questions proved an
integral part to my project, Seidman insists upon these categories occurring separately as three distinct interviews:

We have found it important to adhere to the three-interview structure. Each interview serves a purpose both by itself and within the series…Each interview comprises a multitude of decisions that the interview must make. The open-ended, in-depth inquiry is best carried out in a structure that allows both the participant and the interviewer to maintain a sense of the focus of each interview in the series. (p.19)

Seidman’s insistence is certainly not without strong logical foundation. The dedication of a day to a single interview category and the distance established between each interview instills both focus and ethos into the interview process. In an effort to effectively capture the experience of the participants, the interviews themselves become an experience, a three-day journey through the cliffs and valleys of one’s life. However, while Seidman encourages his readers to “respect the structure” (p.19), the logistical demands incurred by Seidman’s rigorous structure may prove quite taxing for the interviewee who, uncompensated for his or her time, must take multiple hours out of multiple days in order to meet the somewhat arduous request of Seidman’s model. Therefore, in the interest of time, I consolidated the interviews into one or two sessions. The benefits of this approach enabled greater continuity among the three stages with a clear progressive impulse directing the interviews. For this project, the focused life history, while briefly touching on the interviewee’s parents’ occupations and educational attainment, was primarily focused on their college experience. Questions regarding why the participant enrolled in college, his or her professional goals, and the general college experience were asked in order to uncover how college prepared him or her for work experience as well as other connections (and disconnections) between education and employment. The second stage, the details of the
experience, was directed more towards the underemployed condition. Details concerning the participant’s work and his or her feelings and attitudes regarding it were discussed. This experience would progress to the final stage, the reflections on the experience, in which questions seeking how the participant viewed the costs of education in relation to their underemployed condition, how they would advise future college students, and the value of education inside and outside of work were asked. With these three stages, each interview operated as a rich discussion, touching upon many pertinent facets of the participants’ education and work experience from numerous angles.

**A Word on Research Ethics**

In order to perform this study responsibly, ethics must be a force pervading all features of the study, specifically the role of the researcher, the researcher’s interactions with participants, and the researcher’s interactions with the data. My role as the researcher is certainly a complicated one due to my own positionality. As a formerly underemployed college graduate, I experienced many of the same frustrations that the participants are currently experiencing, and those frustrations undoubtedly instilled some preconceptions regarding CGU before I embarked on this research study. Moreover, my position as a Marxist further complicates my role as a researcher, for as a Marxist, I am critical of CGU as it relates to its role in the oppressive tendencies of capitalism. I have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about CGU in a particular way, theorizing it in a specific manner. Some scholars may criticize this approach, Marxian in nature, as problematic when considering the problem of ethics since Marxism has, at times, been derided for being too focused on economics and not the ethical problems of capitalism. In answering these criticisms, I quote from Blackledge’s (2012) book, *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution*, where he states:
Marxism…provides the resources to underpin an ethical political practice that is able to move beyond the negativity of anti-capitalism toward a positive socialist alternative to capitalism. Far from being a form of class reductionism, Marx articulated and justified a conception of social subjectivity in which the struggles for freedom (real democracy) is not only the imperative of free agency but is also rooted in the “new fangled” working class’s emergent desire to overcome alienation through the concrete forms of collective struggle. (p.4)

Despite being somewhat neglected in discussions of Marxist theory, there is a strong ethical undercurrent pulsing through much of Marxism, one through which the problems of capitalism undermine the ethical realms guiding society, compelling theorists and workers alike to collectively negate these undermining determinations.

Although these reflections inform my dissertation and analysis of data and my positionality influences my understanding of CGU, as an ethical researcher, I have not allowed these positions to have a detrimental impact on the integrity of the study. This, like most axiological ventures, is not something easily accomplished. Any critique or text operating with a critical framework is empowered by a strong purpose, enabling critique, and it proves to be a complicated endeavor to not negatively influence the data collection and analysis portions of a study (Hammersley & Traianou, 2011). For instance, as a Marxist, one can relatively easily point to an interview and have that interviewee speaking Marxian rhetoric. If he or she is critical of capitalism, a Marxian qualitative researcher can claim that that individual possesses a “revolutionary” consciousness. If he or she is uncritical of capitalism, that same researcher can point to false consciousness. This possibility leads to the unfair accusations of reductionism for
many Marxist thinkers, including Marx himself, and in order to avoid any legitimacy to such accusations, a series of measures were put into effect.

The first was a commitment to ensure that all participants in the study were truly able to communicate their stories and reflections (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). This commitment stems from my own personal ethics, which dictate that no matter what critical purposes my study may hold, the only means through which these purposes will possess any validity is if my study’s participants’ words are faithfully rendered. Therefore, in the interview guide (see Appendix A), there are no leading questions to manufacture a certain response. For the most part, all of the questions are open-ended, enabling the participants to clearly tell their stories in an authentic manner. Although I am the primary investigator in this study and have composed a theoretical and analytical frame to understand the data, the participants serve as the true authors of this study, and as a respectful editor, my primary goal is to ensure that their authorial intention is respected to the utmost.

My interactions with the participants are perhaps the most crucial dimension of my ethics as a researcher. These interactions not only revolve around faithfully rendering their responses, but in the entire interview process (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2010). Before every interview, the participants read through and sign a consent form that covered the important aspects of the study (see Appendix C). Before signing the form, they had the opportunity to ask any questions, and I often reiterated the most important elements of the interview process verbally. Transparency is vital, particularly due to the sensitivity surrounding issues of employment. All participants knew about the nature of the study prior to the interview taking place; some had questions regarding specific features, and those questions were answered. They were well-informed regarding the consent process and were aware that their data would be
anonymized and that they could remove themselves from the study at any time. Indeed, some individuals, after reflecting on the interviews, did decide that they were not comfortable in being included in the study, and I immediately honored their requests. I made every effort to humanize the process as much as possible, making every effort to be friendly and personable. These efforts were not particularly difficult, but I believe they represent a vital component to the ethical process. The research participants were not compensated for their time; all of them worked, and many of them had families and other obligations, so the least I could do was make the process as positive as I could. I always made an effort to be engaged in the interview process and not just listlessly record their responses, and I made sure to thank them and communicate that they were really helping me in this endeavor. Morrison, Gregory, and Thibodeau (2012) reinforce this point by stating, “meaningful dialogue with participants, rather than a directive from researchers, to identify the ending of the participant-researcher relationship and not the researcher-participant relationship is warranted” (p.420).

The last actualization of my research ethics is represented in the analysis of the data. After my participants had trusted me with their stories, I had a responsibility to analyze them in a way that accurately represented their responses. A delicate balance must be struck in this venture because I conducted the study with an explicit purpose and question in mind, and I analyzed the interviews with those elements in mind. By the same token, the data—though it can be interpreted in numerous ways—hold validity in an unanalyzed form and must be treated as such. Therefore, I did not alter data or represent only the data that affirmed or corresponded with my research purposes, but rather offered a more comprehensive representation of the data, analyzing multiple sides of the issue and ensuring that the analysis, in seeking to establish context to the interviews, did not steer the responses too far from their original intention. I have responsibility
not only to my participants, but also to my readers who seek to learn about CGU in a qualitative manner, which only further reinforces the ethical framework behind the data analysis. Indeed, Paul Sullivan’s model does take ethics into account. Sullivan (2012) offers an intriguing reflection regarding the importance of ethics in his data analysis:

The participants may well expect that their own voice, perspective, and thoughts will be favourably represented by the analyst. Yet, no matter how favourable the analyst is, the task of qualitative research is to create a new text, albeit an intertextual one, and in a sense, what the participants say will become re-accentuated in many different ways as part of the impulse to answer a particular research question. (p.175)

Sullivan speaks to the ethical dilemma I mentioned earlier, reaffirming that there is a delicate balance between the aims of research and the key ambition to remain true to the participant’s voice. His answer lies in the metaphor that the qualitative research study is an intertextual text, a dialectical model that incorporates both the aims of the study and the voices of the participants. As long as the participants are aware of the study’s aims, their voices, interspersed with theory and analysis, are ethically incorporated. Ultimately, the contexts through which the data are analyzed—both through Marx and Sullivan—act as crucial tools that establish ethos in the analysis, and as long as these tools are utilized as intended, the analysis can take place in an ethical manner.

**Recruiting**

Throughout the course of the study, recruiting proved to be one of the more challenging elements. There are two reasons for this challenge. The first is that underemployed college graduates, while fairly numerous, are not centralized in a singular location, but are spread throughout the population. They are often difficult to identify due to the nature of the
underemployed condition since underemployed workers, in many positions, work with individuals who do not possess a degree, and it is difficult to ascertain underemployed parties without asking them. The second reason is that underemployment, like unemployment, is often stigmatized due to the relationship between one’s profession and the social capital entwined in that profession. Sensitive to this situation, some underemployed individuals are hesitant to speak about their experiences, further complicating the recruiting process.

Nevertheless, recruitment occurred gradually from June to October. One by one, individuals were contacted by email (see Appendix B) and asked whether or not they would like to participate. The primary means through which initial participants were chosen were due to my own position at the University of Cincinnati. As a staff member and adjunct professor, I would hear about past graduates and current adjuncts that would be eligible. These initial contacts would sometimes lead to interviews, and these interviews would enable snowball sampling to take place where the underemployed participants would recommend that I would talk to people they knew who also qualified for the study. This would represent the best manner through which I recruited participants, and while I worked some of the participants, as a result of belonging to the same university system, I did not work closely enough with these individuals to exert any influence over the participants due to possessing a staff position at the Clermont campus. The other means through which I found possible participants were via the online directories of surrounding colleges. Since adjunct labor represents a crucial section of the underemployed population, I emailed many adjuncts at random in the academic disciplines I sought. Of course, despite being adjunct professors, many of the individuals I contacted were not underemployed, but rather utilized their adjunct positions to supplement their income from full-time jobs; however, through persistence, I managed to recruit the necessary number of participants from a
variety of academic disciplines, and as the sample section will show, these individuals represent a variety perspectives of the underemployed experience, including possessing academic and non-academic positions as well as experiencing underemployment objectively and/or subjectively.

**Location**

Once the participants agreed to be interviewed, we would meet at a location of their preference, which was usually in one of two locales: on a college campus (since many of the participants were adjuncts, we could usually secure an office or meet at the library) or a café like Starbucks (my digital recorder was able to clearly capture the interviews despite the background noise). Interviews would start out with the consent form and explanation regarding the purpose of the study and its particular nuances. Next, I would collect some basic demographic data (gender, university, year graduated, degrees held) before beginning the interview process. As previously stated, interviews were held over one or two meetings, either one long session or two shorter ones. The interviews would end only after all questions were answered, and afterwards, participants would be thanked for their time and informed to contact me if they had any additional questions or concerns.

**Sample**

For this study, 20 participants were interviewed. Of these participants, the age was between 23 and 55. The primary reason for this large age range was due to interviewing a large number of individuals with advanced degrees as well as a few non-traditional students. Nearly all of these individuals reside in or around the Cincinnati area. However, a few participants currently live in more suburban or rural outskirts of Cincinnati, so not all of the participants live in urban environments. Table 4 below displays perhaps the most important information regarding the sample: the degrees each participant holds and their current underemployed position. The
participants were separated into four disciplinary groups reflecting the degrees held by the participants: English/Humanities, Education/Social Sciences, Math/Science, and Business/Computers, I decided to seek out underemployed persons from all these groups in order to possess a variety of perspectives on underemployment and how their educational identity—as informed by their discipline—related to their underemployed status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Participant Table</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English/Humanities Group</td>
<td>Education/Social Sciences Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Participant 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A. in English</td>
<td>B.S. in early childhood education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library assistant</td>
<td>Goddard school worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Participant 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A. in theatre studies</td>
<td>B.A. in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-Time Tutor</td>
<td>Call center supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Participant 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A. in philosophy</td>
<td>B.A. in political science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.A. in philosophy</td>
<td>M.A. in women’s studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct professor</td>
<td>Testing center coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Participant 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A. in English</td>
<td>B.S. in anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. in English</td>
<td>Part-time tutor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct professor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Participant 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A. in English</td>
<td>B.S. in biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.F.A. in creative writing poetry</td>
<td>M.Ed in ESL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. in poetry</td>
<td>Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct professor</td>
<td>Adjunct English professor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table shows a fairly diverse array of degrees and positions held by the participants. An important thing to keep in mind regarding this table is the nature of underemployed experienced by the participants. As stated in chapter two, underemployment comes in a variety of forms. In this case, two forms of underemployment were most present. The first is objective underemployment, or underemployment determined by a lower wage or part-time status. In this situation, seventeen of the participants were objectively underemployed, including the tutors and adjuncts included in the study. The second form of underemployment is subjective in nature where there is an incongruence between the degrees held and the jobs possessed, and nine of the participants experienced this form of underemployment. In some cases, subjectively underemployed individuals are of full-time status and are gainfully employed, and in other cases, there are features of objective underemployment along with the incongruity between degree and occupation. Regardless of the status, more often than not, the subjectively underemployed individual would prefer to be working in a profession where the degree is utilized, thus demonstrating another form of problematic work experience.

**Data Analysis (Adopted from Sullivan)**

After researching numerous methods of qualitative data analysis, I discovered a rather innovative model developed by Paul Sullivan and described in his 2012 work, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Using a Dialogical Approach*. Sullivan’s data analysis model emphasizes tropes of qualitative research such as dialogue and subjectivity with tropes of literary theory like genre—the common linkage of discourse uniting the two. For Sullivan, the crucial distinction between his model and other qualitative analysis approaches is his utilization of genre as a means of approaching the subjectivity of his interviewees, more specifically a conception of genre formerly developed by Russian Marxist literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin. In order to understand
the interworking of Sullivan’s approach and its appropriateness to this study, some discussion of Bakhtin’s work is warranted.

**Sullivan, Bakhtin, and the Appropriateness of this Analysis**

When one reads Bakhtin’s work, one becomes immediately aware of the correlations between it and qualitative study. Reading his collection of works, there are numerous instances where Bakhtin endeavors to craft connections between literary study and everyday experience. One of his more influential concepts is that of chronotope or “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relations that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1992, p.84). In drawing a keen critical eye to the time-space situations within the novel, Bakhtin is not only reflecting his Marxian perspective (a perspective laden in historical materialism where the spatial temporally of capitalism is always a crucial focal point), but also offers a rich theoretical vein for qualitative researchers—who are also continually looking to situate experience in a specific historical moment (whether personal or contextual)—to mine. And, as I will soon discuss, Sullivan quickly assimilates chronotopes into his analytical approach, employing them as a pivotal base point for his primary appropriation from Bakhtin: that of genre.

Genre is a basic category of literary analysis, the primary means to categorize texts. From the poem to the novel, genre (and the numerous subgenres splintering from genres) groups texts based upon shared fundamental characteristics. What Bakhtin, among other things, adds to our understanding of genre is its applicability outside of texts in the form of what he labels as “speech genres.” As the text mirrors life, life mirrors texts for Bakhtin, allowing for a linguistic utilization of genre in which the speaker employs a genre, relational to a literary form, to cast his discourse. In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Bakhtin (1986) expounds on this notion:
Speech genres are very diverse…A large number of genres that are widespread in everyday life are so standard that the speaker’s individual speech is manifested only its choice of a particular genre, and perhaps, in its expressive intonation…These genres are so diverse because they differ depending on the situation, social position, and personal interrelations of the participants in the communication. These genres have high, strictly official, respectful forms as well as familiar ones. (p.79)

In the world of everyday language, we can categorize our utterances into speech genres, and in doing so, we can comprehend, in a more substantive way, the connectivity within our speech acts as well as the contextual forces that construct them. Zoe Drurick (2009) offers a helpful summation of the philosophical and linguistic content behind speech genres:

Bakhtin’s theory of speech as site of social and historical struggle, neither the purview of a dominating system nor a realm of unconstrained freedom, provides a useful counterpart to the dominant notion of genre as classification. Speech genres provide the shared reference points for speakers, listeners, and, by implication, industries involved in the production of media products. However, in addition, Bakhtin’s emphasis on speech as a situated utterance contextualizes genres as living components of both everyday language and aesthetic production. (p.297)

Speech genres are not merely literary categorizations, but arise from the material conditions of society. Sullivan (2012) compellingly points to the chronotope as a crucial building block of constructing genre, arguing that speech genres are the embodiment of spatio-temporal types of speech: “Genres are particularly interesting in their capacity to organize the time-space dimension of subjectivity. Bakhtin argued that different social genres…offer different sets of
potential to experience and give value to time and space” (p.46). This leads to the final component of Sullivan’s Bakhtian approach: subjectivity.

Sullivan analyzes the interview through an author-hero lens, which he appropriates from Bakhtin. In the case of the interview vs. the novel, however, the interviewee is both the author-hero, employing their subjectivity to interpret events, the recounting of which transforms them into a hero, and according to Sullivan, it is primarily this relationship between hero and author that dictates the nature of the genre presented. This interpretation stems from Bakhtin’s essay, “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” where Bakhtin (1990) states:

The general formula for the author’s fundamental, aesthetically productive relationship to the hero…is a relationship in which the author occupies an intently maintained position outside the hero with respect to every constituent feature of the hero—a position outside the hero in respect to space, time, value, and meaning. (p.14)

For both Bakhtin and Sullivan, the speech genre present in an interview is dependent on the discourse-related distance between the interviewee (the author) and the interviewee-as-character (the hero). If the distance is substantial, heavily mediated by other forms of discourse, and the relation between interviewee and interviewee-as-character is obscured, the genres presented typically belong to an older literary tradition, that of epic, lyric, and tragedy. If the distance is not substantial, the discourse presented in the interview is primarily the interviewee’s discourse, and the relation between interviewee and interview-as-character is clear, the genres usually belong to more subversive literary traditions, namely the novel and the satire.

Emerging from these theoretical waters, the question remains: what are the advantages of Sullivan’s method? Speaking to the appropriateness of this analysis, Sullivan’s approach is perhaps at its most useful when applied to a problem where an individual’s autonomy is in
question. When one considers CGU, an individual’s reaction to it proves to be quite varied. Many individuals feel as though outside forces (the economy, the labor force, educational institutions) largely determined their condition, thus revealing a distance reflective of an epic or tragic genre where the hero struggles against these outside forces. Other individuals place greater onus on themselves, choices they made or did not make, and could look at the situation ironically, revealing different genres. Therefore, Sullivan’s model proves quite apt at categorizing and understanding the underemployed experience in an innovative manner.

While the question of positionality is of undeniable importance in this study, the most crucial reason why this analysis proves appropriate is as a mode of discourse categorization. Remember that Sullivan draws from Bakhtin’s notion of speech genres as inspiration for his analytical framework. When one crafts a story, one is manipulating several nuances of speech simultaneously to compose the form and content of the narrative. In order to better understand all these nuances coming together in process, Bakhtin forged a linkage between everyday speech and literary genres since the literary genre was a concept inherent to the realm of stories. Moreover, these genres carried with them a field of study that proved applicable to the speech genres of everyday life. Certainly, there are discordances between these two genre types; however, in terms of examining an individual’s narrative, the application of genre enables one to understand the creation of a story-in-process more substantially, for within the realm of genre studies comes a variety of tropes to aid in the understanding of narrative. Therefore, when I analyzed the narratives of the participants, I could employ a genre analysis to better understand the stories-in-process, categorizing the participants’ discourse in such a way as to specifically analyze certain features of the participants’ narratives, thus generating a stronger understanding of the underemployed college graduate experience.
Seidman & Sullivan

Before progressing, a brief word on the continuity from Seidman to Sullivan, from data gathering to data analysis: although one can relate method and analysis with little difficulty, I feel there is an aesthetic, almost literary quality to both approaches. Obviously, Sullivan, with his particular emphasis on genre and literary terminology, lends himself well to such a quality, but Seidman also possesses a literary progression in his three stage interview process. The first stage of the interview, the focused life history, operates as a type of prologue for the subsequent events. The next two stages, the details of the experience and reflections of the experience, function as two distinct narration types, one that is descriptive and the other that is reflective. Seidman’s interview process—which often produces tropes of fictional texts such as summaries and scenes of events, description and reflection, and personal and social commentaries—therefore frequently connects to various genres represented in Sullivan’s approach, particularly those of the epic genre (in which participants struggle to gain access into a constrained work environment) and parodic genre (in which participants are well aware and critical of their situations). As a result, the coupling of Seidman and Sullivan create a rather intriguing and aesthetic methodological-analytical partnership, one that allows for a deeper literary understanding of interviewee experiences than perhaps other such partnerships.

Limitations

The primary limitations for this study revolved around the sample selected. In order to complete this project in a timely manner, I had fairly basic criteria regarding eligibility (holding at least a bachelor’s degree and representing some form of underemployment). A more specific set of criteria could focus on certain strains of underemployment (adjunct labor, newly graduated individuals, underemployed people working in the service or retail fields, etc.). Instead, the
twenty participants that I interviewed, represent a variety of different stories, which provides a more diverse depiction of CGU, and while there are certainly commonalities among these individuals in terms of their experiences, analyzing a particular group of underemployed graduates holds a different set of possibilities. Also, in regard to my sample, I believed interviewing twenty people in an in-depth manner would yield the data needed to thoroughly analyze the problem; however, obviously interviewing a larger sample would yield an even greater amount of data to contribute to our understanding of the issue.

In terms of the actual study itself, certain limitations arise from the theoretical framework, methodology, and data analysis that should be considered. By choosing a Marxian theoretical framework, I am choosing a critical model that emphasizes certain points and neglects others. Granted, Marxian theory enables a variety of theoretical propositions revolving around education, labor, social class, and the political economy, but other factors, utilizing different theoretical models, could more adroitly examine the gender, racial, and cultural features of CGU. As previously stated above, my employment of the Seidman model was somewhat compromised due to sensitivity regarding my participants’ time and schedules, and while I was pleased with the depth and detail exemplified by these interviews, utilizing the three-part, three-day interview structure would have probably offered a richer set of data. Lastly, Sullivan’s analytical method—while innovative and appropriate for this study—holds certain limitations, most notably that the genre layer attached to the data somewhat obscures the true nature of the participants’ experiences unlike a study employing grounded theory or a more phenomenological analysis. Ultimately, Sullivan’s model sacrifices, to some degree, the authenticity in the participants’ voices for a more intricate and contextual analysis, a drawback that I attempt to mitigate.
somewhat in the following chapter, but one that is unavoidable in comparison to other forms of qualitative data analysis.

The Organization of the Analysis

The next two chapters will seek to establish a particular qualitative character to CGU. In doing so, I seek to go beyond the appearance of CGU and its superficial gloss that merely asserts that CGU is an unfortunate condition that exerts all of sorts of problems for those experiencing it: emotional and economic. Instead, the analytical system presented here exposes not only specific thematic features linking the participants in the study, but also, through Sullivan’s genre analysis, gathers these experiences into genre categories in order to emphasize the emotional and ideological nuances in their responses, enabling a Marxian qualitative analysis that provides a specific window into how the problems of capitalism manifest in the day-to-day lives of individuals. With this in mind, the data analysis model presented in chapters six and seven possesses two stages: (1) a thematic rendering of the data and (2) the genre analysis. The thematic analysis functions as a broader starting point in which the data are categorized thematically in regard to pertinent coding themes. This entry point will provide important aspects of the underemployed experience, describing the specific features of the experience and the tension among these experiences. Only after these foundational characteristics are described can the interpretative layer linked to genre be transposed onto the data. Theme and content serve as the material through which genre discovers its form. Sullivan’s approach mobilizes these genres to situate larger contextual meaning to the interview data, narrowing the interpretative lens to generate meaning from the responses.
Chapter Six

Data Analysis Part I: Thematic Analysis

The purpose of the thematic analysis is to provide a broader analysis of the data that serves as the foundation on which narrower and more intricate analyses are situated. To approach the essence of the underemployed condition, pertinent themes regarding the participants’ education and work experiences needed to be excavated and analyzed. I have chosen nine themes for this first stage of analysis. These themes were selected as common key moments or declarations yielded from an initial level of Sullivan’s analytical tables, and presented in this fashion, these themes formulate a multi-faceted account of the underemployed condition. By presenting these commonalities, I am not insinuating that these are somehow universal to the CGU experience. Instead, these themes stand as pivotal linkages that create a network amidst twenty unique experiences. Each theme will be described and quotations from the interviews will be employed to substantiate the theme. Pseudonyms will be placed on all participants’ responses, but since the participants’ discipline/degree potentially shades their responses, I will include their discipline/degree along with their pseudonym. Not surprisingly, these themes coincide with each stage of Seidman’s interview process with the initial themes revolving more around the participants’ coursework, the second set of themes reflecting the participants’ underemployed condition, and the final set of themes focusing on the participants’ reflections on their education and work experiences. With these themes, one approaches a kind of history—from before college to the present—of the participants’ experience with what it means to be an underemployed college graduate.

Feelings of aimlessness regarding the college experience. One of the more striking findings from the very outset of the life history was a reoccurring aimlessness regarding going to
college. Although many of the participants were of traditional age when first attending college and thus may not have had a clear career path in mind upon entering, there was a lack of excitement and engagement about the prospects of going to college. As Wallace, who holds a degree in math, states, “Why did I enroll in college? Uh…I guess by default. I mean, you didn’t have to enroll in college, but people were doing it at the time and I was expected to do it. It was more or less the same reason I enrolled in high school.” This notion of expectation, typically parental, occurred in several interviews, often replacing the individual’s own agency in the decision. Marie, a biology major, discusses this issue, utilizing her parents’ “voice” in her response, “In my family, it was never really an option. It was always, ‘You’re going to go to college.’ So, and, I always had the desire to further my education and of course the lure of being able to get a career, get a good job, and really be able to support yourself.” Lisa, who holds a M.B.A. and works as an adjunct, produced a very similar response, “First, it was there really wasn’t a question. I didn’t have a choice in my family. It was really just understood. ‘You were going to college.’”

This parental expectation becomes intertwined, as it does with Marie and Lisa, with an abstracted notion of a career. Despite not necessarily having a strong interest in pursuing a particular career or sometimes even college itself, parental insistence along with an ideological imperative towards employment serves as a crucial catalyst in enrolling. Mona, who majored in theatre studies, expressed anxiety regarding this issue, yet experienced a parental influence in going regardless: “And when I applied in high school, I sort of freaked out. I thought about taking some time off, but my mom was like, ‘We will apply and see what happens.’” This idea of just seeing what happens is another crucial sub-theme. Eighteen of the twenty participants had parents who went to college, and while these parents were quite adamant about their children
going, virtually all of the participants received little guidance from their parents in navigating the labyrinthine network of the university. Janice, who holds a doctorate in education, expresses the intersections of these subthemes:

I was clueless. I was playing follow the leaders with my friends who were native born Americans. It was by accident, I almost think. I always had really good grades. It was never a question if I was going to get in. I got accepted to everywhere to everywhere I applied, but if I had more guidance, I could have gone to the Ivy League, but I didn’t have any guidance.

This lack of guidance, as it pertains to college, often exacerbates the aimlessness revolving around this initial decision to go to college, compelling many participants to choose their majors somewhat arbitrarily. Steven discusses how he decided on receiving a bachelor’s in biochemistry:

But I didn’t know specifically, so I picked my major, biochemistry, on a whim. I had no idea what biochemistry was. I saw the list of majors. They had biology and they had chemistry, and I was like “Well, I don’t want to go into chemistry. I don’t want to go into biology, specifically.” Well, they got this word underneath, biochemistry, so I circled that. I didn’t know what biochemistry was until my junior year. (Laughs).

For many of the participants, the initial step towards higher education was not a sure one, but rather was unsteady as they approached a new stage in their life laden with uncertainty. Many participants believed college was the right step, but the numerous particulars of this decision—from larger questions like where they would go or what they would major in to more everyday questions like how to handle the rigors of college coursework or how to form social relationships in this new environment—were navigated with little calculation. Although this initial
aimlessness does not really account for their underemployed status since many of individuals, who are similarly uncertain during their college years, subsequently obtain full employment, this indecision does speak to the ideological strand connecting education to employment since virtually all the participants perceived education as a gateway to a career due to a career, and yet ideology, while framing one’s larger perceptions of things, only gets individuals so far. Ideology, in some sense, primarily reaches the consciousness at a superficial level, appealing to a larger population, and while I do not wish to attribute some manner of essentialism to ideology, there is a neglect for specifics that is present here, which, for some participants, hampered the progress through their college experiences.

Lack of connection to coursework. This initial theme bleeds into the second as the lack of engagement and agency is transferred into a lack of connection to coursework. This theme is primarily manifested via a further degradation of the ideological connection between education and employment. With the first theme, college as a pathway to a career represented a powerful, yet rather nebulous motivation for going to college, yet when the participants deemed their coursework as lacking professional utility, their connection to it became marginalized. Stephanie, an environmental studies degree-holder, speaks to this notion:

Yeah, my college was not helpful for me and my future career. (Laughs). It was all theoretical. None of it was practical. It was really soft sciences and the environmental studies program just, I don’t know how else to say it, more theoretical, no hands-on, no field, no contacts, no experience actually doing the physical things, like lab.

Herein lies a crucial ideological contradiction at the heart of many participants’ college experiences. Perceiving college (at least in part) as a form of career preparation instead of a collection of learning experiences that are not connected to work, the participants were
disenchanted with the lack of professional utility in their coursework. Even in a field like English where there is not an explicit career path, Travis describes his relationship with coursework in the following manner: “So my coursework, as an English major, was largely ‘read this book, come to class, and we’ll talk about this book, and you’ll write a paper about this book and if the professor feels like grading a blue book exams, take an exam on this book.”” Julie, who holds a Ph.D. in literature also described her undergraduate coursework in a similar manner: “It was much more like read this poem and write a paper about it, which I also enjoyed, but I remember feeling frustrated that I wasn’t doing the real thing.” Once more, perceiving a lack of utility or connection in one’s coursework does not immediately manufacture an underemployed destiny, but the narrative is not uncommon. The prologue to the underemployed story is formulated in college where the ideological pull towards college as a pathway towards a profession becomes fractured in the structure of the university and is further fractured when the job market is not necessarily welcoming. The intersection between the traditional college experience influenced by a still powerful liberal arts tradition and the career-oriented college experience, which insists on material career outcome is not cohesive. Instead, the intersection is quite jarring, generating a mixed experience in college students. For the participants, facets of the college experience held undeniable value where it is the social experience or specific features of the coursework. Yet, these features are intertwined with a malaise that sometimes pervades their college experience, one that finds fault with the career-orientated nature of college, leading to the third theme.

**Lack of confidence regarding career path.** Upon graduation, college students complete one stage of the college to career progression. However, completing this stage, while quite arduous and costly, did not necessarily lead to confidence regarding future employment. Actually, many of the participants were aware of the difficulties revolving around obtaining
employment, particularly if their degree was in the humanities or social sciences where careers are somewhat scarce. Carol, who received a degree in anthropology from Notre Dame, laughed at the notion of obtaining employment right away, stating, “I was an anthropology major.” And Travis further supports this point by arguing that “I had no idea what I was going to do with that or what I would want to do in the field. English, especially these days with any of the humanities, if you have any career goals in mind other than being a PHD or a barista, you kinda insane.” Indeed, for many degrees, the demands of the field require further education, rendering their newly earned bachelor’s degree (and sometimes even a Master’s degree), at least in terms of obtaining employment, somewhat lacking in value.

This narrative becomes particularly problematic when plans revolving around obtaining a graduate degree do not necessarily materialize. Even with the popular ideology that the Master’s degree is the new bachelor’s, graduate degrees require even more time and money to obtain from college-weary students already in debt. Therefore, when these doors shut, the situation becomes somewhat dire, like Elyse who possesses both a bachelor’s and Master’s in philosophy: “I knew that a Master’s degree in philosophy can be a dead end.” This statement reverses the popular notion that the college degree opens an array of opportunities. As will soon be discussed, the college degree actually has the tendency to close doors to employment opportunities when the individual is overqualified or over-educated.

**Initial struggles and excitement/relief.** This state typically leads to a period where the participant undergoes a period of unemployment, searching for jobs in his or her field as well as other jobs to obtain work experience or make ends meet. Although career websites make it easier to search for jobs, there is still considerable energy exerted in landing that job. Rebecca, who holds a degree in early childhood education, discusses this process:
Oh yeah. I applied pretty much anywhere in a 20 minute radius, every which way…I personally went into schools and talked to principals, vice principals, and secretaries. We were told to get your face out there as much as possible. And I didn’t have a job at the time, and I was like “I want to get a job,” so I was going out there full force. I was like “This was the best way I could do, so I went there in person and try to win them over.”

Despite this initial push, Rebecca was unable to find a full-time teaching position and instead had to work at a daycare. Her story proves interesting when compared to Janice’s who holds a doctorate in education and a great deal of experience teaching overseas, but cannot acquire a teaching job other than a part-time position:

I have lots of people from the inside that were on search committees and everyone with over two years of experience—I have 22 years of teaching experience, that automatically throws me in the waste barrel. They will not even look at me. I have so much experience, and with the doctoral degree on top of it.

Within similar fields, too little experience or too much experience leads to an underemployed condition. Additionally, people often entered underemployment from full-time professional jobs, the chaos engendered by the economic crisis forcing them into underemployment. Bethany describes her experience:

I was director of marketing for an international corporation and I did that a total of 19 years at that company. But the bubble burst, I got rifted along with everybody in that senior type of position because companies buy and sell each other. What we ended up with, I kid you not, were nine directors of marketing. There was going to be one person standing. With salaries alone, they saved a half million dollars.
Robert, who holds a Master’s degree in computer science, shared a similar experience: “starting around the year the year 2000, I guess, we already started what became a never-ending cycle of off-shoring and reductions…I lived through at least a dozen reductions in force over those years, between 2000 and 2012, and I think that last one was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Both Bethany and Robert work now as adjuncts, taking severe cuts in salary and benefits as they plan their next career move. Their stories are unique among the other representations of underemployment here due to their education-employment progression being completed, so that they could be fully employed for a substantial period of time. Nevertheless, their current underemployed condition, though acquired by a circuitous path, possesses many of the same elements as the rest of the participants, including now facing a difficult labor market heavily populated with both experienced and inexperienced workers.

Indeed, this difficult navigation of a challenging job market is an arduous one, often rife with struggle and hardship, which initially compels them to embrace underemployment because at least it means some form of employment. Many of the participants expressed excitement or relief when they were hired for their current jobs. Travis found himself relieved to receive a part-time job at the library after his initial post-graduate forays into employment:

I felt fairly relieved. So I graduated in May of 2007, and for two or three months, I was just putting in job applications and not getting phone calls or only getting phone calls from pyramid schemes, so I actually went back to my old summer job of my college years of detailing cars. That’s not a fun job. It’s a crummy job, especially, when you’re getting paid hourly at a very low wage.

Joan, who holds a Master’s degree in women’s studies, also experienced early relief, albeit tempered somewhat, when she managed to get hired at a college testing center:
Most people did a part time job that they liked or didn’t like. A lot of people did part-time retail. Few people—two or three of us—that actually found a job and stuck with it are still in those jobs. So I just felt really relieved that I found anything at all. I knew that testing wasn’t what I wanted to do long term. I still know that it’s still not the field that makes me get out of bed every day.

What these statements express is that there are degrees of underemployment. With the formative disconnections between education and careers being teased out in the college experience, for many participants, these disconnections are cemented in the relief that comes with having a job that is utterly disconnected from education. Even though the majority of participants still hold out hope that they will reconnect labor with education later, the distance between these two concepts becomes established and over time grows more difficult to bridge.

**Underemployed condition.** What does it mean to be an underemployed college graduate? Naturally, this is a central question to this study, and while every participant experiences underemployment differently, the underemployed condition itself possesses several commonalities regardless of gender, age, or academic discipline. The first sub-theme is that despite the numerous problematic features of a job with underemployment connotations—low pay, being-part-time, having nothing to do with the education, etc.—underemployed workers often exert tremendous effort for their jobs despite their status and thus feel exploited. Mona, who works a part-time English tutor for a small college, speaks of this exploitation:

The things were most frustrating when I felt I was being asked to do things that were not part of my job description and…especially towards of the end because…I was one of the more experienced workers there, and I frankly got bored and took more tasks they asked of me, and then I got treated like I was expected to do those things and do even more.
Shelly, who possesses a degree in information systems but works temp jobs, also experiences similar feelings of resentment, moving job-to-job: “My current employer at that time before this job, they were bein’ too aggressive and loved to harass and not let you do the job, and I was about to kick them to the curb before they let me go.” These sentiments may contradict some common notions about less skilled forms of labor. Just because a job does not possesses rich capacities for intellectual stimulation does not necessarily mean those jobs are not taxing in other ways. Moreover, in Mona’s case as well as in other participants’ situations, due to the fact that these individuals hold degrees often leads to their employers holding higher expectations for their job performance and compel them to take on tasks that fall outside of their job requirements.

Another sub-theme regarding the taxing nature of the underemployed condition is the rather arduous nature of being a “flexible worker.” Many of the participants, who took these jobs out of desperation, had long commutes and other logistical hardships for jobs that were part-time. Travis recounts his first days working at a distant branch at the library:

When I was working part-time at the library, it was really weird, especially when I was at my first branch because I had this madman’s schedule where I would always work either Friday or Saturday eight hours, but I was working part-time, so my hours were spread throughout the week, often in four hour blocks, which would really suck because I was working at a branch 25 miles from where I lived, so I would drive 25 miles through congested interstates to work four hours for $10.38 an hour and drive back through congested Cincinnati interstates for 25 miles, so yeah, bordering on zero-sum off those days, probably in terms of my time.
In this situation, the demands of being a flexible worker often negate the sparse benefits of flexible employment. This is a common theme among the participants who were adjunct professors. Heather, who holds a Master’s degree in information systems and works as an adjunct, states, “I am working part-time 60 miles away from where I live because I cannot find anything at home.” This problem is aggravated for many adjuncts that endeavor to make this form of employment a short-term career like Elyse who works at multiple colleges:

Monday, I am the University of Dayton and teaching three classes, either they are back-to-back or I would have spaces in between them and some office hours and do lesson planning. Then, I would do grading and I would go home and do some more grading. The next day I would go to Clermont where I would teach night classes. I was grading and doing preparation for that and teaching…I teach at Xavier on a Saturday for three hours.

So it’s pretty packed.

The instability of the underemployed condition subsequently leads to a demanding schedule and working life that often exhausts individuals or leaves them emotionally burdened. Emotional distress comes in numerous forms for underemployed college graduates, but without question, the notion that since the participant holds a degree and should therefore be gainfully employed magnifies the emotional and mental difficulties originally linked to an underemployed condition. Marie, who works at a daycare, expresses this sentiment quiet well: “I feel definitely better that I have the degree, but when people ask me what my degree is, they expect me to say, ‘I was teacher.’ But I am like, ‘I was in biology with a minor chemistry.’ They are like ‘Why are you here?’” There is this expectation that underemployed graduates should be doing something more, something better, and the disappointment of not fulfilling this expectation injures their sense of self-worth and self-efficacy. Stephanie sums of this feeling:
And now, I feel like I’m just stuck…stuck in an old situation when I should be out doing something with my career or education. It’s harder to find value in what I do here when I know I should be doing something else. Yeah. It’s harder to care because you know theoretically and in the immediate future you will be doing something really awesome that you really want to do.

As will soon be discussed, the problems revolving around the underemployed condition are often shaded with hope. Here, Stephanie expresses feelings of being stuck, yet there is also a certainty that, in the future, she will employing her degree to do something she truly wants to do.

However, on the opposite side, the emotional distress—the feeling of being aimless and stuck—transforms into a quicksand from which there is no easy escape. Janice, who perceives her career as an adjunct with more permanence, conveys a situation where this feeling is far more dire:

I feel like I’ve been Wal-marted. I have no benefits. I have no job security. I don’t know if I’m going to be teaching one class or three classes in a semester because it is all based on enrollments. If those classes don’t fill, I don’t teach. For me as an adjunct, that’s critical. Despite the wages being so low, I rely on that to feed my child. And so that’s where I’m at right now. It brings me a lot of stress and frustration and angst and bitterness. Why did I do this? Why did I even pursue this higher level degree? I thought it would help me versus hinder. I can’t go backwards. I’m in limbo…I’m caught in this horrible limbo. I can’t go back and I can’t go forward, so I’m trapped. That’s how I feel. I feel very trapped right now. It’s not a very good feeling.

A series of complex emotions swirl about this long quotation. Not only are there the hallmarks of the underemployed condition, but the sense of aimlessness is so severe that that is nearly suffocating. Unfortunately, it is degree element of CGU that generates this emotion. The degree,
in essence, further restricts one’s career prospects in some cases, not only in a preference sense where the degree-holder wants a career that corresponds with his or her degree, but in a very practical one as well where the credential actually limits rather than empower. The consequences of overqualification are extreme in this case, but represent a challenging obstacle for those experiencing CGU. The already narrowed opportunities created by the crisis and other movements of capitalism grow even narrower as the certain elements of the education-career progress prevent those affected from not only going forward, but going **backward**. This is the limbo Janice refers to. The trek to the educational mountaintop, progressing farther and farther with each degree, is so arduous that for many individuals going backwards is not an option, and the limbo-like condition of underemployment represents the only viable alternative.

**Debt and degree alienation.** What confines graduates to this underemployed limbo, and what are the ramifications? Nearly every participant in the study had student loans and debt, and while many of the participants expressed the difficulties their debt instilled in their lives, the most common statements revolved around the necessary evils regarding it. For instance, Joan somewhat humorously summarizes this sentiment:

> It is really funny. I go back and forth. Sometimes, I have a panic attack and I am like, “Oh my god, I am going to die in an alleyway. I am going to eat easy Mac for the rest of my life, become a crazy cat lady and live out of a shopping cart.” And then some days I’m like, “Eh, everybody has it now. Who isn’t in a massive amount of debt?” At some point, the bubble is going to burst, and we are all going to be poor.

Indeed, even though participants were not actively “using” their degrees in terms of employment, for some participants, student loan debt is an acceptable price to pay for one’s college experiences. Mona proved able to delay gratification, stating, “I went to a school that was very
expensive and pretty much took the maximum loans that I could take out. And yet I’m…not bitter about that even though I am not using that degree right now because I think it takes time.” Nevertheless, the shadow of debt is a persistent one that colors one’s choices and caused some participants, like Elyse, to question their decisions regarding college:

So, for me, I got numerous student loans, numerous private loans because I couldn’t get federal loans due to my parents’ income, so…I loved my experience at my college, but I now think I maybe should not have gone there. I think you should go to college, but nothing is worth taking private loans out.

This argument regarding the intersection between education and labor mediated by cost leads to another sub-theme within the study, that being degree alienation. With the underemployed condition often yielding a mismatch between education and work, the notion of not actively “using” one’s degree, particularly over time, creates a gradual alienation from one’s course of study. Heather communicates this idea when she discusses her Master’s degree in information systems:

It’s kind of like a jack of all trades degree. You get a little bit of everything, but not a whole lot anything. While yes, I can dabble in this and dabble that, I don’t have the extensive knowledge from my degree that what would give me the feeling that I could go out and doing something really important.

The inability to capitalize on the perceived utility of the degree often wilts the participants’ perception of their degree or discipline. This is quite apparent due to the fact that virtually all the participants want to connect their degree with a career and make efforts to do so even when the chances of such connections are remote. Marie talks about this idea when asked how her degree in biology relates to her work in a daycare: “It relates to it? It doesn’t really. I mean occasionally
there are things that come up when I am talking to the kids and can tell them from a scientific aspect. Like we do science experience at the daycare, so I can pull from my knowledge and explain at a better level to them.” Interestingly, adjuncts, in particular, suffer a variant of degree alienation that is only partially realized. Although they are actively working in their discipline and teaching the very courses they may have taken as an undergraduate, the nature of the adjunct experience and the inability to progress in a certain discipline generates alienation from the degree. Elyse discusses this idea, “I would say I feel somewhat connected just because I know people from my graduate experience, but I say somewhat because I am not getting a PhD in philosophy and being an adjunct has not afforded me the time to do my own research, I feel disconnected in that way.” In thinking about the problem of degree alienation in Marxian terms, the exchange value of the degree supersedes the use value when one is underemployed, which means that the price of the degree/the economic features of the degree such as debt transcend the functionality of the degree. The old educational adage, “if you don’t use it, you lose it,” is somewhat appropriate here because even as the college experience provides immaterial benefits for the participants, once the natural means of employing one’s education, through work, is not taking place, the struggle to understand and utilize the degree for an alternative purpose can corrode the relationship one possess with his or her degree.

**More education.** The narrative of underemployed college graduates is one of numerous contradictions. Initially, these individuals are fairly certain about the importance of college as it relates to their careers, but the choices revolving around college are littered with uncertainties. Their parents are adamant about them going, but they receive little guidance from their parents. Despite being confident about the benefits of college in regard to getting a career, they are sometimes not confident about their prospects about getting a job. Depending on the individual,
the number of such contradictions can be quite large, but perhaps the most striking is the notion that many of the participants, despite not being able to obtain a job with their bachelor’s or Master’s degree, still plan on seeking further education. In this study, this often stems from more college representing an alternative to their current employment situation. Travis clearly represents this category: “I plan on enrolling into a graduate program at some point in political science. I am just bored with my job and frustrated about the lack of raises.” This also proved to be Joan’s situation who enrolled in a women’s studies program after graduating (and stayed in the program) due largely to the limited career opportunities around her: “Pretty much as soon as I started my program, I decided that I did not actually want to do it. The only reason I stuck with it is because I did not know what else to do, which is a really good reason to take on that much debt.” College as an alternative to searching for work after high school motivates many students to enroll, but it takes on a different character after one has already earned a degree. For some individuals, more college seems like the only viable option towards doing something meaningful. The lack of available options and the potentially long-lasting condition of underemployment compels many to acquire more education, not only to possibly improve themselves as professionals for the future, but for the present, it represents some manner of positive momentum that their careers do not provide to them. However, obtaining more education does not increase the number of quality jobs, and with greater numbers of individuals holding graduate degrees (and underemployed themselves), this venture holds the potential for returning individuals back into the fields of underemployment with another unutilized degree and possibly more debt.

**Forms of support.** Amidst the financial difficulties often attributed to the underemployed condition, many participants relied on support from their families or significant others. This support is a crucial facet of the underemployed condition because it, in the cases of
some of the participants, makes the challenges revolving around the situation somewhat less problematic at least in terms of immediate financial difficulties. Angie, who holds a Ph.D. in poetry, discusses why working as an adjunct is not immediately problematic due to support from her husband: “I have the advantage of having a spouse who has a full-time job. He’s not a doctor or a lawyer or anything, but I could be an adjunct and we’d be fine, financially.” Carol had a similar reflection: “Since I am married to someone who is the primary breadwinner, I don’t have the financial pressure, so the low salary was not much of a turnoff.” This support provides not only financial security, but mental and emotional support as well. Bethany did not feel compelled to return to the stressful corporate realm after being laid off due to her husband’s support: “So I was rifted and didn’t want go back to corporate. I really didn’t like it. I spent all these years getting very high up in the corporation and being very powerful and having a really nice office, but I really didn’t like it. My husband makes good money.” In these situations, the problematic nature of underemployment moves from the hostile realm of material and financial difficulties in which individuals must subsist off typically low wages to a different realm in which individuals are either frustrated by other features of underemployment (boredom, lack of degree congruence, etc.) or are actually quite comfortable being underemployed. In short, the support proves invaluable.

Moreover, this assistance is not only limited to spousal support, but it comes from the family as well. Moving back in with one’s parents or accepting other means support is not atypical for younger underemployed persons. When asked about how she felt when she was hired for her current job at a daycare, Marie answered with a laugh, “The daycare center my mom owns? I work for her as one of her lead teachers and as an administrative assistant. So, you know, I am going with the family business.” Although Marie has a degree in biology, her
difficulty in finding a job led to her to working for her mother, and thus her subjective underemployment ironically becomes a form of familial support. Mona, who relies partially on parental support, further characterized this current time period for young people in the following manner: “In a way it has sort of leveled the field for us artists because we are not the only ones who have to work as waiters and live with our parents.” Joan considers a corresponding notion in the abstract as she discussed dealing with employment issues and debt as a graduate: “But I also know people in my life who are going into so much debt that do not have a family that will help and support them if something goes horribly wrong. I can’t even imagine how scary that would be, to put all your eggs in one basket like education and hope it pays off some day, knowing that you are going to have to pay that back.” Joan’s reflection speaks to the importance of outside support for many underemployed college graduates. To help bear the financial and emotional burdens, some form of support is often essential if only to make the situation tolerable. More importantly, for those who do not have support systems in place, the situation becomes considerably more dire as the collective challenges of being underemployed and hampered by debt and compromised expectations grow overwhelming.

**Hope and Optimism vs. Criticism and Doubt.** The narrative for the underemployed college graduate can be fairly bleak at times, but there are also moments of sincere hope, optimism, and gratitude regarding their educational experiences. The final theme is the binary with which college graduates perceive their education and future. Certainly, these positive and negative reflections are often contained within the same interview, but here I would like to reflect on the nuances of this binary. The negativity, the criticism and doubt, are often directly linked, not surprisingly, to the inability to transfer the knowledge and experiences garnered in
college to a career. Economic difficulties, therefore, lead participants to criticize higher education’s value as discussed by Steven:

I think it puts some people behind the eight ball for a good decade after they get their degree. How are they gonna start a family and kids? Obviously, you can, but now you’re in more financial strife? (Laughs). It’s a game. It’s a game. It’s not a ponzi scheme. It’s not like that. I’m not going to call it anything to that degree. It’s very dicey. It becomes very fishy.

When one considers post-graduation and the moments when the university context is stripped away for the context of the career, the ability to discern education for its own sake becomes difficult, particularly when obtaining a quality job is problematic. Stephanie notes this reality, expressing education purely in terms of employability:

As long as everyone buys it, as long employers think it’s valid, and as long as parents and students think it is necessary, it’s just a game you have to play. But once the quality of the actual education…if you don’t learn anything…if the programs become absolute crap and you really don’t learn what employers actually need…it won’t have any value.

These quotes that label the rich and complex experiences garnered in college as a “scheme” or a “game” demonstrate how such experiences can be marginalized in the minds of individuals when that utility is not realized. Amanda also shares similar sentiments:

I think a four-year college degree is expected almost like a high school diploma. While I do feel like you do need to have a four-year college degree, I feel like a lot of places are way overpriced with the type of work you have to do to obtain it. A lot of it, for me, I was just regurgitating information in the form of a fancy written paper that I paid thousands of dollars to do.
At least in part for these people, education appears somewhat broken and is rendered a valueless, degraded object that was supposed to help them garner gainful employment, but ultimately failed to do so. However, this represents only one half of the binary. Still others argue about the benefits of education, particularly the transformative elements. Joan discusses how her degree in women’s studies framed her perception of reality:

The women’s studies classroom changed who I am in this really fundamental way. I would have been a totally different person if I hadn’t had those experiences. And that is something I carry with me in every situation I’m in: personal interactions, professional interactions; regardless of where I go, that experience is a part of me.

Indeed, for some people, this transformative experience, often combined with a deep passion for a certain discipline leads to a generally positive reflection on higher education experiences in light of actually utilizing the degree in a career. Mona exemplifies this reality in her reflection on theatre:

Obviously, I have grown as a person and learned a lot. I know I light up when I talk about theatre. I went to see a production, and it was really joyous and fun and to just look at the set and be able to talk about different things. I love that information that I have; it’s kinda sad that I don’t get to use it right now.

Indeed, for some people, the inability to utilize the degree in a career field is not sad, but actually enables them to obtain a deeper understanding of why perhaps they are underemployed. In an interesting reflection by Travis, the underemployed condition becomes a radicalizing experience:

What’s interesting is that the lack of capitalist critique that I got in my undergraduate years accompanied by my experience with poverty in my youth and coming out into the worst job market, the worst economic circumstances, since the Great Depression, at least
ideologically radicalized me. I’m not out throwing Molotov cocktails. I don’t believe in that. I don’t believe in violence. It definitely made me not take the economic and ideological system for granted.

In all of the participants, there was a gesture toward making meaning out of their educational and work experiences, a gesture at trying to understand how they entered their current situation and how they were going to escape it. With these reflections, positive and negative, there exists an unquestionable richness in the variety of experiences. Each person experienced underemployment differently and related their education to it in different fashions. Nevertheless, these themes would serve as the foundation for the next, more interpretative layer of analysis, the genre analysis where the intricacies of how individuals experienced CGU are more closely examined.
Chapter Seven

Data Analysis Part II: Genre Analysis

The aim of chapter six was to analyze the content of the underemployment narrative and understand the dominant characteristics of CGU as experienced by the participants. In this chapter, the form of these narratives will be the primary objective. In some sense, this is a richer aim. While one can perhaps intuit the makeup of the underemployed experience without having lived it, actually understanding how these experiences are understood and communicated is more complicated. To uncover this phenomenological concept, Paul Sullivan’s genre analysis will be employed to examine the life stories provided by the participants. By doing so, not only will the means by which the participants construct their life stories be brought to the forefront, but also how the participants understand the ideologically constructed relationship between education and employment (as it relates to identity) will be unveiled.

Three Genre Pairs

Due to the nature of Seidman’s three stage interview model, the interviews take shape in a narrative form, progressing through the participant’s educational history to their current underemployed status. This narrative can be essentially perceived as a memoir of sorts, a personal narrative spanning several years focused on a particular topic (in this case, the progression from higher education to a current position). However, despite all these interviews belonging to the genre of memoir and possessing several similar plot points (as described in the previous chapter: familial influence, higher education experiences, initial job searches and work experience, their current underemployed status, and finally a reflection on this status), how each individual conceptualizes this narrative is radically difficult. The root of these differences stems from numerous origins, including how the participants conceptualize how they became
underemployed, their specific relationship to their underemployment, and the role ideology plays in constructing this narrative.

In analyzing these origins, three genre pairs were developed. These genre pairs are as follows: epic and romance, tragedy and black comedy, and novel and draft. Each pair illustrates how the participants formulated their stories regarding underemployment. Before examining how these genres were represented in the interviews and the significance these genres possess, some discussion on how these genres emerged is warranted. The primary means through which this occurred is by asking questions regarding form of the interview data. Questions such as “what is the character of this reflection,” “how is the participant representing himself or herself in their interview,” and “how does the participant consider notions of temporality in their responses” all lead to the development of these genre pairs. Genres prove to be effective analytical devices because they operate as cultural narratives that the participants employ as touchstones as they recount their own life stories. As each participant draws upon pivotal “plot points” in their narrative, the representation of these crucial life stages—as it relates to the narrative as a whole—dictates how genres emerge. Each participant’s narrative contains multiple genres to accomplish this task, so in essence, the primary genre of all interviews is a multi-genre memoir of education and underemployment experiences, but the different rhetorical choices each participant makes in telling their story proves to be of crucial significance in understanding these experiences.

**Genre Pair 1: Epic and Romance**

How do we tell our stories? What tools do we employ to communicate the events and reflections that compose our lives? Genre represents a crucial device that provides shape to our narratives, a cultural touchstone that appropriates modes of storytelling established in traditional
narrative arcs for our own storytelling processes. This process often occurs unconsciously. The participants did not consciously consult modes of epic, romance, or tragedy to craft their own life stories represented in the interviews. However, in analyzing the nature of these life stories, the positionality of the interviewee in relation to his or her own underemployed experience recreates pivotal features of these genres to assist in understanding the situation at hand.

The first genre pair, epic and romance, stem from a common point of intersection: the position of the self in their transmission of their narrative. At key moments within the interview experience, the participants often manipulated these two genres to represent themselves in their narratives. The epic genre is largely typified by a broad dramatization of crucial experiences in which the participant is at the center of the events. Consider epics like *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, or *Dante’s Inferno*. In each of these poems, the hero is centralized in a broad narrative full of trials and tribulations. Many interviewees conceptualized segments of their life stories in similar terms, particularly specific facets of the underemployed journey. In analyzing these moments, molded in an epic genre, the participant perceives facets of the underemployed experience as moments in life resonating with intense activity, often of a frustrated sort. As the ensuing analysis will illustrate, the epic genre intertwines the self with a whirlwind of activity that often resembles a journey, another key motif of epic literature.

I have decided to present the genre analysis in pairs to demonstrate how the participants perceive similar content in a different fashion. This binary relation does not imply that there are only two ways to craft a story, but these genre pairs do function as the dominant genre forms present in the interviews. The romance genre is concerned with similar aspects of the life stories, but functions as a dramatically different representation. Once more, the participant is centralized in the life story, but instead of activity and trial dominating the mode of storytelling, reflection
and idealism serve as the dominant themes. Harkening back to the original Romanticism of Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley, the romance genre is more representative of the internal self. In linking this genre to the underemployment narratives of the study’s college graduates, the romance genre communicates the internal world of the participants, periods of intense reflection that brings light to the participants’ feelings regarding their higher educational experience in light of their current work status.

**The epic genre represented in the interviews.** Now that the primary elements of the genre pair have been introduced, one can see how these genres were employed in the life stories of the participants. In beginning with the epic genre, the centralization of the participant in a world of activity occurs at numerous points in the narrative. In the previous chapter, initial struggles with the college experience proved to be a prevalent theme in many of the interviews. This struggle often possesses an epic character as described by Mona in her discussion of navigating her theatre program:

> I personally ended up having a hard time with my program because it was a conservatory; the idea is that they are training you rigorously to be in professional theatre in the real world. It was very much…the program was not, “Well, you’re kinda of get an idea of what this and then go to grad school.” The idea was we would be employed in theatre. I clashed with my advisors a lot and didn’t feel very supported by them. I think that was a problem with personality more than anything else.

What is important to notice here is not only what is being told, but *how* it is told, for this primarily constructs the genre. The theme of struggle is pervasive throughout this quotation, but more importantly, the other characteristics of the epic genre are present here. Broadly narrating the events of her higher education experience with her firmly centralized in the action, Mona
weaves a complicated narrative in a few sentences. Interestingly enough, this narrative is one that is centered upon the problems of focusing on work preparation at the undergraduate level in a mode of education not necessarily linked to employment. Mona speaks of a time where learning is somewhat supplanted by work preparation, which led to a series of conflicts that placed a great strain on her college experience. With this narrative crucial to the life story, the epic genre proves to be an adequate means by which she formulates this arc in order to relate herself to the stressful action in her higher education experiences.

Another common plot point in the underemployed experience is the search for work, which is, in some sense, an epic journey within itself. Often traveling long distances, meeting numerous people, and undergoing the stress of the searching and interviewing processes, the search for work is often framed in an epic genre. Marie describes her search for work after graduating with a degree in biology in this fashion:

I think originally I was looking for some things still kinda of in the medical field or administratively since I did some office work. I also worked for a certified financial planner as an office assistant. I kinda like the office environment and the organization of it. So I kind of found a new path in that. So I looked into some sort administrative assistant type things, but even nursing homes, just seeing if they had some grunt work available. I was not necessarily trying to be picky because I knew I needed a job. So I still was looking in a medical environment, but also looking for some office generic work. The quest for a job proves to be one that leads the individual into all sorts of potential options. Unsure how she could translate her degree into employment, Marie sought numerous paths, the pressure to obtain some manner of employment compelling her to seek “grunt work” or “generic work.” Once more, notice how Marie generates this portion of her narrative. The emphasis on “I”
here is important because this search is something see feels she has to do. With her higher education experience over (at least for the time being), Marie entered a new phase of her life with considerable uncertainty as she was unsure about what types of jobs she would be qualified for. Marie employs the epic genre to communicate the intensely personal dilemma of realizing that she had to get a job, but struggling with the lack of connections her degree possessed in terms of obtaining employment. In this, Marie’s narrative becomes something of a quest where the goal is firmly in sight, but the means of obtaining that goal are unclear.

The final example of the epic genre presented here is of the underemployed experience itself, which also possesses characteristics of the epic. Struggles are abound in the underemployment experience, both internally and externally, and many participants characterize that genre with an epic mode of storytelling. Discussing her life as an adjunct, Janice describes this content in this genre:

It seems like universities are pulling out the tenure track and going more towards the field position where there is no tenure involved. I would be very happy to just have that because right now I’m part-time. I’ve taught as many as nine classes, which is ridiculous. I will never do it again because I about had a nervous breakdown. I was teaching across disciplines. I was teaching English Comp, psychology, and oral communications…It was just too much for me.

Janice places herself at the center of the larger narrative of the university. What she perceives as a problematic direction for the university leads to a personally problematic experience, an exhausting journey consisting of teaching nine classes in a semester. Once more, the self is centralized in chaotic activity. For Janice as for many other participants, the epic segments of their life stories resonate with a struggle towards acting without understanding. In each example,
the conflicts that emerged compelling the participant to act often possess a feeling underneath of struggling to understand. Whether it is navigating higher education, the job search, or the career world, these new and difficult spheres leave me questions for the individual, and in comparison to the romance genre, these questions populate the narrative with feelings of anxiety as opposed to moments of positive reflection.

**The romance genre in the interviews.** The romance genre, as presented in the interviews, operates as a tool for reflection. Through the entire memoir of the interview, activity functions as only one mode of narrative, and the need for reflection on the activity is equally crucial in providing an account of one’s experiences. Moreover, due to the structure of the interview process, as taken from Seidman’s model, the emphasis on reflection creates a need for a different genre in recounting the narrative of underemployment. Therefore, the romance proves to be an appropriate environment for this reflection to take place. Expressing the internal self at various points in the narrative, participants employed a mode of romantic storytelling to frame several crucial elements of their life story.

What is also fascinating about this particular genre is that it was, more often than not, utilized throughout the education sections of their narrative whereas the epic genre was employed more evenly, but primarily focused on the employment aspect of the story. For instance, Carol who does not utilize her degree in anthropology in her work as a tutor in the hard sciences, employs a romantic lens to reflect on her educational experiences:

> I think my anthropology degree has given me a perspective on…especially in relating to a variety of students and realizing that…that diversity is a thing. It is not just people being difficult. That people do come from a variety of backgrounds, a variety of cultural
differences. And…so…I am happy that I have my anthropology degree, but I don’t think it directly relates to my job very often.

Joan, too, in a similar reflection discusses the profound transformative effect that obtaining a degree in women’s studies had on her: “I can’t even imagine what kind of person I turned out to be if I hadn’t ended up in the classrooms that I did. Mostly, that is women’s studies. The women’s studies classroom changed who I am in this really fundamental way. I would have been a totally different person if I hadn’t had those experiences.” In both reflections, the romantic genre serves as both an avenue of contemplation as well as an expression of recognizing the value of education outside of employment. These portions of the life story hold little action, but operate as a means to make sense of the activity surrounding the participants. Neither Carol nor Joan is actively utilizing their degrees in their current occupations, but both reflect positively on the value of their education in other, more personal ways. Elyse also reflects on education in a similar manner:

I would say the most valuable part of college is not necessarily the job preparation or technical training, but it’s the process of becoming a citizen or becoming an engaged citizen and that was one of the most useful aspects of college. Becoming an engaged citizen and learning how to think, learning how to analyze, learning how to understand yourself in relation to the rest of society and the rest of the world is what I would say is really valuable to take away from college. I think secondarily is the technical training. It should not dominate your whole college experience because it is so much more than that.

This particular reflection distinctly separates education from work, bringing a powerful collection of benefits to the forefront. The romantic/idealistic outcomes of education are included here, not only focusing on critical thinking, but the Jeffersonian outcomes of education of
becoming part of an engaged citizenry. This reflection implicitly considers the increasingly popular notions revolving around the value of education and serves as a powerful refutation for what education could potentially be for the individual as a part of society.

That is not to argue that one’s work cannot be thought of in similar romantic terms. Stephanie speaks of wanting to major in environmental science to eventual work in a field with corresponding romantic implications:

To have a job in environmental field, preferably in the regulatory aspects. Go to state or federal agency, either monitoring pollution or enforcing law against pollution. Working permitting process, that would be cool…I have always known it’s what I should do. I wanna use my life to do something good for the planet. I thought if my career could actually protect nature from humans, that would be a good way to use my time in this world. That was idealistic reason for choosing environmental science.

In this quotation, the romance genre framing reflections regarding educational experiences is extended to potential work as well. Although Stephanie currently is unable to obtain a job in the environmental science field, there is still a life ambition surrounding a specific career path. Stephanie’s reflection, like the other entries in the romance genre, is an interesting combination of intensely personal as well as understanding something larger than one’s self. Education can have a transformative impact on the individual, and one’s career can also further facilitate greater self-actualization. But in these examples, education also helps in the understanding and engagement with other people, and in Stephanie’s example, one’s work can travel outside earning a salary into realms of helping other people or improving the environment.

Considering the epic and romance genres. In considering this genre pair, one is seeking to discover how the epic and romance genre is used in underemployed college graduates’
life stories and what are the implications of this utilization. One can see this genre pair in a dialectical fashion, the unity of these two somewhat contradictory forces generating a narrative theme. As previously stated, these two genres fashion as prevalent cultural narratives that are appropriated across stories, including the life stories of the participants. The epic is an active genre employed to convey the content of trial and journeys; this genre is largely employed in discussing the navigation of one’s college experiences, the job search, and the underemployed condition itself. The romance genre is a reflective genre employed to convey the content of idealism and one’s inner self; this genre is largely employed to reflect upon one’s higher education experiences as well as the nature of education and work in that individual’s life. Table 5 summarizes this analytical content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Epic and Romance Summation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genre Characteristics</td>
<td>A genre of conflict, journey, and struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrational Form</td>
<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interview Representation</td>
<td>Participant recounts activity revolving around educational and employment experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of Education-Employment Relationship</td>
<td>The epic captures the long and difficult ongoing journey from higher education to ideal employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are two primary conclusions from this analysis. The first is from the perspective of identity. An individual’s education and work are crucial experiences that lead to identity construction. One’s education and field of study are often closely linked to one’s identity as they are result of one’s own choices, interests, and inclinations. One’s occupation holds similar implications for identity, but in the case of underemployment, the occupation is the result of a force set of circumstances. In some sense, the ideal self becomes subverted as the individual
struggles with the problems of being underemployed. The epic genre speaks to this struggle in which the ideal self is being beset by numerous problematic situations, not unlike an epic hero. The romance genre contributes this discussion by serving as an avenue where the ideal self speaks its mind, simultaneously removed from these struggles while being influenced by them. Figure 5 further conceptualizes this assertion.

![Figure 5. First Stage of Genre Analysis](image_url)

In this model, the ideal self is represented by a certain work experience that adheres to similar circumstances as one’s education. By becoming underemployed, this ambition is unrealized due to the problematic work experience. This struggle proves to be a primary contributing factor in the formation of the genre. The romance genre, again, effectively communicates one’s views regarding education and work, views that are often unrealized, but still of great significance to the individual. The epic genre is, in a sense, a meta-conversation framing one’s views about the inability to realize these experiences materially.

The second conclusion concerns ideology and its relationship to the genre pair. Before reflecting on this relation, it is important to state that each genre pair embodies an ideological relationship. One’s ideas about the crucial themes of the study: education and employment do not emerge from a void, but are instead the adoption of a set of ideas garnered from a variety of institutions, including family, schooling, and the media. To argue that the participants express a
form of ideology is not necessarily a controversial argument; however, the nature of this ideology requires greater exploration, and genres become pivotal tools in this endeavor.

The epic genre and its representation in the interviews represent a disruption between popular ideology—that establishes a strong connection between education and employment—and how this ideology is made material in one’s day-to-day life. With the majority of college students enrolling in college for the explicit purposes of securing a career of their choosing (see Chapter 1), this mode of thinking is—as stated in Chapter 3—the result of an ideological linkage between education and employment. Underemployment represents a disruption in that linkage, and the epic genre best presents the struggle to comprehend the ramifications of this disruption. The life stories that utilize the epic genre are populated with moments in which the individual seeks to realize the ideological prophecy that the majority of college students seek to fulfill. To not realize it, to be underemployed, is a difficult experience, and in the epic mode of storytelling, the individual seek to overcome these obstacles. The majority of the study’s participants will continue to work towards obtaining a job in their degree field, for realizing the employment promise of their education is of great importance to them. Therefore, the ideological character of the epic genre is one of perseverance as individuals attempt to realize the ideological linkage between education and employment, despite its disruption.

The romance genre possesses a different ideological character all together. In this genre, a different ideology is represented, one more reflective of the classical initiatives of education. Although this set of ideas is not directly linked to employment, it is a form of ideology nonetheless, and may hold a bourgeois tonality. Although the epic genre seems more representative of a capitalist ideology that insists on education and labor as a seamless progression, the romance genre is also embedded in class relations since one typically must have
some manner of privilege for perceive one’s college experience as a disinterested pursuit of knowledge. It is no coincidence that individuals from Ivy League schools are more romantic about education’s purpose while individuals enrolled in two-year colleges are more employment-oriented (Mullen, 2010).

Nevertheless, the romance genre is indeed something of a foil to the epic genre. The ideology linking education to employment is not of the utmost concern to the participants whose life stories possessed shades of romance. Instead, non-employment elements such as critical thinking, becoming an engaged citizen, and improving one’s own learning were deemed as more important. The important thing to conclude from this ideological implication is that while these individuals may also still be seeking jobs in their degree field, they have, in essence, already realized their educational purpose for by virtue of completing the college experience and not recognizing employment as the ultimate endgame. In linking these two concepts of identity and ideology, those individuals who have a romance-dominated life story, as opposed to an epic-dominated life story, are more satisfied with their educational experiences and see education as inherently transformative experience. Even without being fully employed, these individuals largely see their higher education experiences as delivering its promises, enabling them to become better people as opposed to better workers.

**Genre Pair 2: Tragedy and Black Comedy**

The next genre pair analyzes two perspectives on the negativity regarding the underemployed experience itself. Although some participants did not depict underemployment as an overly problematic situation, none of the participants perceived their working status as ideal. Moreover, the majority of participants regarded their underemployed experience negatively and sought to obtain full employment in the immediate future if such a situation presented itself.
What is of interest here is how this negativity is depicted by the participants, and the following two genres, tragedy and black comedy, function as two ways to categorize the difficult features of the underemployed experience.

Although considering underemployment a tragedy is, in some sense, overly dramatic, when considers it from the perspective of genre, it is more befitting. This is due to tragedy, similar to epic, being a genre of overwhelming conflict, but unlike the epic, the climax of a tragedy is typified by deep personal loss. In this way, underemployment is something of a tragedy for underemployed college graduates where the long narrative of the college experience ends in a negative manner in which numerous manners of personal loss take place. Furthermore, as a genre that seeks to categorize the negativity surrounding the underemployed experience, tragedy proves quite adept. The tragedy genre form, as presented in the interviews, is one of intense negative feeling and loss. In the thematic analysis presented in chapter six, I presented a glimpse of these frustrations and disappointments coupled with problems of worker dissatisfaction, feelings of limbo, and financial difficulties and debt. In crafting their life stories in the interviews, many participants employed tragedy as a device to express these difficulties as the tragic culmination of their higher education experiences.

However, this is but one way to characterize the negativity surrounding the underemployed experience. Other participants instilled a different emotional modality to this negativity, instilling almost surreal bewilderment and even humor into these portions of their narratives. Therefore, the other half of the genre pair, black comedy, becomes a useful tool in analyzing these experiences. The black comedy (or dark comedy or tragicomedy) can be represented as either a darkly humorously tale or a humorously dark tale depending on one’s perspective. Regardless, the dramatic action holds similar content to the tragedy; intense
conflicts take place, and personal losses occur. Additionally, the climax of a black comedy often has the protagonist suffer greatly. The crucial difference is that throughout this action there is a surreal sense of absurdity or comedy resonating throughout the story. Underemployment carries certain facets of tragedy, but for certain individuals, these unfortunate circumstances possess a similar absurd quality. This subversion of expectations in which the individual successfully graduates from college, but due to a variety of circumstances is unable to find job can be, for some, a bitterly humorous experience. Participants who employ the black comedy genre in their life story construction often reflect of these ironic or surreal elements more so than reflecting on the overly problematic or despairing aspects of the situation. In this manner, the underemployed experience indeed appears like a black comedy, where the absurd realities of many of our experiences resonate with a heavy ironic character.

The tragedy genre in the interviews. In the interviews, the tragedy genre captured a collection of feelings revolving around the difficulties of the underemployed experience. This collection of feelings largely stem from a single root; it is not the underemployed experience itself that generates this negative emotion, but rather the belief that by virtue of having a degree, the participants believed they should be in a better situation in terms of their occupation. The inability to use their degrees coupled with the intense desire to do something more fulfilling (as well as more profitable) is the true tragedy for the participants, leading to feelings of low self-efficacy. Janice exemplifies this tragedy when discussing her initial confidence about obtaining a job after earning her doctoral degree only to have that confidence shattered:

Oh, initially I was very confident. But that was in 2010, and now that we’re in 2013, my self-esteem has plummeted. (Laughs) I…I mean, really a great sense of worthlessness right now. As an adjunct, I am teaching English Comp, which…it’s connected to my
master’s degree, which is more like a linguistics degree. However, I am not using my
doctorate at all.

The problematic limbo of being unable to fully utilize one’s degree combined with the further
complication of overqualification creates a somewhat tragic modality that is attributed in the life
stories of the participants. Heather exemplifies this problem in her reflection:

That is a difficult question because I have been without [full-time] work for two years
because I am sitting on a master’s degree. Again, the demographics in the area that I’m
from, I can’t go to work at McDonalds because I am overqualified. I could not even work
at McDonalds with an Associate's, probably. The degree that you have plays a huge role
in the area that you work in. So it’s a struggle; it’s a constant struggle.

The interesting character of this reflection is not only the immaterial displacement that Heather
struggles with, that of not being able to utilize her degree, but also the physical dislocation
enforced by where she currently lives. Indeed, this additional component is not uncommon in
those reflections that are framed within the tragic genre. Not only is there the initial tragedy of
not being able to realize the promise of the degree in a career, but this typically becomes further
complicated by other issues and emotions, making the situation even more overwhelming. For
instance, Mona’s underemployment and low confidence obtains another difficult dimension due
to her reliance on her parents:

I managed to not live with my parents, but my parents were paying all my bills, and even
had to take me to the grocery store, and I felt like I couldn’t pick out what food I wanted
because my mom was paying for it, so I had to make really responsible choices, and I
couldn’t splurge on an extra thing because she was bankrolling everything in my life at
that time. I knew I could do theoretically do better because it was a student worker
position, and I had a degree. There was an awareness there that I could do something better. But at that time, my confidence was so shaken.

The underemployed experience and its tragic components do not only influence one’s work life and one’s reflections only schooling, but due to the importance our society places on obtaining a career and the numerous fundamental aspects of adulthood that depend on a career, the negativity surrounding the underemployment experience infiltrates one’s social life as well.

Marie also expresses a similar situation when she discusses having to work at her mother’s daycare:

I don’t want to feel like I am riding my mom’s coattails. She is the reason I have that job and all that. I feel like I have the need to improve myself especially when your friends and your peers are trying to work up a corporate ladder in other companies, and it is very different. It is very different type of atmosphere than a larger business. Sometimes, I feel put more pressure on myself. Just the feeling that it is my mom’s business, and she is the only reason I am there.

Although there is not a heavy sense of despair in these reflections, this is not what typifies the tragic genre in these situations. Instead, the tragedy is a combination of three negative outcomes indicative of the underemployed experience. The first is the inability to utilize one’s degree. The second is the complex array of feelings that this inability generates, including feelings of aimlessness, low self-confidence, and frustration. Lastly, these feelings pervade other experiences in the participant’s social realms including one’s family and social life. Moreover, despite the possibility that many of the participants will in time overcome these obstacles, there is a sense in each of these reflections that this tragedy has some degree of permanence as if the participants will never break out of this limbo. The frustration and low self-confidence instill this
sense, creating the tragic narrative strands in these life stories where a positive resolution does not seem to be on the horizon.

**The black comedy genre in the interviews.** Although it also functions as a tool to understand the negativity revolving around the underemployed experience, the black comedy genre, as employed in the interviews, operates as a foil to tragedy in two crucial ways. The first is the actual content of the life story, which instead of resonating with feelings of deep disappointment, has a somewhat lighter character, typically of either actual humor or general bewilderment. Once more, the content of black comedy can be as dark as a tragedy, but the tonality of this content is presented in a different manner. In her reflection regarding the problems of working in a testing center, Joan employs the black comedy to communicate the contradictions between her degree and her current occupation:

> If anything I would say they are quite a bit at odds with each other. (Laughs) I would say most women studies folks would call standardization testing culturally biased and part of the problem of education. Yeah, there’s that. (Laughs) I guess I could twist it in some ways. Well, we provide testing accommodations with students with disabilities, but it is still sort of difficult because I don’t think of it as a good thing. In a perfect world, you would have professors providing their own testing accommodations. Even in the good part of the job, it still not perfect.

This quotation demonstrates some of the key ideas of the black comedy genre. Most important, this reflection is expressing negativity and dissatisfaction regarding the incongruity between Joan’s degree and her job, one of the primary generators of the tragedy genre in the interviews. However, the form of this negativity assumes a different shape. Punctuated by laughter and not dominated by the frustration of this incongruity, Joan’s reflection carries a lighter tone as she
expresses the problems of subjective underemployment where it is indeed not a perfect world, but thankfully is also not as bleak.

The second crucial dimension of many of the black comedy responses is that while the tragedy carries a largely reflective content, the black comedy typically is centered upon forms of action. This harkens back to the epic/romance genre pair where the epic genre serves as a genre of action guiding activity while the romantic genre proves to be more reflective in nature. In describing his initial work experiences following graduating from college with a degree in mathematics, Wallace’s narrative moves into the territory of a black comedy:

Um…I was more confident immediately after graduation than I was a little bit later. Not too confident really. I think my plan was to sub for a while, like a year, and apply to grad school. Then, when I didn’t do that, the situation became more dire. So the second year, the school year ended when I was substitute teaching…Well no, it was a strange, strange time. All right, well I was sorta fired, not from subbing entirely, just hired paid subbing. So, then, I had not applied grad school the second year, I think that’s right, so then, I moved to Cincinnati on a whim and lived on credit until I found a job, which was probably another bad decision, probably.

Wallace’s journey, in some sense, is similar to the stories described in the epic genre. However, a different tone resonates with this activity. Once more, although this situation indeed proved to be quite dire for Wallace as he struggled with part-time jobs that he may have not been suited for and the financial problems that occurred as a result, there was not a sense of extreme negativity in Wallace’s discussion, but rather an oddly humorous character. This character, as will soon be discussed, probably relates more to one’s personality and identity rather than external factors since different individuals would tell this story in a more epic manner.
Humor alone does not construct the tone of the black comedy genre. In telling the story of the underemployed experience and the negativity surrounding it, participants often regard this situation with a sense of irony and bewilderment. This is not entirely surprising. The reversal of expectations that occurs when one earns a degree and is subsequently employed in a less than ideal occupation, generating these general feelings of bewilderment. This is particularly true when one is employed as an adjunct professor where the benefits of being a full professor are reduced and replaced with less optimal elements. Lisa tells one such story:

I will be honest. I am teaching and have taught classes that I am not qualified to teach. And for that, it is disappointing. I taught a human relations class this summer. Luckily, it was an online class, so I didn’t have to get up in front of the class in lecture, but I am not qualified to teach HR. I would be basically read the chapter, find some extra information, and convey that to the class, but I am not qualified to teach that.

The underemployed experience, in numerous ways, can be exploitive. In this situation, Lisa was asked to teach a class that she was not comfortable teaching, but if she did not teach it, she would not be working. In this situation, the black comedy genre is represented as an ironic narrative at both a personal and institutional level. At the personal level, Lisa, due to her employment status, participates in the somewhat absurd activity of teaching individuals despite not knowing the content of the course. At an institutional level, the university is portrayed in an ironic way where the constructed ethos the university draws credibility from is portrayed in the quotation as a façade. In some sense, this a humorous story akin to the fable of The Emperor's New Clothes, but the ramifications of the underemployment prove to be quite dark as expectations are subverted and a variety of problems ensue.
Considering the tragedy and black comedy genres. In constructing a complex life story from one’s educational experiences to underemployment, a variety of genres are utilized. With the first genre pair, epic/romance, the genres were linked to specific portions of narrative content, either modes of intense activity or reflection of one’s educational experiences. With the tragedy-black comedy genre pair, the content consists of the difficulties revolving around the underemployed experience with the tragedy genre representing a reflective genre that links to strong feelings of self-doubt and frustration and the black comedy genre commenting on the action of the underemployed experience, which at times can be darkly humorous or ironic. Table 6 summarizes this analysis.

Table 6
Tragedy and Black Comedy Summation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Characteristics</th>
<th>Tragedy</th>
<th>Black Comedy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A genre of personal loss and lamentation</td>
<td>A genre of irony and dark humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrational Form</td>
<td>Reflective</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Representation</td>
<td>Participant reflects on the difficulties of the underemployed experience</td>
<td>Participant recounts absurd or ironic moments of the underemployed experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of Education-Employment Relationship</td>
<td>The tragedy captures the difficult reality of not utilizing one’s education to its fullest professional potential</td>
<td>The black comedy captures the befuddling and ironic nature of being highly educated, but underemployed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, one can see particular connections not only among the genre pair itself, but also between the previous genre pair. Both the romance and tragedy genres are largely reflective genres that analyze opposing content as does the epic and black comedy genres in terms of analyzing periods of action. Once more, it is important to reiterate that these genres are not all encompassing, either-or proposition, but instead represent the coming together of common narrative threads of all the interviews as a whole. In this way, Figure 6 below demonstrates an
emerging picture of the underemployed experience with the two genre pairs coming together to provide a more complete perspective on the underemployed experience.

This figure also points to specific conclusions that one can make from the tragedy-black comedy genre in terms of the intersection between identity and ideology. In terms of identity, tragedy represents the loss of a potential identity that is not yet realized. One’s major and one’s work are crucially intertwined with one’s identity. Typically, one chooses a major based on a set of inclinations entwined with one’s identity and hopes, after graduation, to further realize those inclinations in a career. When that is displaced by underemployment, the feelings that construct the tragedy genre come into play and help construct the reflection. This makes for an intriguing comparison to those reflections of the romance genre where feelings of idealism were strong in the narrative despite being underemployed; this is not so for participants who employed a tragic

\[Figure 6. \text{Second Stage of Genre Analysis}\]
genre, for in these situations the negativity revolving around underemployment proves dominant in the narrative.

Black comedy also holds important implication in regard to identity as well. As alluded to earlier, a certain personality comes into play to recognize the irony of underemployment over the overtly negative features. Although certainly these individuals would rather not be underemployed and endure the problems associated with a problematic job status, the ability to see the irony and perhaps even the dark humor of their situation perhaps lends itself to an identity where labor is not as highly regarded as those who primarily employ the tragedy narrative arc. For a portion of the participants, the thought of a career was never fully fleshed out in college, and even now, after graduation, some participants still did not have concrete career goals. With this somewhat dissociated perspective on labor, underemployment acquires the status of a black comedy where it is certainly not an ideal situation, but nevertheless is not tragic either.

This genre pair can be further examined in terms of ideological implications. Indeed, tragedy is, again like romance, a phenomenological outcome following underemployment where the connection between education and employment becomes severed. Individuals are informed, time and time again, that education is the pathway to a career, and this ideology materializes as a strong belief that is undermined when this pathway proves faulty. Not being able to use their degrees outside of the university context, the individual becomes deeply disappointed and frustrated that this ideology did not materialize in their lives. Instead, they meet a job market that is fairly indifferent to what they believed to be the most valuable, and this realization of ideology faltering and not being reflected in the material conditions of labor becomes, for some participants, tragic. This becomes truly unfortunate for these individuals because unlike in the
romance genre, they often see education as lacking value since the value, for them, primarily existed in obtaining a career.

Black comedy also holds ideological implications, particularly when one considers the irony that befalls many college graduates as they first seek work. On the surface, obtaining a job should not be an ironic experience, but for the underemployed, it often is. Once more, the popular ideology linking education to employment becomes disrupted, and the college graduate is bewildered to find that the job market unwelcoming and the knowledge and skills that he or she spent four (plus) years acquiring to be unacknowledged. However, unlike the tragic genre where individuals are deeply hurt by this lack of acknowledgement, those who frame their life stories in the vein of the black comedy genre are not as devastated due, in no small part, to the possibility that such individuals did not so readily accept the ideological connection in the first place. What this ultimately demonstrates is that while individuals are subjected to similar ideological strains, their association with them is quite varied, and thus much like the black comedy genre itself, those who employ it in their life stories hold beliefs about work that can be outside of the status quo.

Genre Pair 3: Novel and Draft

The first genre pair sought to understand different positional tendencies in the underemployed narrative. The second genre pair was analyzed how problems are framed for the underemployed college graduate. The final genre pair, novel/draft, seeks to examine how the participants expressed their futures. How does the underemployed narrative end? These two genres represent two distinctly different forms of ending. Before discussing these endings, it is first important to consider that its relevance in understanding the problem of underemployment. Each participant wished to maneuver out of their underemployed status into a more ideal
position. However, this status can be so disorienting that the nature of these maneuvers possess varying degrees of clarity. Therefore, these two genres not only analyze how underemployed college graduates formulate their “exit strategies,” but also determine their relationship with their underemployed, for the intensity of this relationship can either muddle their future plans or provide keen motivation towards obtaining a more ideal form of employment.

Although the novel genre holds a great many characteristics and comes in dozens of sub-genres, the primary emphasis this genre brings to the discussion is its climax and resolution. While some novels do beguile readers with a lack of climax or resolution, the healthy majority of novels take the reader on a journey through rising action and conflict, which ultimately ends in some greater resolution. For those participants who employed this trope in their interviews, they—as authors of their own life stories—have a clear resolution in mind for their narrative. Perhaps this resolution is seeking another job or further education, but regardless of the outcome, the resolution and means through which it is realized are clear in the participants’ minds and expressed in their life stories. Even though this resolution may exist in the abstract currently and there may be obstacles, foreseen and unforeseen, that hinder it, the participants representative of this genre have a solid understanding of the way forward and possess a plan towards bringing the story of their underemployment to a close.

The other side of this genre pair is that of a draft or incomplete narrative. While some may argue that the label, “draft,” does not represent an actual genre, there are numerous works that fall into this category. For instance, my favorite fiction writer, Franz Kafka, composed three novels in his lifetime and never finished a single one; perhaps his greatest work, The Castle—a surreal journey that, in some sense, resembles the narratives of many of the study’s participants—was never completed. Participants who are representative of this genre have not
yet crafted a resolution to their underemployed stories. Perhaps they plan to merely work their current position until something better arises, or perhaps the limbo of underemployment seems so meandering that a simple exit is not something easily formulated or express. Of the participants interviewed, the majority fall into this category, unsure about their futures and how to end the underemployed narrative, which speaks, again, to the daunting challenges of the underemployed experience where the individual—much like Kafka’s protagonist, K.—struggles mightily to gain admission into their own castle, their own ideal place in life.

**The novel genre in the interviews.** The novel genre is primarily characterized, in this study, as the participant possessing a clear resolution in mind for the underemployed narrative. Moreover, the determining factors that lead to the construction of this resolution can be quite varied. For instance, there are individuals such as Rebecca who had a clear goal in mind upon graduating from college, and despite not realizing that goal immediately, remain determined in achieving it:

I feel confident that in five years I will definitely have a job, under my belt, and I will feel confident in exactly what I am doing. I actually had an interview last week at a district around here, and I was very excited about it, and it went very, very well. And even if I don’t get this job or another position, I still have all kinds of opportunities next year: I can sub, and I can get my foot in the door. I can be a teaching assistant, and I can get my foot in the door.

Rebecca always wanted to be a teacher since she was a child, and although she is struggling to find the right the position, she not only remains steadfast in obtaining a career, but also has a series of backup plans if her initial plans do not materialize. Marie also has plans and backup
plans for her future, which could involve being promoted in the military since she currently belongs to the Army Reserves:

If I want to stay in the army, the military has shifted to be very much in line with education, especially for officers, promotions have gotten to the point where if you don’t further your education from the military side and the civilian side, then you can’t reach those higher promotions. For me to make major, but certainly lieutenant colonel, I would most certainly have my Master’s. Many of them may have Master’s in a couple of different things. So it is very directly linked.

In both situations, Rebecca and Marie have future plans in mind, resolutions that will end their underemployed narrative. These plans also demonstrate how important obtaining a position is to their own identity as they envision leaving their current positions for something better.

Another interesting facet of the novel genre is how the underemployed experience often leads individuals towards future goals. Carol, who currently has a degree in anthropology, works as a tutor and adjunct at a two-year college. This experience directly influences her future plans: “I would really like to teach and do research. I’m not sure what exact research area yet, but I really like undergraduate teaching, and my ideal job would be finding a position at a university that has a commitment to undergraduate education where I can still do research.” Elyse, who is currently working as an adjunct instructor in philosophy, also wants to continue her work in the higher education realm:

So I am looking to do something where I can still be in higher education and still work with students, still do something I am passionate about. I am looking into service learning director positions, civic engagement positions, things like that. That way I could still
adjunct in philosophy, but it wouldn’t be my sole way of living. I would still be able to do whatever I want to do in respect social justice and theory.

Underemployment is not an ideal work condition, but it does provide experiences and ideas that can lead individuals into more fulfilling and profitable career paths. Both Carol and Elyse currently work part-time at colleges, and although this possesses numerous challenges in the present, it also offers them plans for the future. In this way, the underemployment condition can offer individuals resolution to its problem, creating experiences and connections that can lead to the climax of this story and the beginning of a new, more hopeful narrative.

**The draft genre in the interviews.** While the novel genre establishes some insight on how some of the participants seek to end their underemployment narratives, the draft genre—in addition to being more frequently employed in the interviews—holds a greater number of implications. Once more, the draft genre is largely typified by participants who are unsure about how they should bring resolution to their problematic working condition, and the nature of this uncertainty varies from participant to participant. For some individuals, the connection to their field of study remains strong and creates some window into the future, but that window is somewhat foggy. With a degree in environmental science, Stephanie is uncertain about what she wants to do as long as she can transfer her education and interests into a career: “I feel like I will get a job eventually… I am optimistic for the future, but right now, I will settle for something that I may not want to do as long as I can say that I am using something that I learned, somehow. I don’t know.” Steven, too, remains strongly connected to his field, but is unsure about how to continue in terms of a career:

I am not throwin’ in the towel on science. I feel like I can’t. It’s because of the loans. I feel like I can’t. It’s got me to this point, and it’s up to me take it to the next level. And I
can do that. I got a Master’s degree. I am definitely not going to turn my back on science because it has been relatively good to me. I got no problem with it. My plan is to continue on in science and see what happens.

In all of these genres, one’s relationship to one’s degree—mediated by his or her identity and the influence of ideology—is a crucial, and in this situation, the relationship both enforces and negates the draft connation of their responses. In one regard, the relationship enforces the draft genre because the inability to construct a concrete plan towards realizing their degree in terms of a career leads to their underemployment narrative being incomplete. Yet, through this strong connection to their discipline, these participants have some idea of where they wish to go in terms of their working future; they are just unsure how to get there.

This represents just one way the draft genre operates in the interviews. Another way is via the limbo-like quality of the underemployment experience, which, specifically when individuals hold advanced degrees and are overqualified for many positions, restricts one’s options. Janice’s reflection reflects such circumstances:

It’s weird because my future has shrunk. It becomes more day to day. Right now, I am trying to figure out getting my syllabus together. Right now, I have applications on the Greater Consortium where there are multiple school districts, sitting back and seeing if any of those will pan out. I am always still looking. I am constantly searching on the Chronicle. I have just given up, to be honest.

Julie, too, possesses a similar draft-connation to the end of her narrative:

My original plan was to come back and spend this year adjuncting and publishing and applying for academic jobs because I think in the US market, I am more marketable...At
the moment, I don’t know. I haven’t applied to anything because I haven’t been able to.

That could change or it might not. I am kind of in limbo.

In both quotations, the competitive nature of the academic job market coupled with the highly specific nature of their advanced degrees has placed some limitations on their futures. Unlike the individual who only holds a Bachelor’s degree who is more flexible if only be virtue that he or she are often not overqualified for certain jobs, these individuals’ career opportunities are restricted to a specific set of jobs that are in short supply and often have a great number of applicants. In these situations, adjuncting becomes one of the few available options, which, due to the pay and lack of benefits, is not an ideal long-term option.

With more individuals aware of this difficulty reality to academic labor, considering graduate school becomes a difficult decision, particularly when one is struggling with the challenges of the underemployed experience. This, too, can lead to a form of limbo or incompleteness as the individual weighs options carefully, but struggles making significant headway in the decision. Wallace expresses such notions in this reflection:

Every year, it is less likely I will go back. It is pretty unlikely at this point. I can see doing a Master’s in computer science maybe. As usual, I don’t have career goals. I might transition to more of a computer coding position in a few years. My future goals are to be writing better code than I am now. I think I am atypical to have personal skill goals rather than career goals.

As will soon be discussed, one’s choice in the novel/draft genre pair is reflective of their identity and personality, but here Wallace is uncertain about his future, specifically as it pertains to graduate school, and instead focuses on the things he can control: the knowledge and skills he
possesses. When asked about her future plans, Mona considers graduate school a serious option in her reflection, but it is surrounded in some ambiguity:

Um... The answer to that question changes every day right now. I feel very much in that uncomfortable part of your early twenties when you have no idea what to do with your life... But I am going to apply to grad school and look for jobs and cobble together two part-time jobs to make some money and try to get into theatre whether I have time for it or not.

Holding a degree in theatre studies, Mona, like numerous college graduates, is uncertain as to what the future holds for her. Graduate school, for many people is an option, but figuring out the best option—while struggling with the difficulties of being underemployed coupled with the possible debt accrued from the Bachelor’s degree—is not as simple as merely picking a field and dedicating more time and money towards studying it. Therefore, the draft genre is a reoccurring genre in many of the interviews as the challenges revolving around education and employment, at least temporarily, restrict the possibility for resolution in their underemployment narrative.

**Considering the novel and draft genres.** In considering the final genre pair, one must remember the linkage that unites these two contradictory genres: how the underemployed college graduate envisions his or her future. By doing so, pivotal questions arise that the individual must face pertaining to the length of the underemployment narrative and the means by which one may bring this narrative to a resolution. These two genres offer two distinct pathways by which all participants must travel (which separates this genre pair from the others in which there could be other possibilities in constructing their narratives). Either the individual possesses a resolution to the narrative and a plan for achieving it or the resolution is unclear and incomplete. Table 7 summarizes the crucial elements in each genre.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre Characteristics</th>
<th>Novel</th>
<th>Draft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A genre with a resolution</td>
<td>A genre with an incomplete resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrational Form</td>
<td>Active + Reflective</td>
<td>Active + Reflective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Representation</td>
<td>Participant constructs a resolution to the underemployment narrative</td>
<td>Participant is unable to construct a resolution to the underemployment narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection of Education-Employment Relationship</td>
<td>The novel captures the participant’s future plans that usually involve obtaining a more ideal form of work</td>
<td>The draft captures the problematic reality that utilizing one’s education to its fullest professional potential is often difficult to envision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moreover, these two genres also provide crucial components to the progressing model depicting the narrative construction of the underemployment genre. With the previous four genres of the discussion having strong relational components to one another, this final genre pair functions as a device towards manufacturing a conclusion as Figure 7 depicts.
The previous genres represented intriguing intersections between activity and reflection as well as different modes of content. The inclusion of the novel and draft genres in our discussion represent the dialectical synthesis of these genre types. Since these genres are located primarily in the future, they function as activity in the form of reflection. Based upon the circumstances revolving around the underemployed status in conjunction with the intersection of identity and
ideology that each participant experiences, the genre that is chosen to represent his or future emerges.

Indeed, the selection of either the draft or novel genre communicates a great deal about the individual’s identity and personality in relation to the underemployed experience. If the individual chooses the novel genre, he or she has a clear plan regarding how to end the underemployed experience. By having this plan, numerous assertions can be made regarding the individual’s identity. One such argument is that the individual is committed to utilizing his or her degree to the fullest potential and thus has a clear strategy in mind to do so. Another argument is that the individual is not overwhelmed by the difficulties of the underemployed experience and thus is able to envision an exit strategy. Conversely, perhaps the individual is highly motivated to resolve the underemployment narrative and has devised this resolution as a result. Lastly, the individual may just have a plan-oriented mindset or has access to support (such as friends or family) to help formulate this strategy. Any combination of these arguments could be possible, but what is important to conclude is that having a clear resolution in mind to the underemployed experience is the product of internal and external features centered upon the individual.

The same is true if the individual employs the draft genre instead and does not have a clear resolution to the narrative. Essentially, the inverse of many of the arguments regarding the novel genre prove appropriate such as the individual is not as motivated to exit the underemployed experience, being underemployed is so overwhelming that the individual cannot construct an exit strategy, and/or the individual is not plan-oriented in his or her mindset and lacks access to support. The prevalence of the draft genre in the interviews speaks more to these possibilities, and perhaps the most important is the nature of underemployed experience and its paralyzing implications. The majority of participants were motivated to somehow find resolution
to the underemployed narrative, but their frustrating experiences regarding finding a job and the often bleak nature of the labor market instill a sense of limbo to their outlook. In this way, the draft genre represents the manner through which one’s experiences shapes one’s identity as these highly capable and intelligent college degree holders often struggle to formulate an answer to a simple, yet foreboding question: what do you do now? To not have a clear answer to this question is to show how one’s identity can be negatively shaped by difficult experiences as those individuals who were able to navigate the rigorous and challenging college experience (and for some, obtain a graduate degree) struggle a great deal more with transferring the knowledge that they garnered from their degree to a career, the non-liner path towards labor proving too winding to see the end.

One can further analyze this notion of resolution from an ideological standpoint. The novel genre demonstrates a commitment to realizing the ideologically constructed notion that education and employment are firmly linked. Despite this notion not being immediately realized for the participant, the individual remains steadfast in believing that ideological promise of higher education will materialize. Even though numerous factors have demonstrated that this promise is increasingly difficult to realize, individuals will continue to hold fast to it and will work to further facilitate this realization. This planning, which often revolves around further education or a commitment to seek full employment, is the product of the individual’s own effort. Complete onus is placed on the individual. The novel genre, therefore, not only demonstrates a commitment to popular ideology, but a reassertion of the autonomy as the individual works to towards making that ideology real. The individual believes that through further work on his or her part, the connection between education and employment will be finally established; this is important to understand because it illustrates that the material nature of
ideology. These ideas are not merely concepts floating in the ether, but functions as the force behind a particular form of action that continues to establish the relevancy of current systems and structures.

However, one cannot blindly accept ideology as an absolute, flawless system of hegemony. The draft genre further demonstrates these imperfections. While the novel genre depicts individuals who possess a clear vision of how the original popular ideology relating education to employment is realized, the draft genre depicts a different story of the contradictions between ideology and the material realm of society. Underemployment functions as a mode of labor that benefits the capitalist mode of production. At the same time, the ideology linking education to labor also benefits this capitalist system. These contradictory impulses are at play in instances of CGU, and the difficulty, experienced by some individuals, in teasing out these contradictions leads to the draft genre. For the individuals who employed the draft genre in the interviews, underemployment proved too stifling and their faith in the ideology linking education to employment proved too shaken for them to be as committed to the ideological notions that remain persuasive to those who employed the novel genre. In this way, the draft genre is representative of a period of stasis or limbo in the lives of the underemployed college graduate where the formally powerful ideology now appears like an unfulfilled promise. What remains is a difficult moment in these individuals’ lives where the future is uncertain and the only move is to tread water. Perhaps they will eventually complete the draft and employ the novel genre, generating a plan that again corresponds with the popular ideology. Or perhaps this draft, like many stories sitting on the writer’s desk, will remain uncompleted.
Chapter Eight

Conclusions

Throughout the course of this discussion, we have covered considerable ground understanding the theoretical and qualitative components of college graduate underemployment. This chapter will impart a series of conclusions based upon the research, formulating answers to the research questions and offering possible directions for future research. As a result, this chapter will attempt to forge a bridge between the theoretical and the qualitative, linking the broader frameworks of capitalism to the specific modes of experience as demonstrated by the study’s participants. In seeking to achieve this aim, the complex relationship between the forces of capitalism and higher education will be examined, and the ideological components mediating this relationship will be exposed.

Theoretical Conclusions

In chapters 3 and 4, I endeavored to locate college graduate underemployment in the realms of Marxian theory, linking several key concepts to CGU in order to do so. In short, I theorized that capitalism had, in a sense, recast higher education as a commodity, one that through a system of measures anticipated labor and thus became a primary vehicle of ideology through which our thoughts regarding certain forms of labor are created. The crisis that capitalism engenders along with the modes of labor manipulation employed by capitalists (underemployment, unemployment, and de-skilling) contribute to the prevalence of CGU. Through this process, an elaborate contradiction arises. The increasingly corporatized structures of education accompanied by popular ideological imperatives compel many to seek higher education for the purposes of acquiring a gainful career (a strategy that is largely successful considering the millions of college graduates each year), and yet, capitalist enterprises are only
interested in certain forms of labor, and thus the number of “good jobs” is consistently decreasing and only a certain number of the hundreds of degrees offered by universities actually fulfill the promise of college as a pathway to a career, thus leading to hundreds of thousands of underemployed college graduates, many of whom are struggling with considerable student loan debt.

Higher education as the anticipatory commodity realizes objectives of capitalism regardless of the employment outcome of college graduates. If a graduate obtains a degree in fields that capital possesses an interest in—such as those fields revolving around production—then the anticipatory moment is realized. This anticipatory moment is facilitated by popular ideological notions revolving around certain degrees as sure entryways into the job market as well as more direct methods such more governmental initiatives engineered to develop certain fields. In such instances, a greater number of graduates holding “relevant” degrees will reduce the bargaining power of the worker for better working conditions and a higher salary since there will be a wealth of underemployed graduates seeking a job. Indeed, underemployment is a crucial feature of the anticipatory moment, for even if the college graduate traverses outside of capitalism’s anticipation, that individual must still function with the system of capitalist labor where part-time, low-paying jobs are a perpetual fixture. Not only does that graduate help support the university structure by obtaining a degree (the university, itself, a crucial system in terms of labor both serving as a key source of jobs in communities as well as absorbing surplus labor), but this individual—now outfitted with a variety of competencies garnered in college—proves to be a more capable, better-disciplined worker, despite not being compensated for these desirable characteristics.
The future implications of this theoretical proposition are difficult to ascertain with certainty; however, a few strong possibilities may arise. First, with the popular ideology regarding certain fields transmitted—coupled with greater awareness of employment issues connected to other fields—a greater number of individuals will seek the fields more relevant to capitalism than ever before, disregarding the college experience as a period of time for study and a means to pursue one’s interests and passions. The classical liberal arts models of education will be further corroded as students, particular those of a lower and middle class, will continue to perceive education as a gateway to employment, further populating certain labor fields and generating more unemployment and underemployment. Of course, that is not to say that a college degree will not continue to yield higher salaries for its holders compared to non-degree-holding counterparts. Certainly, some individuals, particularly those who hold degrees from more prestigious institutions and have established connections in various labor markets, will find gainful employment as before, and other individuals, due the landscape of labor in certain communities, will also utilize their degrees for quality employment opportunities. Yet, the higher average salary will also be due to more college graduates occupying positions of an underemployed condition that were formerly held by non-degree-holders, thus forcing those individuals to even lower paying jobs. In the end, it is difficult to foresee where the next wave of skilled, immaterial, and knowledge jobs will come from, and if such jobs do not flood the marketplace to match the pace of degrees being produced, the underemployed precariat will be a growing fixture of the labor for some time.

**Qualitative Conclusions**

The qualitative study—discussed in chapters five, six, and seven—investigated the lives of these underemployed individuals, interviewing them regarding their educational and work
experiences and examining these interviews with a genre data analysis. Through this analysis, I determined that three genre pairs were strongly represented in the interviews: epic/romance, tragedy/black comedy, and novel/draft. Each genre category is typified by a series of tropes that represent the intersection between nuances present in the interview and certain prevailing features within the genre.

What do these genres tell us about the underemployed college graduate experience? As a mode of discourse categorization, the genres serve as a means of understanding how underemployed college graduates tells their stories, and by extension, how these individuals experience and understand their underemployment. Through this analysis, I learned that college graduates narrate their employment experiences largely from the perspective of their degree, and the CGU is, in some sense, an educational construct as much as it is an employment construct. Each genre contributes to this understanding as the three primary content markers exemplified in each pair (positionality, negativity, and future plans) intersect with the active and reflective character of the life story. Table 8 summarizes how each genre contributes to this understanding.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epic</th>
<th>Romance</th>
<th>Tragedy</th>
<th>Black Comedy</th>
<th>Novel</th>
<th>Draft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A journey towards obtaining a degree and seeking to employ that degree.</td>
<td>A reflection on education largely outside of the realm of labor.</td>
<td>A negative reflection on not being able to utilize a degree in a career.</td>
<td>A mode of action demonstrating the reversal of expectation regarding the college premium.</td>
<td>A constructed resolution regarding how to employ one’s degree in future work.</td>
<td>An inability to construct a resolution regarding how to employ one’s degree in future work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table summarizes the educational facet of CGU as constructed by the participants. The genres serve as effective tools summarizing how college graduates experience and understand
the difficulties regarding not being able to employ their degree in their careers. While some may argue that the use of genres may obscure these reflections, I argue that they symbolically represent a series of complex reflections present in the interviews that would be difficult to represent otherwise. That is not to argue that genre categories are the only manner to represent this data or even the best way. However, the symbolic capacity of genre as a mode of discourse categorization does establish a sense of clarity to the data that enables one to understand CGU not only as a non-ideal work experience, but as an experience that demonstrates the lasting impact education has on one’s life. The participants do not see work as something outside of education, but rather as an extension of it, which thus demonstrates the truly problematic circumstances of CGU.

This experience, measured qualitatively, holds a dual nature that exists both inside and outside of capitalism. As an expression of potential labor, this experience cannot be separated from capitalism, for it is from this system that we acquire our understanding of what it means to work and why work is important. Yet, despite being mediated by a larger ideological current, there is an intensely personal desire expressed here, for one’s decision to work in a particular discipline goes beyond merely working and is instead an expression of identity that is difficult to leave behind. Our connection to certain areas of work and study often go beyond merely earning money, but rather reflect desires, interests, and past experiences many people cling to in the face of hardship. For many participants in this study, education and labor are linked not solely by ideology, but by a larger ontological imperative, one that shows a commitment to truly being one’s self, a commitment often incongruent to capitalism, but at least for the individual, far stronger.

**Combining Analyses: The Value of Education**
In considering how to link these two analyses (each representing a distinct realm), I return to another crucial Marxian conception: that of value. For in this study, the question of value is of great importance from both perspectives, and as one would anticipate after reading this dissertation, Marx perceives the question of value dialectically, splitting value into two opposing forces: use-value and exchange-value. Preceding capitalism, use-value represents, quite simply, the usefulness of an object or commodity. Oftentimes, we purchase a commodity to fulfill a human need. We purchase food for nourishment. We purchase clothing for warmth. We purchase homes for shelter. Additionally, we buy commodities for less essential human needs such as buying a television for entertainment or a book to learn something about a subject. Therefore, use-values actually are quite complex and span a wide range of human behaviors. They are biologically determined as well as socially determined. Moreover, the nature of use-value can change person to person. If I were to purchase a home, I would undoubtedly use that home to live in it. If Bill Gates were to purchase a home (one of many, I assume), it may go unoccupied for some time. In this way, use-values are rich, qualitative elements that change across time and person to person.

Exchange-value is quite a different animal. Also, preceding capitalism (but not nearly as old as use value), exchange-value, nevertheless, thrives due to capitalism. Exchange-value is representative of how values are exchanged in the open market. Moreover, since money represents the primary means through which commodity exchanges take place, exchange-value, in short, is the price of the commodity. Certainly, prices of commodities also fluctuate, but exchange-values are more singular and are largely quantitative. While the capitalist must consider the use-value of a commodity, he or she is largely not interested in use-value since that commodity will leave the capitalist’s hands as soon as the commodity enters the market, and thus
exchange-value proves to be of far greater interest to the capitalist class. In *Reading Capital Politically*, Harry Cleaver (1979) breaks down the tension within these two notions of value:

The use-value and the exchange-value of a commodity are not just two different determinations, or aspects; they are contradictory determinations. A commodity is a use-value only if it is immediately useful to whoever has it. It is an exchange-value only if it is not immediately useful but is used only for exchange to get something else. Exchange-value is thus not only different from use-value; it is exactly the opposite; they are defined by their contradictory position with respect to each other. (p.90)

I quote this passage at length to demonstrate the contradiction that lies at the heart of value. These two notions of value, human and capitalistic, determine how we consider the political economy and our relation to it, which primarily consists of two fields: consumption and labor.

In discussing value, I turn to the problems of education and CGU, for in considering these two forms of value, I draw a connection between the two analyses. The Marxist analysis of chapters three and four analyzed the value of education from the perspective of exchange-value, for this perspective does not only perceive education from the vantage point of cost, but from a series of interconnected points in the network of capital. The pervasiveness of capitalist ideology as it relates to education, the various modes of labor manipulation, and the crippling impact of crisis—all of these concepts, broached in the Marxian analysis, represent implications generated by framing education in terms of exchange-value. Fixated largely on cost, the exchange-value perspective of education is a largely inhumane perspective that imagines education as a commodity that travels through numerous phases of the capitalist system. The nuances regarding one’s experiences and learning are largely irrelevant as long as universities are generating profit,
a portion of the labor force is trained and suspended in education, and upon graduation, this labor force works and consumes to further establish capitalism’s longevity.

However, this is but one manner of looking at education. If we perceive education in terms of use-value, a variety of implications arise—both inside and outside of capitalism. Individuals have their own inclinations as they seek to further their education in college. Exchange-value can frame one’s perspective of use-value as millions of individuals perceive education from the commodity perspective, fixate on how much education costs, and seek to exchange their education (through the conduit of labor power) for a career. But again, this is just one perspective; it is an increasingly prevalent perspective, which creates great disappointment when one is underemployed and undermines the ideal mission of education, but it is but one perspective. Education as a transformative experience that instills a wealth of benefits outside labor also represents a great collection of use-values within education. Many participants in this study recognized these use-values and further realized the value of education despite being underemployed. In certain forms, education facilitates this realization, but it largely depends upon the individual in relation to the system and recognizing the value existing outside of it.

Despite the celebration of a use-value perspective on education, it is important to understand that it is not an either-or proposition. Every commodity possesses both use-value and exchange-value, and under the current capitalist system, it is impossible to separate the two. Of course, one can focus solely on the use-value of education, but that individual would be merely neglecting exchange-value instead of the negating it. These two forms of value are inextricably linked as a dialectical process that continues to play out in our society. This study explored both sides of the process through the window of CGU, and by doing so, I learned that one cannot (as many do) separate education from the political economy. Capitalism’s impact is found at every
level of higher education, and the value of education will continue to be the product of how individuals relate education to the system—the use-value and exchange-value of education always changing, always locked in continual opposition.

**Further Research**

As previously stated in chapter 1, this study exposes new ground regarding how to interpret and analyze college graduate underemployment. However, this relatively novel study also allows for numerous directions in terms of future research, particularly in two realms: theory and qualitative methods. Since this study employed an exclusively Marxian approach to understanding this phenomenon, other theoretical perspectives could draw other conclusions regarding the issue. Feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory could further parse relevant nuances of CGU. Moreover, even in terms of Marxian of theory, this study only represents certain strains of the theory to varying degrees. While analyzing the more ideological and labor-commodity characteristics of CGU, other Marxists, specifically analytical Marxists, could analyze how CGU fits into the political economy in far greater detail than I have provided here—exploring numerous statistical variations regarding how CGU actually operates under the purview of capitalism.

Theoretical possibilities aside, there are far greater possibilities in terms of researching CGU qualitatively. Chapter 2 discussed how the vast majority of qualitative studies of underemployment are focused on the effects this condition reaps on individuals. This study analyzed CGU is a more intricate manner in order to demonstrate the dominant modes of experience of underemployed college graduates. In this particular endeavor, modifications to this study would further contribute to our understanding of CGU. For instance, increasing the number of participants or analyzing a particular group of participants (certain disciplines, certain
demographics, certain underemployed conditions or jobs) would yield more focused results. Moreover, employing different methodological and analytical models would further map out the origins and experiential ramifications of CGU. A study using focus groups could perhaps create a more collaborative essence to the data, and some form of participatory action research regarding the communication of the CGU condition to the larger public could increase public awareness of what it means to be an underemployed college graduate. Also, as previously stated in chapter 4, since I made a commitment to Sullivan’s data analysis, others can employ other analytical models, including some form of a mixed-methods approach, to generate analyses more concerned with the empirical nature of CGU as opposed to my focus on the subjective nature of the CGU experience.

Lastly, an important factor to consider as we further conceptualize CGU is that—at least in part—CGU should be a concern of universities, and that faculty members within universities are well-equipped to research and comment on their institutions’ relationship to CGU. This charge goes beyond merely researching the job placement of college graduates, but actually analyzing what are the expectations regarding employment of their students and how does the university craft these expectations. Such research initiatives are a complicated endeavor. Emphasizing the relation between their university and the job market is important because ignoring this relation would, in a sense, be removing vital context from the educational experience. Yet, in recasting education as a gateway to certain forms a labor, higher education fosters a problematic ideology, one that obscures the motivations and directives behind higher education. Ultimately, researchers and educators must ask themselves what they value in the education system they lead and how these values correlate with the values of their students. Such questions and subsequent research studies would demonstrate how CGU and its connecting
issues are embedded in the university experience, potentially compelling scholars to ask challenging questions regarding their role in the development of ideologies uniting the education they provide and the careers that their students seek.

**A Continuous Story**

Steven, one of the study’s participants, described his experience with CGU in the following manner: “It depends on how you look at it. Nothing is limiting me or holding me back from doing something later. It is continuous story, and because of that, right now I’m still happy with the portion where we at in the movie.” For many individuals experiencing CGU, these sentiments are quite appropriate. Ultimately, they see (or hope) that their problematic employment is but a minor conflict in the larger story of their lives, one that will in time end happily with them further pursuing their passions in the form of a career. For some individuals, this will occur, and this underemployed condition will dissipate through continual efforts being realized despite the difficulties in the labor market. For others, underemployment of some fashion will be persist, and difficult choices will be made regarding whether or not these individuals will continue to pursue their interests as a career or if they will separate degree from employment and seek a job in a more welcoming field. The story is ongoing, and while this study focuses on a typically discouraging portion, many of the participants still remain optimistic, finding enjoyment in their educational experiences and even in the underemployed condition itself. As Steven said, it all depends how you look at it, and this study—while demonstrating that the connection between higher education and employment is a tenuous one—illustrates that many of these people recognize a deeper value in education both in relation to and outside of labor’s confines, and many participants, despite some misgivings, are still supportive of the goals of higher education and the positive impact it has on their lives. Education is a
crucial element to many of their stories, and their educational experiences still resonate in the face of underemployment.

However, the personal stories collected here belong to the much larger story of capitalism in which we are all minor characters. The narrative of capitalism influences the direction of our lives with equal parts interest and indifference, for capitalists have a keen interest in labor of all kinds and manipulate it with great precision, yet outside of this subplot, the narrative of capitalism is not a humanist one and is typically indifferent to those features of human experience that do not contribute to the generation of surplus profit. The participants’ stories are all chapters in this narrative—each displaying this duality as their underemployed condition represents a mode of labor that capitalism is engendering with increased pervasiveness while the knowledge and skills garnered in their educational experiences are largely neglected.

That is not to argue that this structural framework represents an absolute force. Indeed, it would be somewhat anachronistic among Marxists and other scholars to contend that capitalism enforces some manner of functional determinism in our lives. The world, society, population, and individual interact with political economy in complicated and nuanced ways. Amidst compliancy with capitalism surrounding the lives of the participants, there were also moments of toil, exhaustion, resistance, and intense questioning. Consent with the current system may be manufactured, but it is not universally consumed. Even as forces of capitalism limit one’s options, there is still a great realm of possibility within these constraints. What these interviews show is the wealth of potential—in terms of choices, emotions, actions, and reactions—in what are currently limited circumstances. The commonalities and differences that the participants demonstrate in the face of these limitations show the powerful influences educational and work experiences possess in our lives. Extending far beyond the somewhat monochromatic scope of
theory, these experiences, though largely shaded in frustration, are robust in nature. Although it can be identified in purely theoretical terms, college graduate underemployment is, for the individual, a unique experience, one that can create fear and doubt as well as resilience and optimism for the future. The individual, not some force of capitalism, decides this relation. So while people may not make history as they choose, the subjective lens through which this history is interpreted is up to their own devices, and there is certainly power in this decision, even if its relevance is primarily personal.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

The interview will include three distinct sets of questions, each possessing a variety of questions to ask. What follows is a series of open-ended questions that will be incorporated into the interview.

Day 1 One Questions

Section 1: Focused Life History

1. Question: Describe your parents’ attitudes towards education when you were growing up.

2. Question: Describe your parents’ jobs. Did your parents like them?

3. Question: Why did you decide to enroll in college? What informed that decision?

4. Question: What factors led to you choosing your particular university?

5. Question: Did you have a clear professional goal when you entered college? To what degree did that goal change as you progressed through college?

6. Question: To what extent did you find your college courses prepared for future work experience?

7. Question: Can you describe your relationship with your university? In what ways were you engaged in your college experience (clubs, extracurricular activities, etc.)?

8. Question: Describe the months leading up to your graduation. Describe how you were feeling during this time.

9. Question: How confident were you that you would secure employment after graduation?

10. Question: At what stage did you begin looking for jobs after graduation? What sort of jobs did you initially look for?
Day 2 Questions

Section 2: Details of the Experience

1. Question: How did you feel when you were hired for your current job?

2. Question: Describe your average workday.

3. Question: How does your job relate to your college education?

4. Question: What do you like most about your job? What do you dislike most about your job?

5. Question: What skills are necessary to perform your job? How would you characterize your relationship with these skills?

6. Question: How does possessing a college degree change your perception of your current job?

Section 3: Reflection on the Experience:

1. Question: Based on your experience, in what ways are education and employment linked? In what ways are they separate?

2. Question: In your opinion, how has the economic crisis impacted your professional life?

3. Question: What advice would you give to a high school graduate who wishes to begin the college experience?

4. Question: How connected do you feel to your major/degree since graduating?

5. Question: What do you feel are your employment prospects for the future? Are you confident you will get a job that relates to your degree at some point? And are you interested in further education?

6. Question: Can you speak to the costs of education? To what degree is education worth or not worth these costs?

7. Question: In what ways do the knowledge and experience from your college education influence your life?
Appendix B

Recruitment Email Message

Hello,

My name is Joseph Cunningham. I am a graduate student in the University of Cincinnati’s Educational Studies program, and I am contacting you to see if you might be interested in participating in my dissertation study.

This research study focuses on college graduates’ employment issues in the current economic crisis. If you are interested in participating in the study, you will participate in an audiotaped (with your permission) interview lasting two hours that could (based upon your preference) be split into two sessions. Your identifying information will not be included in any report of the data, and you will have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested, please reply to this email, so we can subsequently schedule an interview time and place. Furthermore, if you have any questions, please ask me. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Joseph

joseph.cunningham@uc.edu
Phone: 513-545-9871
Appendix C

Consent Form

Adult Consent Form for Research
University of Cincinnati
Department: Educational Studies
Principal Investigator: Joseph Cunningham
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller

Title of Study: Understanding the Experiences of Underemployed College Graduates

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please read this paper carefully and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Who is doing this research study?
The person in charge of this research study is Joseph Cunningham of the University of Cincinnati (UC) Department of Educational Studies.

He is being guided in this research by Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller

What is the purpose of this research study?
The purpose of this research study is to gather underemployed college graduates’ reflections on their educational experiences in order to link it to a critical framework of educational purpose.

Who will be in this research study?
About 25 people will take part in this study. You may be in this study if

- You hold a bachelor’s degree
- You hold a job in which you feel overqualified or your job does not relate to your degree.

What will you be asked to do in this research study, and how long will it take?
You will be asked to answer interview questions about your educational and work experiences, including your feelings regarding those experiences. This interview will either be a single two hour session or two, one hour sessions occurring on separate days corresponding with our schedules. The interview(s) will take place in a public location such as a library, student lounge, park, or restaurant.
In regards to a step-by-step interview, it will occur in the following manner if you sign the consent form:

- **Step 1:** You will complete a short one-page demographic survey
- **Step 2:** We will conduct a one-hour interview of about ten questions focused on primarily your educational experiences

Based upon how you are feeling and your schedule, we will conduct the next part in one of two following manners.

- **Step 3:** We can conduct the second half of the interview, which should also take about an hour and consists of roughly 13 questions, immediately after the first.

  Or

- **Step 3:** We can schedule an interview for another day, meet once more at your convenience, and conduct the second half of the interview, which should also take about an hour and consist of roughly 13 questions.

- **Step 4:** After the interviews are complete, I may contact you during the transcription process (in which I write down, word for word what you said) to clarify certain answers. This transcription process should begin no later than one month after the interview takes place.

**Are there any risks to being in this research study?**

- It is not expected that you will be exposed to any risk by being in this research study.

**Are there any benefits from being in this research study?**

You will probably not get any benefit because of being in this study. But, being in this study may help educational researchers understand how the relationship between education and employment.

**What will you get because of being in this research study?**

You will not be paid to take part in this study.

**Do you have choices about taking part in this research study?**

If you do not want to take part in this research study you *may simply not participate.*
You have a choice whether or not this interview is audio-taped. There is a place at the end of this paper to mark your choice.

How will your research information be kept confidential?
Information about you will be kept private by the following measures:

- using a study ID number instead of the participant's name on the research forms
- keeping the master list of names and study ID numbers in a separate location from the research forms
- limiting access to research data to the research team
- not including the participant's name on the typed transcript
- keeping research data on a password-protected computer

Your information will be kept will be kept in a locked drawer in my office (McMicken Hall 149), and all electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer for three years. After that it will be all information will be destroyed by shredding documents and deleting data from the computer. The data from this research study may be published; but you will not be identified by name.

What are your legal rights in this research study?
Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

What if you have questions about this research study?
If you have any questions or concerns about this research study, you should contact Joseph Cunningham at 513-545-9871 or joseph.cunningham@uc.edu.

Or, you may contact Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller at 513-556-5108 or mary.brydon-miller@uc.edu.

The UC Institutional Review Board reviews all research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC IRB at (513) 558-5259. Or, you may call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or write to the IRB, 300 University Hall, ML 0567, 51 Goodman Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0567, or email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.

Do you HAVE to take part in this research study?
No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have.
You may skip any questions that you don't want to answer.

You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop being in the study, you should tell Joseph Cunningham at 513-545-9871 or joseph.cunningham@uc.edu or Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller at 513-556-5108 or mary.brydon-miller@uc.edu.

Agreement:

I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

__ YES, you may audiotape my interview

__ NO, I do NOT want you to audiotape my interview

Participant Name (please print) ____________________________________________

Participant Signature ___________________________________________ Date ______

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent _____________________________ Date _____