I had been working at Arise for Social Justice for almost exactly a year. Arise is a nonprofit economic justice organization in Springfield directed by two sisters who are both outstanding community activists, Michaelann and Liz Bewsee. It was my first time returning this school year. I hugged all of the staff in greeting, I chatted and helped them organize colored folders containing archival material: newsletters, pamphlets, and fliers for various events (a new improvement since my last visit.) On my way out, I’m stopped by a man at one of the public access computers. He needs help logging in. He complains a bit as I log him in onto the desktop. He feels sick. Yes, yes, I’m sorry sir. I double click the Internet icon.

He begins to tell me about his nephew. A good kid, he insists. Happened to get mixed up in the wrong crowd. His nephew used to meet him at the bus stop as he came home from work at the factory. They would walk home together; talk about life. His nephew was pretty smart. But he got involved with the wrong people, and just three days earlier, someone put a gun to his nephew’s smart head and shot him a few blocks from here. And now, the man tells me, now he goes to the gun factory and it makes him physically sick to put these guns together. The same guns that leave the factory and end up in poverty-stricken regions, such as parts of Springfield.

He can’t quit his job. He doesn’t have the fiscal mobility to disengage with a career choice that makes him feel so awful. He’s still trying to pay off a fine associated with a DUI he got in 1988. He wasn’t able to pay it then, and he’s still not able to now. He tries to log onto an online system that tracks his payments. The gun factory is his only viable option as a source of stable financial support.

The narrative of participation in economic systems is rarely linear, despite what we are led to believe. The perpetuation of poverty is based on a cyclical discourse, in which the multi-dimensionality of oppressive systems creates a cycle of limited opportunities and disenfranchisement for minoritized communities. In Springfield, nephews are mixing with the wrong crowd. It can be hard to contextualize the theoretical knowledge we learn about in class. For me, working in Springfield is invaluable to my academic experience, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world.