

Lessons from Dorothy Allison: teacher education, social class and critical literacy

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Integrating autobiographical narrative and case study, this teacher-research article looks closely at how one white, female, heterosexual, middle-class elementary school teacher in the US used short stories written by Dorothy Allison as an entry point to look at difference from a critical perspective. Challenging the too often conflated constructs of race and class, this study was conducted in a Masters course on literacy that foregrounded issues of social class. Contrary to what some may believe, the author argues that foregrounding class did not eclipse critical analyses of race, gender and sexuality, but moved one student towards more nuanced readings of oppression.

Mrs Stritt was my fourth grade teacher and a skilled clogger. Her salt-and-pepper curls bounced around her enthusiastic, wrinkled face as she urged me to follow along clap-clacking my toes and heels. Sliding and clicking my dance shoes to ‘Rocky Top’ and other traditional mountain songs felt good, comfortable. As our clogging group improved, Mrs Stritt entered us into dance competitions, and a weekend rehearsal was called. On a chilly, sunny Saturday morning my mom and step-dad drove me to my teacher’s home. Stepping outside our van, I stopped in mid-stride and stared with awe at her house; the newly constructed two-storey brick sat on a grassy slope with manicured landscaping and an in-ground pool. Having never seen such a house in real life, I was nervous about entering. Coaxed by my mom, I walked up the steps and crossed the threshold into my emerging consciousness of social class.

It all started right there on the periphery of Mrs Stritt’s middle-class property. The world that opened up to me that morning made my head spin, and the years ahead of me complicated things even more. Even as I sit down to write this paper I am not certain that I have a solid grasp of why social class differences are turned into opportunities for judgment and discrimination, but I am certain that my personal life, coupled with research and literature, has taught me a great deal about this dirty little secret in the Land of the Free. Classism in America has a long history and painful realities, and where we are from helps to paint a picture of what we believe

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about class. As Jane Van Galen put it, researchers ‘who do not experience class as a problem have the privilege to ignore it’ (2000, p. 670). Researchers are not the only ones to ignore class. Teachers, teacher educators, publishers and people in mainstream US society who have not experienced class as a problem are also likely to ignore it. Instead, class might be considered ‘the uncool subject’ (hooks, 2000a, p. vii), while seemingly more fashionable topics such as race, gender or sexuality get close and critical analyses, more press and perhaps even more clout.

However, the end of our innocence around social class in the United States is abruptly with us. The gap between the rich and the poor has continued to widen, not narrow, in the past 20 years, and we find ourselves in a place where the state of Michigan alone has lost 130,000 jobs in the last five years due to General Motors cutbacks, with GM recently announcing 30,000 more employees to be cut by 2008 nationwide (Associated Press, 2006); where trade unions—organizations that have protected working-class men and women for decades—are being dismantled; where politics aligns itself with corporate capital to erode public space and social support systems—the very democratic ideals once strived for in our country (Giroux, 2004); where neo-liberal capitalism stretches its tentacles across the globe for cheaper labour and wealthier consumers (McLaren, 2006); and where we are on the brink of a health care crisis and beyond crisis in the fight for democratically run public schools. Those carrying the burden of such social, political and economic shifts are those who have always suffered most in our country’s history. Social class matters, and its oppressive forces will matter more to all of us as time moves on.

One way to better understand such forces is through the lens of critical literacy, a lens that reads the world from the perspective that language, power and identities are inextricably linked. This is a lens grounded in the assumption that anything that has been constructed through language and literacy practices is saturated with ideology and therefore can be deconstructed, better understood and reconstructed through social action (e.g. Comber, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1996, 2001; Jones, 2006). Such constructions could take infinite forms: for example, a social interaction, an Internet website, a children’s book, a television commercial, a sitcom, an email, a newspaper article, and so on. And as we read these texts, we recognize that they are just that: constructions. Through this realization we can ask ourselves questions like ‘What is this text doing to me? Whose interests does this text serve? How might this text read differently had it been constructed from a different perspective?’

But how do I make critical literacy—and specifically social class—matter to the future and current teachers who sit in front of me at an elite, private institution in the Northeast of the United States? One sure-fire way to make it matter less is for me to stand on my soapbox, offer lectures on neo-liberal capitalism, rant and rave about corporate corruption, homelessness, poverty, the students’ own class-privileged histories, and so forth. Though it is often tempting to do just that, I began with students’ lives in a Masters literacy course and then turned to adult literature: Dorothy Allison’s stories from the margins. I believed that stories, both those that

students tell about themselves and those written through voices from outside mainstream society, coupled with critical analyses of texts, could open up transformative spaces. Literary stories—unlike even the most radically written educational research—use language to pull us into worlds where lived realities are not told but felt. As a story-writer, Dorothy Allison (2001) claims one goal as drawing readers into the unknowable in a way that leaves them with some small sense of having been there:

I know that some things must be felt to be understood, that despair, for example, can never be adequately analyzed; it must be lived. But [if] ... I can write a story that so draws the reader in that she imagines herself like my characters, feels their sense of fear and uncertainty, their hopes and terrors (Allison, 2001, p. 77)

Dorothy Allison is hopeful that if she can write in a way that pulls readers into the lives of her characters they will be closer to knowing and understanding such experiences—and perhaps even work towards doing something to change oppression in our society. Class oppression and domination may be something that must be lived to understand such fear, uncertainty, hopes, terrors—but perhaps these stories could help students move closer to knowing. Though most of the students in the graduate course that is the focus of this teacher-research had not experienced living on the lower rungs of a ladder society stratified by social class, my hope was that through our readings and dialogues around Dorothy Allison's writings, our personal experiences, and a number of critically focused theory and practice texts (e.g. Boran & Comber, 2001; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 2001; Hicks, 2002; hooks, 1994; Rist, 2000) we could, as a group, construct a transformative space where critical class consciousness was indeed a possibility.

Brooke

Brooke, the Masters student who is the focus of this case study, moved to New York City at the age of 24 to study at Teachers College from Upstate New York where she lived with her mother and her father, who worked as a police officer in their suburb that was almost entirely white and middle-class, though Brooke's recognition of pockets of marginalized children and families came up from time to time. Her reading and discussion of her version of George Ella Lyon's *where i'm from* poem (1999) on the first day of our class was engaged and eye-opening. During an interview conducted six months after the end of the class Brooke began spontaneously talking about that first day and her work around the poem:

... that poem was when ... we were beginning to see ... how different everybody was. Like what were the things that we all drew from. And I was just listening to everybody 'cause there were so many different people from different cultures, and so the whole semester is very similar. Everything that we read ... even the people that we learned from like Freire and some of these different, um, researchers that were included in the articles that we read, um really helped me to look at the world every day differently ...

Here Brooke does something that Lesko and Bloom (1998) argue is imperative in a renewed vision of multicultural teacher education—she implicates everyone in

difference through stating her recognition of how ‘different everybody was’ even in a classroom space where many people looked similar. Brooke makes a connection between this initial encounter with the classroom space as opening up difference, with her perspective on how the rest of the semester unfolded as she tells the interviewer, ‘... and so the whole semester is very similar’. Her narration then moves from specific examples of that first class meeting to a broad discussion of the semester, including an attribution of her ability to ‘look at the world every day differently’ to her work within the course.

Though Brooke named Paulo Freire in this section of the interview as one theorist she could recall easily, it was the reading of short stories by Dorothy Allison that stimulated her critical thinking around social injustice and provoked her continued growth across the semester and beyond the constraints of the 15-week semester-long course. Positioned as a reader of adult literature, Brooke’s transactional experience with Dorothy Allison’s short stories had a powerful impact on her ability and willingness to see difference in a different way. Following a description of the research, Brooke’s written assignments and interview will be used to explore how she began to reconstruct preconceived notions about class bias *and* employing a new lens to more deeply read race, gender and sexuality. These enriching and extending narrations around race and gender helped to disrupt the too often laminated constructions of whiteness and blackness that circulate in educational research and theory and informed Brooke’s assumptions about class.

The researcher and the research

As a researcher, I align myself with a number of scholars from working-class and poor backgrounds investigating complex issues around social class, marginalization, schooling and identity (e.g. Bettie, 2003; Hicks, 2002, 2004, 2005; hooks, 2000a; Reay, 1998; Rose, 1989, 2004; Van Galen, 2000; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). This positioning doesn’t change as I enter the university classroom to work with adult students from the position of Assistant Professor. Instead, it informs nearly everything I do, from choosing course readings and the structures of the class meetings to facilitating discussions and highlighting specific comments and quotes. My working-poor background seemed most complex and magnified, however, when I began teaching at an elite institution where many, but not all, students had lived class-privileged lives. The classrooms I entered were filled with ethnic and linguistic diversity, but were often lacking in social class diversity, and students who identified as African American. Foregrounding social class in such a context seemed a risky business to me, not only because of my own class vulnerability (Halperin, 2001) and continuing battles with inferiority issues in relation to my experiences with class-specific power, but also because introducing social class, specifically, would mean that the majority of the students in this high class/status setting must critically consider their classed histories and perhaps reimagine what has been constructed for them their entire lives: that people who work hard are rewarded through social positions and economic capital.

This research, then, is focused broadly on how pre-service and in-service teachers engaged with critical literacy practices on one particular course from the fall of 2004, but it includes the particularities of constructing class consciousness and class-specific readings as refracted through race, gender, sexuality, ability and other markers of identity when considering social inequities. Student-created artefacts, including a quick draft of a poem, a ‘thought paper’ based on one assigned reading, two ‘critical readings’, a mid-term reflection paper, a final reflection paper, a small-group book presentation, and a brief writing on what kind of teacher they wanted to be, were collected throughout the semester. Students were asked on the final day of class whether or not they would like to be included in the study, a strategy used to prevent blatant coercion and any change such a discussion would make in the dynamics of the group. I didn’t, in other words, want the students to experience the course doubly positioned as inferior to me as the professor *and* the researcher across the semester.

Six months after the course ended, students were contacted by a research assistant¹ and asked for an interview as a second layer of data in the study; of 18 students, 18 agreed to participate in the study, but only ten were interviewed. The eight students who were not interviewed gave reasons such as distance to travel, overwhelming schedules and the inability to find a common time with the interviewer, but some of them may have declined because they didn’t know the research assistants. Having someone other than myself contact the participants and conduct the interviews was a decision made to avoid the power dynamics of a professor interviewing a student about the same professor’s class (a clear problem from my perspective), but at the same time I realize that some of the students might have been more comfortable talking with me personally than with someone they had never met.

From this data I construct one case study here of a 24-year-old white female student, Brooke, who had taught Kindergarten and First Grade for two years prior to becoming a full-time Masters student in New York City. Brooke was chosen as the case for this particular paper for four reasons: (1) she was an experienced teacher who often referred to her past classroom work with children and made comparisons between how she used to teach and how she wanted to teach; (2) she came on the course without an obvious critical edge, that is, as someone who was already considering social injustices from the perspective that such injustices are constructed and need to be re-examined; (3) she is a white middle-class female, which makes her similar in many ways to the majority of the teaching force in the United States; and (4) Brooke currently teaches at a public school in New York City where I hope to continue this research in her classroom across at least one year. In essence, for this case study, I wanted to focus on an experienced teacher who did not seem to have a critical perspective at the beginning of the semester, who represents—in some fashion—the majority of the teaching force in our country, and who was staying in New York City to teach, where I could do further research.

Brooke’s interview transcript and her written artefacts from the course were read many times across a six-month period and eventually coded, using emerging themes

(Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) within each artefact and across data sources. Knowing about Brooke as a person and as a teacher apart from official data sources affects my readings of these data, since my personal communication continues with her, and she is a member of a Critical Literacy Teacher Research Group that I have initiated and that has met a handful of times across the 2005–06 academic year. This case study has been constructed around the importance of Dorothy Allison to Brooke's growth as a critically literate person and as a teacher, but it could have been constructed in an infinite number of ways. This is simply how I have decided to 'angle' my vision on the data in front of me (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). This angle is guided by my personal history, my agenda as an educational researcher with commitments to critical literacy, social justice and issues of class, and my ability to shape some kind of meaningful story out of what I am faced with: a developing person and educator who makes meaning within a course I taught, through engaging with her complex histories, identities, desires and dreams.

Dorothy Allison: a first encounter

Following our small-group and whole-group discussions about where we were from on the first day of class, I quietly walked around the room handing out copies of the first short story in Allison's *Trash* collection, 'River of Names'. After a brief discussion about Dorothy Allison and her status in the literary world, I simply told them that as they read this short story they were to make note of Connections, Disconnections, Questions and A-Ha moments. The students began reading. Silence fell, and 18 heads were still as the students' eyes moved line-by-line and their pencils made notes in the margins and on sticky notes—notes that weren't often used in the discussion that followed. A sombre mood had replaced the energetic buzz of sharing one another's lives, but the ensuing discussion was important. Two questions—what experiences are being centred and/or privileged in this text? From where did you read this story?—were posed by me to prompt a whole group discussion. The first was answered in a series of one or two words: lesbian, southern, rural, poor, female, broken family, violence, tragedy, and then an uncomfortable pause. Something I had not expected was that no one mentioned Dorothy Allison being white, so I asked about race. Glances around the room revealed discomfort or uncertainty so I wrote on the blackboard: white.

Brooke spoke up quietly, shaking her head and stating her embarrassment that she thought the family in the story was black. Though the first to speak out, she was not alone in making this assumption. Several heads nodded knowingly, others pursed their lips, and still others sat unnaturally still likely trying to 'read' the context of the classroom, our first coming together of the semester. Brooke's statement is illustrative of a common problem within our society: the constant conflation of race and class is more typical than we might expect, as the words 'poor' and 'poverty' conjure images of blackness, and perhaps in some minds, dark-skinned recent immigrants. African Americans and poverty seem synonymous, as do whites and privilege (hooks, 2000a, 2000b). Class relations, however, are much more complex than the

colour of one's skin, and they are more nuanced than people are willing to investigate (Bettie, 2003; Heilman, 2004; hooks, 2000a, 2000b; Lew, 2006; Reay, 1998; Walkerdine *et al.*, 2001). For this young white middle-class kindergarten teacher from Upstate New York, whiteness was indeed representative of class privilege, and therefore poverty, from her perspective, must be representative of blackness.

Dorothy Allison's short story opened up these tension-filled but generative conversations on the first day of class, right on the coat tail of discussing who we believe we are and writing our own versions of 'Where I'm From' poems. Contrasting the students' personal experiences, expressed through discussions and poetic musings, with the language and experiences of the narrator in Allison's 'River of Names' created an opportunity for purposeful deconstruction of the students' experiences as readers. This opportunity did not end with that first class, however, at least for Brooke, who continuously drew from her experience as a reader of Dorothy Allison throughout the semester. She cited only Allison in her two critical readings for the semester—due seven and ten weeks later—listed *Trash* as the most important reading of the semester on both the mid-term and final reflection paper, and without prompting and almost instantly brought up Dorothy Allison in an interview six months after the end of the course.

In the following section I will take a look at excerpts from Brooke's first critical reading assignment. One purpose of these assignments was to situate the students as adult *readers* of adult texts, and not necessarily as *teachers* of reading through children's literature, the latter most often reported in elementary teacher education and professional development in literacy (e.g. Jewett & Smith, 2003; Lewis *et al.*, 2001; Van Sluys *et al.*, 2005). The students selected their own texts (oral conversation, speech, television commercial, print advertisement, a book) and were given a list of suggested questions that might prompt them to consider representations of power and privilege and the perpetuation of oppressive stereotypes. In doing this, students analyzed their personal location as a reader of the text and imagined how the text might position readers with various life experiences. Brooke's first critical reading was of a Bailey Banks & Biddle advertisement for diamond wedding rings found in *Vanity Fair*.

Love, beauty, and wealth: a critical reading

The introductory context Brooke offered for this reading was:

... an advertisement that was included in the November 2004 edition of *Vanity Fair* magazine. The advertisement is for the jewelry company *Bailey Banks & Biddle*. This company is advertising a huge diamond wedding band and engagement ring. There is a face shot of a white woman who has her left hand brushing across her face. She is wearing the diamond wedding band and engagement ring on her ring finger. The woman is depicted as youthful, with long, straight brown hair, a small nose, thick lips and healthy vibrant skin. There is a caption across the page that reads, 'For almost two centuries, we've made sure love and beauty need never be apart'.

As a critical reader of this text Brooke explicitly explored race, gender, beauty, marriage, love, sexuality, age and class and framed her critique with two sentences:

The woman meets society's standards of being beautiful (white, big lips, small nose, long hair, thin, make-up). The image that is portrayed seems to send the message that the woman is successful because she is young, beautiful, and engaged with a huge diamond.

These two sentences, populated with discourses around race, gender, beauty, marriage, sexuality, age and class, are unpacked throughout the paper primarily from the perspective of a female. Brooke gets to a critical point immediately following this set-up:

This fantasy is unattainable for most women in the world today.

She then moves into her readings of Dorothy Allison to consider the impact these mainstream discourses have on women:

Dorothy Allison was searching for love in her book *Trash*. She mentions 'I want to go crazy with love, eat myself up with love ... Like the rest of the world' (Allison, p. 90). Dorothy is a representation of the many women who may read this advertisement and feel marginalized because their love is not as beautiful and picture-perfect as this picture.

Brooke considers a perspective different from her own, but one that she is coming to know through literature. In a sense, Brooke is positioning Dorothy Allison as a potential marginalized reader of this advertisement and as someone for whom 'this fantasy is unattainable'. She moves beyond this positioning, however, and states:

This advertisement portrays a false image of love in the real world.

Brooke considers the 'real world' then as one that is filled with diversity across experiences within race, class, gender, sexuality, relationships and age. In her reading, Brooke critiques the positioning of males by this advertisement:

A man who reads this [advertisement] may feel as if he could never give his wife a beautiful symbol of their love, because he could not afford a huge diamond.

Considering the ad from a male and class-specific perspective was something of a risk for Brooke, since she had written elsewhere that:

Before this class I often had unsympathetic feelings toward homeless people and poor people. I had always felt badly about their living conditions; however I believed that if they truly wanted to get out of the conditions they could go out and work (like I was doing) ...

In the past, then, perhaps Brooke might have imagined that a man could and should work hard to provide his fiancée with an engagement ring to put his love on exhibition around a finger. She may not have considered that hard-working men, or men who were unable to work for various reasons, may not have the resources or even the desire to buy such a luxurious piece of jewellery.

In addition to this class-specific risk-taking, Brooke exhibited in her paper an even greater risk in reconsidering her beliefs around normative heterosexuality. In her final reflection paper for the semester Brooke wrote:

... when I was reading the book by Dorothy Allison, I was a little disturbed when I was reading about lesbians. I came from a small town and a religious family. Homosexuality

is not accepted. I was reading this book and I kept thinking that the women in the story were wrong and that they must have been rejected by a male father figure to be lesbians. I am now aware of how absurd it is to just pass judgment on characters that I cannot identify with.

Dorothy Allison's stories prompted a rethinking for Brooke around her pejorative assumptions about homosexuality and homosexuals, and she foreshadowed this rethinking in this first critical reading with a brief question about a lesbian's perspective:

How would a lesbian or a woman who had never been married feel about this advertisement? Would they, like Dorothy Allison, secretly long to have this picture-perfect version of 'love' that the world portrays exists?

Through writing 'This advertisement portrays power in being married and having beauty and love', Brooke carefully combines the discourses employed in the print ad around marriage (heterosexual normativity), beauty (white skin, long hair, thin, small nose, big lips; stereotypical femininity), and love (demonstrated through material consumption and materialistic exhibition) and how these three discourses converge to represent power in an unjust society. Through the use of hypothetical questioning, Brooke indirectly critiques these discourses throughout her paper:

Isn't there power in being single and average looking? Do we need to re-focus some of our literature in today's society? Should more of our literature serve many different discourses like the literature by Dorothy Allison?

In other words, Brooke moves from a statement towards the beginning of her paper, 'This fantasy is unattainable for most women ...' to asking herself and others to consider whether this, indeed, should be a fantasy worthy of attainment in the first place.

In Brooke's first critical reading, written seven weeks into the semester, she engages as a reader who questions representations and uses of power in a text, and considers the possible perspectives of various kinds of readers, including herself and Dorothy Allison, and the potential ways various readers might be positioned by this particular text. Though her writing incorporates important constructs from the course readings and discussions, such as discourses, sexism, racism and materialistic consumerism, Brooke chose only to quote and cite her reading of short stories from *Trash* written by Dorothy Allison (2002).

From disconnection to more nuanced readings

Standing on the periphery of Mrs Stritt's middle-class world, represented by material living conditions I had yet to witness before fourth grade, I felt disconnected from the sprawling evidence in front of me that articulated difference. In this moment of disconnection I recognized myself as other, marginalized, on the outside—literally peripheral to an existence that was clearly a reality for some people. This awakening, for me, was the beginning of a long and ongoing dialogic grappling with critical class consciousness and recognition of the oppressive forces of social

class and the ways class intersects with race, gender, sexuality, religion, language and other markers of identity.

Brooke experienced a similar disconnection as she read Dorothy Allison's 'River of Names', a disconnection that served as an entry point to insight fed by disequilibrium and discomfort. In her interview six months after the course had ended, Brooke talked about her initial reading of Dorothy Allison:

I remember we had to read *Trash*, by Dorothy Allison. One portion of that. Immediately I was marginalized, I felt like, 'Gosh! I can't believe it', you know, 'What is this?' And I remember thinking, um, that, ah, I just remember thinking that I didn't identify with the story at all.

Dorothy Allison's short stories served as Brooke's Mrs Stritt. Brooke was the other faced with sprawling evidence that lived realities existed, particularly within experiences of whiteness that she had yet to know. Brooke began to reconsider her assumption that poverty equalled blackness and that whiteness equalled economic and social stability. The simple fact that she worked towards the unravelling of these often conflated constructs of race and class is powerful in and of itself, and across the semester and in her interview six months later she critiqued herself in relation to the fact that she had imagined Allison's characters to be black. Part of her attempt to read class and race in more nuanced ways was to imagine reading a text from the perspective of Dorothy Allison and to consider how the text might position Allison as a reader and how Allison might, in return, position the text. Brooke, positioned as a *reader* and not as a *teacher of reading*, opened up possibilities for her to engage in transformative experiences (hooks, 1994) that may not have been possible had she been reading children's or young adult literature that would not have positioned her as a reader of sophisticated texts in her own right but instead as a reader who is always a teacher of reading.

Social class analyses are crucial, given the economic and political era in which we find ourselves, where neo-liberal global capitalism continues to devalue and dehumanize human labour—and the human beings who labour—and perpetual divisions between racial and ethnic groups who scrounge and scrape just to survive on a daily basis strengthen and solidify class domination as we are experiencing now and as we have not yet imagined. Attending to social class and the ways in which it intersects with gender, race, sexuality, religion and other subject locations will not only help people to look more closely at the material, emotional, embodied and lived implications of social class, it will also help to disrupt the laminated constructs of blackness and whiteness that pervade discourses in schools, society and educational research. Continuously positioning blackness as synonymous with class marginalization and whiteness as synonymous with class privilege perpetuates stereotypes that drive expectations and assumptions when working with all texts: families, children, research participants, graduate students, educational research, media and literary texts.

So, how might literature offer openings for examination of social inequities and processes of domination? Dorothy Allison (2002) tells us that she writes stories to

join a conversation, the ongoing conversation of human experiences that must be lived to be fully understood, but can be conveyed through richly narrated stories that serve as entry points for readers to join the ongoing conversations. So we read stories to listen in on the conversation, often conversations we might not be privy to if we relied on our physical and social worlds to help us gain access. Ears perked, eyes squinted, we make meaning from the printed words—words written from locations we cannot yet imagine. We make our own meaning through transactional processes and the social interactions we have before, during and after our reading. Dorothy Allison lets us into a conversation about poverty, and more specifically, white poverty in the rural South of the United States and the intersections with being female and lesbian—and critical literacy offers tools to read these conversations from a critical perspective. Allison's lived experiences of whiteness are constructed differently from mainstream representations of whiteness and those laminated identities of white, middle-class males or females held up as notorious examples of unearned privilege and perpetuating existing patterns of domination. She helps us join a broader and more richly textured conversation about difference: opening our eyes and minds to the infinite complexities of oppression in our society in a way that can help us imagine what we, as teacher educators, might do to work toward social justice.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Grace Enriquez and Gravity Goldberg served as research assistants in this study, conducting and transcribing interviews in the summer of 2005.

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