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by

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2015

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**The Political Economy of Literacy in the ‘Post-Racial’ Era: The
Common Core State Standards and the Reproduction of Racial
Inequality in the United States**

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Inequality in the United States**

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

Dedication

To “D”—my dad—for doing what you had to do in school and work so that I could have the opportunity to do things I never thought I could. Thank you for always being there—
and for still being here—to support me in my journey.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this dissertation marks the end of a chapter in my life, neither of which would have happened without the contributions of many gracious people. I am hoping they know, wherever they are, how truly grateful I am.

I am most grateful to each of the members of my dissertation committee, whose wisdom, scholarship, professionalism, and service to students remains an inspiration for me. I often feel more intelligent just by association with you. I am especially grateful to Dr. Shirley Thompson, for her guidance, permission, and steadfast belief in my ability to do this. I thank Dr. Uri Treisman for keeping me grounded throughout the process and for sharing his wise insights from the fields of education, policy, and life. I have to thank Dr. Stephen Marshall for consistently making my brain hurt in all the best, most intellectual ways. I am also grateful to Dr. Keffrelyn Brown for keeping me honest in my discussions of schools and communities and for her willingness to work with me despite not having seen my work before our first meeting. And to Dr. Simone Browne, I know I join the chorus of students when I say a sincere “thank you” for always being so genuine and gracious with your interest and support. I will always feel humbled by, and indebted to, my dissertation committee members.

I also need to recognize the American Studies Department at the University of Massachusetts Boston, who willingly accepted me as a graduate student despite the fact that I was still struggling to relearn how to read, speak, and write. I will be forever grateful for the cognitive rehabilitation afforded by the wonderful people, ideas, and opportunities that led me to this final step of my academic journey. To my graduate cohort in the Department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, especially Lily Laux, you have offered genuine friendship, community and support these

past few years. Thank you for walking alongside me on this academic journey, keeping me in the loop, and pushing me on to that next step that eventually got me here.

I am especially indebted to Nelda Barrón, my partner in all aspects of life, CEO of our family, brilliant and dependable resource, and truly “The Queen.” This is your dissertation as much as mine. I also owe sincere love and gratitude to my parents, Robert and Jennifer Williams, and my children—Tatiana, Antonio, Pedro, and Yessenia—especially for their patience, moral support, technical assistance, and inspiring illustrations that have adorned my workspace throughout. I am grateful to all of my family, immediate and extended, and all of my friends and colleagues from Boston to Austin. Thank you for believing in me and supporting me throughout this process.

I want to extend a special thank you to my former secondary students, some of whom became my “literacy sponsors” by helping me to read again when the medical professionals said it might not be possible. As struggling students yourselves, you first taught me how to be a better teacher for you, and then you became the most effective reading specialists in my time of rehabilitation. I take great pride in knowing this project is a result of your efforts and compassion; something none of us should ever take for granted in education.

**The Political Economy of Literacy in the ‘Post-Racial’ Era: The
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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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This dissertation contextualizes *The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* within the racialized neoliberal “post-civil rights” United States. It begins with an introduction to the standards, including an overview of the existing criticism surrounding the content, processes, and potential effects of the standards in practice. It then historicizes the standards’ brand of literacy within the context of literacy in U.S. history, including its discursive ambiguity and its potential as both a tool and a weapon for social control, rulership, and revolution. This is followed by an examination of the standards’ authority on the national conception of literacy, illiteracy, the literate, and the illiterate, including the definition of personal traits and characteristics for the literate person of the 21st century. The standards, fashioned within the larger national narrative of racial progress in conjunction with the social narrative of educational decline, seek to re-center the idea that higher, measurable standards will rationalize the inequalities of race and class. This project examines the political economy of literacy in a “post-racial” era, by historicizing

the standards as a 21st century racial and cultural imperative. Appealing to individuals and communities across the political, economic, and cultural spectrum, the standards were initially adopted by as many as 46 states, Washington DC, and three U.S. territories. By investigating the origins, evolution, and implications of this literacy policy, we can see that the conception of literacy lends credence to aggressive capitalist ventures through the *terms* of race and class. The effect is a new politics of equality based on the consumption of literacy skills. Literacy, newly defined and valued as a commodity in the “knowledge economy,” is a political intervention into the pedagogies of citizenship for the 21st century, and currently serves as a primary mechanism for policing the boundaries of property, personhood, and privilege in the 21st century.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: A National Literacy Project for the 21st Century

“If the ruling and the oppressed elements in a population, if those who wish to maintain the status quo and those concerned to make changes, had, when they became articulate, the same philosophy, one might well be skeptical of its intellectual integrity.”¹

With the adoption of the CCSS, what now exists is a new literacy policy for public education that arguably abstracts literacy from its material realities and colludes with the current political culture of redistributing wealth, resources, and control “upward” and away from poor and racial minority communities. My argument rests on two foundational premises: one, that any policy regarding literacy has a racial and cultural component; two, that in order for us to understand this component, we must situate the actual “text” of the literacy policy historically, temporally, and rhetorically to see the “text” itself as actively constructing meanings and effects as well as reflecting and reproducing pre-existing ones. In order to do this, I draw on the lessons learned by scholars of critical race theory, the history of education, literacy, nostalgia, neoliberal economics, and the politics of policy-making in general.

What is it about the CCSS that eventually allowed for the consent of political leaders in 46 states and three US territories? Exactly what national problems did proponents think the CCSS could solve? At the core of these standards is a new 21st century definition of literacy that includes an emphasis on reading non-fiction texts over fiction, writing expository essays over personal narratives, analyzing text “within the four corners of the page,” and acquiring content knowledge directly from “carefully selected” informational texts. Among the CCSS central claims for redefining what makes a literate

¹ John Dewey. *Philosophy and Civilization*, New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931, 180.

person for the 21st century, is the promise of a better job with higher pay, improved equality, higher academic achievement, national economic stability, better prepared citizens, a stronger democracy, and a victory for America in the global race for success on the international stage.² The CCSS in ELA and Literacy advocate a redefinition of acceptable literacy skills, practices, and effects in the name of improving social equality, individual and national economic prosperity, and US global performance. This vision of literacy is directly connected to national political and economic trends.

The CCSS is the latest manifestation of educational reforms that began in the wake of the post-civil rights backlash that commenced with the famous report, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983. To many political leaders, the CCSS are a contemporary example of successful collective action, but a closer examination of the context, campaign, and speedy consensus regarding the CCSS in ELA and literacy suggests that they were the product of a very tiny, elite group of individuals as opposed to the work of a “collective.” My investigation also suggests that rather than doing anything revolutionary, the CCSS might be popular precisely because they present a nostalgic return familiar to a generation steeped in the narrative of racial progress and the educational discourse of social decline. Faith in a sound democratic process of creating standards may not have been the primary cause of wide-spread consensus, but rather the arrival of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy triggered a return to a familiar place of promise and potential for some, and a comfortable return to authority for others.

What makes the CCSS feel revolutionary for the current generation of adults at this time is their use of literacy as the pretense for equal opportunity for all. Even though

² Common Core State Standards Initiative. Mission statement of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) <http://www.corestandards.org> (accessed October 2, 2012). As of March 2015 this mission statement no longer appears on the CCSS homepage.

they rely on myths long since debunked,³ the standards nonetheless appeal to a generation of policy leaders, educators, and parents who still believe in the liberal notion that the country can finally overcome its racist history. The new literacy standards are presented as a “staircase” for literal and figurative upward mobility. The process of literacy standards offers a set of discrete skills, that when “consumed,” make equality accessible to everyone through preparation for “college and career.” In the spirit of private property, the promise of literacy is offered as an asset available for acquisition and consumption, a commodity for exchange, and the key to 21st century social mobility and international competitiveness---common anxieties of the nation’s members and leaders.

When I embarked on this project in 2011, I began with a hunch: our public schools were becoming increasingly segregated and unequal. At the same time, the discourse of education reform reflected an increase in the use of words like "standards," "freedom," "choice," and "equitable." The discussions around education took on an increasingly vocational flavor. Today, education discourse and reform is almost exclusively about economic ends and global competition. I suspected that the education reform discourse and the focus on literacy was serving something other than making society and the schools more racially just and socially equal. I suspected they were serving a national neoliberal agenda.

The most recent tangible product of education reform is the creation, publication, and adoption of the Common Core State Standards. These standards are a bold statement

³ For a discussion of debunked literacy models see the work of Brian Street "What's 'New' in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice." *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (Teachers College) 5, no. 2 (2003): 77-91. For a discussion of literacy myths see the work of Harvey J. Graff *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

about literacy for the 21st century and a monumental document that many educators and political leaders seem to believe is just "common sense." Thus, it came to pass without much criticism or fanfare, that 46 states and several US territories adopted this new and extensive set of educational standards in ELA and literacy (and math), with science and social studies soon to follow. Some of these states, like Massachusetts, by all accounts, already had excellent academic standards in place, outstanding performance on national tests like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), strong high school graduation rates, and a stellar reputation amongst the rest of the states in the country. I was especially interested in the CCSS in literacy given the new push for college level education for all U.S. citizens. What problems did this literacy document propose to solve? How did the CCSS in literacy become so widely embraced as the 21st century answer to the problem of reforming all of public education in the United States? And why, when the impetus for the CCSS was improving math performance, were the ELA and Literacy standards amongst the first to be written, developed, released, and adopted?

From my perspective as a long-time professional educator in Boston, the inequalities of the public school system were the greatest and most pressing problems in education. Because the CCSS was so quickly adopted and warmly received—even by Massachusetts—I assumed they were designed to improve both “excellence” and “equity” in education. I therefore set out to investigate the new literacy standards as a solution to the long-standing and ubiquitous “achievement gap.” The achievement gap has become a popular rallying cry for education reform since the courts mandated the racial integration of public schools.⁴ Inequality based on race and class in public schools

⁴ Kevin K. Kumashiro, *The Seduction of Common Sense: How the Right Has Framed the Debate on America's Schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2008.

remains a problem that no one and nothing has been able to definitively solve. I wondered how the CCSS, adopted just two years after the nation elected its first African American president, was going to address the problem of racial inequality in our school system and in our country? Given the country's historical commitment to the principles of democratic equality and participatory citizenship, why and how did this document get so much approval so quickly, with seemingly so little critical examination?

I am interested in the stories we tell ourselves about reform, equality, and the role of literacy in the racial redemption of American national identity. My project considers the convergence of neoliberalism and post-civil rights reforms in the realm of educational policy. I am especially interested in what narratives frame our consent for such practices as standardized testing, surveillance, increased governance and monitoring, and exacerbated gaps between racial and ethnic group wealth and academic attainment. Historically, literacy has been a substitute for "education," as well as a perceived race-neutral qualifier for the rights of citizenship and enfranchisement.⁵ In and through my project, I seek to bring together the discourse on neoliberalism, education reform, and racial justice to illuminate the possibilities, promises, and limitations of the CCSS to solve some very large national problems.

The story of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy suggests new lessons about the relationship between literacy and racial equality in a neoliberal age, shifting political and economic landscapes, and the use of nostalgia to legitimize authority in a time of social transition. This story also raises difficult questions about democratic processes, the

⁵ See the work of David Barton, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007 and Catherine Prendergast *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. For a discussion of literacy, voting rights and citizenship see Waldo E. Martin. *Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents*. Series in History and Culture. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998, 123.

purposes of public education, the future of membership in the nation, and the realities of social mobility. The bulk of the project represents an effort to locate the standards in context in order to analyze the CCSS in ELA and Literacy as a racial and cultural phenomenon. Doing this will hopefully illuminate the potential of literacy standards to advance or undermine the national project of social and racial equality.

When I first began this project in 2011, I did not originally intend to feature the African American community when discussing the CCSS. By the time I finished the project, however, I realized that I must. The black/white paradigm persists as a constant in the discourse of racial justice and injustice. And the narrative of crisis and social decline in education has been more permanent than other crisis narratives in U.S. history. While the CCSS in ELA and Literacy will likely have similar effects on various poor and racialized communities, I will be primarily referring to the African American community, most of whom remain concentrated in ghettoized public schools in urban cities today. Though most of this manuscript looks at school-based literacy standards and policy projects that have most often *imposed* on the schools with the fewest material resources, this does not negate the long history of literacy and education as a central tenant of black communities, black schools, and black politics. There is a well-researched history of the power and potential of literacy in the black community for political purposes.⁶ This

⁶ For the centrality of literacy within the African American community, see the work of Carol D. Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity: Interdisciplinary Issues and Critiques." *Review of Research in Education* (AERA) 33, no. 1 (April 2009): 63-100; Vanessa Siddle Walker, "Black Educators as Educational Advocates in the Decades Before Brown v. Board of Education." *Educational Researcher* (American Educational Research Association) 42, no. 4 (2013): 207-222; and *Their Highest Potential: an African American School Community in the Segregated South*. University of North Carolina Press, 1996. James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. University of North Carolina Press, 1988; Teresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard, *Young Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003; and Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

includes literacy employed to counter the permanent entrenchment of the black political subject as an *indebted subject* from the time of slavery, through emancipation, reconstruction, and continuing today. So while the rest of the country is experiencing the pangs of neoliberalism beginning in the 1970's, the African American community remains central to the question of freedom, liberty, and the relational tensions of debt and equality that continue to influence the culture of politics, reform, and democratic participation.⁷

The manuscript should be read in light of good intentions and unintended consequences that are apparent in any large-scale effort to enact policy change. We must keep in mind the shifting political structures, including the inevitable inclusion of public education in the domestic policy-making arena, increasingly subject to private and corporate influence. Because so many people claim to be working to improve education and circumstances for the nation's children, my aim in this project is to articulate a racial and cultural context that can help us to better understand the intersections of powerful forces to converge on the formation of literacy policy. Ultimately, I seek to present and describe the salient historical patterns, relevant literature base, and primary source documents to tell the story of this latest and most significant national literacy effort in the United States. I will do this by examining the ideologies reflected in the evolving discourse on race, neoliberalism, education reform, and literacy. I will attempt to connect the literature regarding public schooling, American racism, literacy, and the current neoliberal pedagogies that have come to shape our social reality in the 21st century.

⁷ For a discussion of the construction of “debt” and “indebtedness” for the black political subject, see especially the work of W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Bantam Classic, 1903; and Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

When I began this project in 2011, I could only find two books containing any concern or critique of the CCSS in literacy.⁸ The approximately 1500 other books written on the CCSS were overwhelmingly education trade books focusing on understanding, aligning, and implementing the CCSS.⁹ The history, content, and supporting materials of the CCSS could be found on any of the official sponsors' websites. To find a worthy critique of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy in 2012, one had to read between the lines of current publications. There were two sources that offered some critique of the standards but for neither one was critique of the Common Core the explicit goal. While four years had passed since the announcement that the CCSS were coming, and two years had passed since their adoption, there remained no visible or accessible, explicit critique of their approach to literacy.

The first book, published in 2011 by Beacon Press, includes 19 essays addressing a wide variety of topics befitting the book's title: *Feel-Bad Education and Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling*. All of the essays are the work of Alfie Kohn, well known for his consistent critique of public education over the years. Essay #15, "Debunking the Case for National Standards," directly addresses the CCSS. In this five-page essay, Kohn surveys the damage wrought by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. He concludes that the CCSS are a push for the national standardization of public education. He believes that any day now, the CCSS will be followed by a national standardized test because standardization requires top-down control and corporate efficiency practices. He asserts that it is the politicians and corporate businessmen who

⁸ See Alfie Kohn *Feel Bad Education: and other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011 and Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman. *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2012, 1.

⁹ See especially the trade books published by Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Heinemann, Jossey-Bass, and Harvard Press between 2011-2012.

are best-served by a one-size fits all curriculum because it streamlines the production and profit for the private market developing the materials, and overwhelms the subjected masses from coast to coast. “If these bright new digitally enhanced national standards are more economic than educational in their inspiration, more about winning than learning, devoted more to serving the interests of business than to meeting the needs of children, then we’ve merely painted a twenty-first century façade on a hoary, dreary model of school as employee training.”¹⁰ Kohn argues that the next logical off-shoot of a national set of standards is a national standardized test, which will negate any degree of existing autonomy in what and how things are taught in classrooms across the country. Kohn mentions that today’s education “standards” are evaluated based on their degree of specificity, encouraging tighter control from the top down.¹¹

The second published critique of the CCSS comes in a trade book called *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*, published in 2012 by Heinemann Press. The authors of the book are well-known educators and founding teachers of the Readers and Writers Workshop model of K-8 literacy development.¹² Lucy Calkins and Mary Ehrenworth joined with Christopher Lehman to get ahead of the CCSS by publishing a book focused on interpretation and implementation of the CCSS. I

¹⁰ Alfie Kohn. *Feel-Bad Education: and Other Contrarian Essays on Children and Schooling*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011, 164-165.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹² Readers and Writers Workshop was developed by Lucy Calkins and other educators involved in the Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University in New York City, New York. See Lucy Calkins, *A Guide to The Writing Workshop, Grades 3-5*. Portsmouth, NH: 2006. This method of reading and writing instruction focuses on the goal of fostering lifelong readers and writers. Readers Workshop emphasizes interactions between students and text encouraging readers to ask questions, make connection with prior knowledge and previously read texts. Writers Workshop allows students to have choice in both topic and style of writing and encourages students to write about their lives, use a consistent writing process, and work in authentic ways that ultimately foster independent writers. Teachers work as mentors who model writing techniques and confer with students throughout the writing process.

remember attending the professional development workshops run by Calkins and Ehrenworth at Columbia University Teachers College in 2005. People came from all over the United States to get trained in how to teach reading, writing, speaking, and thinking all through fostering a love of books. Those of us who attended those workshops over the years are the clear audience for this book, and Calkins and Ehrenworth do not apologize for empowering teachers to make critical judgments about how best to get children to meet these Common Core standards. The book itself is organized in such a way that it takes control of introducing, interpreting, and implementing the CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy. It begins with an introduction to the CCSS, which it describes as follows:

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a big deal. Adopted by forty-five states so far, the standards represent the most sweeping reform of the k-12 curriculum that has ever occurred in this country. It is safe to say that across the entire history of American education, no single document will have played a more influential role over what is taught in our schools. The standards are already affecting what is published, mandated, and tested in schools---and also what is marginalized and neglected. Any educator who wants to play a role in shaping what happens in schools, therefore, needs a deep understanding of these standards. That understanding is necessary for anyone wanting to be a co-constructor of the future of instruction and curriculum and, indeed, of public education across America.”¹³

As implied by the quote above, the focus of the book is remedying what the new literacy standards “marginalize and neglect.” The authors translate the standards for educators, and in so doing, attempt to control how they get understood and applied by teachers at the classroom level. In essence, the book is an attempt by expert educators to reframe the literacy conversation. Calkins, Ehenworth, and Lehman use their established reputations

¹³ Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Christopher Lehman. *Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2012, 1.

in the world of literacy and education to leverage their influence on how the CCSS in ELA and Literacy should be interpreted and implemented by classroom teachers.

The book was not well received by the original proponents of the new standards. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute's blog, "Common Core Watch," featured staffer Kathleen Porter-Magee's scathing indictment of the Calkins book in her blog entry: "Misdirection and Self-Interest: How Heinemann and Lucy Calkins are Rewriting the Common Core."¹⁴ The blog entry is substantial and incorporates direct quotes pulled from the text. There was also extensive commentary posted in response to the blog entry. Reading both the blog post and the responding comments, one senses the existence of a substantial community of supporters for the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

Beyond these two books, any substantive critique of the CCSS existed only in sporadic individual blogs or isolated paragraphs in a scattering of essays and journal articles whose primary subject was something other than the CCSS. In 2012 the history, overview, and intentions of the CCSS appeared to be published by the official organizations that funded or developed the CCSS. This was also true for the only book detailing the history of the CCSS: Robert Rothman's *Something in Common: The Common Core Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education*. To date, this is the only existing book that professes to tell the story of the formation and adoption of the CCSS. The CCSS in ELA and math were not formally released to the public until July 2010, and were adopted by most states in August of the same year. Harvard Education Press wasted no time in getting Rothman to crank out this story on a tight deadline for

¹⁴ Kathleen Porter-Magee. "Common Core Watch." *Thomas B. Fordham Institute Advancing Educational Excellence*. 2012. <http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/common-core-watch/2012/misdirection-and-self-interest-how-Heinemann-and-Lucy-Calkins-are-rewriting-the-Common-Core.html>.

publication in 2011. Rothman even thanks Harvard Education Press in his acknowledgements by saying, "They made the idea of getting a book on this subject so urgent that I agreed to a ridiculous timeline."¹⁵ The commissioning and release of the Rothman book is important for two primary reasons. One, it demonstrates someone's urgent need to control the story of the CCSS, and two, it affirms that most educators and members of the general public had no idea what these standards were about. This reinforces the notion that the CCSS are a "policy without a public,"¹⁶ and therefore it is a literacy campaign without a social movement.

The book is an interesting compilation of information about the CCSS. Rothman explains the purpose, audience, and need for the book as follows:

Something in Common is my attempt to explain the Common Core State Standards to a broad audience. The standards have the potential to transform American Education, but only a small number of people are aware of what they are or what they can do. This is the first book to lay out how they came about, what they say about what students should know and be able to do, and what the remaining challenges are. This book can become the definitive volume on the early stages of this major development in American education--both a guide for practitioners who are faced with the challenge of implementing the standards and a reference for those who want to understand how they came about.¹⁷

Rothman's book becomes more significant (and will be discussed in more detail) when we consider the elements of the CCSS literacy campaign, the engineering of the policy, and the framing of the national narrative regarding this most significant education reform effort.

¹⁵ Robert Rothman. *Something in Common: The Common Core Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011, vii.

¹⁶ Peter J May "Reconsidering Policy Design: Policies and Publics." *Journal of Public Policy* 11, no. 2 (1991): 187-206.

¹⁷ Rothman, *Something in Common*, 4.

In 2011, Education Week, the “American Education Newspaper of Record,” created a searchable database of all commentary related to the CCSS. Based on my cursory research in 2012, I concluded that there was not much discussion or analysis on the impact of the CCSS on students, families, communities, or schools, but rather a dominant monologue on the merits, urgency, assessment, and implementation of the CCSS as a “cure” to the current literacy “crisis.” It is still my hope that this project, will, in part, fill this gap and support on-going conversation and critique. Despite an absence of scholarship on the CCSS themselves, there is ample literature on the social, political, and economic context that produced the schools purportedly needing to be “fixed” by something like the CCSS reform efforts.

I set about gathering information regarding the historical moment of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. This included evidence of a national turn to neoliberal economic policy, a self-congratulatory atmosphere of "post-racial" national consensus on racial progress, and a renewed emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility. I also conducted a cultural studies analysis of "literacy" as an object of study in relation to race, citizenship, and democratic equality. Examining "literacy" as an object that gets both employed and deployed in the national interest reveals how existing institutions and policies are shaped and impacted by the notion of literacy. The deeper story of the CCSS reveals the political economy of literacy in today's racialized context. I investigated what has changed historically, what has been reproduced, and what is indicative of a new social threshold.

Using this cultural studies approach, I studied the object of literacy in recent U.S. history, and also looked at the role of literacy in movements and international campaigns around the world. There is ample research on literacy itself, some research on literacy

movements and campaigns internationally, and very little on literacy in the CCSS. My hunch turned into a theory about how literacy has become newly commodified in our market society, and that, like private goods of any kind, has been used as both a tool and a weapon in policing the boundaries of privilege, personhood, and property.

In order to understand the political economy of literacy in our racialized post-civil rights era, I needed to understand the history of literacy in relation to civil rights, the historical definitions of literacy over time, and the indications of shifts in what we believed literacy could do for us. I studied the CCSS themselves, examining the origins and evolution of the modern standards movement and this powerful driving force for education reform. Because schools have served as the primary disseminators of literacy in this country, I needed to explain the purposes and practices of literacy in schooling, and how the CCSS fit with, or broke free, from this history. I examined literacy documents produced by the founding organizations of the CCSS, including the National Governor's Association (NGA), Achieve, Inc., Student Achievement Partners (SAP), and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). I looked for common metaphors, analogies, phrases, descriptors and narrative frames that would allow me to analyze how literacy was being understood and for the problems people thought it could solve.

Borrowing on Derek Hook's notion of nostalgia as "defensive formation," I explored the operative function of nostalgia in the (re)defining of literacy as a national imperative. In regard to "nostalgia," Hook suggests we pose the following questions:

We might ask then of any instance of nostalgia: what does it enable one to disavow, to forget? What identification does such reminiscence allow one to assert? What ideological world-view is thus maintained? Similarly, what threat is domesticated, what is effectively disproved by virtue of such a remembering?¹⁸

¹⁸ Derek Hook. "Screened History: Nostalgia as Defensive Formation." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* (American Psychological Association) 18, no. 3 (2012), 232.

I explored the CCSS documents and supporting materials to examine how a nostalgic literacy policy might serve to restore hegemony, reconstruct something “lost,” mediate the present, construe the narratives of the past, and generate a kind of elite “hallucination” in an effort to shape the future.

In the next chapter, I will explain important aspects of the overall context for the project, including the ambiguous purposes of public education, the impact of the *Brown* decision on the contemporary context, and the new discourse formed through the intersection of race and neoliberalism. In each of the following chapters, I attempt to present a more detailed discussion of the relevant documents, histories, processes, purposes, productions, and pedagogies that have resulted in, or served as an effect of, the CCSS.

In chapter three, *(Re)Turn to Discrete Literacy Skills: Criticisms and Controversies*, I provide a detailed introduction to the official standards document, a description of the people and processes through which the document was produced, and an overview of the existing criticism and controversies surrounding the content, process, and potential effects of the standards in practice. Despite some serious concerns, the CCSS were developed quickly, confidentially, and without some of the traditional obstacles faced by states and organizations that have tried to develop educational or discipline standards in the recent past. State and corporate leaders warmly received the standards on the date of their formal release in the summer of 2010. Today, five years after the release, some states have dropped the CCSS in ELA and Literacy and more people are speaking out against the new standardized tests that have been developed to accompany the standards. Chapter three is intended to provide an essential overview of the description, process, and reception of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

In chapter four, *(Re)Branding Literacy and Illiteracy for Membership in the Nation: Definitions and Dilemmas*, I explore the origins and evolution of “literacy” in U.S. society. Chapter four is designed to historicize the CCSS brand of literacy within the context of what we know and understand about the historical trajectory of the mythical and ambiguous cultural object we call “literacy.” Despite the warm and glowing reception of the 2010 CCSS in ELA and Literacy, we still have no single definition for literacy that encompasses the many ways it is experienced and used. While defining the personal traits and characteristics of the literate person, the document initially endorsed by 48 states and three U.S. territories is poised to become the authority on the national conception of literacy, illiteracy, the literate, and the illiterate.

In chapter five, *(Re)Grouping Over the “Decline” of Standards: Race, Rationalization, and the (Re)Making of Educational Standards*, I provide an overview of the modern standards movement in education in order to show how this movement evolved and eventually produced the CCSS. In this discussion, I explore connections between civil rights advocates and the implementation of education reform, as well as the appropriation of civil rights rhetoric into the conservative social and educational agenda. I intend to demonstrate that the CCSS was fashioned within the larger national narrative of racial progress and borrows from the 40-year-long standards movement in education to re-center the idea that “high standards” for all will solve the problem of inequality in education and society.

In chapter six, *(Re)Purposing Conditions Real and Imagined: “A Growing Chorus” Focused on Literacy to (Re)Place Race and Inequality*, I attempt to explore the historical, political, and economic context that generated the consensus for the need to create the CCSS. I locate the CCSS within the tensions of American public schooling, the

dominant neoliberal economy, and the anxieties of a post-9/11 nation to show how the literacy standards are borne out of existing discourses that serve a racialized, neoliberal agenda. Borrowing on post-civil rights rhetoric and embodying familiar literacy myths, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy continue to expand stratified vertical pathways for students who are already successful in schools, while at the same time narrowing the possibilities and targeting the very populations of students and communities that most need better access to resources to achieve more advanced forms of school-based literacy.

In chapter seven, *(Re)Production of Consent: Selling Literacy to a Literate and Racially Unequal Society*, I consider the qualifications of the CCSS as a social movement and/or a literacy campaign. I present the research available regarding the history of literacy campaigns and movements in other countries and even in the U.S., to understand how to find evidence of methods used to drum up public participation and the political will to make necessary literacy policy changes for the development of a nation. I contend that the CCSS did not qualify as a literacy campaign or a social movement in and of itself. This has led many to describe the CCSS as “a policy without a public,” a media blitz, a federal takeover, and the next step toward privatizing education. Everyone seems to agree that the CCSS timeline was unusually fast, the consensus uncharacteristically broad, the standards process uniquely confidential, and the political landscape exceptionally different than it used to be. In chapter six, I explore this landscape and investigate the making of the public image of the CCSS in the midst of neoliberal practices and classic tensions in the purposes of public schooling.

In chapter eight, *(Re)Making Public Pedagogy: The Political Economy of Racialized Literacy in the Making of Neoliberal Hegemony*, I try to bring together the CCSS contribution to the ideas of literacy, racial justice, social reform, citizenship, and

globalization by explaining the appeal of the CCSS project for the neoliberal state. Ultimately, I argue that the CCSS conception of literacy lends credence and moral authority to aggressive capitalist ventures in an increasingly market society through the terms of race and class. In short, I conclude that the CCSS in literacy are a political intervention into the pedagogies of citizenship for the 21st century.

In the Conclusion, I revisit the potential for the CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy to enhance an equity agenda by resolving the ubiquitous racial achievement gap in education. Using the concept of “debt” and “indebtedness” as applied to the African American community in particular, I explore the promise and the limitations of school-based literacy standards to solve what have become permanent social, political, economic, historical, and moral problems in American society.

Chapter 2: (Re)Forming Reading, Writing, and Ruling

In this chapter, I describe the current state of American public education, including a history of ambiguity regarding the actual purposes of public education in the nation. In addition to sometimes competing and complementary purposes, schools are also subjected to converging narratives regarding social reforms and racial progress. I will explain important aspects of the overall context of the CCSS, including the impact of the *Brown* decision on the contemporary context, and the new discourse formed through the intersection of race and neoliberalism. I will also discuss the racialization of literacy itself, as found in the discourses of difference and deficiency that have long characterized the institution of public education. Near the end of the chapter, I will present an example of how the CCSS commonly get introduced to the public, so that I can illuminate the beliefs and ideologies that have been synthesized in the political process of distilling the standards into the final product. In each of the following chapters, I attempt to present a more detailed discussion of the relevant documents, histories, processes, purposes, productions, and pedagogies that have resulted in, or served as an effect of, the CCSS.

There is a long and complex history about the country's struggle regarding the goals of public education. Historically, Americans have not been able to agree on a singular goal for the institution of education, and as a result, schooling is susceptible to the winds of social and political influence. Scholar David Labaree suggests that there have been three primary goals for education over the years in this country: democratic equality, which equates to a focus on preparing future citizens; social efficiency, which is about training workers to fill needed jobs; and social mobility, which involves preparing

students to compete for the best social positions life has to offer. His research shows that sometimes these goals are in competition with each other and sometimes they merge and support each other. Because American education does not have a clear singular goal, it has become an institution that tries to do a variety of things that are oftentimes contradictory. Unclear goals and differing political motivations contribute to the seeming incoherence of public education in the 21st century.¹⁹

Many scholars argue that the major problems in education are not, contrary to popular belief, pedagogical, social, cultural, or organizational in nature. Instead, they argue that the major problems in education are political. As a society, we cannot agree on what the purpose of schooling should be, so it is hard to envision the kind of schools we want and need. In discussing this purpose Larabee notes:

That is, the problem is not that we do not know how to make schools better but that we are fighting among ourselves about what goals schools should pursue. Goal setting is a political, and not a technical, problem. It is resolved through a process of making choices and not through a process of scientific investigation. The answer lies in values (what kind of schools we want) and interests (who supports which educational values) rather than apolitical logic.²⁰

In 2015, it is the social mobility goal that governs the choices we make about schooling. In many ways, this goal makes the most sense for communities experiencing financial hardship, poverty, and lack of material resources needed for survival, let alone political participation. Those communities already well-positioned in terms of access to good jobs, neighborhoods, resources, and political venues are more interested in having public schools maintain, rather than enhance, their child's social position. It is for this reason

¹⁹ For further discussion on the purposes of public education see David Labaree. "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle Over Educational Goals." *American Educational Research Journal* (AERA) 34, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 39-80.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

that the social mobility goal gets interpreted as endorsing the liberal notion of democratic equality, while also appeasing wealthy conservatives.²¹

For better or worse, the social mobility goal requires common schools to become "uncommon" in order to serve the social mobility needs of its students.²² Social mobility is opposed to equal treatment and counters the western philosophical tenets of civic virtue. It is "aggressively individualistic" in that it discourages any collective endeavors like devotion to the political community or subordinating one's own interests for the public good. "It has lured students away from the pursuit of civic virtue by offering them the chance to use schooling as a kind of cultural currency that can be exchanged for social position and worldly success."²³ Schooling for democratic equality is reduced to only a course or two in the social studies department during one's high school experience at best, or as in the case of Arizona recently, further reduced to the graduation requirement of correctly answering 60 out of 100 questions on the U.S. Citizenship test.²⁴ In essence, a focus on schooling for social mobility in the current system renders all educational content and learning irrelevant as it is only the credential earned that is worth anything on the exchange market for a job. "By structuring schooling around the goal of

²¹ For further discussion of influential political philosophies regarding modern notions of democracy and the potential for democratic equality, see the works of foundational western thinkers such as Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*. Edited by C.B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Edited by Frank Shuffelton. Penguin Classics, 1998; and de Toqueville in *Democracy in America*. Abridged with an Introduction by Michael Kammen. Translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings. Bedford St. Martin's, 2009. These thinkers established political theory based on specific ideas regarding human nature, democratic capacities, and the morality of majorities. Such theories often relegated or excluded the African American community from the equal practice of democracy and politics. For a discussion of the promise and challenges of democratic equality for the African American community in particular, see the work of W.E.B. DuBois, *Darkwater:Voices From Within the Veil*. Dover Publications, 1920; Richard Wright, *Black Boy*. Harper Perennial, 1944; and Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. Vintage International, 1947.

²² Labaree, "Public Goods," 65-66.

²³ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴ Linda Heitin. "Arizona First to Require Citizenship Test for Graduation." *Edweek*, January 16, 2015.

social mobility, Americans have succeeded in producing students who are well schooled and poorly educated."²⁵

The ultimate result of schooling for the purposes of social mobility and efficiency over democratic equality is an education system for 2015 that reflects the pyramid shape of the job market, with lots of exit and re-entry points. At the same time, it is absolutely possible to move up the ladder through educational attainment, but it is also *highly unlikely* that one will do so. The bottom line: be a smart consumer, choose the fast-track and stay on it. The social mobility model can only succeed if it simultaneously limits the number of students who reach the top, otherwise, it will overproduce for a very small number of jobs and contradict its very own premise. Under these conditions, realizing democratic equality *through* social mobility will only happen for a very small number of individuals coming out of public schools in the high-poverty areas of today's urban cities.

The shifting political, social, and economic purposes of literacy have created an educational institution loosely based on common or popular notions of what schools should or could do to improve the conditions of society for the public good. The belief that school-based literacy is one of the fastest routes to social reform remains strong among liberal democrats and progressives. The shared American cultural value that schools can offer equal opportunities for learning, and that a well-informed citizen can be trusted with self-governance stretch back to the days of Thomas Jefferson and his "1787 Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge."²⁶ While Jefferson originally called for three years of public education for potential democratic leaders (white males), he also included some education for the shapers of the American citizen (white females in the

²⁵ Labaree, "Public Goods," 68.

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge." *Thomas Jefferson Monticello*. 1787. Monticello.org (accessed January 23, 2011).

father's absence) and the schooling of enslaved peoples in preparation for freedom. While the Virginia legislature never adopted the Bill, the belief in the importance of some schooling for the success of the republic remains with us today.

THE STATE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, legal scholar, Lani Guinier, published an article regarding the “complicated and ambiguous” legacy of this paramount Supreme Court ruling. She focuses on the current state of affairs in society and in particular, schooling. She notes common research demonstrating the existing gap in resources and education between blacks and whites, the lagging support for public schools in general, and the increasing failure rates of black students across the board. She grounds her analysis in the urgency of such statistics in an increasingly knowledge-based society. She attempts to address why the noble intentions of the legal team and court magistrates have not resulted in equal outcomes for all racial groups. She attributes the failure to a misdirected treatment of the symptoms of racism rather than the disease itself. In order to begin addressing the disease, she proposes a move from racial liberalism to a new “racial literacy.” “It is the interest-divergence dilemma that requires a new racial literacy, meaning the capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narrative of our republic.”²⁷

Guinier discusses the history of “interest-divergence” post WWII, racialized geography and white solidarity, and the stigma of race post-Brown. Her analysis is particularly compelling in this age of increased individualism where myths of

²⁷ Lani Guinier. "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma." *Journal of American History*, 2004: 92-118, 100.

meritocracy reign supreme, Guinier cautions us that for racialized groups, success and failure must be “understood in more collective terms” and as a “product of systemic rather than personal deficiencies” in order for a healthy critique and reform effort to grow.²⁸ She also recalls that the appellees in *Brown* came closest to predicting our current situation regarding education; a public resentment for public schools that will lead to the demise of public education in general. “Legally compelled segregation became socially acceptable separation; separation became stigma; stigma became association with blacks who still occupied and defined separate, albeit public, education. Integration was reduced to diversity, a benefit to be enjoyed by a critical mass, but not by the masses.”²⁹ Guinier is quick to point out that “race” itself has not caused the interest-divergence, but rather the economic and social conflicts that are “simultaneously revealed and concealed by race.”³⁰

Given that this history demonstrates a pattern of the most advantaged by the status quo often manipulating race to extend their benefits, then, Guinier argues, we must closely examine racially stratified geographies and hierarchies to look for the role of race in maintaining these inequitable dynamics. “Racial literacy, in contrast, requires us to rethink race as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control of both whites and blacks. Racial literacy offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism.”³¹ Guinier offers a step-by-step process for obtaining racial literacy, exercising racial legibility, and applying the new understandings to question the role of government

²⁸ Ibid., 109.

²⁹ Ibid., 113.

³⁰ Ibid. For further discussion of the theory to which Guinier is responding, see Derrick Bell’s “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma.” *Harvard Law Review* 93 (1979-80): 518-533. For more history on the legal treatment of racial segregation and integration, see Derrick Bell’s *Race, Racism and American Law*. Little, Brown and Company, 1992.

³¹ Ibid., 114.

and public institutions in redressing racial injustice. Her analysis provides a backdrop for why it is imperative to look at a current national literacy campaign as a means for possibly policing the boundaries of white property and identity. What would it look like to use race as a lens for critically examining the CCSS in ELA and literacy? What might we find if we examined literacy policy in the context of civil rights and racial justice?

According to scholar Richard Rothstein, despite the promise and possibility of the *Brown* decision, “black children are more racially and socioeconomically isolated today than at any time since data has been collected.”³² Some of the earliest data collection happened after the *Brown* decision and began around the year 1970. Rothstein notes that many things have improved since the *Brown* decision, including African American students and communities having access to better resources. Student achievement is much higher according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, the same test referenced frequently by the CCSS project. Rothstein and other scholars explain that because the achievement rates of both black and white students have risen so much since the early 1970’s, there still remains a racial achievement gap between the two groups; “The average black student still performs better than only about 25 percent of white students, making the goal of equal qualifications for the labor market a distant and daunting goal.”³³

Rothstein explains that because the income gap is so closely tied to the history of racism in this country, generations of black families still suffer under access to fewer social resources than white families. To improve the academic achievement of isolated black families and communities, he claims that the country would have to improve the

³² Richard Rothstein. “*Brown v. Board* at 60: Why Have We Been So Disappointed? What Have We Learned?” Economic Policy Institute, April 17, 2014.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2014.

social and economic conditions by investing in “expensive but necessary resources” like early childhood education, health clinics, better afterschool programs, skilled teachers and smaller class sizes. These investments have yet to be realized.

In the “wake of *Brown*,” Rothstein says we have seen a renewed pattern of increased segregation in residential housing, which then perpetuates the racial segregation of neighborhood schools. Despite federal policy attempts to curb this trend, the author points out that most anything enacted is not enforced, and therefore the pattern continues.³⁴ According to Rothstein, integrated housing is essential to making school integration a reality, but as it stands, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is once again gearing up to try and enforce the requirements embedded by the 1968 Fair Housing Act. According to Rothstein, white suburbs have yet to consistently follow these policies.

While Rothstein lauds the civil rights gains inspired by the *Brown* decision, he also says that the ruling did not result in school integration. The Columbia University professor still claims that racial integration is essential to improving equity and equality in academic achievement outcomes, but that American society still has a long way to go to accomplish the promise of *Brown*.³⁵

³⁴ For a discussion of these continuing segregation patterns see the work of Kevin M. Kruse *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

³⁵ For further discussion on the failed promise of the *Brown* decision, see additional work by Rothstein, Wade Henderson, Waldo Martin, et al. It should be noted that there is significant research by scholars that argue that integration is *not* essential to improving equity or equality for African American students in particular. These scholars contend that a better alternative is more investment in black cultural institutions. For this discussion, see the work of James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. University of North Carolina Press, 1988; Vanessa Siddle Walker, "Black Educators as Educational Advocates in the Decades Before *Brown v. Board of Education*." *Educational Researcher* (American Educational Research Association) 42, no. 4 (2013): 207-222; Geneva Sitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America*. London : Routledge, 2000; and Carol D. Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity: Interdisciplinary Issues and Critiques." *Review of Research in Education* (AERA) 33, no. 1 (April 2009): 63-100.

The 60 year anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* demonstrates the collective scholarly lament that schools in the U.S. are currently more racially segregated than they were in 1954. Also common knowledge is the fact that black and brown children are overwhelmingly concentrated in under-performing and under-funded schools. The academic racial “achievement gap,” measured by indicators such as standardized tests and high school graduation rates, continues to widen. This reality exists alongside the fact that the country has its first ever African American President, an event so symbolic that many people in the United States have expressed the belief that the country’s longstanding national narrative of racial progress has finally been crowned and concluded.³⁶ Yet, while much of the United States lauds the story of civil rights gains, it also shudders at the narrative of decline that dominates the discourse of public schooling and education reform since the 1970’s. How can these narratives legitimately co-exist within US society?

Scholar, George Baca, takes on the dual existence of these two narratives in his investigation of race relations in Fayetteville, NC. Indeed, Baca finds the relationship between these two opposing narratives to be complex yet crucial to understanding how current racial and economic injustices have been rationalized, reified, and entrenched. He draws on the work of David Harvey, Nikhil Singh, Thomas Sugrue, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore to argue for a more encompassing critique of contemporary circumstances that would incorporate an analysis of the development of civil rights reforms in conjunction

³⁶ For further discussion of the narrative of racial progress and the ‘post-racial’ mindset, see the work of Catherine Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the 21st Century*. New York University Press, 2014; Tim Wise’s *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat From Racial Equity*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 2010; and Dorinda J. Carter Andrews and Franklin Tuitt, ed. *Contesting the Myth of a 'Post Racial' Era*. Peter Lang, 2013.

with evolving Southern white economic practices.³⁷ “When looked at in this way, it becomes clearer how civil rights reforms have intermeshed and helped legitimize the devastating economic policies that have reduced public education and inner cities to rubble and the explosion of prison population among poor African Americans.”³⁸ Baca’s project demonstrates the power of two narratives, racial progress and social decline, to shape current education reform discourse.

According to scholar David Theo Goldberg, the state of public education is symptomatic of a larger racialized project of neoliberalism that he calls, “racial americanization.” In essence, racial americanization boils down to an applied belief in “live and let live” within a historically racially produced/denied reality of inequality, oppression, containment, and dispossession for black and brown peoples. “Live and let live” governs the discourse of daily interactions so long as the philosophy does not encumber “institutionalized Americanization.” “Racial americanization in this context includes nominal commitment to liberty, individualism, market economies, private property and profit, but also historical denial of or disregard for others’ suffering and concerns, of one’s own privilege and self-assertion, near or far, even at the cruel cost to others.”³⁹ Such racial americanization is made possible through the work of

³⁷ For further discussion see David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005; Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Survivors, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007; Nikhil Singh’s *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Harvard University Press, 2005; Thomas Sugrue’s *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton University Press, 1996.

³⁸ George Baca, "Neoliberalism and Stories of Racial Redemption." *Dialect Anthropol*, 2008, 222. For further discussion, see also Kevin M. Kruse’s *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

³⁹ David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009, 77.

neoliberalism, and it is this project, at once political and economic, which has come to order social possibilities in the United States.⁴⁰

In the current policy discourse, it is difficult for anyone to engage in the national narrative of racial progress without mentioning *Brown v Board*, yet it is equally hard to engage in the educational narrative of social decline while avoiding the topic of race.⁴¹ However, since the release of the famous federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, in 1983, educational reform discourse has been nearly “raceless” in its dialogue. What is most fascinating about this alarmist report, is that it was generated during the time when the racial achievement gap was at its narrowest, when unprecedented gains had been made for students of color in all academic areas over a short 15 year period, and when black and Hispanic students were actually attending college at a rate comparable to whites.⁴² What does it mean that one of the most devastating indictments of public education was released at the very moment when civil rights reforms had gained their highest ground? And how are the CCSS situated within or outside of this narrative?

Specific cultural productions in conjunction with historical events and activities can create a kind of “meaning-making” that evolves into a hegemonic “common sense.” If the end result is the production of a discourse on American education, it is not so much the work of conspiracy or mal-intent, as it is the “process of convergence” where

⁴⁰ “Neoliberalism” is a concept that is still being defined, however, the common working definitions describe it as a new form of economic liberalism that favors free market actors over government regulation. The definition also typically includes the shift from the public sector to the private sector. See especially the work of David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴¹ For a discussion of the history, impact, and legacy of the *Brown v. Board* decision, see James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*. Oxford University Press, 2002 and Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*. Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1975.

⁴² For a run-down of these exact statistics, see Linda Darling-Hammond’s book, *The Flat World And Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010. Also see the National Center for Education Statistics at <https://nces.ed.gov>.

“historical events, overlapping representations, and diverse vested interests come together in a powerful and productive, if historically contingent, accord.”⁴³ Arguably, the American political system, characterized by negotiation and compromise, encourages such “convergence” as part of the deliberative process. This is what happened in American public education in the latter half of the 20th century. The contemporary discourse of educational reform that is characterized by a narrative of social decline, increasingly devoid of a racial analysis, and leaning toward the language of post-racial “universal uplift”⁴⁴ is a cultural product borne of the post-civil rights environment that is most recently seen in the Diane Ravitch book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, and the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” initiative. The title of Obama’s educational initiative is telling and timely, as it aptly demonstrates the only acceptable definition and usage of “race” in contemporary educational and political discourse.

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the phrase “at risk” has become code for students of color, low-income families, and cultures and communities perceived by educational institutions as “deprived” and “deficient.” Many children today enter school under the label “at risk,” and must persist in their learning while being constantly reminded that they will likely fail at any moment. The cultural moment that produced *A Nation at Risk*, and its tremendously popular public reception, is a moment borne out of

⁴³ Melani McAlister. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005, p. 8. McAlister uses Derrick Bell’s theory of “interest convergence” to examine how new meanings are constructed out of various representations of the Middle East. These meanings are created based on economic and political interests. For further discussion of the “interest convergence” theory, see Derrick Bell’s “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma.” *Harvard Law Review* 93 (1979-80): 518-533.

⁴⁴ Tim Wise. *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat From Racial Equity*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2010.

decades of social solidarity and struggle for civil rights. It is arguably a moment created by a public educational and national discourse characterized by “race” and “rights.”⁴⁵ *A Nation at Risk* offers up language and conjecture in support of a new era of increased governance, increased surveillance, and a denial of the nation’s racist history in the public schools and communities. The end result: a “common sense” discourse in the 21st century that deracinates the past, the present, and the future, in the midst of the greatest racial disparities in educational opportunity, housing, health, and income. Educational reform efforts are but one realm where this discourse functions, but the convergence of post-civil rights reforms, economic and political interests, educational policy, and a new “colorblind” government in the early 1980’s. This resulted in the production of a discourse that perpetuates the denial of historical realities, legacies of racial segregation and discrimination, and the narrowing of possibilities for the socially under-resourced and marginalized.⁴⁶

In order to understand how any educational reform document functions within the national narrative, it is essential to examine the larger context of racial discourse that had been developing in the U.S. since the height of the civil rights movement. Scholars Omi and Winant call attention to how such a discourse operates in their foundational book, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960’s to the 1980’s*. In their analysis, they describe significant characteristics of the discourse on civil rights that now make sense as a foundation for current neoliberal bi-partisan practices and policies. Most importantly, is the fact that the state was the target of civil rights protest in the 1960’s

⁴⁵ See Patricia Williams’ *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Harvard University Press, 1992.

⁴⁶ For further discussion of this process, see the work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Survivors, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007.

where the social critique centered on “every state institution is a racial institution.”⁴⁷ Such demands gave the state social permission to “reform” or “re-articulate” its policies and practices. This resulted in a series of efforts to deracinate the state, effectively moving it in the direction of “colorblindness” as a counter-measure to accusations of racial bias and discrimination.

As African Americans successfully applied white ethnic arguments to their own circumstance, whites retreated into a familiar place of individualism to counteract the social ground gained by African Americans using group solidarity.⁴⁸ In 1986, Omi and Winant describe the post-civil rights era “National Common Sense” as being about “equality of opportunity” rather than “equality of results.”⁴⁹ It is no wonder, then, that the outstanding feature of today’s racial discourse is an absence of race, an absence of historical recognition of the role of ascribed race in privileging some and disadvantaging others, and an absence of naming the ever-present racial patterns that continue to plague the schools and other public institutions.⁵⁰

In addition to shifts in the racial discourse, the same time period brought about shifts in the economic discourse. In order to understand how neoliberalism became the public pedagogy of power in the United States following the momentous civil rights movement, one must acknowledge the significant historical weight of the country being

⁴⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960's to the 1980's*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1986, p. 76.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of these patterns, see the work of George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism & Racial Inequality in Contemporary America*. Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2010; and Joe Feagin *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. Routledge, 2010.

always in tension between its racialized constitution and the subsequent denial of its racial state of being. The description of such a state of being requires the use of words like “whiteness,” “blackness,” “brownness,” “colorblindness,” and “statelessness.”⁵¹ The suffix “ness” allows for an articulation of that which is in constant flux: adjusting to the movement of power and privilege that prevails. To say that neoliberalism is a public pedagogy is to say that the public state of being is one in which the wealthy business and corporate classes “liberate” themselves from state power in order to realign power to suit their needs. This reverses the “flow” of capital and resources from the lower classes (the “embedded liberalism” of the New Deal), to the upper classes.⁵² Thus “neo” liberalism follows “liberalism” in that it is centered on the importance of regulating capital. However, neoliberals want the market, rather than the government, to control the flow of capital. Such an arrangement advantages those already resourced and privileged while creating the illusion of a level playing field for all individuals, for only those already possessing some capital can benefit fastest from a free-market system.

Scholar Kris Gutierrez et al, assert that the field of social science and its scientists, those that provide us with a significant chunk of the research base on literacy over the course of U.S. history, have operated from deficit assumptions about individuals, communities, and entire societies. “Deficit notions about the cognitive potential of individuals from non-dominant communities have persisted in social science inquiry,

⁵¹ For further discussion, see the work of David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.

⁵² David Harvey. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005. See the work of David Harvey for a discussion of the influence of Milton Friedman on the Reagan administration. For further discussion of “supply side economics,” see also the work of Arthur B. Laffer, *Return to Prosperity: How America Can Regain Its Economic Superpower Status*. Simon and Schuster, 2010 and Jude Wanniski, *The Way the World Works*. Regenery Publishing Inc., 1978.

particularly where literacy is concerned. The intellectual trails of current conflicting ideas about literacy can be traced in part to theories about the role of literacy in society.”⁵³ Couched within 20th century notions of the “White Man’s Burden,” literacy definition, practice, value, and dissemination often coincided with racist social views of civilized versus uncivilized, educated versus uneducated, modern versus primitive, and superior versus inferior. In the world of literacy scholarship, this is known as the “great divide” thesis. Literacy was easily employed as a tool and a weapon for rationalizing the perceived cultural and racial differences among various peoples, while at the same time being perceived as existing outside and apart from this history of American society itself.⁵⁴

The “great divide” literacy thesis viewed culture on an evolutionary continuum from primitive to modern, with European whites as the pinnacle of Western progress. Within this context, literacy theories set about to divide the primitive from the highly evolved to justify social policies and practices that preserved the culture and political power of American born whites against “savage” influences both domestic and foreign.⁵⁵

This literacy thesis was not formally challenged until the 1980’s, when some scholars sought to recognize orality on a continuum with literacy, where the former was an earlier stage of the latter. Thus, African American culture was described as an “oral” culture, further away on the continuum of progress toward literacy, but linked to

⁵³ Kris D. Gutierrez, P. Zitali Morales and Danny C. Martinez. "Re-mediating Literacy: Culture, Difference, and Learning for Students From Nondominant Communities." *Review of Research in Education* (American Educational Research Association) 33 (March 2009), 212.

⁵⁴ For further discussion of the “great divide” thesis in literacy, see Kris D. Gutierrez, P. Zitali Morales and Danny C. Martinez. "Re-mediating Literacy: Culture, Difference, and Learning for Students From Nondominant Communities." *Review of Research in Education* (American Educational Research Association) 33 (March 2009), 212. For an example of the “great divide thesis” in American history, see Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Edited by Frank Shuffelton. Penguin Classics, 1998.

⁵⁵ Gutierrez et al, "Re-mediating Literacy.”

“modernized” notions of reading and writing for education and communication nonetheless. Gutierrez et al explain, “the metaphor of a divide or a continuum suggests a deficit in people whose literacy practices differ from those of dominant groups and are considered to be normative.”⁵⁶ This belief led to what literacy scholar Brian Street calls the “autonomous model” of literacy, which supports the notion that the possession of certain literacy skills could lead to other, more developed cognitive practices and effects, which in turn, could allow an individual and community to lift itself out of poverty.⁵⁷

Also in the 1980’s, Street and others asserted a new model of literacy that viewed literacy as a “social practice” embedded within one’s social context. This led to the notion that there were multiple “literacies” that varied in accordance with how one employed reading, writing, and speaking practices in their immediate contexts. “Viewing literacy as a social practice exposes the long-standing belief that introducing literacy to the poor, ‘culturally deprived,’ and ‘illiterate’ communities (p. 1) will enhance their cognitive skills and so improve the economic conditions that created the illiteracy in the first place.”⁵⁸ From the “great divide” theory of literacy, to literacy as an autonomous set of discrete skills, to literacy as a set of “social practices,” theories of literacy continued to develop within and among the more expansive ideologies of nativism, nationalism, and schooling. However, without a critical component to the research on literacy, these theories continually reinforced or were co-opted by the dominant beliefs of privileged policy makers and educators. Even the research on literacy as a social practice would

⁵⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁵⁷ See Brian Street. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography, and Education*. Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1995. For a contemporary example of how literacy practices are often linked to prevailing beliefs regarding the “culture of poverty,” see Ruby Payne’s, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Aha! Process, Inc., 2001.

⁵⁸ Gutierrez et al, “Re-mediating Literacy,” 213.

commonly identify the different ways literacy was practiced in various communities and cultures, but it fell short of linking the local context to larger social patterns and power relations.⁵⁹

In response to the identified shortcomings of existing literacy models, Street and others embarked on the “New Literacy Studies” which sought to identify and more accurately address the complexities of literacy and the significance of the power relations that produced particular literacy events and practices. The New Literacy Studies thus located literacy practices within socially constructed institutions and relationships, embedding literacy within the history, dynamics, and political forces that have shaped the contours of the nation itself.

Street et al, determined that people would take in new literacy practices and apply them in a localized context, while at the same time, these localized practices could also influence global notions and effects of literacy, thus marking the new literacy as more of a hybrid than an essential set of discrete skills.⁶⁰ This becomes tremendously important in how the literacy learning of students from non-dominant communities is both conducted and measured. Such approaches to “mediating students’ literacy skills are imbued with

⁵⁹ For further discussion of these patterns, see Brian Street’s “What’s “New” in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice.” *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (Teachers College) 5, no. 2 (2003): 77-91; Kris D. Gutierrez, P. Zitali Morales and Danny C. Martinez, “Re-mediating Literacy: Culture, Difference, and Learning for Students From Nondominant Communities.” *Review of Research in Education* (American Educational Research Association) 33 (March 2009), 212.; Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton. “Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 34 (2002): 337-356; Amy Rose, “Adult Education as Federal Policy: The Search for a Literacy Agenda.” *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* 3 (1994): 4-13; Judy Kalman, “Beyond Definition: Central Concepts For Understanding Literacy.” *International Review of Education* 54 (2008): 523-538; Harvey Graff, *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011; and Robert Aronov and Harvey J. Graff, ed. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008.

⁶⁰ See Brian Street. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography, and Education*. Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1995.

discourses of difference and deficit views that undergird interventions for students ‘at risk.’”⁶¹

Discourses of difference and deficiency have characterized the learning and study of literacy throughout the history of public schooling in this country. Such beliefs led to the popular and still pervasive “culture of poverty” theory regarding the learning rationale of students from low-income communities. This theory posits that the “culture” in poor communities is not only different and deficient, but fixed and static, so that the entire poor population of students can be singularly diagnosed with something akin to a disease that can be treated with a prescription of certain literacy skills, taught within a restrictive pedagogy of teaching as medical intervention for a social and economic disease. Houston educator and national consultant, Ruby Payne, continues to profit from her promotion of this theory today, where her assertions promote a model of “blaming the victim” and endorsing that we must teach in such a way that counters the negative external forces that have contributed to the deficit personal traits such children now exhibit as a result of poverty.⁶² “Such discourses about children and youth ‘at risk’ are often organized around medical or pathological orientations that perpetuate negative or stereotypical assumptions about students who come to be known as the problem rather than a population of people who are experiencing problems in the educational system.”⁶³ Thus, to fix the problem, educators are encouraged to change the individual student. As I will discuss below, this is reflected in the CCSS, which never offer an explicit definition of literacy, but rather articulate their vision of a “literate person” for the 21st century.

⁶¹ Gutierrez et al, "Re-mediating Literacy," 216.

⁶² For further discussion see Payne, Ruby. *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Aha! Process, Inc., 2001.

⁶³ Gutierrez et al, "Re-mediating Literacy," 218.

As public schools increasingly became viewed as the primary disseminators of “good” literacy, the deficit theories of social scientists also increasingly influenced the pedagogy and policy making practices of legislators and community and school leaders. Students who failed in schools were described as children who came from culturally different or incongruent communities, thus not possessing the “right” skills for success in school. Families and communities often get labeled as external problems that prevent entire racial and ethnic groups of students from achieving academic success in the American school system. Rather than question the school system itself or the historical and social conditions that might have produced “different” communities, schools, as literacy-serving institutions, endorsed the notion that it was the student who must be changed or “fixed.” Using the individual as the locus of failure further propagated the Eurocentric idea that genius, as well as failure, is an individual accomplishment.⁶⁴ This notion led to the institutionalization of labels for chronically underperforming children. Such labels include “at risk,” “low performer,” “under-achiever,” and worse. The power of these labels is that they simultaneously discourage an appreciation for an individual’s uniqueness while at the same time allowing for the simple explanation and corresponding prescription that fit neatly into existing institutional views of diversity “management.” The power and potential for academic success or failure now resides solely in the individual. Even during the civil rights movements of the 1960’s, the foundational belief in individual possibility survived the expansion of the discourse to include a critique against societal failure and notions of a racist state.

⁶⁴ See Lawrence W. Levine’s book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, for a discussion of western philosophy and the cultural belief of genius in the individual as opposed to the collaborative. Harvard University Press, 1990.

Scholar Carol Lee explains that the history of schooling in this country has always operated, explicitly or implicitly, under the assumption that non-white groups are second class citizens if citizens at all, and that it is therefore acceptable to provide them with a second class education: “What is most interesting is that the same fundamental beliefs that fueled second-class schooling until the 1960’s has been re-appropriated under new guises in the post-*Brown* era.”⁶⁵ She explains that there are two dominant political orientations serving these purposes. The first is a white belief in the innate or biological deficiency of people of color, and the other a belief in the deficiency of culture and social practices of these groups. Both orientations believed in a deficit orientation, and the ideology of constructing a public school system predicated on allowing all children access to develop to their full academic potential served both orientations. Within this framework, student who failed did so at their own behest and not because the schools prevented them from having the opportunity to develop that potential. According to Lee, “In the second half of the 20th century, the deficits were based on presumptions about social capital in terms of language practices, family socialization, and a culture of low expectations within these very same communities, that is, those identified as non-White.”⁶⁶

So what does this mean for literacy learning under the CCSS? Popular education reform discourse implies that “particular family configurations, belief systems, and practices have been presumed to be deficits that place youth from non-dominant groups at risk; as a consequence, to achieve equity, schools must develop compensatory

⁶⁵ Carol D. Lee, “Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity: Interdisciplinary Issues and Critiques.” *Review of Research in Education* (AERA) 33, no.1 (April 2009), 67.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

programs to address the deficits rooted in family life and language practices.”⁶⁷ The language of “at-risk” still dominates the educational discourse and is a veritable euphemism for students of color in low-income communities. Arguably, The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legitimized the restructuring of an educational system around the population viewed to be “at-risk” of not attaining the dominant norms of white middle-class society. As some scholars have pointed out, NCLB is an example of an anti-Black project in that it is designed to target the most vulnerable students and communities in the nation’s schools.⁶⁸ In turn, the CCSS create a compensatory vision of literacy learning that also relies on the premise that we view poor and racial minority children as lacking, strangers to the education system, and failures upon arrival. This is a deficit system by design, and the CCSS reinforce and entrench this notion under the guise of race-neutral standards and “high expectations.”

Lee finds that the current discourse on equity and schooling recognizes poor and racial minority families as being “passive recipients” of dominant views and policies, rather than active agents in educating their children to contend with a school system and society that sees them as deficient, lacking, stranger, and failure. She argues, “learning not to internalize negative stereotypes, learning how to overcome persistent obstacles, and learning how to navigate tensions that inevitably arise from social class and racial/ethnic distinctions are important outcomes.”⁶⁹ Lee calls attention to the scholarship and history that shows just how successful African American communities have been at educating their children academically and socially. This preparation for schooling, work,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁸ See Connie Wun. “The Anti-Black Order of No Child Left Behind: Using Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Critical Race Theory to Examine NCLB.” *Academia.edu*, 2011, (Accessed December 17, 2014).

⁶⁹ Lee, “Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity,” 71.

and life included accelerated literacy rates, access to both classical and vocational courses, and community leadership support to maintain quality schools that were also racially segregated and often administered by white school boards.⁷⁰ There is much documented success of African American students thriving in these environments at the same time they had to learn how to survive and succeed in a racially stratified society with a system that encouraged their social and academic stigmatization.

Some of the gains of the civil rights movement include an expanded discourse where traditionally marginalized peoples called for state and institutional reform, for justice, and for recognition and full citizenship. While the discourse now included specific rhetoric that countered deficit notions of specific racial and ethnic communities, it still relied on foundational beliefs in the power of the individual to surpass any obstacles and achieve social mobility and equality. The increased visibility of women and people of color rising through the ranks of formalized education and power further belied this possibility and catered to the national belief in racial progress. Many scholars note that “racial progress” is often still measured as the distance traveled from formal slavery and it involves the prevailing social belief that entire groups of racialized peoples were inferior or superior by natural order. The evolution of these ideas happened within existing structures and histories that continue to endorse homogenization as a national requirement for stability.

In discussing the CCSS as a literacy document that is also a racial and cultural document, it is important to examine the CCSS as something that both shapes, and is shaped by, the social concept of “race.”⁷¹ Some of the “literacy effects” of the CCSS

⁷⁰ Ibid., 73-75.

⁷¹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Third edition. Routledge, 2015, 304.

include the potential re-articulation and refashioning of racial ideology to fit new political and economic positions. As scholars Omi and Winant explain, “Race operates at the crossroads between social structure and experience. It is both historically determined and continuingly being made and remade in everyday life.”⁷² As I will attempt to show, an historically post-*Brown*, post-civil rights, neoliberal literacy policy, the CCSS draws from a nostalgic version of the past to construct the future through its reinterpretation of literacy and the literate person.

My project is a cogitation on the role of literacy in the prevailing notions of reform, equality, and the racial redemption of our national identity. Racism, slavery, and exploitation are undeniably cornerstones in the construction of this country, a country founded on the premises of equality, liberty, freedom, and self-governance. I do not want to argue for or against standards in education. Instead, I want to look at the role literacy has played in reproducing racialized inequalities in a neoliberal context. The CCSS are the latest example of an attempt to once again redefine and present literacy as a national priority. As such, the CCSS either contributes to or works against the existing state of racialized inequality. The lens of literacy, embedded in histories, political economies, and ideologies, can help us more fully understand the impact of this latest iteration of school-based literacy in the United States.

THE PROJECT OF THE CCSS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND LITERACY

On Friday, June 10, 2011, David Coleman, chief architect and public face of the K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS), delivered a keynote address to NYC principals at their annual conference. Coleman’s keynote marked the one-year

⁷² Ibid., 307.

anniversary of the public release of the CCSS in English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. The state of New York, at the time, was among the 43 states, Washington D.C., and three U.S. territories that had already adopted the CCSS in ELA and Literacy (and also math).⁷³ The Obama administration had already endorsed the CCSS by offering significant credit to state adopters who applied for the competitive “Race to the Top” (RTTT) school funding initiative. Bill Gates’ foundation had also dedicated millions of dollars to incentivize states to adopt the standards. By the time Coleman was addressing the principals in NYC, he had become the public face for this significant and widespread educational reform initiative. It was poised to become the authority on literacy for the entire country. In his 28 minute speech, Coleman provides an overview of the CCSS by commenting on his own schooling experience, outlining the overall core principles of the new standards, and discussing the six specific shifts that should take place when the CCSS in ELA and Literacy are implemented consistently within school-based literacy programs.

Coleman tells the audience that he is a former NYC public school student whose favorite school was located in a diverse neighborhood where a broad range of children were encouraged to work together socially and academically. He explains that the school was a place where teachers planned ELA/literacy curriculum together, and where the result was a student like himself being moved by a book for the first time. Coleman then presents a contrasting description of the current school-based literacy context in order to establish the rationale for what must “shift” as a result of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy:

⁷³ It should be noted that this number will shift throughout the manuscript for three important reasons: (1) sometimes the number represents the states who were asked to endorse the standards even before their official release; (2) sometimes the number represents the states that have officially adopted the CCSS as of the date being discussed; and (3) since the initial adoption of the CCSS, some states have recently decided to drop them.

(1) a greater emphasis on informational texts; (2) use of informational texts to build content knowledge; (3) use of more complex texts; (4) asking more text-dependent questions; (5) teaching writing to inform and argue; and (6) emphasizing vocabulary common to academic texts.⁷⁴ To make the case for these particular shifts, Coleman describes a culture of school-based literacy that he represents as currently over-emphasizing fiction, literature, and personal expression in a 21st century world where, according to Coleman, “people really don’t give a shit what you feel or what you think.”⁷⁵ He offers the CCSS in ELA and Literacy as a solution to this national literacy crisis.

In the keynote Coleman identifies himself as the product of “diverse” neighborhood schools, the beneficiary of an integrated school, and an authority on literacy for the 21st century. His overview and characterization of the CCSS represents the consistent message of the promotional materials and the language of the document containing the actual standards. When Coleman presented his keynote address, he was campaigning for a literacy program that had already been endorsed and adopted by New York and eventually 47 other states, Washington D.C., and three U.S. Territories. Despite this widespread acceptance for the new literacy program, the principals in the room were not yet familiar with the CCSS. This fact perhaps explains why Coleman spent his 28-minute keynote address providing an introduction and overview of what the standards are, why they are needed, and what they will accomplish if implemented with fidelity.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ David Coleman. “Keynote Speech from David Coleman: Contributing Author of the Common Core Standards.” YouTube video. June 10, 2011. 28:14. <https://vimeo.com/24930297> (Accessed February 13, 2014).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ For the complete speech by David Coleman presented at Chancellor Walcott’s Principal Conference, in NYC, see the *YouTube* video: David Coleman. “Keynote Speech from David Coleman: Contributing Author of the Common Core Standards.” *YouTube* video. June 10, 2011. 28:14.

In what would become a familiar pattern of representing the CCSS, Coleman begins by establishing his authority on public schooling and the racialized context that makes the CCSS necessary. For the particular audience of NYC principals, Coleman describes himself as a former NYC public school student who attended PS 41, IS 70 in Chelsea, and Stuyvesant High School. Coleman presents the audience with a little multiple choice game by labeling each school “A,” “B,” “C,” and asks the audience to guess which was the “best school”? He then explains that it was IS 70, the middle school, because it was there that Coleman experienced a personal literacy transformation within a diverse environment. He describes the surrounding neighborhood as: “A truly integrated environment not just by race or class, but a range of gangs and worlds and immigrants and an example of the remarkable diversity perhaps only a childhood in New York could bring.” He then claims that the true reason this school was his favorite is because the “hard-ass principal” created a school culture where this diversity of children worked together socially and academically, and where teachers worked together to plan “coherent curriculum” of ELA/literacy such that Coleman was able to experience being moved by a book for the first time in his life. He credits principals for making such experiences possible. The rest of his 28-minute speech covered the rationale for the CCSS in Math and ELA and Literacy to argue that these new standards would help NYC principals make the necessary “shifts” to change literacy for the better.

After establishing himself as a successful product of a diverse, urban public school, Coleman introduced the three core principles upon which the CCSS were developed: career and college readiness, evidence, and “taking time seriously.” Coleman calls the career and college readiness effort a “moral imperative” given the “50% remedial” course rate at community colleges nationwide. When discussing the second

core principle of evidence, Coleman explains that there is a “dangerous form of nostalgia that creeps into the conversation” whenever adults get together to talk about what children should know and be able to do as a result of schooling. He mentions how adults tend to describe what they “think” children should know in terms of what they themselves know or do not know. He contrasts this “dangerous” form of nostalgia-based decision-making with the need for hard evidence; the kind of *evidence* that characterizes the CCSS.

The third core principle upon which the standards are based is *taking time seriously*. Coleman explains that standards writers have ample time to add in standards to appease the members of a given standard-writing committee, but that principals and teachers exist in a perpetual state of worry about how to best use every minute of the day. He connects this concern to support his point that the CCSS are an ethical set of standards: “...so the ethical demand for these standards were that they were a focused set of standards, concentrating on what matters most, so that there is the time for teachers to teach and for students to practice.” According to Coleman, it is these three principles that ensure that the CCSS initiative is a moral and ethical endeavor, as opposed to just another convoluted set of academic standards based on the “nostalgic” conversations of adults.

After discussing the mathematics standards, Coleman introduces the CCSS in Literacy by describing the “stark” literacy problems the nation faces, as evidenced by the 40-year flat scores of 8th grade readers on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test (NAEP). Coleman frames this crisis in economic terms as well when he explains that during the same time period, American educational spending doubled. Coleman employs a war analogy to compare the CCSS in literacy with a “battering ram to take down that wall.” He explains that because there hasn’t been any significant

movement in 40 years, everyone should be very concerned with teachers who say they are already “doing these standards.” For this reason, according to Coleman, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy are necessary to “dramatically shift reading” for the future years.

In keeping with the second principle of “evidence,” Coleman presents six “shifts” that must happen in order to counter what he perceives as problems with the current context of school-based literacy. He then outlines these shifts as: (1) the need for an emphasis on “informational texts” over “literary texts”; (2) the use of informational texts to build “content knowledge” about the “world we live in”; (3) employ more “complex texts”; (4) ask more “text-dependent” questions; (5) de-emphasize personal narratives and teach children to write to “inform” and “argue”; and finally, (6) emphasize academic vocabulary because it is the “true language of power.”⁷⁷ In sum, Coleman asserts that educators should teach children to “read like a detective and write like an investigative reporter,” as well as “read and observe as an excellent juror.” To make the case for these particular shifts, Coleman mentions specific statistics (see below) that depict a culture of school-based literacy that currently over-emphasizes fiction, literature, and personal expression in a 21st century world where, according to Coleman, “people really don’t give a shit what you feel or what you think.” This particular quote would soon become a media sensation and a mantra for proponents of the new literacy standards.

Coleman asserts that the problems of contemporary school-based literacy programs require that educators use the CCSS to “force” situations where children read for content knowledge, reclaim the “rightful role of teachers to teach,” and “heal the rift” of remediation by creating a “staircase” to college and career readiness. He supports his conclusions with the statistic that in elementary schools, children currently read and take

⁷⁷ Coleman. “Keynote Speech.”

tests that are 80-90% literature-based, while these same students only spend 7% of their time reading informational texts that include science and history. According to Coleman, this has resulted in nothing short of a “ban” on the teaching of science and history, and that these standards “reclaim the rightful role of teachers to teach their students about the world, in addition to the stories they share.” Coleman stresses that students will now gain content knowledge through their reading, writing, speaking, and listening experiences: “The CCSS, for the first time, demand an equal balance between literature and informational texts.”⁷⁸

Coleman next states that “they asked us to write the ELA standards first and we refused.” He explains that the first standards written were actually those for literacy as opposed to ELA. According to Coleman, success in ELA alone will not guarantee success in college where students are asked to read mostly dense informational texts. He offers this as the reason behind the fashioning of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects: to build content knowledge necessary for later success at higher levels of schooling. Without this, Coleman concludes “they cannot become independent learners.” To further illustrate his point, Coleman provides an example of the kind of question a teacher might ask students who read about faction in “Federalist Paper #51,” by James Madison. He suggests the teacher would ask “From this page, and this page alone, what do you know and not know about what Madison thought about faction?”⁷⁹ This, he asserts, will “force” situations where students have to draw evidence directly from the text.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

In regards to text complexity, Coleman explains that the CCSS create a “staircase” of more complex texts that lead to college and career readiness. This, according to Coleman, is in contrast to the current state of affairs where most students read high school texts that are below college or work training course expectations. He locates the root of the problem with the fact that children currently practice reading texts far below the level necessary for college readiness: “the core standards heal this rift.”

When discussing the fourth shift, “ask more ‘text-dependent’ questions,” Coleman offers what the standards designers learned from an “informal study of instruction” in Texas and Vermont where they found that “80% of the questions students were asked when dealing with text did not depend on the text in front of them.” His first example (not identified as being from Texas or Vermont specifically) refers to Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” Coleman explains that asking children how they feel about non-violence or the time when they were “confined in their bathroom,” will not help them develop an analysis of the text. “Even though it may seem critical thinking, it may seem deep, but perhaps what is most deep is to dare to ask, what are his first three arguments?”⁸⁰

Coleman is especially critical of the contemporary writing environment in public schools. He claims that currently, the two most popular forms of writing in American high schools are narrative writing of one’s personal opinion or personal experience. This is problematic to Coleman because he finds that the world of college and career does not care about a student’s thoughts or feelings. He goes on to explain that what people do care about is a student’s ability to write an argument and defend a claim. These, he says, are what the college and labor markets demand. Therefore, he concludes, the CCSS treat

⁸⁰ Ibid.

personal narrative as only a possible sequential step to “mastery” of writing to inform and argue.

In presenting an introduction to the final shift the CCSS will make in literacy learning, Coleman claims that academic vocabulary must become “the true language of power in these standards.” He argues that academic vocabulary, rather than “literary terms,” are “common to all difficult texts” and often serve as a “wall” for English Language Learners. According to Coleman, it is for this reason that the CCSS make this kind of “academic vocabulary” its focus. In this description, Coleman borrows the phrase “language of power” from the world of critical literacy theorists who typically use the phrase to describe how school-based hegemonic literacy approaches are oppressive by design. In his use of “language of power,” Coleman appropriates the phrase from familiar rhetoric of literacy for liberatory purposes and attempts to align the new standards with the tenets of democratic equality.

In his final remarks, Coleman emphasizes readers view texts “focused humanely and wisely on the evidence that is before them,” like an “excellent juror.” Doing this, he contends, will get at the heart of what the CCSS want students to do: “the idea that to dare to pay attention to precisely what’s happening there, to judge it and evaluate it based on its own evidence is the most powerful thing you can do, and then to express it and write about it clearly.”⁸¹ Coleman concludes his keynote address by reminding the audience that the CCSS, despite being issued during a time of severe budget cuts, focuses on what matters and eliminates what doesn’t. To this end, Coleman hopes the audience will agree that this is worthwhile work.

⁸¹ Ibid.

In less than 29 minutes, Coleman, the public face of the CCSS generally, and the primary architect of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy specifically, presents the audience with an overview of why these standards are necessary *now*. He presents a remarkable case for going to war against weak school-based literacy curriculum by using the weapons of: “informational texts,” “more complex texts” “text-dependent” questions, argumentative writing and academic vocabulary as the “true language of power.” The CCSS in ELA and Literacy seeks to redefine the quality of knowledge, foster the genius of the individual, and reclaim the rights of teachers everywhere by “this page, and this page alone.”

Chapter 3: (Re)Turn to Discrete Literacy Skills: Criticisms and Controversies

“...procedure itself reigns as the ultimate standard of justice, in which, as Louis Menand has phrased it, 'we know an outcome is right not because it was derived from immutable principles, but because it was reached by following the correct procedures.'”⁸²

Between 2012 and 2015, more people have spoken out about their concerns regarding particular aspects of the initial creation, development, feedback process and validation of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. As more people read, study, and implement the literacy standards, more criticisms are surfacing. In this chapter I attempt to present the philosophy and ideology embedded in the language of the standards themselves, then I provide representative samples of some of the critical conversations taking place regarding the content, approach and process of these new literacy standards. These include controversies around “close reading” methods, “text complexity” measurement and appropriateness, the cultural bias of the sample lessons, and complaints about the “undemocratic” process of designing and validating the standards themselves. Despite some serious concerns, the CCSS were developed quickly, confidentially, and without some of the traditional obstacles faced by states and organizations that have tried to develop educational or disciplinary standards in the recent past. State and corporate leaders warmly received the standards on the date of their formal release in the summer of 2010. Today, five years after the release, some states have dropped the CCSS in ELA

⁸² Louis Menand as quoted in Stephen Best’s. *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 271.

and Literacy and more people are speaking out against the new standardized tests that have been developed to accompany the standards. Chapter three is intended to provide an essential overview of the description, process, and reception of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

AN INTRODUCTION TO 520 STANDARDS

CCSS encompass a set of common expectations for what students should know and be able to do from kindergarten through 12th grade in order to be prepared for college and career success. According to the CCSS homepage, the mission is as follows:

The Common Core State Standards provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them. The standards are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers. With American students fully prepared for the future, our communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy.⁸³

The publishers and supporters advertise the initiative as a collaborative, multi-state effort drawing on the expertise of education scholars, teachers, parents, and members of the business community. Currently, 43 states, three U.S. territories, and Washington D.C. are using the CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy as well as Math (some former adoptees have since dropped the CCSS). This makes the CCSS the closest thing we have ever had to a national curriculum initiative. It is important to note that, unlike in most other countries, it would be unconstitutional for the United States to have a “national” curriculum for public K-12 education.

⁸³ Common Core State Standards Initiative. Mission statement of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) <http://www.corestandards.org> (accessed October 2, 2012). As of March 2015 this mission statement no longer appears on the CCSS homepage.

Presently, the leading standardized testing companies are in a race to develop the computerized assessments that will “test” student mastery of the CCSS.⁸⁴ At the same time, private curriculum development companies and textbook publishers produce an extensive array of expensive products and tools to assist teachers and school leaders in implementation. The sponsors of the CCSS also publish reports regarding examinations of the pre-existing state standards in states where students score best on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, as well as reports on secondary curriculum vs. business world requirements, and U.S. performance as compared to the academic performance of students in other countries. The premise of the CCSS is that “common” expectations will produce the best and most excellent economic labor force for the global economy.

The actual CCSS document provides a preface to the detailed requirements for literacy in grades K-12. Literacy is broadly referred to as those skills and understandings required for students to “learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas.” In total, *The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* is 66 pages long, and features the following: nine pages of general introduction to the CCSS in ELA and Literacy; 33 pages introducing the 13 sets of “anchor” standards for Kindergarten through 5th grade covering reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language; 24 pages introducing the 11 sets of anchor standards for grades 6-12; and seven pages outlining the five sets of anchor standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. A glance at the Table of Contents shows that the two

⁸⁴ For further information regarding the development of assessments for the CCSS, see www.smarterbalanced.org, or www.parcconline.org.

sets of anchor standards appearing in grades K-5, but not in grades 6-12, are those for “Foundational Skills” in reading and “Staying on Topic Within a Grade and Across Grades.” Also of note, the only individual standard (as opposed to sets of anchor standards) named in the Table of Contents for both grades K-5 and 6-12 is “Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading.”⁸⁵ This particular standard has received attention from literacy scholars because of its emphasis on particular reading methods and texts, and will be discussed in greater detail below. While information regarding the CCSS in ELA and Literacy commonly refers to 10 sets of anchor standards customized by grade bands, the 66 page document lists no less than *520 separate standards for ELA and Literacy*.

The CCSS Introduction is broken down into the following sub-sections: “Key Design Considerations,” “What is Not Covered by the Standards,” “Students Who are College and Career Ready in Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language,” and “How to Read This Document.” Each one to two page section calls attention to specific information. The nine-paragraph preface highlights the CCSS in ELA and Literacy project as an extension of a “prior initiative” led by the CCSSO and NGA to “create the next generation of K-12 Standards” in order to ensure that students graduate from high school “ready in literacy” for college and career. The authors explain that the document “builds on the foundation laid by states in their decades-long work on crafting high-quality education standards.”⁸⁶ They claim that the standards are based on international models, research, and feedback from “state departments of education, scholars,

⁸⁵ NGA and CCSSO. “Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.” *Common Core State Standards*. Common Core State Standards Initiative. 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

assessment developers, professional organizations, educators from kindergarten through college, and parents, students, and other members of the public.”⁸⁷ What is most important to note about the Introduction to the standards is the way in which the authors describe the rationale by including their reasons to trust and believe in this new recipe for literacy despite the many things it is not designed to do and the many students it is not designed to serve. From the very beginning we are told that these standards are the culmination of the modern standards movement in education reform, that they focus on college career preparation, and that they claim to be developed using a democratic process involving a wide variety of people.

Despite the assertion that the standards follow the specifications laid out by the CCSSO and NGA, the preface also includes disclaimers regarding the use of the “best available evidence” to indicate necessary “mastery” of particular literacy skills for a society that is both 21st century and globally competitive. “The Standards are intended to be a living work: as new and better evidence emerges, the Standards will be revised accordingly.”⁸⁸ For the time being, according to the introduction section, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy are “(1) research and evidence based, (2) aligned with college and career expectations, (3) rigorous, and (4) internationally benchmarked.”⁸⁹ According to the authors, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy are therefore “an important advance” over the previous work of the states themselves. Central to the distinction of this advance is what the authors identify as unique “college and career readiness standards” (CCR) which get used to frame the K-12 expectations. Working backwards from these CCR standards, the authors assert that each grade band reflects a “translated” version of such skills into “age-

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

and attainment-appropriate terms” that are engineered to scaffold the student to successful readiness for post-secondary demands by the end of high school. The authors clearly explain that the standards are back-mapped according to academic performance and not according to child development or localized priorities. Such an approach would be described later by some critics as narrow and akin to “one-size-fits-all.”

The remaining content of the preface includes a long paragraph devoted to articulating the CCSS vision of a “literate person” for this 21st century, globally competitive society. While this vision will be discussed later in this paper, it is important to note here that rather than present the necessary literacy skills, the vision instead presents four respective behaviors that define the individual who can understand and enjoy complex texts, sort through unlimited amounts of information, build content knowledge, and become a responsible citizen in a democratic republic. The necessary behaviors include: close reading, critical reading, the seeking out of “high-quality literary and informational texts,” and the demonstration of “cogent reasoning and use of evidence.”⁹⁰ The final sentence of the introduction completes the CCSS vision of a literate person in this way: “In short, students who meet the Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language.”⁹¹ Because the standards never present an explicit definition of “literacy,” the fact that the authors take the time to name the personal traits and behaviors of a literate *individual*, the implication is that the work of the new recipe for literacy is *cultural* work to change the *individual*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

The introduction presents “Key Design Considerations” including commentary regarding the role of the standards for CCR, information for assessment development, benefits to school faculty and administrators, the rationale behind grade band breakdowns, and how an achievement focus will encourage the professionalization of teachers. From this section, we learn that the developers of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy intend for the standards to provide the “specificity” and “cumulative progression” needed to successfully prepare for college and career. We are also presented with how the high school grade bands, which cover grades 9-10 and grades 11-12 respectively, encourage “flexibility” in high school course design. The CCSS focus on results is explained as providing teachers and others more—rather than less—freedom to create their own curriculum and select their own tools and strategies “with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful.”⁹²

This same section on design offers an explanation of an “Integrated Model of Literacy,” directions on how to locate research and media skills in the standards, and an argument about our “Shared Responsibility for Students’ Literacy Development” as justified by the NAEP assessment. From these remaining subheadings, we learn more holistic information about the CCSS conception of reading and writing. Two sentences explain the integrated literacy model and remind us that reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language usage are all connected “processes of communication.” The authors also offer a paragraph to explain why there are not any standards targeting research or digital media: “research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the Standards rather than treated in a separate section.”⁹³ Later criticism and

⁹² Ibid., 4.

⁹³ Ibid.

feedback would include concerns about the peripheral inclusion of digital media and technology in literacy standards designed for the 21st century. Rather than focusing on defining this “Integrated Model of Literacy,” educators only get told to integrate media and research into all the standards. Due to the amount of space devoted to the CCSS connection to the NAEP test, it would seem that this latter topic is the priority in the Introduction.

We are next presented with a page and half of foundational information justifying the CCSS emphasis on informational text over literary text, and informational writing over personal narrative. The presentation of the rationale for one of the most significant shifts in reading and writing curriculum is grounded in the NAEP assessment framework. It is useful to consider a couple of things about NAEP in general in order to understand the meaning of this significant section independent of the CCSS. NAEP is the premier national assessment used to measure academic performance as a country. It is not used to measure individual student performance. The National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) oversees the policies regarding NAEP, including the awarding of contracts to organizations to research, develop, and disseminate the assessments every two years, in a sampling of children in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades. There are at least two committees made up of the people at various non-profit organizations, university professors, educators, etc. Some of these same players also worked on the CCSS, which will be discussed in more detail below. The NAEP framework reports explicitly state that the assessment and rationale for its design are not intended to represent how reading or writing should be taught. The NAGB also explains how they draw on international reading assessments to inform the NAEP; they consider the definition of reading literacy as found in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and they base their item

development on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. Neither international source is used for benchmarking or reading curriculum.⁹⁴

The NAGB is also deliberate about not making changes to the test so that it can be a comparative measurement over time, since its inception in 1972. The most significant changes to NAEP happened in 1992, and slight modifications were made in 2009. The latest of these changes included recommendations from Achieve, Inc. on how to modify the test to be more aligned with college and career readiness goals.⁹⁵ Aside from the fact that the world of literacy assessment and policy seems to be a very small one, the overlap of various people, organizations, and projects makes it difficult to determine any actual research base or evidence used to support some far-reaching conclusions. When various reports, projects, and policies cite various other reports, projects, and policies, the conclusions themselves have a way of becoming the “truth”—and later the axiom—that serves as the evidence to convince more people and organizations of the “common sense” we all seem to now share about reading and writing.⁹⁶

The CCSS developers argue that NAEP confirms all teachers should be literacy teachers, and every classroom should emphasize informational reading and writing: “The Standards are not alone in calling for a special emphasis on informational text. The 2009 reading framework of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) requires a high and increasing proportion of informational text on its assessment as students advance through the grades.”⁹⁷ The authors also suggest that the evidence gathered

⁹⁴ National Assessment Governing Board. *Reading Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, US. Department of Education, 2010, 5.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, v.

⁹⁶ For more discussion of the overlaps in recent literacy policy conversations, see chapter 6 of this manuscript.

⁹⁷ NGA and CCSSO. “Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy,” 4.

during the writing of the CCSS supports “NAEP’s shifting emphases” and conclude that, “consistent with NAEP, the overwhelming focus of writing throughout high school should be on arguments and informative/explanatory texts.”⁹⁸ What follows are two tables of data that report the *content and tasks* for the NAEP test:

Grade	Literary	Informational
4	50%	50%
8	45%	55%
12	30%	70%

Table 1: Distribution of Literary and Informational Passages by Grade-2009 NAEP Reading Framework

Grade	To Persuade	To Explain	To Convey Experience
4	30%	35%	35%
8	35%	35%	30%
12	40%	40%	20%

Table 2: Distribution of Communicative Purposes by Grade-2011 NAEP Writing Framework

At the bottom of the CCSS page with these tables, there are two footnotes, one on reading and one on writing, that explain how to read the information in these tables. The focus of each note is to explain that the “percentages on the table reflect the sum total” of student reading and writing across content areas. In actuality, the tables reflect the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 5.

percentage of passages for *use on the NAEP*, and *not* a percentage that reflects what children should read in their school curriculum. The NAEP frameworks never present this information as based on what children are currently reading and writing, or on how much they should be reading and writing in any particular genre. For NAEP, these tables reflect the thinking of the NAGB and contracted consultants around how best to assess the nation's literacy.⁹⁹ This is important to understand because the designers of the CCSS took the information out of context to bolster their argument for rationing fiction and personal writing in the K-12 public schools.

In their original context, the percentages in these tables represent the total content found in four to nine short passages at each grade level followed by sets of 10 questions in the form of multiple choice, short response, or longer response (essay). NAEP tests at all levels are limited to 100 questions.¹⁰⁰ While the first table on reading passages for NAEP is presented in its original format, the CCSS changed the format of the table containing the information about writing purposes. In its original form in both the pre-published and formally released NAEP writing frameworks reports, this table looks like this:¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ To view these tables in their original context, see the *Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, 11, and *Writing Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, 9. Both reports are put out by the NAGB for the US. Department of Education.

¹⁰⁰ For more information on the format of the NAEP test, see the National Assessment Governing Board. *Reading Framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, US. Department of Education, 2009.

¹⁰¹ NAGB. *Writing Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, Pre-Publication Edition*. Iowa City, Iowa, ACT, Inc., 2007, 42.

Purpose	Grade 4	Grade 8	Grade 12
To Persuade	30%	35%	40%
To Explain	35%	35%	40%
To Convey Experience	35%	30%	20%

Table 3: Original Distribution of Communicative Purposes by Grade in the 2011 NAEP Writing Framework

The original table presented here emphasizes the purpose of the writing task at each grade level, and how often a student will encounter this task on the NAEP test. In the CCSS version above (see Table 2), the table has been re-formatted to match the reading table, and the emphasis is on the grade level and percentage of writing tasks at each. Given the way the CCSS narrative uses these tables, the change in format is significant. The original NAEP table format visually emphasizes the writing *tasks*, while the CCSS table emphasizes the grade level writing *content*. The percentages get presented and used as content recommendations as opposed to test items. If the NAEP test contains 100 questions (which it does), with 50 questions being multiple choice questions that follow a reading passage, then these percentages really represent a difference of about *five* test questions on the NAEP. Therefore, the CCSS base their *content* argument for reading and writing across grade levels on the change in about five questions on the NAEP test.

When the developers of the CCSS generalize these percentages to apply to a working ratio for reading and writing across grades and content areas from K-12, they do so based on the content of a single assessment made up of less than ten reading passages and a handful of writing task samples. The use of the NAEP passage and writing task distribution tables to justify the significant shift in curriculum across the states is worth noting. This is indicative of later charges against the CCSS that claim they were

developed with assessments in mind. Aside from the design of NAEP, the CCSS developers do not include any additional sources or expertise upon which they base their recommendation. The controversy surrounding the CCSS emphasis on “informational texts” and writing to persuade and explain will be taken up in more detail below.

The next section of the Introduction outlines what is intentionally left out of the standards by design: “The Standards should be recognized for what they are not as well as what they are.”¹⁰² It identifies six things the CCSS in ELA and Literacy are not designed to do. The first two could be viewed as positive benefits under the current education system, but the remaining four suggest these standards will be no help in solving some of the greatest challenges to providing a quality education for all of our students. They are as follows: (1) The standards do not tell teachers how to teach; (2) they do not provide a curriculum;¹⁰³ (3) they are not designed to direct instruction for advanced learners; (4) they do not provide interventions for struggling learners; (5) they are not designed to support English Language Learners (ELL) or students with disabilities;¹⁰⁴ (6) they do not support other areas of learning and development, such as social emotional or physical. The converse stated a bit more clearly would sound like this: The CCSS in ELA and Literacy are designed for students who are already performing at grade level, speak fluent English, require no modifications for learning

¹⁰² NGA and CCSSO. “Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy,” 6.

¹⁰³ Coleman and Zimba founded two separate non-profits to provide teaching support, lesson plans, and curriculum for the CCSS. So while the standards themselves may not tell teachers how to teach or provide a curriculum the new non-profit organizations do provide teacher with free materials covering number 1 and 2. See Student Achievement Partners, <http://achievethecore.org> and edreports, <http://www.edreports.org>.

¹⁰⁴ Though the standards state they are not designed to support English Language Learners, David Coleman uses this group as an example of who benefits from the standards’ focus on academic vocabulary. See Coleman, David. “Keynote Speech from David Coleman: Contributing Author of the Common Core Standards.” *YouTube* video. June 10, 2011. 28:14. <https://vimeo.com/24930297> (accessed February 13, 2014).

effectively, need no additional supports or interventions, and are not considered “advanced.” Given the ubiquitous challenges of teaching in today’s classrooms, how many students will not likely be served by these standards? And what will this mean for them? What does it mean that this national literacy effort disregards so many children, schools, and districts? Worthy of note, there are no subheadings within this section to denote the actual topics of what is not covered by the standards. One must read through the text of the paragraphs to discern the acknowledged limitations of the CCSS.

While the introductory preface contained a paragraph defining the CCSS vision of a literate person for the 21st century, on page seven we get a “portrait of students who meet the standards” by listing out the seven “capacities of the literate individual.” It should be noted that previous drafts describe student “practices” and not “capacities.” “Practices” by definition, is about the consistent application of skills. “Capacities,” on the other hand, are defined as the ability or power to do, experience, or understand something. The choice to use “capacities” over “practices” further supports the notion that this literacy effort is focused on changing the individual. In addition, the June 2010 version shows a reduced list from nine to seven, and some words have been substituted. The final June 2010 version no longer included the successful student as someone who would “care about precision,” or “craft and look for structure.” However, some of the language that was removed from this section can be found in the supporting paragraphs.

Each capacity is explained in a paragraph containing what does and does not qualify as a “capacity.” The language used presupposes particular cultural values. I briefly note the changes between the final released version of the CCSS and the earlier drafts to later contrast the feedback, from literacy experts, that was not incorporated in the final copy of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. According to the authors, students who

meet the standards are those who demonstrate independence by being “self-directed learners.” They are also students who build strong content knowledge by reading “works of quality and substance.” The third capacity is described as when “students adapt their communication in relation to audience, task, purpose, and discipline.” The word “adapted” had changed from the word “considered” in this line. Additionally, successful students can “comprehend as well as critique,” in a manner that was originally described as “skeptical” in an earlier draft, and now appear as “discerning.” In the January, 2010 draft, the 5th capacity appeared as students who “privilege evidence,” but by June of 2010, “privilege” had been changed to “value.” The remaining two capacities describe successful students as those who can “use technology and digital media strategically and capably,” and “understand other perspectives and cultures.” This last capacity is worth examining in greater detail below.

It is this last capacity, “to understand other perspectives and cultures,” that is worth presenting here for later discussion of the CCSS’s commitment to diversity at the exclusivity of equality:

Students appreciate that the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own.¹⁰⁵

There has been ample research by scholars and social scientists to demonstrate that the group who benefits most from this diversity inclusion argument are the groups that

¹⁰⁵ NGA and CCSSO. “Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy,” 7.

already are the most comfortable and powerful in this country. Whites benefit most from exposure to races, ethnicities, and cultures unlike their own, but this does nothing to address structural inequality. This is commonly known as the “diversity” argument for integration which was generated in the discourse of anti-affirmative action suits including the 1978 Bakke case, 2003 Grutter case, and the 2013 Fisher case.¹⁰⁶ The ambiguous word “representative” allows for any texts beyond the canon to potentially be excluded for not being appropriately “representative” by the assumed authority of the CCSS developers. This paragraph serves as the only articulated gesture toward “diversity” in the standards, despite the detailed feedback, rationale, and research base provided by organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA—recently renamed the International Literacy Association).

In this final section of the introduction, we are presented with the organization and key features of the document itself. We once again see the language of the “staircase” to describe “Standard 10” and text complexity, we are reminded about the language of three writing types, the importance of “flexible communication and collaboration” for students, and the right approach to language usage. The supporting paragraph describes the “right approach” as focusing on the conventions of “standard written and spoken English,” while instilling in students that language is a “matter of craft and informed choice among alternatives.” This phrasing is an example of how language dropped from the January draft gets re-appropriated in a new location in the final June version. We are also presented with the description of three appendices—A, B, C—that include text

¹⁰⁶ For further discussion of the diversity argument, see Richard Rothstein. “What Arne Duncan’s Comments on Racial Integration Reveal.” *Washington Post*. September 6, 2013. In the article, Rothstein explains how the court’s opinions “justified integration because it benefits whites.”

exemplars, supplementary reading material applicable to all categories of standards in ELA and Literacy, and writing samples demonstrating at least “adequate performance.”¹⁰⁷ Worthy of note: the writing samples, with one exception, are taken from a single high school in Cupertino, CA. As of 2013, the Monta Vista High School demographics feature a student population that is 96% white and Asian, 4% “other” and 3% “limited English speaking.” Cupertino is also listed as the 11th wealthiest U.S. city of 50,000 people or more, with a median household income of \$160,000. In 2012, Forbes names the city “most educated.”¹⁰⁸ The remaining 58 pages of the document present each of the 520 standards organized by grade band, category, and content area.¹⁰⁹

Four years after the 2010 adoption of the CCSS we are hearing more criticism and questions regarding the content, process, reception, and impact of this unprecedented new prescription for school-based literacy learning. The convergence of interests from funders, publishers, state leaders, federal leaders, and educational entrepreneurs created new alliances that streamlined the creation and adoption of the CCSS. Upon closer examination, it appears the usual policy channels were side stepped, and the usual processes of public accountability were confusing and constrained. This might help to explain the silence and delayed response of well-known critical scholars and experts in the field. However, once the dust settled, the media and the people named on some of the committees for the CCSS are starting to speak out.

¹⁰⁷ NGA and CCSSO. "Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy," 8.

¹⁰⁸ For more information see the following websites: www.mvhs.fuhisd.org, the Bay Area Census site, and the Wikipedia page for Cupertino, CA.

¹⁰⁹ To look through the original documents, see www.achievethecore.org. This website is run by the Student Achievement Partners organization, a non-profit originally founded by lead writers of the CCSS: David Coleman, Susan Pimentel, and Jason Zimba. The site includes free resources, lessons, professional development, etc. to support the curriculum and teaching that accompanies the CCSS. This site also houses the official versions of the primary source documents available on the standards themselves.

CRITICISMS AND CONTROVERSIES: A DISCOURSE OF COMMON VIEWS ON THE COMMON CORE

With time and perspective, as well as the 2015 perception of declining political support, members of the media, education community, and academic fields of literacy are making their concerns public. What follows is a discussion of some of the representative views on the controversies and criticisms surrounding the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. What is important to understand about this criticism is that it surfaced several years after the adoption of the CCSS by nearly all of the United States. This suggests that professionals in the field of education and literacy knew very little about these standards until the policy was already in place. The concerns range from issues regarding the undemocratic nature of the drafting, feedback, and validation process, to the narrowly constricted methods for teaching reading. Some feedback on earlier drafts was particularly concerned with the language and content of the standards. The critical conversations are relatively recent, and more are emerging every week. What follows is a presentation of some of the most significant criticism and feedback that contrasts the nearly instantaneous adoption and support for the CCSS. An examination of the people, process, and concerns will also aid us in understanding how the CCSS operate from within, and depart from, the modern standards movement, as well as why the proponents have mounted a retroactive literacy campaign to sell the public on a policy that was developed and implemented outside of traditional democratic forms of accountability.

Educator and critic, Anthony Cody, published an article on what he calls the “Ten Colossal Errors” of the CCSS. Cody sums up the popular criticism emerging in the last few years regarding the undemocratic process of developing the standards, the impact of more standardized testing, and the failure of the CCSS to address some of the most pressing social inequalities that continue to expand the achievement gap in education.

The undemocratic process to which Cody refers, involves ambiguous people, procedures, and motivations behind the creation of this very significant reform effort. He raises questions about the membership of the work group teams to create the standards in ELA and math: “I eventually learned that a ‘confidential’ process was under way, involving 27 people on two Work Groups, including a significant number from the testing industry. Here are the affiliates of those 27: ACT (6), the College Board (6), Achieve, Inc. (8), Student Achievement Partners (2), America’s Choice (2). Only three participants were outside of these five organizations. ONLY ONE classroom teacher WAS involved—on the committee to review the math standards.”¹¹⁰ Cody also finds fault with the fact that none of the reported 10,000 public comments were actually made available to the public. Instead, the CCSS Initiative posted only a summary of the feedback that was remarkably positive.¹¹¹ Cody also questions the funding of the CCSS, which, according to many accounts, was almost exclusively done through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. According to Cody and others, Gates paid out \$33 million for the development of the CCSS, and \$158 million in the form of grants to organizations that promoted the standards. Gates also provided money and assistance to states applying for the competitive federal grants through Obama’s Race to the Top program. According to Cody, Gates would only provide such support to states that agreed to adopt the CCSS. Cody’s description of the tainted process, development, and funding of the CCSS would become a recurring theme for anti-CCSS protesters in the years that follow.

¹¹⁰ Anthony Cody. “Common Core Standards: Ten Colossal Errors,” *Education Week*, November 16, 2013.

¹¹¹ For the complete summary of the public feedback, see the official document published on the NGA website: “Summary of Public Feedback on the Draft College-and-Career Readiness Standards for English-Language Arts and Mathematics,” at NGA.org.

Between the kinds of people participating in the drafting of the standards, the top-down market-oriented and narrowly defined skills, and the fast timeline, Cody is convinced that testing was a major motivator of these CCSS. He presents the “arcane” quantitative measures used to determine the “complexity of texts” but that are far more conducive to measuring reading scores on tests than to tell us anything about complexity of those texts. Cody is also concerned about the data coming back from these tests that continue to show students are doing even worse than before. He concludes that perhaps the priority is just collecting more data on teachers and students to feed more profits in the technology arena.

In addition to finding no valid evidence to support anything in the CCSS, Cody is upset that such a significant reform program is being implemented without ever having been piloted. He suspects that the use of the CCSS will not address the “biggest problem of American education and American society:” the amount of children in poverty.

“The Common Core has been presented as a paradigmatic shift beyond the test-and-punish policies of NCLB. However, we are seeing the mechanisms for testing, ranking, rewarding, and punishing simply refined, and made even more consequential for students, teachers, and schools. If we use the critical thinking the Common Core claims to promote, we see this is old wine in a new bottle, and it turned to vinegar long ago.”¹¹²

Educators and watchdogs are also speaking out on concerns regarding the CCSS narrowly defined approach to reading. Recently, The Hechinger Report published an article called “The Common Core English Standards: Content and Controversy,” where the report attempts to present and explain some of the controversial aspects of “close reading” advocated in the CCSS. Not unlike many of the articles being generated around this topic, The Hechinger Report uses one of Coleman and Pimentel’s popular lesson

¹¹² Cody, “Common Core Standards: Ten Colossal Errors,” 2013.

examples to outline the issues. In this article, the author refers to David Coleman and Susan Pimentel as “co-writers” of the ELA and Literacy standards, as well as “co-founders” of Student Achievement Partners: the organization now generating all the free CCSS materials and resources for teachers. The report presents the three-day high school lesson on Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in order to invite commentary from the field about what could go wrong with this kind of reading lesson.¹¹³

The article presents Coleman and Pimentel’s rationale for using the text and for taking three days to read the three paragraphs of the Gettysburg Address. The article describes Coleman as arguing for the complexity of texts and for the right of all students to not be “exiled” from reading them. According to the article, Pimentel actually claims that because assessments ask students to use evidence only from the text, then that is reason enough for teaching them to read this way. Both proponents counter popular and longstanding reading programs that advocate using “just right” books to assist struggling readers and foster a love of reading that lasts a lifetime. One program they single out for criticism is the Teachers College, Readers and Writers Workshop by Lucy Calkins, who also authored the book that tried to interpret the literacy standards for educators in 2012.

The article goes on to present commentary from experts in the field who are very concerned about encouraging children to read historical texts without giving them a context and helping them to access prior knowledge. The report explains that Susan Pimentel responded to the criticism by toning down her strict approach and granting permission for teachers to consider using some of the traditional reading comprehension strategies to help struggling readers in particular. Her response, however, did not address

¹¹³ Sarah Garland for The Hechinger Report. “The Common Core English Standards: Content and Controversy,” *A Guide to the Common Core*. 2014.

the larger controversy of using more non-fiction and informational text over literature in the English classroom. According to the report, many secondary teachers remain concerned over the incorporation of such historical documents in classes that are expressly about the teaching of literature.

One educator, Daniel Ferguson, published an article in *Rethinking Schools* that directly responded to David Coleman's video presentation depicting the sample lesson on Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From A Birmingham Jail." Ferguson uniquely applies the CCSS tenets of close reading and staying within the "four corners of the page" to demonstrate the limitations and impact such techniques can have on how readers construct meaning:

What would happen, I wondered, if I were to attempt a close reading of Coleman's video? Would it be possible to dismiss my own thoughts from the four corners of the text? How would the attempt affect my 'reading' of his lesson? How can I see David Coleman speaking about instruction and not be reminded that he represents both the Common Core and the College Board, positions of power in national curriculum and standardized assessment? How can I forget that he was a founding board member of Students First with Michelle Rhee, who advocates the use of standardized tests to judge teacher quality? As he grins at the camera, how can I forget him saying, 'People really don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think' in regard to student personal narrative writing? How can I dismiss the fact that Coleman had a former career as a business consultant, but he has never been a teacher? Although these connections from outside the frame should not overshadow the picture itself, do we understand Coleman's text at all without understanding the context?¹¹⁴

Ferguson's quote here illustrates the points he tries to make in his longer article: that close reading of a text can negate and dismiss the knowledge that students bring to the table. To do this, says Ferguson, is to commit what Paolo Freire calls an act of

¹¹⁴ Daniel Ferguson. "Martin Luther King Jr. and the Common Core: A Critical Reading of "Close Reading," *Rethinking Schools*, 2014.

oppression. Ferguson goes on to argue that Coleman’s video on this lesson assumes that close reading and personal connection are “diametrically opposed” in the Common Core.

Ultimately, Ferguson finds that the CCSS approach to close reading that limits children to the “four corners of the page,” eventually makes outsiders of the students themselves. They are invited in to read what is there, but not to think about what is not there and why. This, Ferguson contends, violates the students’ rights to literacy itself.

While most of the criticism has emerged after the adoption of the CCSS by nearly all of the states, the controversy surrounding the CCSS in ELA and Literacy began before the public release of the standards document in July 2010. A year earlier, the National Council on Teachers of English (NCTE) was asked by the CCSS developers to review a draft copy of the ELA and Literacy standards. The NCTE Review Team received the draft in July 2009, and they delivered their detailed 21-page report in early August of the same year. Despite their attempts to be constructive and diplomatic, the NCTE Review Team spent the majority of the document being very explicit about their concerns.

The NCTE organization has been involved in literacy leadership, teaching, policy, research, and assessment for nearly 100 years. Along with the International Reading Association, the NCTE is considered the leading authority on school-based literacy work in the United States. They routinely publish position statements, support local and state efforts, and provide professional development to current educators. The institutionalization of this organization means that it has not been founded or developed within the same culture of today’s non-profit explosion in the private sector. Leading experts in the field of literacy, as well as teachers and educational leaders nation-wide often belong to the NCTE for the duration of their careers. The CCSS team would have been remiss not to ask for their feedback on a new national literacy policy.

The NCTE Review Team found that the standards as written “could apply to the schools of 1950 as to the schools of this decade and the realities the nation and the world face today.”¹¹⁵ What follows is perhaps an example of the most thorough and inclusive set of concerns and reservations subsequently voiced by teachers, parents, scholars, and “concerned citizens across the United States.”¹¹⁶ The framing of the concerns and the precise articulation of suggested revisions, rationale, and research base make this report a comprehensive introduction to the outstanding features of current criticism and controversy regarding the content, process, and impact of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

While much of the discourse surrounding the CCSS in ELA and Literacy suggests that most of the public endorses the standards, and by default its vision of a literate person for the 21st century, the feedback from the NCTE demonstrates that there was criticism early on in the process of developing the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. The NCTE is a longstanding professional organization made up of people who specialize in various aspects of literacy, with an emphasis on shaping policy and practice within public institutions. The NCTE published its first position paper on literacy in 1972 when it voted to approve federal support of the “Right to Read” effort. Its latest position paper outlines the NCTE “Definition of 21st Century Literacies:”

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic, and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with

¹¹⁵ NCTE Review Team. *A report of the NCTE Review Team on the July 2009 Draft of the Common Core English Language Arts State Standards*. General Critique, National Council of Teachers of English, 2009, 1-21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

particular histories, life possibilities, and social trajectories of individuals and groups.¹¹⁷

Six bullets depicting specific behaviors and actions required for “active, successful” participation in this “21st century global society” follow this declaration. The bullets include developing proficiency with technology, working collaboratively with others across cultures, managing “simultaneous information,” and breaking down multimedia texts. The last bullet addresses the requirement of attending to the “ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.”¹¹⁸ The NCTE proposal emphasizes practices and competencies that demonstrate multiple literacies. When the CCSS developers disseminated the draft of their standards criteria in July 2009, the NCTE was quick to respond with feedback and critique by August 6th of the same year. By the time the CCSS released their next draft in early 2010, they included a vision of a “literate person” for the 21st century, emphasizing *personal traits and characteristics* as opposed to skills and practices.

Issued within weeks of the 2009 CCSS draft, the NCTE report offers comprehensive feedback on positive directions, notable omissions, and constructive suggestions for the drafters of the CCSS. The report provides perhaps the most extensive and specific feedback on record regarding the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. The following is the NCTE’s opening paragraph to the CCSS development team:

The introduction of the common core standards occurs at a time of substantial change in American language and literacy. US schools are now much more diverse, with more multilingual and multicultural students per capita, than has been the case in a century. At the same time, commerce and communications have become globalized, and people can no longer assume that they will interact only with those whose language and culture match their own. These new patterns are permanent and growing, and the transformations bring with them new definitions

¹¹⁷ National Council of Teachers of English. "NCTE.org." *NCTE Position Statement*. November 19, 2008.

¹¹⁸ *NCTE Position Statement*, 2008.

of what it means to be educated. In addition, the rise of the Internet as the locus of so much of the developed world's information and communications environment has introduced new forms of language, new kinds of texts, and new practices with composing and interacting. The literacy environment is one that demands innovation, creativity, and adaptability within an accelerating rate of change. In our classrooms across the nation, the impact of these changes is already apparent. That impact, however, is not apparent in the draft of the Common Core State Standards, which, with few exceptions, could apply as well to the schools of 1950 as to the schools of this decade and the realities the nation and the world face today.¹¹⁹

This rather scathing assessment, couched in constructive commentary, is delivered from an organization that has lead literacy research and practice since the desegregation of American schools. The NCTE attempts to frame the current context within which literacy exists to justify the nature of their position on what literacy should look like in the 21st century United States.

It is not inconsequential that the report writers locate the CCSS as appropriate for 1950. The year positions the CCSS in ELA and Literacy as fitting for a society that had not yet received the Supreme Court decision that endorsed the racial integration of public schools. The year 1950 was also a time of heightened nationalism and a "return" to repressive patriarchal racist structures that preceded the victory of the U.S. in WWII. The 1950's were a time when African American soldiers returned from defending the lives of the oppressed overseas, only to find their own country perpetuating the same circumstances for racial minorities at home. Schools were racially segregated, and women who had been earning their first paychecks by working in the factories abandoned by the men in wartime, were told to return to the kitchen and their domestic sphere. The 1950s were a time just before the peak of the Civil Rights movement that would force

¹¹⁹ NCTE Review Team. *A report of the NCTE Review Team on the July 2009 Draft of the Common Core English Language Arts State Standards*. General Critique, National Council of Teachers of English, 2009, 3.

real change in the educational, economic, and political lives of African Americans and traditional marginalized groups in the U.S. The year 1950 exemplifies the last vestiges of blanket authority for white supremacy.

In the opening paragraph of the report, the NCTE implies that the CCSS in ELA and Literacy ignore racial, cultural, and linguistic aspects of diversity that now characterize public education. According to the NCTE, the CCSS endorse a nostalgic return to some mid-century notion of a classical education that dominated literacy instruction for white students, by white teachers. In other words, the CCSS not only fails to embrace the richness of today's diverse society, the value of cross-cultural collaboration, or even a superficial rejection of racial discrimination in education, but rather the CCSS attempt to return us to an open endorsement of white supremacy in its definition and conception of literacy for the 21st century.

In many ways, the criticism expressed by the NCTE reflects concern over the racial and cultural components of the literacy policy itself. This is expressed in language that emphasizes the purpose of public schooling as one of democratic equality alongside career and college readiness (social mobility and efficiency goals). As the general critique progresses, the NCTE Review Team questions the standards in terms of their very definition, their rigor, and their impact on low-income marginalized communities. The team also cites concerns over the primary focus on what is easily measured by standardized tests over what is known about literacy development. They also mention the impact on citizenship, the lack of evidence, and the flawed process inherent in the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. It is worthwhile to examine this report in some detail before moving into a more specific discussion of additional criticisms regarding reading

techniques, democratic processes, elitist curriculum, catering to the testing industry, and the return to the patronage of “literacy sponsors.”¹²⁰

The NCTE Review team focuses its feedback on mitigating what they think are the profound problems of the CCSS that will result in reducing education, undermining the “pleasures and power of a literate life,” and producing differentiated consequences for the students and communities that have consistently been historically marginalized and underserved in the U.S.. Though their critique is framed in three parts addressing the positives, the omissions, and the suggested language revisions respectively, the questions and themes named above remain consistent throughout the document. It should be noted here that the NCTE is an organization that prides itself on supplying expertise needed to inform literacy policy in the U.S. Their feedback recognizes both racial and cultural dimensions of the literacy approach proposed in the CCSS.

Though couched in the potentially positive aspects of the literacy standards, the review makes the point for the standards being too narrow. Each “positive” listed is followed by language that communicates overall insufficiency. The review team acknowledges that some of the skills listed are good for college, but the list is described as at best, “insufficient.” While the reviewers state that some of these listed skills could turn into good classroom lessons, they describe the developer’s attempts as only “somewhat successful.” And the team likes the naming of different kinds of texts, but then follows this with “see our revisions...below.” The NCTE was also “gratified” to see some presentation of reading materials, they also note that only “certain qualities” are

¹²⁰ The concept of the “literacy sponsor” comes from the work of literacy scholar, Deborah Brandt, who uses the term to refer to the various forms of patronage historically associated with the acquisition of literacy for marginalized peoples in the United States. For more information, see her book, *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001.

named, and that the CCSS writers should see the NCTE feedback in the report. The final rhetorical blow is delivered when the NCTE explains that the presence of pullout text boxes providing additional information in the draft, is indeed confirmation that the CCSS writers already have some understanding that the standards are currently too narrow: “Therefore, even as we move toward our areas of concern and objection, we do acknowledge that in some initial assumptions, we are on the same page.”¹²¹

According to the findings of the report, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy have 6 critical omissions in the 2009 draft: they do not mention the many purposes of reading, writing, and education generally; they do not mention the writing process; they are “silent on matters of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity;” they do not discuss the importance of collaboration or social interaction in literacy learning; they fail to recognize the role of the audience in developing a quality piece of writing; and they are vague on how 21st century literacies differ from literacy practices of the past. The NCTE wants to see the standards either commit to a “compelling defense” that education is now for the sole purposes of college and career readiness, or follow the suggested revisions in order to restore the role of literacy and education for democratic equality. According to the NCTE, the CCSS draft does nothing less than undermine the public good by advocating a vision of literacy that stifles social and civic participation, democratic processes, and ethical responsibility.¹²²

The report claims that the draft ignores that writing occurs as a process because the writing process cannot easily be measured by existing standardized tests. “Although assessing process is difficult and involves investment, these standards are not being

¹²¹ NCTE Review Team. *A report of the NCTE Review Team*, 5.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

advertised as standards for assessment but standards for learning. It will be extremely costly for the nation to misrepresent the nature of composition in such standards.”¹²³ The review team emphasizes that good writers can determine how to shape a composition based on the rhetorical situation, including exercising the many skills needed to evaluate a purpose in light of the audience. Some of the specific language revisions the team recommends include adding in the importance of considering “the backgrounds, values, knowledge, and perspectives” of an audience. They also advocate including specific language addressing the social skills and collaboration needed for engagement with writing in college and the workplace, the broadening of relevant sources in the construction of arguments.

In addition to commenting on how the standards need to expand on the standards to include the writing process and the importance of audience, The NCTE also attempts to help the drafters fix some seriously limiting ethnocentric language. In regard to writing, the revisions include eliminating the phrase “proper” to describe sentence structure and instead substituting the word “appropriate” because it corrects the unsupported notion that there is a right/wrong dichotomy in linguistics. They also suggest defining “standard written English” not as a “register,” but as one of many possible dialects students must determine as most appropriate for a given writing situation. They go on to remark that “conflating register and Standard English here could be insulting to diverse linguistic communities.”¹²⁴

Also in the critique of writing, we find suggested revisions for correcting outdated and restrictive language that disregards the important purpose of education for

¹²³ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 18.

democratic equality. The report adds “democratic participation” as a purpose of effective argumentation, and it suggests eliminating language that refers to the “rightness” of a claim, choice, or text. The NCTE is also very concerned over the presentation of focusing on just two “modes” of writing: to inform and to argue. “We see no justification in restricting modes to two (even if the standards must use the outdated form of modes to organize the discussion). It would represent an inaccurate reduction of college and workplace writing.”¹²⁵ The team’s concerns over the portrayal of writing are centered around the reductionist approach to writing types, purposes, and situations. The negation of conclusions drawn from years of research and experts in the field result in a conception of writing that is narrowly defined and insufficient for preparing children to interact in a “culturally diverse world.”¹²⁶

The NCTE critique of reading continues many of these same themes: the CCSS conception of reading is reductionist, exclusive, solitary, problematic, indefensible, and even “politically explosive.” The team cites the pattern of narrowly defined “right/wrong” language in many of the standards. In the standards, reading informational or nonfiction texts is presented as a sole source of content knowledge, and that any knowledge needed to construct an inference or draw a conclusion can come from within the “four corners of the page.” The NCTE argues the importance of readers bringing existing prior knowledge to the table when making meaning from any text. The team names the pattern of all skills and capacities being demonstrated “individually” suggesting that literacy learning is a solitary activity. They call attention to the fact that social and collaborative processes are not only necessary for college and the workplace,

¹²⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 16.

but they also provide the community of readers and writers that are required for deriving multiple meanings from texts.

The team also finds the focus on non-fiction over fiction or informational over literary, to be too dichotomous and inaccurate. The NCTE points out that standards referring to one type or another exclusively do so because they conflate genre with text structure. This further exacerbates the problem of standards that encourage the children to “extract knowledge and information” from the text alone. “The language in the draft seems outdated in reading and psychology (since the 1970s). Much research from a variety of perspectives supports a more constructivist model of reading, not simple extraction of information (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lee, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1978; Rumelhart, 1985; Schraw & Bruning, 1999; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).”¹²⁷ The NCTE raises a caution about prioritizing the ability for a student to come to a decisive conclusion about the meaning of a text in isolation as opposed to studying a text and discussing its possible meanings with others in their reading community.

Perhaps the critique of the standards regarding the range and quality of texts elicited the most intense criticism from the NCTE team. They call attention to unsupported assumptions, language and syntax that are value-laden and imprecise, and the presumptuous exclusivity implied therein.

Language like ‘Since certain works are products of exceptional craft and thought’ begs the question of who is going to decide which works, and what they will be. In other words, this kind of statement implies the creation of a canon and implicit or explicit exclusion of works not included in that canon. Leaving aside the question of whether it is true that certain works are such monuments, the process of identifying them in a nation like the United States is impractical and politically explosive.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 11.

When the CCSS developers use ambiguous language like “broad resonance,” or “often quoted” as indications of a “high-quality text,” they are presenting something that the NCTE finds “immeasurable.” Therefore, the purpose of this exclusionary language rests on a “common” understanding of what counts for “quality.” It is for this reason that the NCTE team recommends using explicit language to counter “common” assumptions along these lines by inserting the importance of including works by “women and authors of diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.”

In closing their general critique, the NCTE reiterate their belief that their “reservations” are “shared by educators, parents, and concerned citizens across the United States, and we think they should be listened to carefully.” While the team took the time to provide detailed feedback on the 2009 draft, they ultimately conclude that there is no valid evidence to support the claims in the CCSS, and not enough participation by actual educators from the K-12 sector or the colleges to legitimize the process of framing and drafting to date. The result, according to the NCTE, is another set of authoritative expectations created “from a distance” and imposed from the top down. The effect will be no less than the unintended consequences of further marginalizing historically underserved students and communities:

For students from marginalized groups, especially ethnic minorities and students from low-income households, however, we anticipate school experience sharply narrowing to focus on only the limited skills enumerated in the document, omitting the literacy practices that motivate, engage, and inspire, as well as those that represent real power in civic life, the workplace, and the academy. Restricting their curriculum to the mundane and tedious acquisition of skills whose purpose and value—the pleasures and power of a literate life—they are never invited to see is likely to reduce education, for them, to an exercise in meeting limited literacy standards.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Ibid., 3.

While the final version of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy did not reflect most of the NCTE revisions, the developers did tone down their word choices and include more vague references to the reality of “diversity” in today’s world. The focus on individual skill, measurable skills, and narrowly defined skills is still there. Any gesture toward “culture” is fleeting and ambiguous at best. To date, the NCTE has not endorsed the CCSS.

While the NCTE may not have endorsed the CCSS in ELA and Literacy, some of their prominent members have. And in some cases, scholars who served on some of the feedback and validation committees for the standards are now publishing articles and giving keynote addresses that counter certain aspects of the Common Core. Catherine Snow and Carol Lee are two such people who have since spoken out about what they view as controversial depictions of close reading and text complexity in the CCSS. Because official CCSS committee members had to sign off on confidentiality agreements, it is hard to gauge their actual contributions to the standards themselves. Therefore, we could interpret this scholarly work as confirmation that their input was *not* originally considered, or that they had second thoughts after experiencing the initial impact of standards implementation. Because the recently published work of both Snow and Lee is consistent with their published work *before* their participation on the CCSS committees, it is more likely that their participation was in name only.

Despite signing off on the literacy standards as part of her official role on the CCSS Validation Committee, Catherine Snow has published articles and participated on panels where she expresses concern over the concept of close reading in the standards. She is a well-respected authority on literacy and reading development, a professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and an accomplished author of numerous books

and articles on the subject of reading in school-based literacy programs. Similarly to the NCTE team, Snow is careful to locate her analysis of the CCSS idea of close reading in the reality of school culture:

We celebrate the move to put text at the center of instruction across the curriculum, to delete talk about the topic that *substitutes* for reading, and to let students struggle productively with the text. But we fear that too much emphasis on close reading will lead to unproductive struggles, will be taken as a *prohibition* on discussing and questioning texts, and will create an illusion of a level playing field even as the field is being excavated further from under the feet of the struggling readers [emphasis hers].¹³⁰

Snow offers an actual example from a district that recently declared 80-90% of questions about curriculum materials aligned to the CCSS should be text-based because that is what the reading standards require. While the district leadership has good intentions, Snow explains that unintended consequences could result from such guidance.

Snow is clear to point out that close reading, despite the authoritative assertions of David Coleman and the CCSS, is not actually a technique for building background knowledge. For this reason, it will not work to level a playing field that is defined by students who come from “language- and literacy-poor backgrounds.” Snow stays grounded in the limitations and potential damage that can happen as a result of how the concept of close reading will get interpreted and used on the ground in schools. She never openly indicts Coleman or the CCSS, but she does use language such as “simply wrong,” “worsen conditions,” and “unleash lethal mutations” to describe the unintended consequences of emphasizing close reading as the primary reading comprehension strategy in the standards.

¹³⁰ Snow, Catherine and Catherine O'Connor. *Close Reading and Far-Reaching Classroom Discussion: Fostering a Vital Connection*. Policy Brief for the Literacy Research Panel, International Reading Association, 2013, 8.

Close reading is also described as problematic because it can further frustrate struggling readers, undermine the importance of classroom discussion, and encourage the idea that evidence for constructing meaning can only be found in the text itself. Snow and O'Connor point out, as did the NCTE team, that the narrowness of the standards can exacerbate existing challenges the CCSS intend to alleviate. For a struggling reader at the secondary level who is more interested in issues than language, close reading can kill motivation and engagement. The standards' advocate close reading as an exclusively solitary process, discouraging engagement with a student's reading community. If a student is unwilling to read a challenging text closely, the standards suggest that she/he will not be able to construct meaning, argue a position, or participate successfully in extended tasks related to the text. Snow and O'Connor remind educators that there are other forms of evidence that are "equally justifiable," as well as additional reading comprehension strategies to support struggling readers and enhance the social interactions between students in the classroom community.

On October 7, 2013, Dr. Carol D. Lee, pre-eminent scholar on African American education and literacy, delivered a keynote address to an audience of educators at Northern Illinois University. Lee is a very well known and well-respected literacy scholar as well. She is best known for her many books, articles, and conference papers devoted to the importance of the impact of racial and cultural realities on student literacy learning. In her presentation to NIU, Lee focuses on a discussion of text complexity and how the CCSS in ELA and Literacy have created an opportunity to critically examine the "texts and tasks" that we ask students to do in everyday classrooms.

Dr. Lee is another example of a scholar who sat on one of the formal committees for the Literacy standards. She was actually a member of the officially listed

“Development Team,” though again, because all members signed off on confidentiality agreements, no one is quite sure what they actually did. She continues to work on projects that are housed or funded by the likes of Carnegie, West Ed, and additional organizations connected to the CCSS and/or funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (fundors of the CCSS). She is not alone in this situation. Catherine Snow also participates in projects and programs that might cause a conflict of interest in any critique about the CCSS. This might explain the delicate and diplomatic nature in the critical literacy work of both scholars since the release of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. There may also be more to the story about their role on the committees, and what they thought they were doing when they signed their reputable names on the dotted line. Some of the controversy regarding the process for the development of the standards will be discussed in more detail below. In any case, Lee’s keynote and subsequent articles reveal her expert perspective on both the possibilities and limitations for literacy learning as a result of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

While Lee does not directly address the CCSS very often in her keynote address, she does name it as framing the current reality within which we all teach, and she does comment on it specifically in a few places. She credits the CCSS with refocusing importance on the kinds of texts we are using in schools, and she names the standards as appropriately including “text complexity” in their recommendations. She describes the CCSS as pushing back the use of more complex texts into the younger grades making for a more challenging teaching and learning environment for underserved students. This is especially true when the standards recommend the use of more complex texts, but they do not define “text complexity” by grade level. This, Lee explains, will be problematic under current accountability structures that rely on external grade level reading assessments to

judge the literacy abilities of students. In addition, she contends, there is the historical trend to try and deconstruct reading into an autonomous set of skills that are more easily measured by the assessments. She calls these kinds of skills “absolute,” as opposed to the “relational” skills that students develop when they have a range of interactions between texts, prior knowledge, each other, and the world. While not going so far as to call out the errors in the CCSS, Lee offers her own theory which just happens to expose the limitations of the CCSS.

Lee describes herself as arguing for an “integrated reading approach” that involves understanding the relationships between many different kinds of skills that impact good reading development. She advocates teaching grammar and syntax as a tool for reading as well as for writing. She explains how the more prior knowledge a student has, the less their actual skills matter in understanding a text. She provides an example of lyrics from a hip-hop song that English teachers struggled to understand but their struggling readers could comprehend quickly. Lee points out that what changes from grade to grade is not so much the reading strategies, but the “texts and tasks” to which students are exposed.

When she does describe some of the limitations in the CCSS in ELA and Literacy, she does so in the context of what the standards mean for the issue of text complexity. “The CCSS is a huge step forward in many respects, however, there are many challenges. They went from high school standards to grade level bands and suffered the same obstacles other states have encountered; even though some of the verbs change, it’s the same stuff.”¹³¹ She explains that grade bands make little sense because

¹³¹ Lee, Carol D. "Common Core Culture and Argumentation in the Disciplines." *Youtube* video, Oct 7, 2013. 1:28 min. <https://youtu.be/qkxQ9VYP0Gs> (accessed on February 15th, 2015).

there is no logical reason for the nature of the changes from grade to grade. She goes on to say that while the CCSS demand we teach more complex texts, they cannot tell us how to define this. Despite the additions of both quantitative and qualitative forms of measurement for evaluating the complexity of a text, it is still very limited. Lee says that “Text complexity usage and advocacy is still a step forward...Common Core is great, it is here, but view it as a critical document...it is not from God.”¹³²

The remainder of Lee's presentation is regarding her work on Project READI, in conjunction with the Carnegie Corporation and WestEd, building off her integrated reading model (not to be confused with CCSS “Integrated Literacy Model”). The structure of her conversation about the project goes point for point in countering existing language, measurement, and philosophies found in the CCSS, but she does not name this. She offers an alternative to the CCSS Coh-Matrix system of measuring literature, an alternative to what close reading should look like in the classroom, and an alternative purpose for reading literature. Finally, she offers her own model of building “sets of texts” that incorporate deliberate thoughtfulness around genre, themes, and developmental appropriateness. She presents the philosophical and moral context for her model as responding to the typical resistance of secondary students who have been taught to hate literature, and the fact that literature should be about interrogation (rather than extraction) and result in great discussions and insights about what it means to be a human being. While not presented as a critique of the CCSS, it is arguably a direct response to the message embedded in the standards; the meaning and complexity of text is not dependent on context or community.

¹³² Ibid.

Additional scholars and well-respected educators have made their voices heard in offering cautions about the CCSS. There were many in attendance at the 2013 IRA conference. Long time literacy educator, author, and consultant, Kylene Beers, is one such person. Beers was a member of the NCTE Review Team for the 2009 draft of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. She is also a member of the International Reading Association (IRA) and served on several panels during their 2013 conference. In a specific session focused on the IRA and the CCSS, Beers offered the following caution to the audience: “The Publisher’s Criteria of the CCSS has assumed authority, not assessed. Don’t do what you know isn’t right.”¹³³ Nancy Frey, author of some of the very best books on literacy learning K-12, also warned that “Standard 10 in reading is the game changer.”¹³⁴ Carol Lee, Catherine Snow, Kenneth Goodman, and Kris Guttierrez were also presenting. The points raised by these scholars cover the gamut from concerns over reductive practices to policies reflecting a new millennium version of the “White Man’s Burden.”¹³⁵

Many of the recurring themes addressed by members of the IRA panels involved the concerns over literacy policy being made without the consultation of research or experts in the field. Some of the speakers even felt dismissed and ignored. Fears over their perceived irrelevance were echoed time and again in panels that addressed the absurdity of testing regimes and the global spread of western reading tests that amount to more examples of cultural imperialism and what Kenneth Goodman referred to as a new iteration of the “White Man’s Burden.” Some of these concerns were located in original criticisms of the No Child Left Behind Act, and others focused on how to get ahead of the

¹³³ Personal notes taken at the International Reading Association Conference, 2013, San Antonio, TX.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

potential damage of the CCSS by focusing on the spaces of promise and possibility. Kris Gutierrez suggested that the IRA get more involved with creating the “modules” for how to think about and implement the CCSS. Others focused on using the IRA blog to stay in the conversations, and still others wanted to focus on organizing protests. At the core of the discussion was a concern over the de-professionalization of knowledge, and the lamented disconnection from the policy-makers that was resulting in literacy decisions being made primarily on political and economic grounds.¹³⁶ As more criticism surfaced both within and outside of the IRA conference, some of these issues would be affirmed by those involved in the CCSS process itself.

Like Snow, Sandra Stotsky also sat on the Validation Committee (VC) for the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. The Validation Committee is where we see some of the best known scholars in education, literacy, ELA standards, and assessment. The names on the VC are established scholars, whereas the names on the work group and feedback committee (an advisory role only) had lesser-known people from a variety of organizations and universities. Stotsky is currently Professor Emerita at Arkansas University. What makes her unique is that she did not sign her name on the letter of endorsement and she has told us why. Stotsky, along with four other members of the 29-member VC, did not officially endorse the standards. Only three out of the five who left shared their reasons with the public. Stotsky served as the expert on ELA standards due to her work with Massachusetts and Achieve, Inc. on the American Diploma Project. Stotsky eventually wrote a letter and presented a conference paper on why the state boards of education should reconsider their votes for the CCSS. In her words, the process

¹³⁶ Ibid.

of writing, revising, and validating the standards should make all votes automatically “null and void.”¹³⁷

According to Stotsky, there are three primary reasons to consider formal votes invalid at this point: (1) there was no higher education faculty involved in validating college-readiness; (2) state boards of education have no authority in determining college-readiness levels for credit-bearing post-secondary coursework; (3) the history and membership of the VC suggest it is also not qualified to evaluate ELA standards for college-readiness. Stotsky supports her argument by describing the committees and people involved in developing the standards, and her experiences with their deficiencies. Among her chief concerns: the lack of transparency, the lack of qualified people doing the actual work, and the false pretenses for a Validation Committee.¹³⁸

Stotsky, claims that there were no English teachers or professors on the ELA work team, but there were people who worked with departments of education, and the publishing and testing industries. She mentions that from what she understood, the primary standards writers of the 2009 draft of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy were: David Coleman, listed as the President of the non-profit organization called Student Achievement Partners; Susan Pimentel, consultant, drafter of the Texas ELA standards (Texas did not adopt the CCSS), and member of the NAEP test governing board; and James Patterson, listed as Senior Program Development Associate in Language Arts at ACT. Stotsky points out that the ACT testing organization was well represented throughout the process, and that Coleman and Pimentel have never been high school or college English teachers, published research, or worked on developing curriculum. “they

¹³⁷ Sandra Stotsky. "Common Core's Invalid Validation Committee." IN, September 9, 2013, 2.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

were virtually unknown to the field of English language arts. But they had been chosen to transform ELA education in the U.S.”¹³⁹

Stotsky raises additional concerns about closed-door meetings, no available notes from meetings, no allowable communications between committee members (everything was sent to a CCSS staffer), no response to her feedback, and no evidence that any of her comments were ever considered. She raises concerns about the timeline, which she states was accelerated in order to provide states with a draft before the U.S. Department of Education deadline of January 19, 2010 to commit to adopting the college-ready standards to qualify for Race to the Top grants. Stotsky calls the draft “poorly written and content-deficient.” She also states that the final version released later in 2010 demonstrated the same issues found in earlier drafts: “lack of rigor (especially in the secondary standards), minimal content, lack of international benchmarking, lack of research support.”¹⁴⁰

When Stotsky initially joined the Validation Committee, she had to sign off on confidentiality agreements and ownership rights to content. She also had to sign off on the three tasks of the VC, which included reviewing the process for the development of the standards (which were done behind closed doors), validate the sufficiency of the evidence supporting the standards, (which she could not determine), and lastly, add any standard not yet included and provide the evidence to support it being necessary for college and career, and evidence that the standard is “internally comparable.”¹⁴¹ This final task was soon dropped from the list of VC responsibilities.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

Stotsky explains that in February, 2010, the VC received a “letter of certification” that they were supposed to sign as an act of endorsing the standards that had not yet been drafted for public comment and weren’t due to be released in their final form until June, 2010. In addition to endorsing the standards before the end of May, the VC received word from “unidentified people” and for “unidentified reasons,” that they were only to complete the first two tasks of the VC regarding reviewing the process and validating the evidence. They were no longer invited to contribute any additional standards. In the end, five of the 29 members of the VC did not sign the letter of certification and were therefore not named in the later public materials regarding the CCSS. They disappeared off the list of VC members. In addition to Stotsky, the following members also did not sign off: Alfinio Flores, Professor of math education, University of Delaware; Barry McGaw, Professor and Director of Melbourne Education Research Institute; James Milgram, Professor Emeritus, Stanford University; and Dylan William, Deputy Director, Institute of Education, University of London.¹⁴²

Stotsky is not alone in her concerns about the process, the qualifications, the funding, and the final version of the standards. Beginning with the leaks of confidential drafts in 2009, the media team at EdWeek was reporting on the rumors that the process for developing the CCSS might have been less than transparent. Staffers Sean Cavanaugh and Catherine Gewertz reported on the informal reception of an early draft of the college and career readiness standards that would later be broken down by grade bands. Their article presents the “mixed reviews” of some who saw the draft. They quote Alan Farstrup, director of the IRA, and E.D. Hirsch Jr., founder of Core Knowledge. The two

¹⁴² NGA, “Common Core State Standards Initiative Validation Committee Announced,” September 24, 2009.

adamantly disagreed on the quality of the drafted standards, with Farstrup thinking they were heading in the right direction by not being too prescriptive, and Hirsch, who found the standards typically lacking the right prescription of content to build “topic familiarity” necessary for good reading skills.¹⁴³

Cavanaugh wrote a lengthy piece published online just a week later on July 30th, 2009 and addressing the concerns over the lack of transparency in the drafting of the standards to date. While Cavanaugh is careful to include education and discipline leaders who speak to the history of standards writing as often a long, contentious, and confusing process, he also includes many voices who are concerned about state organizations keeping the process closed. In this discussion, Cavanaugh writes that unlike previous state processes to write standards, the CCSS process is being paid through the NGA Center for Best Practices, which, he states, is actually a “501(c)(3) entity that is funded primarily through grants from the federal government and private foundations as well as through contracts, according to the governors’ organization.”¹⁴⁴ These same issues of transparency and funding would continue to fuel questions and controversies long after the adoption of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

Before the CCSS in ELA and Literacy were even officially released to the public, they had generated criticism from both left and right leaning organizations and prominent individuals. The NCTE disapproved of the early drafts. The former president of the IRA thought they were heading in the right direction. And E.D. Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Foundation, thought they were “dead on arrival.” Despite the scarce but clear

¹⁴³ Sean Cavanaugh and Catherine Gewertz. “Draft Content Standards Elicit Mixed Reviews,” July 23, 2009, Edweek.

¹⁴⁴ Sean Cavanaugh. “Transparency of Common-Standards Process at Issue.” *Education Week*, July 30, 2009.

critique, the CCSS in ELA moved forward to a final release that was glowingly received according to press releases and media accounts. The fast adoption by so many states seemed to affirm the broad consensus. Even E.D. Hirsch and his organization were formally standing behind the CCSS in ELA and Literacy by July 2010. It is helpful to take a moment to consider the role of Core Knowledge (who had a member on the development committee for the CCSS in ELA) and the influence of Hirsch and his organization on the shaping of the CCSS.

E. D. HIRSCH: FROM COMMON CORE KNOWLEDGE TO COMMON CORE STANDARDS

A handful of people have made reference to similarities between Hirsch’s Core Knowledge movement, and the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. The “core” of public American knowledge was explicitly articulated by E.D. Hirsch in his 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. The title implies Hirsch’s vision of what should be or ought to be as a result of American public education, but just in case his conservative vision was dismissed as implausible, Hirsch includes an appendix in the book: “What Literate Americans Know: A Preliminary List.” This appendix consists of 5000 words and phrases “as they are normally alluded to” by “literate Americans.” The paragraph that prefaces this list in the appendix begins by establishing the names and academic credentials of the three men from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville who compiled the list and then shared it with “100 consultants” who “reported agreement on over 90 percent of the items listed:”

But no such compilation can be definitive. Some proposed items were omitted because they seemed to us known by both literate and illiterate persons, too rare, or too transitory. Moreover, different literate Americans have slightly different conceptions of our shared knowledge. The authors see the list as a changing

entity, partly because core knowledge changes, partly because inappropriate omissions and inclusions are bound to occur in a first attempt. Comments and suggestions are welcome and should be sent to Dr. Hirsch at the Department of English, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903. Correspondents should bear in mind that we do not seek to create a complete catalogue of American knowledge but to establish guideposts that can be of practical use to teachers, students, and all others who need to know our literate culture.¹⁴⁵

From this initial list, Hirsch published books on what children should know in each grade level. He published the books in multiple languages and gave away many of the materials for free. Since the publication of the first books, Hirsch's "curriculum" has been adopted by hundreds of schools in 25 states.

Though he and his concrete list of what makes for a culturally literate American were initially criticized by both the politically conservative and the liberal leaning left, Hirsch is now enjoying a bit of a renaissance thanks to the CCSS. In 2012, he received the coveted James Conant award from the Education Commission of the States. As a recipient of this award, Hirsch joined the ranks of previous recipients, including Thurgood Marshall and Senator Claiborne Pell of the famous educational "Pell grants." According to a New York Times article from September 2013, Hirsch is being "dragged back into the ring at the age of 85---this time for a chance at redemption."¹⁴⁶ The article attributes Hirsch's newfound popularity as resulting from the adoption of the CCSS:

Mr. Hirsch did not write the Common Core, but his curriculums---lesson plans, teaching materials and exercises---are seen as matching its heightened expectations of student progress. And philosophically, the Common Core ideal of a rigorous nationwide standard has become a vindication of Mr. Hirsch's long campaign against what he saw as the squishiness---a lack of specific curriculums for history, civics, science and literature---in modern education.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ E.D. Hirsch. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Houghton Mifflin, 1987, 146.

¹⁴⁶ Al Baker. "Culture Warrior, Gaining Ground." *New York Times*, September 27, 2013.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

In 1987 and in recent articles, Dr. Hirsch is adamant about his work being aimed at serving the underprivileged youth in order to achieve equity in American society. In an interview with Al Baker, he is quoted as saying, “You have to give the people who are without power the tools of power, and these tools don’t care who’s wielding them.”¹⁴⁸

Contemporary critics, including Henry Giroux and even Diane Ravitch still have concerns over Hirsch’s Core Knowledge concept and the CCSS as potentially leading to a standardization of knowledge and testing that will lead to a culture of test prep and rote memorization that could potentially stifle creativity and innovation. Nevertheless, Hirsch attributes his renaissance to himself being less controversial and to the fact that people are finally coming around to agree with his initial argument. But the mystery remains: if people now agree with his argument, why do they now agree? What has changed since 1987 to allow state policymakers to now award and reward Hirsch’s work? The answer to this question lies in the complex interweaving of social forces that converged to produce consent for the CCSS.

One clue to help explain the reception and trajectory of the CCSS can be found in Dr. Hirsch’s initial reaction and response to the CCSS in ELA and literacy. In July 2009, a confidential draft of the ELA and math standards was leaked to E.D. Hirsch and his colleague, Robert Pondiscio. On July 22nd, the two posted a scathing review of the ELA standards on their “Core Knowledge” website and blog page. In the review, Hirsch and Pondiscio describe the ELA and literacy standards as “neither a revelatory insight nor a meaningful standard. Educators hoping for guidance on what particular texts are expected

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

to be taught, or how to get students to reach the bland and obvious standards will be disappointed.”¹⁴⁹ In the blog entry, Hirsch is quoted as saying “One begins to despair.”

Following the blog post, there was a commentary dialogue consisting of 21 separate comments posted, including one by Hirsch and three by Pondiscio. Each was responding to earlier posted comments in the strand. The conversation emphasizes the concerns over the difference between “curriculum” and “standards,” “prior knowledge” and “shared national knowledge,” as well as how reading proficiency is attained, and how the liberal “arts” are no longer taught as “arts.” Both Pondiscio and Hirsch want to see the CCSS be more explicit in the kinds of texts children should read to accomplish knowledge and proficiency. They state that this is essential to do for “poor and minority children” and “low SES inner city children with virtually no background knowledge on any subject.”¹⁵⁰ They push back on the drafters of the CCSS to include more “influential and political documents” and “foundational literary works,” which Pondiscio associates with the “Declaration of Independence” for which he commends the drafters for including in the sample text section of the document.

It is important to understand the initial critique of the Core Knowledge Foundation in light of the changes that emerge in the following drafts of the CCSS in ELA and literacy, and in the public shifts in who supports or opposes the CCSS in the months that follow. Suffice it to say, by the time of the formal public debut of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy in July, 2010, the Common Core State Standards Initiative website posted a press release that included 22 comments of support, including the following from E.D. Hirsch of the Core Knowledge Foundation:

¹⁴⁹ Robert Pondiscio. *Voluntary National Standards Dead on Arrival*. July 22, 2009. blogcoreknowledge.org.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The Common Core Standards could presage a breakthrough in the dreary record of 8th grade reading scores over the past 40 years. Based on sound principles from cognitive science, the new language-arts standards place a unique emphasis from the earliest grades on science, history, and the arts, so that students will gradually build the general knowledge they need to read and to comprehend. The standards state that they can only be properly implemented both within a grade and in moving from one grade to the next through a coherent, cumulative progression of knowledge--- not just a collection of readings... Also very welcome, in this final version is the emphasis on civic knowledge and on the seminal texts of the nation. If they are indeed accompanied by a coherent curriculum that ensures students accumulate needed knowledge starting in earliest grades, they will form a platform on which we can finally address the literacy crisis in this country.¹⁵¹

From Hirsch's stamp of approval, we can see his direct reference to the most important addition since the initial leaked draft in 2009: "seminal texts of the nation," which in Hirsch's view equate to "civic knowledge." This raises questions about the future conception of CCSS for social studies, or if reading the founding documents of the nation will suffice for "civic" literacy. The actual changes in the version of the CCSS in ELA and literacy, as well as the revisions to the "Publisher's Criteria" and the explosion of concrete lesson plans generated by Student Achievement Partners¹⁵² (posted, advertised, and available for free on their website) suggests that Hirsch's critique and others like it had a profound impact on the revision and roll-out of the standards themselves.

On July 2, 2010, the NGA and CCSSO released an official press release announcing the launch of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy as well as in mathematics. The title of the release reads as follows: "The Formal Remarks Made by Various Governors at the Formal Launch of CCSS." Despite the title, the press release confirmed the presence

¹⁵¹ See the "Quotes of Supporters" in the Common Core State Standards Initiative. *Common Core State Standards Initiative/NGA and State Education Chiefs Launch Common State Academic Standards*. NGA and CCSSO. 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org> (accessed June 29, 2013).

¹⁵² For more information produced by David Coleman's organization, see the SAP website at <http://achievethecore.org>

and quotes of only two governors at the Peachtree High School in Suwanee, GA. Other people listed as present included the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the Vice President of the National Education Association, West VA state superintendent, Florida Commissioner of Education, and the CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools. The press contains a brief announcement and quotes from people who were present, followed by 22 substantive quotes from big name supporters who were not in attendance; among these, E.D. Hirsch (noted above), Bill Gates, Bob Wise of Alliance for Excellent Education, and high ranking officials representing statements for the College Board, the ACT, various corporations, Achieve and other non-profits, and state boards of education. The press release sent the message that there was public and private consensus for the CCSS.¹⁵³

The comments of supporters demonstrate consistent themes that can be found in the official documents of the CCSS, supporting materials and websites, presentations and speeches. The themes reflect recurring tropes in the discourse of education reform for the last 40 years. The quoted business leaders, policy makers, and education reformers demonstrate the beliefs and values that are truly at the core of this literacy effort: global economic competitiveness, college and career readiness, standardized education across zip codes, a “pathway out of poverty,” innovation, leveling the playing field for every student, protecting the “promise of social mobility” as students “thrive in a democratic society and a diverse, changing world as knowledgeable, creative, and engaged citizens

¹⁵³ Common Core State Standards Initiative. *Common Core State Standards Initiative/NGA and State Education Chiefs Launch Common State Academic Standards*. NGA and CCSSO. 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org> (accessed June 29, 2013).

and lifelong learners.”¹⁵⁴ While Hirsch names that the CCSS will specifically address the literacy crisis by including “seminal texts of the nation,” others take comfort in the international benchmarking and the research base, which the ACT affirms when it states that the standards are based on “decades of sound empirical data.”¹⁵⁵ With the commitments of 48 states in place, the campaign for state adoption and implementation could now begin.

The representational array of critical commentary addressing multiple aspects of the CCSS content, process, and product, is grounded in existing ideologies regarding the definition, purposes, and practices that involve “literacy.” Literacy has a legacy in the U.S. The CCSS attempt to redefine new parameters and expectations for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language usage. These practices are *cultural* and thus deserve an examination as part of the cultural object we call “literacy.”

¹⁵⁴ See the “Quotes of Supporters” in the Common Core State Standards Initiative. *Common Core State Standards Initiative/NGA and State Education Chiefs Launch Common State Academic Standards*. NGA and CCSSO. 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org> (accessed June 29, 2013).

¹⁵⁵ *Common Core State Standards Initiative/NGA and State Education Chiefs Launch Common State Academic Standards*, 2010.

Chapter 4: (Re)Branding Literacy and Illiteracy for Membership in the Nation: Definitions and Dilemmas

Literacy and history have much in common. Both are prone to perceptions of crisis and decline---precipitous declines that are sometimes claimed to threaten civilization as we know it. Both literacy and history attach themselves to discourses of legacies and lessons. Both are susceptible to mythologization and are hard to define and measure.¹⁵⁶

As of 2015, we still have no single definition for literacy that encompasses the many ways it is experienced and used. In this chapter, I explore the origins and evolution of “literacy” in an effort to historicize the particular brand of literacy being offered by the CCSS. The document, serving as the authoritative version of literacy, illiteracy, the literate and the illiterate, also never offers a clear definition of “literacy.” Instead, the authors present us with their vision of a *literate person*, suggesting that this latest national literacy imperative is primarily about shaping *people*, and power relationships, rather than improving literacy. This could explain why the literacy standards were drafted first, despite the impetus for the project being the poor performance of U.S. students on international math tests. Literacy is and has always been *culturally* meaningful. In this chapter, I include references to the centrality of literacy in the African American political project, and the simultaneous exclusion of the African American community from the political rewards and benefits of literacy in service of democratic equality. I introduce a brief history of literacy myths and models, the role of the courts in shaping the contemporary discourse of literacy, race, and rights, and I offer historical examples of the uses of literacy to legally impede democratic equality for the African American

¹⁵⁶ Harvey J. Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Indiana University Press, 1987, 1.

community. I discuss the political uses of literacy in the making of the nation-state, and illustrate literacy's connection to racism, liberation, and national identity development.

There is a rich history to the evolution of the definition of "literacy." What is today a very powerful term that conjures up moral authority, virtue, and all of our best intentions, has not always been so prominent in our discourse on education, citizenship, or the economy. One of the challenges of examining "literacy," is that it is often conflated with the idea of "education" and "citizenship," thus establishing a rich repository of ideologies from which to shape the national narrative of people, power, and relationships. Constructions of the "literate" automatically rely on the implicit but understood conception of the "illiterate" and vice versa. The same is true of "literacy" and "illiteracy." Even today these terms are often employed without clarification, used interchangeably, and applied to descriptions of individuals, entire groups, nations, geographic regions, and whole cultures. The malleable and shape-shifting concept of literacy allows it to be applied and understood in a multitude of ways. Despite the many attempts to define and redefine literacy, scholarly work has only been able to conclusively determine that the definition of literacy changes as the characteristics and needs of a society change. From that premise, we can learn much about American society past and present, by examining the historical trajectory of the formal definitions of "literacy," "illiteracy," "literate," and "illiterate."

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the concept of "literacy" is a relatively recent phenomenon. The adjective "literate," first appears in 1432, and is defined as meaning "educated." The word "illiterate" makes its debut in 1556, but "illiteracy" does not appear until 1660, and is not connected to reading or writing until 1880, where it is used to describe voters who cannot cast a written ballot and must voice

their votes instead. The term “literacy” does not appear in the OED until 1880. In the English language, interestingly, “illiterate” is derived from “literate,” but “literacy” is derived from “illiteracy.” The sequence of this etymology is not inconsequential, as each pair remains mutually constitutive to this day.

In his recent book, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*, David Barton discusses his findings after researching 20 U.S. dictionaries to determine the evolution of the use and understanding of the meaning of “literacy.” He finds mention of the term “illiterate” in Samuel Johnson’s first English Dictionary in 1755, but no mention of the term again until it appears in Barclay’s Dictionary of 1820. In 1839, Walker’s Critical Pronouncing Dictionary has the term “illiteracy” and “literate,” with the latter meaning “educated or “learned.” In 1883, The New England Journal of Education mentions Massachusetts as being first in “literacy” amongst the union states, but it is not until 1924 that we see the first mention of the word “literacy” in an American dictionary. The dictionaries of 1894 list “literate” as the opposite of “illiterate” for the first time in U.S. history. By the time the first dictionary formally lists the term “literacy,” it is defined as being able to read and write. Current dictionaries now list this particular definition as the first, with “educated” typically listed as a secondary definition.¹⁵⁷ Despite the fact that “literacy” has more positive connotations in contemporary language use, “illiteracy” is actually the term of origin and “literacy” is derived from it. According to Barton, the term “literacy” began as the private property of individual people and later became a descriptor of entire cultures.

¹⁵⁷ David Barton, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 19.

“Literacy” is a long contested and ambiguous concept. Even today, the concept may be the impetus behind policy documents or national programs without it ever being defined. This is part of the timelessness and usefulness of “literacy.” The word is often imbued with mythical and moralistic qualities that allow it to be applied like a salve to cure all social, political, and economic ills. It has sometimes been appropriated to right the wrongs of history, raise the life hopes of the indigent, and level the playing field in idealistic democratic nations. As demonstrated in the latest CCSS version, literacy is typically portrayed as an end, a means, a movement, and a force for good. It is sometimes a private commodity, an essential factor in national development, or a basic and functional set of discrete skills. Part of the difficulty in critically examining “literacy” as an object is that it is a slippery slope of shape-shifting subjectivities and relationships.¹⁵⁸ I will continue where much of the work around literacy often begins: with the actual power of the written word.

The history of western culture and the written word is a long and entrenched one. The foundational beliefs and practices of this country’s Judeo-Christian culture mean that U.S. society has put tremendous value on the power of the written word as found in sacred religious texts, especially the bible. “In the beginning was the Word, and the

¹⁵⁸ For further discussion of these usages, see Brian Street’s “What’s “New” in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice.” *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (Teachers College) 5, no. 2 (2003): 77-91; Kris D. Gutierrez, P. Zitali Morales and Danny C. Martinez, “Re-mediating Literacy: Culture, Difference, and Learning for Students From Nondominant Communities.” *Review of Research in Education* (American Educational Research Association) 33 (March 2009), 212.; Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton. “Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice.” *Journal of Literacy Research* 34 (2002): 337-356; Amy Rose, “Adult Education as Federal Policy: The Search for a Literacy Agenda.” *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* 3 (1994): 4-13; Judy Kalman, “Beyond Definition: Central Concepts For Understanding Literacy.” *International Review of Education* 54 (2008): 523-538; Harvey Graff, *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011; and Robert Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, ed. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008.

Word was with God, and the Word was God,' starts John's version of Creation in the King James Version of the Bible. 'Man's word is God in man,' echoed the nineteenth century British poet Alfred Lord Tennyson."¹⁵⁹ Early on, to be opposed to the written word was tantamount to blasphemy. However, many religious and state leaders would worry over how to ensure that the written word of sacred texts was read and understood "correctly."

Plato perhaps first raises the challenging intersection of reading, writing, and ruling in his critique of writing as found in *Phaedrus*. This contradiction, or "dilemma," could serve as a metaphor for the continuing struggles of the United States to move toward a true definition of literacy: "And every word, once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself."¹⁶⁰ Plato represents the dilemma that remains at the heart of contemporary literacy: writing cannot defend itself, it cannot reason, and therefore it cannot guarantee or defend its interpretation. Those who are "ready" to read its meaning and those who are not can both be the audiences when all know how to decode the letter symbols.¹⁶¹ Hence, the conception of literacy has been both a weapon of hegemonic colonialism and a liberating tool of revolutionaries. From Plato's dilemma over the written word, to the Bible's word as "God in man," the formation of contracts and treaties, and the articulation of specific standards, the increase

¹⁵⁹ Ray Browne and Arthur Neal. "The Many Tongues of Literacy." *Journal of Popular Culture* 25, no. 1 (summer 1991), 158.

¹⁶⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, section 275e.

¹⁶¹ For further discussion, see James Paul Gee's, "The Legacies of Literacy: From Plato to Freire Through Harvey Graff." *Harvard Education Review* 582 (1988): 195-212.

of mass literacy has been fraught with anxiety, liberation, order, and control. The very evolution of the term “literacy” reflects the changing value of reading, writing, and speaking to a modern, and now post-modern body politic.

For Plato, true knowledge and understanding could only happen through the dialogic interaction that occurs between two people who can ask each other questions and thus have the opportunity to defend what they know and understand as well as amend it when presented with new information. In short, Plato found fault with any form of language that discouraged critique and questioning because it inhibited the process of uncovering true meaning and hence, learning. There are scholars who argue that Plato also condemned poets and politicians in addition to rhetoricians as they all used language as a way to mask the truth rather than to uncover it.¹⁶² But Plato and his Socrates were also revolutionaries in the sense that they opposed the order of their contemporary society and instead argued for a natural hierarchy with “philosopher-kings” like Plato himself, at the top of the food chain. So while Plato’s attack on writing can be taken out of context to mean one man’s noble pursuit of all things true and beautiful, the text takes on a deeper meaning when considering the dynamics of the political, economic, and social conditions within which Plato wrote. If Plato believed the philosopher should be at the top, then the rhetoricians, politicians, and poets were some of his competition in the hierarchy of authority. Thus, Plato’s critique on writing can be read as a base fear of the power of the reader to interpret and make alternative meaning from any text. The CCSS writers, then, reached the same conclusion as Plato about power and hierarchy in relation to literacy:

¹⁶² Ibid.

there must be external structures in place to ensure that readers and consumers of text reach the “right” conclusions.

As some Plato scholars have noted, this leads us to the notion of authoritarianism and the “will to power.” In essence, the idea that not all are born ready to make the interpretations that count, so someone has to control for the selection and dismissal of credentials that qualify someone to read and interpret in the “right” way. Of course, this conclusion only leads us back to the purpose of the poets, rhetoricians, and politicians: to persuade and seduce through language in the name of controlling the ideas and interpretations, as opposed to pure education and the uncovering of one’s truth and beauty. As Plato scholars and philosophers have argued, Plato’s contradiction or “dilemma” regarding literacy is real, and many have wrestled with it over time. Ultimately, the mythologization of literacy was employed by rulers to help resolve Plato’s contradiction regarding the written word.

Ancient political thinkers like Plato, and also Aristotle, formed the foundational political philosophies upon which more modern U.S. thinkers based their own. Thomas Jefferson is one such influential leader whose views helped to shape the way American society still views the value of educating its citizens. Jefferson’s ideas were derived from a western tradition of thinkers who believed that education had an important role in a well-ordered community. Ancient philosophers viewed the pursuit of education as virtuous and in service to both state and God.¹⁶³ However, these same thinkers feared the possible crisis over authority (God or state?).¹⁶⁴ They viewed the society as an aristocracy

¹⁶³ See Aristotle’s *Politics*, books 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 1, 2, 8. See also Plato’s *Apology*.

¹⁶⁴ For a discussion of the dilemma over authority, see Plato’s *Crito*, where Socrates bows to the laws of state and not God.

where only a few ruled with the consent of the many. At the same time, these ancients also believed that education was the great instrument by which the legislator could ensure that the future citizens of his state share the common beliefs that make the state possible. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, western philosophers would continue to wrestle with questions regarding human nature, slavery, democracy, justice, authority, virtue, education, and the meaning of the state. As the use and value of acquired literacy evolved in the United States, it remained intertwined with emerging forms of political philosophy and governance.¹⁶⁵

In the United States, literacy has evolved in its definition, status, and connection to the nation state. In the early 18th century, literacy was confined to early Protestant religious communities who sought to read the Bible when there was no official minister available to serve as the messenger of God's word. Under these circumstances, the arbiters of literacy became one's immediate family members or local church community. In the early 18th century, literacy was an instrument for "religious salvation."¹⁶⁶

Later in the 18th century, literacy switched from being a means to religious salvation to being an absolute civic virtue. This was the time of universal literacy for white men in the United States. To be literate was to be able to read the basic political platforms in the local newspapers and pamphlets, and to sign one's own name on the voter cards. Someone who was literate was a recognized member of the United States, a property owner, and a voter. Under these conditions, literacy became an end in itself as it

¹⁶⁵ For more discussion on the influential political philosophies of modern U.S. government, see John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. Edited by C.B. Macpherson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980, and Alexis de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*. Abridged with an Introduction by Michael Kammen. Translated by Elizabeth Trapnell Rawlings. Bedford St. Martin's, 2009.

¹⁶⁶ Amy Rose. "Adult Education as Federal Policy: The Search for a Literacy Agenda." *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning* 3 (1994), 4.

bestowed a certain high “status on its possessor.”¹⁶⁷ It is not inconsequential that this status was also raced, gendered, and classed. The common view of the literate man was that he had full political participation, economic mobility, and social stability. This time in U.S. history also saw organized and strategic literacy efforts directed by white northerners toward African Americans, and at the same white Southerners were legally denying access to literacy for enslaved and immigrant peoples. The idea of literacy as an achievable status for individuals meant that it was employed as both a weapon and a tool by both the powerful and the powerless. In addition to a possible elevation in status, literacy could mean the difference in important political elections.¹⁶⁸ To control the spread of literacy was to control the vote. Because of this, in 1882, the Commissioner of Education in the United States declared that literacy was the key to preserving the newly unified nation

According to an address by the Commissioner of Education in 1882, the United States was having a literacy crisis.¹⁶⁹ Based on 1880 census data, the commissioner, The Honorable John Eaton of New York, determined that an unacceptable number of people in the country could not write. Based on these numbers and the geographic location of the “illiterates,” Mr. Eaton makes the case that as a bloc, this group could have forced an opposite outcome in the last federal election. Implicit in Eaton’s address is the belief that increasing the rate of literacy for all people meant ensuring that the North would retain its political power over the South, and that the citizens of the country would be ruled by

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶⁸ For a discussion of the role of Christianity and religious groups in accessing literacy and its proprietary status, see Jill Lepore’s *A is for American*. Vintage Books, 2007 and Nathan Hatch’s *Democratization of Christianity*. Yale University Press, 1991.

¹⁶⁹ John Eaton. "Illiteracy and its social, political and industrial effects: An address delivered before the Union League Club of New York City, by Honorable John Eaton." NY, NY, December 21, 1882.

their consent to a common understanding of the Constitution and the principles upon which the “founding fathers” established the republic. In more ways than one, Eaton’s account could have been written today. He makes a plea for the federal government to provide monetary support to the existing agencies of the church and school to remedy the problem of dangerous illiterates who are ignorant and more susceptible to dogmas and passions. He makes his case for reading and writing as a pathway to civility, citizenship, participation through enfranchisement, increased value of labor and capital, morality, and virtue both for the individual and society. And he uses the pure raw data from the 1880 census to make his case. His speech may very well be one of the clearest articulations of the connection between the mythology of literacy and the success of the democratic republic. And at the heart of his argument is the belief that those currently in power (the politicians of the North) should remain in power, as this, he believed, was just and good.

Like the analogy he borrows from the sociologist, Dr. Jarvis, Eaton never doubts that a man trained to appreciate how his society is the best, will not interpret texts in any way that encourage that man to act against the best interests of the state. In Eaton’s argument, the state has only the best interests of the educated and virtuous man at heart, and therefore a man is literate when he, too, believes this and gives his consent to be governed. At the same time, the individual man arriving at this “educated” conclusion is exercising his own free will to agree, even though disagreement would mark him as an “ignorant” man. Eaton’s speech implies that he is defining or conceptualizing “literacy” as equating to a person’s ability to read the Bible and the contemporary newspaper articles that communicate the political arguments of the day. According to Eaton, the United States was facing nothing less than Plato’s original literacy dilemma.

What is perhaps most interesting about Eaton's argument, is the fact that he uses the metaphor of slavery and the recent emancipation to communicate the evils of illiteracy and ignorance within and upon the nation. In the first public address regarding a literacy crisis in the United States, race plays a central role. Contrary to popular belief, race and literacy have always been inextricably linked:

Nearly twenty years have passed since the declarations of universal freedom; yet the slavery of ignorance remains with all its perils. Joy is increasing in all the land that man no longer has property in his fellow man; yet we must confess that the evils threatened by African slavery are only partly averted. The millions in ignorance are not as free as American liberty must make free; their ignorance invites vice, crime and petty demagoguism to become their masters, and by ruling them to assail the foundations upon which rest the very citadel of our liberties.¹⁷⁰

Eaton frames his argument for state support of education for the masses within the continued obligation to save the nation from the vestiges of slavery that come in the form of illiteracy and ignorance. He goes on to provide a detailed accounting of the current state of affairs in terms of funding and yields for the partial education of the citizenry through churches and charities. He acknowledges the religious implications of untreated illiteracy but also explains that the cost of literacy education through churches alone would be cost prohibitive and leave thousands uneducated. Eaton argues that religion and liberty will both be preserved by the process of shifting the responsibility of literacy education from the churches and charities to the state itself. From Eaton's point of view, reading and writing were essential to the future of a nation trying to reconstruct itself post-emancipation.

Eaton's speech raises several complicated issues for recently emancipated people to become political free agents in and through their acquisition of reading and writing.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

Literacy, as demonstrated in Eaton's speech, is at once bound together with the liberal ideas of obligation, responsibility, duty, and consent. A "literate status" is presented as a privileged political status accompanied by the duty and obligation to read political news and cast political ballots. A literate status gave one permission to enter into a social contract and grant consent to be governed by a here-to-for pro-slavery government.

Throughout the history of the United States, the African American community has been active in acquiring, defining, and spreading literacy despite the formal and informal restrictions by social, religious, educational, and legal institutions. There is a long history of African Americans as actors, agents, and revolutionaries with regard to literacy, legitimacy, and life. Despite this struggle and its victories being well-documented, there remains today a dominant cultural and institutional belief that the African American community doesn't care about education or schooling. Quite the contrary, literacy has been at the heart of the African American political project since before the days of formal emancipation. While the narrative of the democratic national literacy project has been commonly framed by the politically privileged, it often excludes the literacy efforts of entire communities who have been traditionally excluded from equal democratic participation.¹⁷¹

In the 60 or so years following John Eaton's speech, literacy would shift once again from being a civic virtue to being a "cultural imperative."¹⁷² Various leaders,

¹⁷¹ For this history, see the work of James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. University of North Carolina Press, 1988; Vanessa Siddle Walker, "Black Educators as Educational Advocates in the Decades Before Brown v. Board of Education." *Educational Researcher* (American Educational Research Association) 42, no. 4 (2013): 207-222; Geneva Sitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America*. London : Routledge, 2000; and Carol D. Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity: Interdisciplinary Issues and Critiques." *Review of Research in Education* (AERA) 33, no. 1 (April 2009): 63-100.

¹⁷² Rose, "Adult Education as Federal Policy," 5.

governments, and organizations would seek to define literacy, measure literacy, and spread literacy. By the middle of the 20th century however, it was illiteracy that took center stage in the national imaginary, echoing Eaton's initial fears that illiteracy, ignorance, and the "evil vestiges of slavery" could lead to the downfall of the nation.

In 1946, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded to advance the development of societies around the world. They adopted education as a central tenet of their mission, and thus their attention to literacy has remained consistent. A perusal of the UNESCO documents regarding its work with literacy and global development reveals a useful lineage of national, regional, and more recently, global notions of literacy throughout the twentieth and into the 21st century. Assuming that the founders of UNESCO were considered to be literate by their own definitions, an analysis of the UNESCO definitions of literacy reveal an interesting history of how literacy leaders have defined literacy. In other words, we should not lose track of the significance that those who consider themselves to be literate are always in the position of defining the "illiterate," but never the other way around. Hence, the power of "naming" literacy equates to a presumed possession and mastery of said "literacy."

In the 1940's and 1950's, as chronicled by many scholars, both UNESCO and the U.S. defined a "literate person" as someone who was "functional" in their capacity to read and write. UNESCO researchers defined this "functional literate," as someone who could "write a short, simple statement on his everyday life."¹⁷³ Interestingly, the United States quickly formulated the criteria for "functional literacy" as defined by the number of years in school. Despite the applied technical skills of any one individual, in the

¹⁷³ David Harman. "Illiteracy: An Overview." *Harvard Educational Review* 40, no. 2 (1970), 226. Harman is quoting himself from a 1965 UNESCO panel meeting in Paris, France that explored "Literacy as a Factor in Development."

United States you were illiterate if you had had less than 5 documented years of schooling.¹⁷⁴ Scholar Kenneth Levine explains that early on, “The Census Bureau was attempting to characterize the literacy levels of large populations with indicators simple enough for respondents and enumerators to use in the field. Unfortunately, its formulation perpetuated the idea of a strict equivalence between amount of schooling and reading and writing attainments.”¹⁷⁵ According to Levine, this presumption lead many to make sweeping and inaccurate assumptions about the skills and abilities of many individuals and groups of people based solely on data from surveys about how many years someone had been in school.

In his analysis of the UNESCO documents, Levine finds that the concept of “functional literacy” first appears formally in an “authoritative publication that reached an international audience” in 1956, when UNESCO published findings from its survey on reading and writing. In the beginning, UNESCO located “functional literacy” within its larger project of spreading “fundamental education,” but due to the influence of the 1956 survey, literacy soon became the cornerstone of their work. As Levine points out, UNESCO initially viewed basic reading, writing, and even counting as ingredients necessary for the further development and civilization of all industrial societies. In other words, UNESCO viewed such skills as a means to an end, rather an end itself. However, at the same moment UNSECO was embracing and defining literacy as a core component of fundamental education for all, its Executive Secretary, Sir Julian Huxley, was warning the world that in the wrong hands, literacy was becoming a route to cheap amusements at the expense of cultural treasures. Levine cites the following quote from Huxley in 1947:

¹⁷⁴ Kenneth Levine. "Functional Literacy: Fond Illusions and False Economies." *Harvard Educational Review* (Harvard College) 52, no. 3 (August 1982), 250.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

Literacy is not enough.... Certainly for some people literacy has meant merely new ways of filling time, new forms of escape from reality in the shape of cheap newspapers and magazines.... instead of sending them to the stored treasures of art and wisdom or promoting deeper understanding of nature and human life.¹⁷⁶

By 1949, UNESCO was issuing pamphlets that warned against the view that “illiterate people are children who should be disciplined into progress.”¹⁷⁷ Cultural elitism and paternalism went hand-in-hand with initial efforts to define and extend “functional literacy.” Combined with the optimism that followed WWII in the U.S., it is not difficult to connect the dots and see how the country’s sense of itself as the pinnacle of morality, liberty, intellectuality, and technology could lead it to conclude that literacy was indeed, an agent of its progress.

The perhaps unfortunate flipside to seeing literacy as progress, is seeing illiteracy as cultural and national demise. There has been significant scholarship documenting the emergence of the belief that “illiteracy” and “illiterates” were akin to a national disease by the 1950’s.¹⁷⁸ Following WWII, the nation turned its gaze homeward toward a new victorious nation and a leader of the free world. Literacy was now more than an individual virtue; it was the mark of a truly democratic society. To be literate was as much for the common good as for individual virtue. Within this context, illiteracy surfaced as a profound national disability that threatened everything from the economy to national security. According to scholar Amy Rose, “Those who lacked literacy were now outsiders. In fact, illiteracy became one of many factors interwoven with poverty to explain ‘social maladjustment.’ The inability to read and write no longer simply signified

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ UNESCO in Levine, "Functional Literacy," 251.

¹⁷⁸ For further discussion of illiteracy as a national disease, see Kenneth Levine, David Harman, Amy Rose, et al.

the lack of a specific skill, but it stood rather at the center of a nexus of social pathologies to be eradicated.”¹⁷⁹

The post-war optimism in the US simultaneously generated a rise in the fear of losing the nation’s international standing and political, economic, and social success. This culture of fear turned the prior beliefs and views of literacy as salvation, virtue, status, and agent of progress, to a profound fear of illiteracy as a plague on the nation. In the wartime discourse, President Roosevelt pointed out that 433,000 native born white draftees had been denied the opportunity to serve in the nation’s defense because they had not met the army’s basic literacy requirement.¹⁸⁰ According to Rose, this illiteracy was linked with a loss of labor in the form of “manpower” to defend the nation. Because the army needed the manpower, they had no choice but to create literacy policy that included initiatives to increase the schooling and therefore literacy of its draftees. The nation soon equated this illiteracy with a threat to the national defense, a potential drain on national resources, and a scandalous stain on the national reputation. In short order, increased literacy skills were seen as leading to increased job-force skills and human resources, which would lead to better defense and production for a more stable and sustainable nation.

Soon, a syllogistic logic emerged on the domestic front, where everything and everyone illiterate was threatening, and everything and everyone threatening was illiterate. Because illiteracy was still defined as having less than five years of formal schooling, many reformers looked to the schools as the cure for illiteracy. Those people who had access to schooling tended to also be those from the most resourced and

¹⁷⁹ Rose, "Adult Education as Federal Policy," 5.

¹⁸⁰ Levine, "Functional Literacy," 250.

privileged families, so illiteracy tended to follow concentrations of poverty whereas literacy followed concentrations of resources. At this point in US history, those who had the least resources were those historically denied access to schooling, jobs, and membership in the nation. The dynamics of this climate often produced a conflation of illiteracy with poverty, and poverty with blackness, making white conceptions of the “illiterate” overwhelmingly synonymous with African American communities, schools, and individuals. Tracing the conception of literacy through the second half of the twentieth century is a matter of trying to tease out white anxieties about these perceived threats. To best do this, it is perhaps easiest to look at the development of federal literacy policy.

Throughout the 1950’s, governments of industrialized societies around the world undertook programs and initiatives to counter the perceived problem of illiteracy. In 1961, UNSECO was formally commissioned by the United Nations General assembly to study the state of world illiteracy and recommend a plan of action. What they proposed was a direct attack on illiteracy through enhanced and extended schooling for both children and adults. By 1962, UNESCO had identified the completion of secondary school as essential to eradicating illiteracy. At the same time, President Kennedy was appealing to a new type of literacy crisis to rally the nation to invest in education. By 1966, the United States had passed the Adult Education Act, which named completion of secondary education a national priority.

In a speech to Congress in 1962, President Kennedy argued for making public education a priority of the federal government. In the very opening of the address, Kennedy describes education as both the “foundation and the unifying force of our democratic way of life---it is the mainspring of our economic and social progress---it is

the highest achievement in our society, ennobling and enriching human life.”¹⁸¹ Kennedy associates education with social mobility, democracy, and individual and collective virtue. When he does this, he is appealing to the nostalgia of a white audience for whom this conception of literacy would resonate. While he attributes these qualities to “education” and not “literacy,” he next goes on to describe the failures of the current education system as resulting in the “illiterate and untrained, and thus either unemployed or underemployed.” When Kennedy referred to these same “educational failures” as breeding “delinquency, despair, and dependence,” and increasing the “costs of unemployment and public welfare,” it was not a stretch for the public to link illiteracy to the ultimate social, economic, and political pathology still plaguing the nation in 1962.

Further on in the speech, Kennedy addresses the “Reduction of Adult Illiteracy” directly. In describing the problem, Kennedy names the estimated number of Americans having “attended school for less than five years, and more than a third of these completely lacking the ability to read and write.” He goes on to say that the “twin tragedies of illiteracy and dependency are often passed on from generation to generation.”¹⁸² With poverty, illiteracy, and the national economy all tied together as a crisis necessitating federal intervention in education, the government was poised to subject any new literacy policy to the filters of the political policy-making process.

Kennedy’s plea to Congress to aid the states in initiating and growing literacy programs for the sake of fixing educational failures was answered with the passing of the Adult Education Act (AEA) in 1966. Adult education was seen by proponents as the quickest way to raise literacy levels and thus improve the production and employment of

¹⁸¹ John F. Kennedy. "Special Message to the Congress on Education." *The Public Papers of President John F. Kennedy*. February 6, 1962.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

more of the current workforce. In 1964, The Adult Basic Education Program was established as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. By 1966, all states had some sort of adult education program in place already. When the Adult Education Act was passed, it resulted in the linking of the new goals with the existing Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and this resulted in an explicit grant to aid states in developing programs that would serve people 18 years of age and older “whose inability to read and write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to obtain employment.”¹⁸³ In 1968, the AEA was amended to serve people 16 years of age and older, and in 1970, to extend educational opportunities through the secondary level. This amended version was officially called the Adult Secondary Education program. The amendments made in 1978 separated the adult skill-set in literacy from those of the schools. The adult skills were now competency-based for the purposes of “functioning” in society. The focus on adult education and literacy attainment reflected the heightened anxieties of a nation concerned about economic mobility and opportunity. By the early 1990’s, the priorities of this same legislation included the language of “economic self-sufficiency” and defined “literate” as possessing the requisite skills for global competition, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship.¹⁸⁴

Eventually, the services provided by the AEA of 1966 were integrated into the National Literacy Act, which supported the improved literacy of adults in order to meet the federal education agenda of the Clinton administration. In 1991 Congress passed the National Literacy Act to address goal #5 in the Clinton administration’s “Goals 2000” national education plan. In Goals 2000, the Clinton administration laid out six goals to be

¹⁸³ United States Congress. "Economic Opportunity Act of 1964." *Public Law 88-452*. U.S. Government, August 20, 1964, 520, sec 212.

¹⁸⁴ Division of Adult Education and Literacy. "Adult Education Act." *Adult Learning and Literacy*, 1991.

completed between the years 1990 and 2000. The fifth goal reads as follows: “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.”¹⁸⁵ Immediately following the re-articulation of the goal for which federal programs must be established, the policy makers define the term of literacy as meaning “an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential.”¹⁸⁶

The incorporation of this definition is particular to an act that focuses on the goals of adult literacy, including the achievement of basic functional literacy for “marginally employed” or non-employed persons (marginally employed is never defined in this document) through direct partnership with the private business sector. Though “marginally employed” is never defined, it is clear from the list of “titles” in the act as to where policy makers are expecting to find illiterate individuals. The act authorizes appropriations in eight key areas that include literacy research and planning, workforce literacy, investment in literacy, programs for commercial drivers, books for families, literacy for incarcerated individuals, literacy challenge grants, and territories and freely associated States. From these targets, one could assume that the highest population of functionally illiterate individuals is in low income areas that translate into higher incarceration levels and low-paying job opportunities. The provisions of the NLA meant that institutes, programs, research, and workforce aid would be created and disseminated for the express purpose of raising adult functional literacy rates in the US. The language

¹⁸⁵ Paul H. Irwin. *National Literacy Act of 1991: Major Provisions of P.L. 102-73*. General, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, United States Government, 1991, 7.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

of the act suggests that the highest rates of illiteracy among adults are found across the lowest levels of socioeconomic class and correlate to income and occupation. The implicit assumption is that becoming functionally literate will impact the quality of the nation's economic competitiveness and increase the participation of the nation's citizenry. The significance of understanding the federal government's conception of literacy and literacy priorities is that this set the basis for the future trajectory of recent federal and national literacy efforts by marrying the corporate world to literacy policy and practice in the nation.

MYTHS AND MODELS OF LITERACY

The trajectory of reading, writing, and speaking is a long and unique history in the United States and in other English speaking (colonized) regions. Because of its relatively modern origins, the concept and definition of "literacy" is not easily translatable across languages and cultures. In English-speaking countries, including the United States, reading, writing, and speaking is bound up in national identity, authority, and legitimacy. Like any history, the history of literacy reveals the ways in which aspects of communication, education, and information are gendered, raced, and classed. The one constant running through the history of literacy in the U.S. is the ever-present but always contested relationship of power, place, and political force. In order to fully realize these literacy effects, scholars and academics expanded the study of literacy definitions and conceptions outside of the United States in order to create a framework for understanding its place within the United States.

Not unlike the language of contemporary educational discourse, the language of literacy definitions is rife with an explicit vocabulary of power. John Eaton, in his 1882

speech, employed the analogy of the master and slave to describe the implications of literate vs. illiterate. This same foundational power dynamic is seen repeatedly in the language of literacy throughout U.S. history. This pattern confirms that literacy cannot be understood *outside* of a racialized power relationship. To divorce literacy from this historical reality is a form of erasure, denial and repression. Throughout the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's, the definitions shifted to include a more politically leaning orientation and appreciation for the personal empowerment of literacy. Embedded in the language of these definitions is a pattern of power-relationships, such as those depicted by the terms "slave mentality," (Nyerere, 1975) "domination or liberation," (Freire, 1971) "dominant reading and writing," techniques, (Ntiri, 2009), and most recently, the importance of "mastery" (CCSS, 2010).¹⁸⁷ The language of "mastery" in the CCSS must therefore be understood as *reproducing* this racialized relationship. Despite the authors' intentions, the reality of this history prevents any attempt to abstract literacy from this dynamic. Whether viewed as dominating or liberating, stakeholders perceive the acquisition of literacy in the 20th and 21st centuries as an essential tool of power. With this realization came the influx of new research and subsequent scholarship regarding all aspects of "literacy" definitions, possibilities, and policies.

Returning to Barton's research surrounding literacy in the U.S., we find that there are not many books published on the subject before the 1980's. Even in the 1980's, only a couple books a year were released. By 1991, the number of books with "literacy" in the title had increased to 15, and a quick search for the same on amazon.com reveals an

¹⁸⁷ For further discussion of education as liberation, see especially Paolo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1971, and Daphne Ntiri, "Toward a Functional and Culturally Salient Definition of Literacy," *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* 3, no. 2 (2009): 97-104.

accumulation of 206, 218 results. Literacy, as an object of study is a very recent and very popular subject:

The titles reveal a great deal. One of the first key books in the field was *Language and Literacy: the sociolinguistics of reading and writing* (Stubbs, 1980). There is clearly a definition of literacy in that title. This was followed in 1981 by *The Psychology of Literacy* (Scribner and Cole, 1981) which at the time seemed a challenging title, claiming so much more than books entitled *The Psychology of Reading*. Already we knew that it relates to the 'social order' (Cressy, 1980) and that there is a 'literacy myth' (Graff, 1979). Although a short article rather than a book, a whole methodological approach was suggested with 'The ethnography of literacy' (Szwed, 1981). Others then asserted that literacy has a 'social context' (Levine, 1985) and is 'socially constructed' (Cook-Gumperz, 1986). It has theory underlying it as well as practice (Street, 1984). It relates to 'popular culture' (Vincent, 1989) and it is 'emergent' in children (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). Other words in titles make links with literacy, including orality, empowerment, involvement, culture and politics, right up to interest in 'ideology and discourses' (Gee, 1996), or it simply goes under the heading *The new literacy* (Willinsky, 1990). 'Ecology' is one more link, one which can bring together many of these strands.¹⁸⁸

Up until the late-1980's, most scholars and policymakers believed that literacy preceded material and social development. The many studies surrounding literacy that exploded onto the scene in the 1980's helped to dispel the "myths" of literacy.¹⁸⁹ "School has been promoted as the institution responsible for the education of new readers and writers who, according to this view, will learn the basic skills necessary for entering the work force, vocational or professional training and, eventually, placement in the job market."¹⁹⁰ In addition, there is also a widespread belief that literacy will lead to personal improvement and enlightenment.

¹⁸⁸ David Barton. *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, 22-23.

¹⁸⁹ Harvey Graff. *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011.

¹⁹⁰ Judy Kalman. "Beyond Definition: Central Concepts For Understanding Literacy." *International Review of Education* 54 (2008), 524.

In her research, Judy Kalman has determined that the history of literacy definitions in this country demonstrate that the literate person has been depicted differently over time as someone who can performatively do the following:

1. Sign his/her name
2. Read/write a simple sentence describing his/her daily activities
3. Read and write, by his/her self-report (not based on a test)
4. Pass a written reading comprehension test at a level comparable to that achieved by an average 4th grade student
5. Engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his/her community¹⁹¹

Kalman outlines the performative nature of functional literacy skills, but it is Robert Pattison who names the “axioms” that tend to govern the belief in what Pattison calls the “same old whine” in declarations of literacy crisis. He describes the first of these as the belief that literacy only equals the ability to read and write, that those who can do this are more “cultured or civilized” than those who can’t, that such skills should be imposed on the poor as a “first step in their economic and social development,” and that such skills should be emphasized and taught in the name of preserving democracy, “moral values, rational thought, and all we hold dear” in the nation.¹⁹² With the growth in literacy research and the expansion of a formal disciplinary field, Pattison and others began to poke holes in some of the ideology surrounding the American notion of literacy.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 525.

¹⁹² Robert Pattison. *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock*. Oxford University Press, 1982, vi.

The “sociocultural model” of literacy sees literacy as more than just the basic isolated skills of reading and writing, but rather literacy is how a person uses these skills in their daily lives. This model includes the belief that there are differing consequences to literacy skills dependent on how an individual or group is socially and politically situated. Those who ascribe to this model often depict literacy in two stages: the ability to use the written word to participate in one’s society, and separately, the deliberate manipulation of the written word to create new meanings and effects in one’s world. The first of these stages might be described as “being literate,” according to Kalman, while the second is a more a process of “becoming literate.”¹⁹³ The sociocultural model of literacy acknowledges that the written culture is nested within social institutions where power dynamics determine who gets to name what counts as the “right” literacy and for whom. These institutional power arrangements also impact the constraints or permissions under which a person may exercise their use of the written word. Kalman and others refer to these arrangements as “asymmetrical power relations” and often list the current dominance of the western tradition in school curriculum as one example. Under this tradition, to succeed at school-based literacies, students must “master” the basic rules of “standard” English language usage as found in classical literature and reflected in expository essays. Because this western tradition dominates school-based literacies, the country’s institutions tend to value this conception of literate over local literacy practices and understandings, such as those seen in text messages, blog posts, and hip-hop music. The sociocultural model of literacy involves an emphasis on both context and our participation in that context as important factors for literacy acquisition and use.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Kalman, "Beyond Definition," 527.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

According to some scholars, equal access to the acquisition of literacy has been narrowly conceptualized as the equal opportunity to sit in a classroom and be subjected to this western tradition of reading and writing. Such scholars argue that this definition of equal access neglects the differentiated impact on the results of this literacy learning that seems to always reward the wealthiest and most privileged among us, while at the same time punishing the poorest racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority students. Computers and technology are only recently being considered in discussions of the materiality of access to literacy practices, and recent research suggests that how individuals use these devices (for consumption, collaboration, creation, or curation) impacts the kind of literacy students develop. Kalman asserts that just having a computer with Internet access does not guarantee that a student will do anything other than shop or listen to music. She contends that we would need to investigate what kinds of learning influence the student who uses that same computer to create and sell a product, for instance. The stratified social practices involved with any form of technology, so these scholars believe, must be studied alongside the basic elements of reading and writing to determine the power of context to shape our participation in our own world through literacy.

Kalman provides a useful summary for the implication of neglecting the many important facets of social interaction in the use and acquisition of literacy:

In authentic uses of literacy, the reader and writer control their reading and writing activities. Access to literacy, in a broad sense of the term, requires contact with powerful discourses and literacy practices that lead to understanding and responding to other discourses (Bahktin 1981), how to read the world using experience and texts as a reference, (Freire 1970); and relationships that give literacy a place in ones' personal and social life (Dyson 1997).¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 532.

While scholars have exchanged and extended the terms and theories they use to invoke these same ideas, the basic conclusion is this: literacy is complicated and powerful, and if students only experience it as a set of isolated and prescriptive practices determined and controlled by someone else, then they will develop a literacy apart from that of someone who experiences more autonomy and control of what they read and write.¹⁹⁶ If we connect this idea back to Plato's dilemma, we are forced to confront the notion that at least part of the explanation for varying levels of literacy is that there are too many cooks in the kitchen. This conclusion certainly supports the development of something like the CCSS and the increased value of all things "coherent," aligned," and "common" in American educational governance and policy for the 21st century.

Originally, literacy scholars posited that literacy was made up of a discrete set of skills and practices that, when mastered, allowed a society or nation to thrive economically, politically, and socially. In more recent research, this is referred to as the "autonomous model" of literacy.¹⁹⁷ Beginning with Brian Street in 1984, the world of literacy research turned to notions of local literacies and the power of social mechanisms to shape literacy. "In other words, social context organizes literacy, rather than the other way around."¹⁹⁸ In the autonomous model of literacy, the text stood alone as able to render its own meaning to the reader, regardless of context. Yet much of the research was

¹⁹⁶ See especially the works of Deborah Brandt, especially *Literacy and Learning: Reflections on Writing, Reading, and Society*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009, Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. Herder and Herder, 1971; Carol Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity: Interdisciplinary Issues and Critiques." *Review of Research in Education* (AERA) 33, no. 1 (April 2009): 63-100; M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Micheal Holquist and Caryl Emerson. University of Texas Press, 1981; Micheal Eric Dyson *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

¹⁹⁷ Brian Street, "What's "New" in New Literacy Studies? Critical Approaches to Literacy in Theory and Practice." *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (Teachers College) 5, no. 2 (2003): 77-91.

¹⁹⁸ Deborah Brandt and Katie Clinton. "Limits of the Local: Expanding Perspectives on Literacy as a Social Practice." *Journal of Literacy Research* 34 (2002), 340.

showing that readers interpreted the meaning of the same text in different ways, and could respond to texts submissively or aggressively. “People could shape reading and writing to their own purposes, often in inventive ways.”¹⁹⁹ This later model of literacy is now referred to as literacy as “social practice.” In 2002, Brandt and Clinton posited a third theoretical framework that they argue best fits with a post-modern literate society: the “literacy-in-action” model. This model borrows on scientist and social scientist Bruno Latour, who seeks to bring together the formally divided pretext of “natural” and “social” world in the realm of science. In short, Latour’s theory allows for the reinterpretation of literacy objects as social actors exercising some agency in the interactions with humans. “We want to restore what could be called an autonomous status to literacy, meaning that it is a something in practice, not merely an accomplishment of practice.”²⁰⁰ From this notion, Brandt and Clinton coin a set of analytical constructs they refer to as “literacy-in-action,” “sponsors of literacy,” and “localizing moves, globalizing connects, folding in.”²⁰¹ Their theoretical framework represents the latest, post-internet set of constructs, which might be the best to apply to the CCSS brand of literacy for the needs of a 21st century society.

Literacy scholar, Deborah Brandt, has done extensive work using the concept of a “literacy sponsor” to help us understand both the macro and micro levels of literacy

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 341.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 348.

²⁰¹ Brandt and Clinton discuss “Literacy-in-action” as “literacy action [that is] part of our action” and implies that any “objective trace of literacy” in a given setting (like a screen print t-shirt) should be considered in theoretical studies of social practices. “Sponsors of literacy” are defined as “underwriters” of someone else’s reading and writing actions: “those agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable or induce literacy and gain advantage by it in some way (349). “Localizing moves, global connects, folding in” refers to the reading and writing actions or interaction of human or nonhuman agents in any context. This concept allows for the tracing of literacy from the bottom up as well as the top down in a globalizing society (351-352).

acquisition, advancement, and application. “The concept of the literacy sponsor recognizes the historical fact that access to literacy has always required assistance, permission, sanction, or coercion by more powerful others or, at least, contact with existing ‘grooves’ of communication.”²⁰² For the most part, the relationship between the literacy sponsor and the person receiving literacy as a reward for their commitment, loyalty, or service has resembled older models of European patronage. “Patronage integrated otherwise antagonistic social classes into relationships of mutual, albeit unequal, dependencies.”²⁰³ According to Brandt and Clinton, tracing both the humans and the literacy objects, or things, can illuminate the hegemonic forces at play, and link the actual act of reading or writing to multiple agendas, agents, and interests. As Brandt succinctly notes, “When we use literacy, we also get used.”²⁰⁴ This particular view of literacy sponsors allows us to investigate the creation and dissemination of materials, the funding for these creations, the methods of dissemination, and the indebtedness of the users. “Tracing sponsorship illuminates how things in a setting serve as surrogates for the interests of absent others.”²⁰⁵ Such investigation can help flush out the power dynamics in the core of literacy: the relationship between the learner, the teacher, and the materials.

The construct, “localizing moves, globalizing connects, folding in,” as described by Brandt and Clinton in 2002, involves an emphasis on literacy as an abstracting of human-life-world elements that also redistributes these elements onto “things,” such as diplomas, web pages, job credentials, and paychecks. “Localizing moves” describes the immediate and local literacy practices, skills, habits, and behaviors that make-up literacy

²⁰² Ibid., 349.

²⁰³ Ibid., 350.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

in action at the local level. This could include cultural norms and values that make particular genres preferred over others, or certain local rewards for certain types of literacy. Because technology and the world of communication has meant an increasing globalizing force in all things political, social, and economic, literacy can serve as a bridge from the macro world of globalization to the micro level of classroom reading and writing in neighborhood schools. The joining of these globalizing technologies with Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" that is formed through readership, leaves us with an increasing possibility that individuals have memberships in multiple globalizing communities at any given moment.²⁰⁶ These memberships could be sustained through the preference of a particular author, the joining of a fan club, filling out a census form, or clicking on a website and being counted among the growing number of "hits."²⁰⁷ "In technologized, post-modern societies, in which the trade routes of goods and ideas---not to mention identities and affiliations---can be complex, corporate, and fluid, globalizing connects are regular actions in reading and writing."²⁰⁸ This influence can flow in both directions, from global to local and from local to global, being perpetually mediated by technologies along the way. These interactions are changing so rapidly, that tracing the networks involves significant searching in real time and virtual space simultaneously, while trying to untangle the web of authorship in a world of selective anonymity.

"Localizing moves" is a useful concept that allows us to actively seek out those globalizing actors that appear absent in local contexts. According to Brandt and Clinton,

²⁰⁶ For more discussion of "imagined communities," see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Verso, 1983.

²⁰⁷ Brandt and Clinton, "Limits of the Local." 351.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.

“literate practices are, more often than not, responses to technological change, just as so many of the new electronic genres (email, chat rooms, websites) have emerged as aspects of the proliferation of personal computers and internet connections.” And of course, since 2002, social media, improved wireless capabilities, and the introduction of mobile technologies have intensified literate responses. Many current scholars are now claiming that students are learning and applying more literacy skills outside of school than within the classroom walls, authorship is now possible for anyone at anytime, and publishing a professional document is now instantaneous, often free, and can happen with the use of an “app” rather than an agent, designer, editor, and clearinghouse.

It is perhaps not inconsequential that the CCSS emerged on the scene at the onset of mass mobile technology and new social media use. The constraining and nostalgic framing of the “right” literacy practices could be seen as a direct response to the new anxieties of authorship in the digital age. Where once many needed to read but only a few needed to be able to write, now everyone is writing and many are making money and participating in the production of capital across class and geographical boundaries. This might explain in part, the seeming return of the CCSS in literacy to the now debunked notion of literacy as a set of autonomous and isolated skills. The new ideal literate person is one who participates in the new system and concedes that in a literate society, some literacies are more right than others.

Technology has allowed literacy sponsors and actors to extend the relationships of power and influence in multiple directions and through a variety of communities in an instant. Brandt and Clinton’s concept of “folding in” describes the new capacities of these ontological relationships. Borrowing from Latour, they argue that these new technologies have allowed a shrinking number of people to have an increasingly large impact on other

people. Where once a person would have to be able to fly a plane to a far away location, hover over a village, physically press a button to drop a bomb, and then witness the explosion and desecration of the landscape, all this can now be done from the comfort of a room and the use of a computer. Not unlike playing a video game, one can maneuver a drone over a geographical site, fire a missile, and then get a cup of coffee or check email. Technology allows us to exercise power and influence in increasingly distanced ways. The concept of “folding in” allows us to investigate the practice of literacy while not falling prey to myths that literacy is an autonomous set of isolated skills. It reminds us to ask questions about how the prescription of certain literacy practices and materials participates in the extension of powerful relationships, contributes to hegemonic pressures, or reproduces the very inequities it seeks to rectify. “Literacy as a technology—as a collection of things and mediums—does not exist free of human contexts and ideological designs. It is unfair and dangerous to treat literacy as if it did.”²⁰⁹ As Brandt and Clinton remind us, viewing literacy as a set of practices in action helps us understand why so many have found it an attractive and powerful force to control.

In 2011, scholar Harvey J. Graff published *Literacy, Myths, Legacies, and Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. The book is the culmination of 40 years of research regarding the history of literacy as well as literacy’s role in the history of societies. Much of Graff’s contemplation of literacy in American society revolves around his reflections on the significance of his 1979 work, *The Literacy Myth*, which chronicled the literacy movements of 19th century America. What Graff concluded in 1979, was that literacy, in and of itself, was not a guarantee of upward social mobility, economic gains, or national stability. Instead, Graff suggests that the realities of social and political contexts are the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 354.

determining factors for shaping the literacies of people in the United States. Yet, literacy, according to Graff, is often conceived as the “independent and critical variable” in discussions of progress, order, transformation, and control.²¹⁰ Graff’s work contradicted the work of new social science historians who, at the time, overwhelmingly believed that literacy was a pre-requisite for individual and group progress. "In the twentieth century, particularly during the period from 1960 on, pronouncements about literacy deem it a process of critical consciousness-raising and human liberation. Just as frequently, such declarations refer to literacy, not as an end itself, but as a means to other goals--- to the ends of national development and to a social order that elites, both national and international, define."²¹¹ When Graff published his book in 1979, he did so at the very moment the racial achievement gap in schooling and wealth was at its narrowest, and only two years before the commissioning of the foundational 20th century educational reform report, *A Nation at Risk*. The timing of Graff’s work is not inconsequential given that the US was still reforming itself by trying to reconcile its progressive narrative of racial progress with its fear of a crisis in national authority and identity.

According to Graff, the “literacy myth” refers to “the belief, articulated in educational, civic, religious, and other settings, contemporary and historical, that the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable qualities, purportedly conferring on teachers a predilection

²¹⁰ Harvey Graff. *Literacy, Myths, Legacies, & Lessons: New Studies on Literacy*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011, 35.

²¹¹ Robert F. Arnove. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008, 2.

toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical 'state of grace.'"²¹² In other words, such presumptions about the effects of literacy are divorced from any real and consistent empirical evidence, but such attitudes, coupled with the existing national myths of origin and exceptionalism, create a literacy myth that is powerful and resistant to change. "Like all myths, the literacy myth is not so much a falsehood but an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes. For these reasons, the literacy myth is powerful and resistant to revision."²¹³

The ideologies embedded in the myth of literacy continue to pervade all aspects of national and local education reform, despite there being issues with how to define, measure, and evaluate literacies. Graff finds that within the last forty years, individual students were seen to be "at risk" if they were not mastering the right kinds of literacy skills deemed necessary by those in the position to govern schools and set educational policy.²¹⁴ The rich history of the uses of literacy to include, exclude, regulate, and police the boundaries of privilege and entitlements makes the game of "literacy" a game where the rules are always changing based on the whim of some unseen hand.

LITERACY AND AUTHORITY

Many scholars have written about the role of literacy in the struggles over power and rulership in early American history. Sandra Gustafson writes eloquently about the importance of oration in early European American "settler" culture until local Native peoples demonstrated their superior oration skills in public debates. As early as the

²¹² Graff, *Literacy, Myths, Legacies, & Lessons*, 6.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

1700's, there is evidence that the Europeans displaced oration as the badge of legitimacy and replaced it with the written word once they realized that the local Native peoples might demonstrate a superior mastery of the oral form of language.

Such ideas still persist in the age of the CCSS. The current education system in the United States emphasizes reading and writing at increasingly younger ages. Where once third grade marked the transitional year of students moving from “learning to read,” to “reading to learn,” the 2015 discourse reflects an hysteria over kindergarteners who cannot yet read. The growing anxieties over student reading have risen in accordance with nativist fears over the real or perceived rise in the number of immigrants. One effect of a U.S. education system that emphasizes fluent reading and writing at younger ages, is the mass failure of many recent immigrants who come from countries where math, science, and orality are emphasized in the earlier years of schooling, and reading and writing in the later years.²¹⁵ If the U.S. were to emphasize math and science up front, many of the recent immigrant children would be far ahead of U.S. born students. Reading and writing in kindergarten forces a fluency in the English language that few recent immigrants possess. Math and science, however, offer a “common” ground in any language.

The use of the word “common” in the CCSS is a telling echo to the colonial history of the battles over authority, authenticity, and legitimacy that took place in what would come to be called the public sphere of the “commons.” The “commons” was the model for colonial political identity because it became the public space where ideas were “represented” through public debate, without the authority of the state. Those who had no

²¹⁵ See the database National Center for Education Statistics at <https://nces.ed.gov> and state departments of education websites for accountability information by sub-populations.

official standing in the state could still openly discuss issues important to the state. The commons, in this sense, preceded the emergence of republicanism in both England and in the new American colonies.

The early English colonists who valued the idea of the “commons” exercised a new form of literacy that is arguably the origins of “free speech:” oration cut loose from historic texts and religious authority. When these same colonists had to confront their own envy for the more eloquent and persuasive oratory performance of the Native peoples, whom they called “savages,” they newly embraced the legitimacy of reading and writing the written word. While perhaps not the first example of manipulating the rules of literacy for rulership, this history does show us that literacy and power have always been connected, and that when threatened, the established rulers will change the game of literacy to preserve their own access to power and privilege.²¹⁶

Today, both the literal *and* figurative space of the “commons” has all but disappeared. Social media sites that filter according to individual patterns of consumerism have essentially replaced it. With existing technological advances, it is entirely possible to “search” the web and *only* come across discussion sites that fully agree with one’s position on nearly any social issue. Computer-based algorithms keep consumers from accessing any true digital “commons.” In the physical world, public spaces are disappearing and being replaced with stores full of consumable goods. Despite having limitless and immediate access to information of all kinds, the contemporary “public” is rarely able to collectively participate in civic discourse. Hence, the voice that can effectively frame a conversation, authoritatively, disseminate the narrative to the

²¹⁶ For a discussion of the early uses of literacy in the pursuit of power, privilege, and rulership, see Sandra M. Gustafson. *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory Performance in Early America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

masses quickly, and control for counter commentary, can now function with an *assumed* authority. The “commons” is no longer desired or required to establish authority and legitimacy with the polity. All one needs now is money to access the technology. What was once the space of the “commons,” is now the domain of the “common.”

While the “commons” was literally a public space for debate, the use of the word “common” in the CCSS is figurative and implies something publicly shared absent the public participation that originally took place on the “commons.” In order to understand how we traveled from the importance of the “commons” in the new republic to the assumed authority in anything that goes by the name “common,” requires that we examine the sources of authority and legitimacy then and now.

The citizens of the new republic---restricted to an elite group according to the particularities of race, gender, religion, and class---eventually established authority through institutions and one’s consent to be governed by them as a requirement for membership in the nation. In various ways, the authority invested in literacy has allowed for the ruling establishment to require new kinds of social contracts where the expanding membership in the nation must agree to consent not only to be governed, but to be constantly evaluated on the qualifications for that membership. Members of traditionally excluded groups are often continually evaluated on their qualifications for membership, citizenship, and rights with tests and contracts that are always changing, never contextualized, and consistently created and controlled by members of the old guard still occupying seats of power within institutions of governance and other elite venues. For a current example of the changing rules of membership, see the Arizona law passed in January 2015: “The American Civic Bill.” According to the new state law, the graduating high school class of 2018 will have to correctly answer 60 out of 100 questions on the

U.S. Citizenship test as a requirement for the high school diploma.²¹⁷ North Dakota and Tennessee are expected to pass similar laws in their own states in short order.

Elite venues—political and corporate offices, universities, and private closed-door meetings—are where the top-down battles over literacy are traditionally fought. In this country, literacy defining and policing has been the purview of powerful and well-resourced individuals and positions. This is not to say that battles over literacy have not been fought on the ground, as indeed, many have, but in the case of institutionalized literacy, power and privilege have defined the decision makers.

In America, literacy is, and has always functioned as a personal and collective asset like property by those in privileged positions of power as well as those seeking access to “move up.” In a neoliberal era, the cost/benefit analysis of remedying racial injustice has resulted in a discourse of national racial uplift alongside the discourse of educational and social decline. In both the courts and the schools, declining literacy standards were leveraged against the progress of civil rights in an effort to slow down the depreciation of white property and power. While many scholars have tried to compartmentalize the history of education from other histories, the lens of literacy makes transparent the fluid intersections of multiple institutions in creating a new national narrative that sought simultaneously to remedy racial injustice and preserve white supremacy. Literacy, time and again, has been employed throughout U.S. history as both a tool and a weapon in the battle over racial equality.

The white ruling establishment has used literacy repeatedly as a legal method of oppression in order to preserve the status quo of white supremacy. In the late 19th century, whites used intimidation and violence to keep black voters away from the polls.

²¹⁷ Linda Heitin. "Arizona first to require citizenship test for graduation." *Edweek*, January 16, 2015.

By the early 20th century, we see literacy emerge as the disenfranchisement method of choice at the polls, “in fact, the various ‘legal’ disenfranchisement devices employed over time --- especially literacy tests and poll taxes --- significantly diminished the size of the poor and working-class white sector of the southern electorate. Blacks, however, bore the brunt of disenfranchisement. Widespread illiteracy made literacy tests --- requirements that voters ‘read’ a section of the state or federal constitution --- quite effective.”²¹⁸

The Mississippi Voter Registration Form represents a common method of employing literacy legally to disenfranchise black voters. Though there was both a racial and class element to the impact of such literacy tests on the voting electorate, black voters were especially challenged because their performance on such a test had to be approved by a white gate-keeping registrar who could decide to deny an application for any perceived error, no matter how small. Martin sums up this practice in context and demonstrates the power and necessity of examining the role of “literacy” as a racial and cultural object:

The Mississippi Voter Registration application...was part of a series of devices that effectively disenfranchised blacks as late as the mid-1960s because satisfactory completion of the form was at the discretion of the white registrar, who reviewed the forms of whites far less strictly. Such byzantine writing hurdles worked in concert with irregular voting hours; requiring registration at the county courthouse --- the center of local white power --- rather than local precincts; and harassment, violence, and even murder to discourage black registration. On the voter registration form, any error --- real or imagined, large or small--- was typically sufficient for the white registrar to deny a black applicant. Particularly effective was the question demanding that the applicant explain a section of the Mississippi state constitution to the registrar’s satisfaction. Similar ‘understanding’ requirements and disenfranchisement devices were indeed common throughout the South.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ Waldo E. Martin. *Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents*. Series in History and Culture. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998, 123.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

Martin's example demonstrates two important aspects of literacy as a cultural force in the struggle for racial equality: the role of literacy as a gatekeeper, and the role of the literacy gatekeepers themselves. It is not until the sweeping power of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which eliminated all but residency and proof of age for voting requirements, that the courts set out to establish new parameters involving literacy and racial justice.

Equipped with new enfranchisement protections, many people of color sought out the courts as a justifiable forum for airing their grievances and redressing historical wrongs. In the face of new laws and new social attitudes rejecting the appearance of formal racism and overt racial discrimination, the justices of the Supreme Court turned once again to literacy as the way to solve the historic problems of racism. Though the public schools and the voter registration booths were feeling the direct impact of new laws and policies regarding racial integration and enfranchisements, it was the Supreme Court justices and not the politicians who continued to deliberate and shape the future of the new civil rights laws. Politicians had not yet found a way to successfully intervene in racial politics without losing their elected offices, but Supreme Court Justices were appointed, and could therefore take greater political risks than local and state politicians. This would all change once the *Nation at Risk* established public schooling as a national economic issue. However, until the early 1980s, it was the courts that fashioned the foundational new narrative where literacy served once again as a race-neutral qualifier for expanding citizenship rights, employment, and privilege.

The courts provide an important arena for understanding the intersection of literacy and racial justice that both reflects and shapes the national imaginary regarding the power of literacy to remedy racial and social inequality. Following the important role of the courts in *Brown v. Board*, the courts became a popular forum for debating the

definitions, applications, and possibilities of literacy to mitigate racial privilege and discrimination in schools, municipalities, and public and private job sites. Arguably, the courts first witnessed litigation surrounding concern for “standards” in education and job qualifications, and it was the courts that first had to rule on challenges to the merit of literacy tests.

While *Brown v. Board* purportedly established equal access to a high school diploma, it was the courts that would begin to undermine the high school diploma as a marker of legitimate literacy. Instead, the courts became the battle field over creating a new path of intellectual or vertical “white flight” in the form of new and evolving literacy credentials that sought to further stratify the value of an educational credential according to newly established literacy criteria created in the name of the individual and common good. Through a small sampling of court cases, we can see the emergence of the two dominant narratives that would become the bedrock of the modern standards movement within which the CCSS would evolve: the national narrative of racial progress, and the educational narrative of crisis and social decline. The foundational beliefs and assumptions that contributed to the ideology of these duel narratives: (1) high school education is no longer sufficient for civil service jobs; (2) racial discrimination cannot be defined by a differentiated racial impact alone; (3) literacy tests are racially neutral; (4) and white supremacy is not at issue. Contrary perhaps to popular belief, the elite venue of the Supreme Court was not a race-neutral space.

Many scholars have long established that despite its premise of objectivity, the legal system has never been free of racism in this country. It is this reality that lead legal scholars to define the field of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in an effort to identify the injustice in the formal governance of rights and grievances. Critical Race Theory began

in the field of legal studies and included influential scholars such as Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman bringing racial ideology to bear on Gramsci's notion of hegemony. The result is what Kimberle Crenshaw et al call a "left intervention into race discourse and a race intervention into left discourse."²²⁰ CRT follows from the premise that racism is a perpetual feature of American life and culture, so much so that policies, documents, movements, and shifts in power formation are shaped directly in response to our American racialized reality. CRT serves as a tool for exposing new and re-articulated forms of racism that might otherwise be invisible to mainstream scholars.²²¹

The use of CRT as a "tool" flows from the development of an analytic standpoint that allows a scholar to center race and therefore to see perspectives and angles that might be otherwise ignored, shunned, or rendered invisible or irrational. In the discourse surrounding education reform, such a perspective is needed to weed through the progressive philosophies and ideologies that view all well-intended efforts as examples of incremental progress toward a more benevolent and just outcome for all of America's children and families. Within such a common culture of belief about an American institution, to criticize is to be marginalized and even labeled "irrational." CRT provides an understood framework for analyzing such discourse and institutions in a new way:

CRT is also a criticism of liberalism. When applied in legal studies, CRT allowed Crenshaw to expose the limits of the legal system in acting as a catalyst for social change. 'Crenshaw (1988) argues that the liberal perspective of the 'civil rights crusade as a long, slow, but always upward pull' (p.1334) is flawed because it fails to understand the limits of current legal paradigms to serve as catalysts for social change and its emphasis on incrementalism. CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes but liberalism has no mechanism for any such

²²⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, ed. *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. New York: The New Press, 1995, xix.

²²¹ Gloria Ladson-Billings, ed. *Critical Race Theory: Perspectives on Social Studies*. A Volume in Research in Social Education. Information Age Publishing, 2003, 9.

cataclysmic change. Rather, liberal legal practices support the painstakingly slow process of arguing legal precedence to gain citizen rights for people of color.²²²

Likewise, when applied to education reform efforts and discourse, CRT can help us better understand the limitations of incrementalism, the true state of affairs, the need for drastic and urgent measures, and the value of keeping "race" a central part of the conversation in an era that is often mistakenly characterized as "post-racial."

Scholar Catherine Prendergast argues that the Supreme Court utilized the assumed neutrality of literacy to "stall the civil rights movement." The United States has routinely practiced an unequal education system in an unequal society. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ushered in a new era where the intention of the courts was to promote an equal education in a still unequal society. Because the *Brown* decision relied on the psychological damage done to black children by denying them access to white schools, white supremacy was never challenged (see the testimony of Professor Hugh Speers, witness for the NAACP). The court decisions that follow in the wake of *Brown* demonstrate new anxieties on the part of white judges, attorneys, and policymakers. Formal legal challenges to the unequal practices of social institutions put new pressure on the courts to work harder in favor of promoting equality while simultaneously not questioning white supremacy.

In the decades following the *Brown* decision, literacy emerged as a universally neutral category that went unchallenged by people on both sides of any given case. The court's beliefs and assumptions about literacy helped to frame a new discourse for racial progress that holds the possession of the "right" kind of "literacy" as a neutral requirement for enfranchisement in the post-*Brown* nation. According to the court, the more "developed" the literacy, the more access and privilege were afforded to the

²²² Ibid.

litigants. Because the definition and criteria for possessing the right kind of “literacy” was always changing, the potential of the *Brown* decision was already stifled before its implementation could begin.

Literacy, however, was not only a factor in formal decisions in the courts, it also played a role in the informal circulation of social capital in the courtroom itself, where attorneys and judges on both sides would often engage in casual conversation, segues, or tangential exchanges in the middle of formal cases where they discussed or made reference to the elite private colleges they attended, the educations they had received, or the places where they had grown up.²²³ These exchanges were all coded references to what qualified as legitimate credentials for high levels of literacy. The mutual understanding fostered in these exchanges allowed for the justices to rule on cases where race and literacy intertwined without ever challenging the need to examine the neutrality of a literacy test. To question literacy as a race-neutral qualifier for school or employment would have meant the judges were challenging their own access and privilege in this society. The attorneys and justices had much to lose from challenging “literacy” as a remedy for racial injustice. They themselves had benefitted from the racially unjust system. African American Justice Thurgood Marshall, former lawyer for the NAACP and lead attorney in the *Brown v. Board* case, is often the only person who does not participate in these casual interactions in the courtroom.²²⁴

The *Brown v. Board* case is particularly important to the development of discourse surrounding the conflation of racial justice and literacy learning because in the

²²³ Catherine Prendergast *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

²²⁴ See especially the audio recordings and transcripts of *Washington v. Davis* and *Bakke* available at www.oyez.org.

Brown decision, public education is held up as being the quintessential institution for stability of the nation. The justices described public education as the pathway to good citizenship and economic advancement. Because “literacy” was first defined as “learned” and later as the ability to read and write, it was easy for the courts to conflate the two. *Brown* posited desegregated education as the way to stop racism in education and make education “equal” in an unequal society. Following from that, the justices saw literacy as both a means to a more equal society and a remedy for racial injustice in schools and other state institutions. While the topic of “race” was still too controversial for the elected politicians to take on, the appointed judges of the Supreme Court continued hearing cases and shaping laws. The result was an inadvertent centralization of governance within education. In order for the new laws to be enforced, the federal government had to get involved, especially when the media focused national attention on what had previously been “local” issues.

Immediately following the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954, Rudolfo Flesch published his now infamous book, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It*. This 1955 publication depicted nothing short of a literacy crisis threatening to reduce the status of the U.S. to that of “Haiti or Uganda” in terms of education.²²⁵ Here we see literacy as “reading” and equated to national development and crisis. Perhaps coincidental, perhaps not, the book had a profound effect on shaping both the popular and professional rhetoric of reading and the state of the union. It is this rhetoric that influenced the discourse of the courts in the several foundational cases in the 1960’s and 1970’s.

²²⁵ Rudolfo Flesch. *Why Johnny Can't Read--and What You Can Do About it*. NY: Harper, 1955.

One of the themes running through all of these court cases, from Griggs, Albermarle, *Washington v. Davis*, and Bakke through to anti-affirmative action cases like *Fisher v. Texas*, is that a high school diploma is no longer a sufficient credential for life in the 21st century. The very credential *Brown v. Board* first guaranteed all students the right to access was now deemed outdated and an inaccurate indicator of skills and qualifications for jobs and further education. What was needed now, so many argued throughout the last half of the twentieth century, was newer and higher “standards” measured with literacy tests or guaranteed by college diplomas. Under the guise of staying current with the changing times, attorneys and defendants argued that a high school diploma was just no longer enough. What these debates ultimately reveal is that there is a pattern of beliefs, behaviors, and practices that result in a vertical, intellectual, and arguably white “flight” of which the CCSS becomes only the most recent iteration.

With formal segregation now illegal, previously white spaces like schools and businesses were pressured into demonstrating that they had changed their racist and divisive ways. The courts heard new cases that forced the courts to deal with policies for determining if new “qualifications” for potential employees were racially discriminatory. Court records from the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s show that the justices debated and ruled on cases involving explicit discriminatory intent and implicit discriminatory impact. The courts set new definitions for when an act could be deemed a violation of the Equal Protection clause, but they never took on the problematic notion of white supremacy. The *Washington v. Davis* case is an interesting example of the intersection of race, literacy, and policy that demonstrates the evolving ideology of leaders and lawmakers in the post-*Brown* era. The ruling in this case ultimately laid the foundation for the eventual ruling in the Bakke case (anti-affirmative action) in the years to follow.

While not the only case to deal with literacy in the context of racial justice (see Griggs, Albemarle), the *Washington v. Davis* case does demonstrate a particular set of assumptions and possibilities that would become foundational in the discourse of racial justice and education in the courts, the schools, and the legislatures around the country. As noted earlier through this case, we see the conflating and entrenchment of the following ideas: that literacy tests are racially neutral; racial discrimination cannot be defined by a differentiated racial impact alone; high school education is no longer sufficient for civil service jobs; and white supremacy is not at issue. The ideology demonstrated in the *Washington v. Davis* case, allows for a kind of intellectual “white flight” away from traditional notions of “qualified” education and workforce individuals toward a more selective and restricted set of criteria. Borrowing on commonplace beliefs that today’s world is more complicated than that of yesterday, white lawyers and justices avoid scrutiny and rely on “higher standards” as the rationale for finding these new methods racially “neutral on their face.”

The *Washington* case, filed in the late 1960’s and decided in 1975, involved several African American men who were denied entry into the Washington DC police recruitment academy because of their scores on a civil service literacy test. In the court transcripts, this test is referred to as “Test 21,” and at the time of oral arguments, no one in the court had seen a copy of it. However, the absence of such a copy did not deter the justices from finding it neutral and necessary as a means for determining entry into the police academy. In the process of arguing this fact, the lawyers and justices on both sides undermine the value of a high school diploma and assert that “something more” is now

needed: “A college degree isn’t necessarily needed, but something is.”²²⁶ The reasons they offer for this “something more” are never specifically stated. The lawyer for the defense, Charles Sutton, simply states that “the policeman of today is not the village constable of yesteryear.”²²⁷ Later discussions in the oral arguments feature Sutton providing evidence of the company’s good intent by sharing the awards it had been given for its attention to “diversity.” Discussion of this case is important because the logic used to make the arguments in *Washington v. Davis* is the same set of arguments made about today’s neutral literacy standards.

The Griggs case, decided in 1970, challenged the constitutionality of the Duke Power Company in mandating a minimum cut score on two achievement tests before an existing employee could be considered for transfer to a better paying position within the company. Griggs, an African American employee, asserted that the tests unfairly impacted African American employees resulting in racial discrimination under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. At the time, the justices ruled 8-0 in favor of Griggs, finding “Neither the high school graduation requirement nor the two aptitude tests was directed or intended to measure an employee’s ability to learn or perform a particular job or category of jobs within the company.”²²⁸ Because the company reserved the higher skilled and better paying jobs for whites before 1965, and initiated achievement tests for both white and black applicants after 1965, the company had the burden of proving that the tests were somehow “job related.” If the tests were found to be job-related, then the justices might have found them valid. However, no validity was offered. In this case,

²²⁶ Attorney Charles Sutton, *Washington v. Davis*. 74-1492 (Burger Court (1975-1981), DC March 1, 1975).

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Griggs v. Duke Power Company*. 124 (Burger Court (1970-1971), December 14, 1970).

literacy tests served only as a filter to sort out African American applicants who had historically been denied the same rights and opportunities in regard to formal education. The test would automatically target African Americans for failure. Despite the favorable ruling for the plaintiffs, the fact that the courts had a copy of the literacy tests and never examined it, speaks to the assumed racial neutrality of the content in a literacy test.

When attorney Ferguson argues for the Griggs company he makes claims that could resonate today. He references language used by congress that encourages the use of ability and intelligence tests to ensure fairness of hiring. Ferguson argues that the plaintiffs claim the tests are unfair because African Americans are "culturally deprived" and can't pass the tests. He argues that an employer may set his standards as high as he likes and may use this criteria to assign employees. Ferguson claims that now they are being asked to show that the tests are job related. He acknowledges that the fact that the tests were professionally developed is not enough, but because they are and congress encouraged the use of them, then the only question is if the design or intent is discriminatory. Ferguson argues that the tests are simply a substitution for the high school requirement. At one point in the deliberations, Justice Thurgood Marshall points out that the company "is not writing on a clean slate" when they institute these literacy tests on the heels of purposeful racial segregation.

These court cases are useful to understanding the ideologies embedded in the CCSS and in the rhetoric surrounding their support and critique. By examining the role and function of literacy in the formal decisions of the Supreme Court since *Brown*, we can see a pattern of beliefs and values that evolve as the white establishment is forced to reconcile formal equality with the realities of social inequality. The realities of racial desegregation were almost always followed by challenges to the court regarding

clarification on the terms of racial discrimination and equal protection. Amidst the complicated history of these court cases emerges the common factor of literacy as the new gatekeeper. Employers, schools, and organizations claiming to institute new restrictions based on literacy for the purposes of raising standards for the public good were cloaked in morality and shielded from the legal or monetary consequences of racial discrimination. Like the court cases show, new definitions of reading and writing abilities become the safest and most popular “remedy” for past and present racial discrimination and inequality. Using ill-defined and unchallenged literacy tests as a new way to determine job placement and promotion reinforced the legacy of literacy as a tool for social control. One of the motivations for using literacy to police the boundaries of labor capital, was that it also allowed the white establishment to legitimize their entitlements. As in the case of the Supreme Court justices, their access to advanced literacy institutions is protected as “meritocratic,” thus disguising the vertical pathway paved for the privileged in the name of literacy.

In her discussion of literacy as white property, scholar Catherine Prendergast explains that black encroachment on white space has always signaled a significant “tipping point” for whites.²²⁹ She cites the documentation of multiple scholars regarding the actual impact of any black person moving into previously all white neighborhoods. The realty market, financial institutions, and property owners interpret the person as a signal that their property values are in decline. This tradition of “less than” being associated with black people and black space, also plays out in public schools. Steeped in the tradition of local control, public schools often follow a neighborhood school model

²²⁹ For further discussion, see Catherine Prendergast *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2003.

where the people living in the immediate surrounding area also attend the school. When the common belief and practice is that the best literacy is delivered within the school, then literacy levels become reflective of, and associated with the actual school itself. Hence, in conversation, the name of a given school can be a stand in for an actual literacy level. Given the murky and ambiguous definition of literacy, using the name of a school as code for “good” or “bad” literacy prevents the participants from having to actually discuss what literacy looks like in and across various schools and populations.

Prendergast explains that in the economy of literacy as white property, schools function like unwritten neighborhood value indicators where race is concerned:

When African American applicants are admitted, whether to a high school or the police force or a medical school, literacy standards are perceived to be failing or in peril of failing. Frequently, when this perception of declining standards has occurred, many Whites simply go elsewhere, to attend other schools or take other jobs.²³⁰

When this concept of “white flight” is applied to literacy standards, we can see the framework for a very common narrative. The argument for higher standards, couched in the march of time and circumstance, results in the devaluing of previously accessible “assets” like diplomas and credentials, and the introduction of newer, harder, and less accessible “standards.” This ensures that those with access to the “best” credentials (a diploma from Harvard vs. a community college diploma) retain their high status. The new standards are now truly attainable by only the most elite of candidates, and those applicants best qualified are predetermined by historical and social inequality.

Despite this history of defining and refining our understanding of what literacy is and is not, the proponents of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy felt somehow compelled to define it once again at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Paired with a host of

²³⁰ Ibid., 41.

newly articulated standards to help students achieve this 21st century literate status, the CCSS vision of literacy is less a new contribution to our existing understanding of literacy, and more a rebranding of familiar and nostalgic literacy designed exclusively for an already highly literate society. While posing such a definition of literacy in this way might perhaps garner more support than criticism from the general public, the other purpose could also be to create a definition so seemingly rational and scientific that it would allow for the most precise measurement and management of educational outcomes and product design.

Because there is no single definition of literacy, the concept is potentially very attractive to those who seek to wield power and influence in the shaping of the nation. Ambiguous and ill-defined uses of “literacy” allow longstanding myths and fantasies to cloud important investigations of the actual causes of continued racial and social inequality. Under the CCSS definition, “minimal,” “functional,” and “basic” literacy are replaced with a new conception of the “literate person” that fits with contemporary values of self-help, personal responsibility, and a vocational approach to education for global economic competitiveness:

As a natural outgrowth of meeting the charge to define college and career readiness, the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the skills and understandings students are expected to demonstrate have wide applicability outside the classroom or workplace. Students who meet the Standards readily understand the close, attentive reading that is at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature. They habitually perform the critical reading necessary to pick carefully through the staggering amount of information available today in print and digitally. They actively seek the wide, deep, and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts that builds knowledge, enlarges experience, and broadens worldviews. They reflexively demonstrate the cogent reasoning and use of evidence that is essential to both private deliberation and responsible citizenship in a democratic republic. In short, students who meet the

Standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language.²³¹

According to the CCSS explicit vision of a literate person, practices of literate people, and prescriptive guidance around types and works, the CCSS defines the new 21st century minimum literacy as a particular achievable status, with the aims of creating a more responsible citizenry that is capable of supplying a workforce for the global economy. This follows from an historical trajectory and re-brands nostalgic ideas about literacy for a highly literate American audience.

There are four core beliefs reflected in the definitions, policies, and practices related to literacy in the last 60 years: literacy is race-neutral; literacy makes good or better citizens; literacy is an achievable status; literacy promotes social equality and mobility. Together, these four core beliefs form the dominant ideology behind the CCSS in ELA and literacy. In this sense, the CCSS contribute to the evolving aims of literacy for the 21st century by employing a familiar ideology already “common” to policymakers, educated citizens, revolutionary liberationists, conservatives and liberals alike. The secret to the seemingly universal appeal of the CCSS is that it re-packages a familiar, mythical literacy as a new 21st century solution for much of what ails society, especially the persistence of racial and social inequality. In this way, the CCSS are very compatible with the existing discourse of neoliberal hegemony, prompting a wide range of audiences to find consensus in wondering “why didn’t we do this sooner?”

Many people have worked hard to define literacy throughout modern American history. Scholars have analyzed literacy definitions in relation to social, economic, and

²³¹ Common Core State Standards Initiative. "Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects." 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org>, 3.

historical conditions.²³² National organizations like the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), drawing on scholarly research and teaching experience have also put forth public statements on literacy to inform education policy and guide instructional practice. International organizations, especially the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have also thoughtfully defined, modified, and refined their own definitions of literacy in relation to their work with developing nations. Drawing from both the national academic discourse on literacy and the international work of literacy in developing nations, the federal government has enacted laws like the Adult Education Act and the National Literacy Act to define, promote, and support the spread of “functional” and “minimal” literacy in connection with the national political and economic agenda. History has demonstrated that every major institution in the U.S., including schools, the military, the police, civil service employment agencies, marriage, and enfranchisement systems have all drawn on the rhetorical cachet that “literacy” has to offer. The pattern of these definitions not only shapes today’s notion of what literacy is and is not, but also our recognition of the powerful and the powerless, as these individuals, groups, and entire cultures get associated with being “literate” or “illiterate.” Such is true of the CCSS implicit definition of “illiteracy” and “illiterate” through its explicit depiction of literacy and the “literate person” for the 21st century.

Because there is such a convoluted understanding and use of the definition of literacy, the very process of defining it became a subject of study in 1960, and again in

²³² For a discussion of scholarly work analyzing literacy definitions, see especially David Harman, "Illiteracy: An Overview." *Harvard Educational Review* 40, no. 2 (1970); and Daphne Ntiri, "Toward a Functional and Culturally Salient Definition of Literacy." *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* 3, no. 2 (2009): 97-104.

2005. There is a rich body of research chronicling the contentious attempts of academics and policymakers to continuously wrestle with how to define literacy and the characteristics of a literate person. This is an important history to consider, as the CCSS can be located in this larger conversation over who should define literacy for the nation, and how the right definition should be articulated. This debate is so controversial, that a professor from the University of Auckland published a suggested framework exclusively for analyzing definitions of literacy. The framework provides a useful understanding of the implicit purposes for establishing any definition of literacy.

Roberts borrows from Israel Scheffler's classic text, *The Language of Education*. Scheffler's work was originally published in 1960 and sought to explain the important differences between the uses of scientific discourses in education versus non-scientific discourses. He distinguishes the role of the former in educational research circles, and the latter serving as a general translation for use in policy-making circles. In short, Scheffler calls attention to the presence of both discourses in the making and shaping of educational language and policy-making. After analyzing the educational discourse samples, Scheffler asserts that there are essentially three kinds of "definitions" most often used in education: stipulative, descriptive, and programmatic. In his article, "A Framework for Analyzing Definitions of Literacy," Roberts succinctly describes the meaning of each category of definition, provides examples, and then proposes that a new category of definition, called "essentialist," be added. He then applies these categories to an analysis of the literacy definitions posited by Paulo Freire in the 1970's. Roberts's application and modification of Scheffler's initial framework provides a useful method

for analyzing more contemporary definitions of literacy within the larger discourse of education in the United States.²³³

Roberts begins by summing up the original categories of definitions provided by Scheffler. He describes the notion of a “stipulative” definition as follows: “Stipulative definitions, whether non-inventive or inventive, reduce the need for laborious or repetitious descriptions; they allow discussion to proceed where space may be limited and where lengthy digressions on the meaning or contestability of specific terms might impede the aim of presenting a coherent and concise overall argument.”²³⁴ While the meaning of stipulative definitions are “assumed,” Roberts explains that “descriptive” definitions are more denotative in nature and seek to communicate which particular definition applies to the case being discussed. By contrast, a “programmatic” definition includes both what a particular concept is and should be, simultaneously. Scheffler describes the three definitions as follows:

The interest of stipulative definitions is communicatory, that is to say, they are offered in the hope of facilitating discourse; the interest of descriptive definitions is explanatory, that is they purport to clarify the normal application of terms; the interest of programmatic definitions is moral, that is, they are intended to embody programmes of action (Scheffler, 22).²³⁵

Roberts believes that the quest to define literacy is not unlike the struggle to define education itself in that it often turns “implicitly or explicitly, on ethical questions.”²³⁶ Such ethical questions demonstrate that any attempt at defining literacy, then, is part of the larger quest to determine the best possible literacy any society should be seeking at a

²³³ Peter Roberts. "A Framework for Analysing Definitions of Literacy." *Educational Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005), 30.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

²³⁵ Isreal Schleffler as quoted in Roberts, "A Framework for Analysing Definitions," 31-32.

²³⁶ Roberts, "A Framework for Analysing Definitions," 32.

particular point in its development. Because of this, Roberts suggests that the Scheffler framework be modified to include the following categories of definitions: stipulative, essentialist, and prescriptive. He explains that because there are so many literacies, whenever the singular form of the word is used, it is used only to refer to a particular mode. Understanding that some definitions can be “essentialist” in that they refer to specific and particular constructs of reading and writing can help separate out more definitions from more broadly encompassing or vague ones. Roberts then replaces the notion of “programmatically” with “prescriptive” to more accurately describe the category of definitions that seek to both name what is and what ought to be as the result of any literacy program or policy. I am especially interested in the essentialist and prescriptive definitions as applied to literacy because, as Roberts states, they attempt to both “pin down the ‘true’ meaning of literacy, and assume that there is an essential ‘nature’ to literacy waiting to be uncovered,” as well as “seek to give grounds (especially of an ethical kind) for literacy being this way or that.”²³⁷ Roberts’s framework is useful in providing a method of analysis that allows us to transition from the actual definition of literacy to the possible motivation and intended purpose of the definition itself. It also provides a method for distinguishing how certain definitions are similar or different to others in these same categories.

Given this historical trajectory of defining literacy, it is important to now consider one of the foundational documents used to support the quantification of literacy as described in the CCSS. The authors of the CCSS never explicitly name the Bormuth study in their research base, however, the standards do name the Coh-Metrix system for measuring appropriate levels of text for each grade level. The creators of Coh-Metrix,

²³⁷ Ibid., 34.

Jeane Chall et al, based their system on Bormuth's research. John Bormuth is considered the father of the "cut-score" idea in standardized reading tests. Also important to note, the Coh-Matrix system is a computer-based analysis:

Coh-Matrix incorporates into its computer-based analysis more than sixty specific indices of syntax, semantics, readability, and cohesion to assess text complexity. Central to its assessments are measures of text cohesiveness, that is, the degree to which the text uses explicit markers to link ideas. By analyzing the degree to which those links are missing in a text---and therefore the degree to which a reader must make inferences to connect ideas---this measure gauges a key factor in the comprehension demand of a text.²³⁸

Interestingly, the Coh-Matrix system is mentioned only in the very first draft of the CCSS released exclusively to the selective working committee for the CCSS in ELA and Literacy. In subsequent versions, including the public release, no such description of measurement appears, however, it is discussed in the more recent supporting materials listed on the CCSS website.

John Bormuth's 1974 article, "Reading Literacy: Its Definition and Assessment," has three specific purposes according to the author: "1) to analyze the concepts of literacy for the purpose of identifying the parameters that must be specified in literacy definitions, 2) to identify measurement problems associated with specifying each of these parameters, and 3) for dealing with these measurement problems."²³⁹ The article is nearly 60 pages long, written in a formal scientific tone, and includes the mathematical algorithms for measurement of reading. Bormuth offers the following definition of literacy in 1974:

Literacy may be defined broadly as being able to respond appropriately to written language; in this sense, it is one of man's most valued skills. Man has used writing to record, accumulate, and store his knowledge in an easily used form.

²³⁸ Common Core State Standards Initiative. *Confidential Draft of CCSS July 2009*. Prod. NGA and CCSSO. July 22, 2009.

²³⁹ John R. Bormuth. "Reading Literacy: Its Definition and Assessment." *Reading Research Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1973-74), 7.

Because those who were literate have been able to overcome the barriers that time and space throw in the way of communication, some have been able to master and apply technical information and thereby achieve unprecedented material prosperity. Some have been able to master and apply social and political knowledge to secure personal and political liberties for themselves. And some have been able to enlarge their perspective and satisfy their aesthetic desire through literature.²⁴⁰

If we approached making meaning of this statement by considering the historical and social context of this text, we might notice that nowhere in this definition is there any indication that all those rewards for literacy can be caused by anything else in our social world. Thus, we might miss entirely the fact that unequal power relationships also contributed to access and accumulation of material property, and literacy itself, for that matter. We might walk away thinking that literacy is indeed a set of isolated skills that cause us to have “appropriate” responses to the written word. We might even come away thinking that some are masters and everyone else is a slave, and literacy is the reason. If we kept reading this text beyond the definition, we would find that while Bormuth references writing in his initial definition of literacy, he only refers to one’s reading ability for literacy measurement in the 60 pages that follow.

Additionally, Bormuth offers the following guidelines for defining literacy in ways that can be measurable:

What is important to note at this point is that there is no true definition of literacy. Rather each definition must be designed for the purpose to which it is to be put, and its correctness may be judged only in terms of how well it serves that purpose. Thus, when a definition of literacy is being developed, it would seem rational to state clearly the purpose of that definition, to derive from this statement a set of criteria for selecting and excluding behaviors, and then to select behaviors using these criteria. It seems likely that had rational procedures of this sort been followed in the earlier formulations of the concept of literacy, we might have been spared much pointless and often destructive controversy.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 9.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

The CCSS document attempts to take up Bormuth's challenge and apply his formulas for rationally measuring literacy efficiently with the use of today's technology. The importance of measurable literacy in the CCSS is further supported by the presence of assessment designers on the initial development teams (see previous chapter.) The CCSS even avoids defining literacy explicitly or simplistically, and instead articulates a clear vision of the "literate person."

According to the Roberts framework for analyzing literacy definitions, the CCSS vision of a literate person is both essentialist and prescriptive. The CCSS simultaneously articulates the concept of both what "literate" is and ought to be. The CCSS definition, is rather a moral declaration on the "right" personal traits all literate people should possess. Under the Roberts framework, the CCSS definition is programmatic or prescriptive and prepares the audience for a specific plan of action: the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in ELA and Literacy.

The evolution of the history of literacy has created dichotomies regarding literacy and illiteracy that reinforce myths and misinformation in almost impenetrable ways. Beliefs about literacy remain imbued with positive race-neutral promises of equality and social mobility, moral advancement, improved citizenship, and limitless possibility for individual achievement and empowerment. Because literacy has always followed concentrations of privilege and wealth, it is the country's elites who have defined the acceptable parameters for literacy. The legacy of illiteracy retains a highly raced and classed history, a prescribed status for all those forcibly denied access to formal education, a plague on the nation, and a self-fulfilling prophesy for low-income communities and communities of color.

For those already possessing literacy, the ideology of illiteracy became a convenient rationale for masking/denying the material realities associated with racism, discrimination, and perpetual poverty by systemic design. Literacy was a commodity that whites possessed and to which they were entitled. Illiteracy was a denigrated state of ignorance that threatened every citizen's private property. "Illiteracy" became a popular social classifier for people of color and those in poverty who were historically underserved or denied education and presumed illiterate until they could prove otherwise. However, because the definition and conception of literacy changes with the needs of society, those who possess literacy and have access to social capital are always able to set new parameters for defining, spreading, and qualifying "literacy" in the name of the common good and national preservation. This makes "literacy" a powerful force for both social oppression and social liberation.

Chapter 5: (Re)Grouping Over the “Decline” of Standards: Race, Rationalization, and the (Re)Making of Educational Standards

"The myth of decline, then, is an expression of an ideology in which a particular form of literacy is seen to represent a world that is at once stable, ordered, and free of dramatic social change. More than nostalgia for a non-existent past, the myth of decline articulates a conception of the present and the future, one in which specific forms of literacy practice exemplify an ideological commitment to a status quo that may have already past."²⁴²

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the recent 40-year standards movement in education in order to show how this movement evolved and eventually produced the CCSS. In this discussion, I explore connections between civil rights advocates and the implementation of education reform, as well as the appropriation of civil rights rhetoric into the conservative social and educational agenda. I present the debates over opportunity-to-learn standards, the history of the eventual disappearance of such standards, and the now dominant rationalization, order, and neoliberal principles governing public education. I intend to demonstrate that the CCSS was fashioned within the larger national narrative of racial progress and borrows from the 40-year-long standards movement in education to re-center the idea that “high standards” for all will be enough to serve the equity agenda and solve the problem of inequality in education and society.

One of the major contributions of the CCSS is arguably to scale up much of the ongoing attempts to rationalize schools since September 11, 2001 (9/11.) Perhaps the events on 9/11 made it clear that the United States was not in control of the world order, or perhaps it was the gradual tightening of the reins and centralizing of domestic policy

²⁴² Harvey Graff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*. Indiana University Press, 1987, 40.

oversight that has occurred since the peak of civil rights gains in the 1970's. In any case, whether the perceived threat was foreign or domestic, the CCSS arguably demonstrate that we are in the throes of a new wave of rational administration in public education. Combined with the American tradition of believing that we can “remake ourselves by remaking our schools,” newly minted definitions and standards of the right kind of literacy for our 21st century society are nothing short of a national identity project.

The scientific management of institutions is not a new concept for the United States of America, but it is not often the primary lens applied to the history of education. Rational administration, or “Taylorism,” as it is sometimes called, has been applied to schooling in the past and it has failed.²⁴³ Standards have always been a key factor in the rationalization of schooling, but they would not have such bipartisan popularity if the process of top-down scientific management of public schooling did not also exemplify quintessential core American values such that the likes of George W. Bush and Edward Kennedy could both endorse the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. This act, far and away the most poignant example of government (over)reach into local school classrooms was advanced under a republican administration and championed by a stalwart liberal democrat just three months after the planes crashed on 9/11.

Unfortunately, there are shortcomings to applying the scientific management principals of industry to the citizen-shaping project of schools. One of these limitations is the “iron cage” effect that results in an institutional focus on the measurable over the

²⁴³ For a discussion of the rationalization of public schooling in the 20th century, see Mehta, Jal. *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations, and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. For a discussion of exceptionalism in American education, see Henig, Jeffrey R. *The End of Exceptionalism in American Education: The Changing Politics of School Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. 2013.

meaningful.²⁴⁴ Public education is a particularly vulnerable institution because it has historically been characterized as having an exceptional form of governance structure, a feminized teaching force, and a “semi-profession” undecided in its support of teaching as a calling or a vocation. This vulnerability increases when the institution itself cannot agree on the purposes of schooling.²⁴⁵ The attempt at rationalizing schooling will likely leave education with the same backward system that functions in the reverse order of the education systems touted as more successful than America’s. Countries like Finland and Japan invest in teacher training, select from an elite pool of academic candidates, and use very little if any standardized testing or top-down accountability measures. On the other hand, the American system involves little if any competitive selection process for teacher candidates, little if any training of teachers up front, and an immensely expensive and expansive system of accountability measures on the back end. Just take Texas as one example. The current federal accountability system, entrenched by NCLB, was first hatched in Texas under then Governor, George W. Bush. The common billboards along the North/South Interstate 35, reading, “Want to Teach? When Can You Start?” exemplify the Texas teacher recruitment program. The message from the billboard implies that credentials or qualifications are not required. People are not so easily measurable, but a standard set of skills and competencies can easily be measured by a standardized test.

The first time rational administration was applied to the public schools was during the Progressive Era in the 1920’s. The recent influx of Eastern European immigrants

²⁴⁴ Jal Mehta. “*The Allure of Order*” 2013.

²⁴⁵ For a discussion of the rationalization of public schooling in the 20th century, see Jal Mehta’s 2013 book, *The Allure of Order*. For a discussion of exceptionalism in American education, see Jeffrey Henig’s *The End of Exceptionalism in American Education*.

promised an industrial boom for the U.S. but the numbers of children flooding the school system lead to the perception of chaos, crowding, and crisis. When journalists first began reporting on the “crisis” of a fragmented school system, the city superintendents responded with creating and applying standards to run the government schools more efficiently.²⁴⁶ These city superintendents used the new theories of scientific management, or Taylorism, to apply industry knowledge to school management. Scientific management is credited with making the U.S. the industrial leader of the world by WWII. “Then, as now, teachers charged that such movements were wrongly applying the logic of industry to schools and argued that education had a deeper ‘bottom line’ than could be measured through actuarial techniques.”²⁴⁷

The second application of standards and rationalization came in the 1960s and 1970s, but this time the management was at the state level as opposed to the districts. The key framing document of this second wave of scientific management was the 1966 Coleman Report. Coleman used social survey data from the “Equality of Educational Opportunity Study” (EEOS). The study was conducted in response to the provisions in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which “highlighted the ways in which educational inputs did not translate into educational outputs and thus motivated legislators to see schooling as a production function that needed to be made more efficient.”²⁴⁸ At the same time, governors in the South were continuing to frame education as a tool for economic development in the wake of forced school desegregation. Those governors and constituents, opposed to court-ordered desegregation, tended to support states’ rights and local control over federal involvement. The National Governor’s Association (NGA) later

²⁴⁶ Mehta, *The Allure of Order*.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

became the collective expression of the governors' new focus on education as a means to better the economy, with North Carolina Governor, James Hunt leading the charge. Following court-ordered desegregation, the Southern Governors framed their education platforms in terms of a crisis over the quality of public education standards.

The third standards movement, which is still upon us, first began in the 1980s and linked the economic concerns of the nation to its educational outcomes. The NGA and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) were ready to push education as an economic issue on the national front in the early 1980's. "With education cast as an economic development issue, state legislators and governors became involved in an area that had previously been left primarily to local schools and school boards."²⁴⁹ While the first movement to rationalize administration of the schools shifted the power from the one-room schoolhouse teacher to the city superintendent, the second movement shifted the power to the state level. The third and most recent movement shifted the power from Governors to the federal government, in part prompted by the 1983 report, *A Nation At Risk*, and then solidified with NCLB where new federal reforms built on previous state efforts. The Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) program raised the economic stakes of education by inciting all school districts to apply and compete for limited federal funding support. All three movements valued standards, data, and testing over the "humanistic view of educational purposes."²⁵⁰ The CCSS were released to the public just months before the RTTT applications were due. One of the requirements for RTTT funds was that districts align their standards in accordance with "college readiness." Most states had not yet done this on their own, so when the CCSS became

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

available, governors were eager to endorse them if for no other reason than it provided the required aligned standards free of charge and earned them considerable points (50 of 500) on their RTTT applications. This fact would later be cited by newly elected conservative republican governors who argued against the CCSS as a “federal takeover” of public education.

Historically, education in America has always been a specially protected system from “politics as usual.” Traditionally, this meant that decisions about education were made locally. What we are seeing now in the 21st century is what Jeffrey Henig refers to as the “gradual reabsorption of educational decision making into multilevel, general-purpose government and politics.”²⁵¹ He uses the word “reabsorption” because in the pre-progressive era, educational policy-making was done by general-purpose government, until it was co-opted by progressive educators who wrested control away from professional politicians. Since that time, education has always been seen and treated as a “thing apart” from regular politics. Currently, however, this is changing, and education is now being “reabsorbed” into professional politics where it will become more like other domestic policy arenas.

Henig explains that the visibility of “institutional faultlines” suggest this trajectory. There has been an erosion of single-purpose institutions, a shift to more centralized governing structures, and moves to privatize what was once considered the realm of the public. While it remains to be seen if this “reabsorption” serves the greater purposes of public schooling, historical patterns and limitations suggest a rationale for something like the CCSS at this time. Single-purpose governments allow for greater technical expertise, but the “siloeing” effect creates institutions that are narrow and unable

²⁵¹ Jeffrey R. Henig, *The End of Exceptionalism*, 3.

to coordinate to address causes and effects efficiently.²⁵² Therefore, in the case of education, general purpose governments are so partisan that the best they can do is *accommodate* rather than *resolve* conflicts, special interests, or competing values. Thus, the CCSS provided an extra-governmental attempt to resolve something, namely the perceived racial achievement gap in a lackluster system of public education. Of course, in recent days, the CCSS has become much more of a partisan issue, which suggests that it will, in time, be folded into the existing policies, practices, and effects of reigning domestic politics. But by that time, the damage may be done.

HISTORY OF THE MODERN STANDARDS MOVEMENT

In much the same way that mandated racial desegregation policies had opened up new access for traditionally marginalized peoples in this country, the *Brown v Board* decision and subsequent school desegregation actions were followed by an outcry over the need for new standards in education. In society at large, there was a surge in the practice of administering competency tests in lieu of the new equal-access high school diploma following the *Brown* decision. At the moment when the greatest gains had been made toward reducing the racial achievement gap, the Reagan administration published a 1983 report on the state of affairs in national education. It was called, *A Nation At Risk*.

The *Nation At Risk* (NAR) report was the nexus of the discourse produced by the convergence of political, economic, and educational forces in the post-civil rights “second reconstruction.” The NAR report is widely accepted as the mark of the third and most recent wave of the modern standards movement in education, the most recent outcry of a national literacy crisis, and the foundation of today’s “common sense” understanding

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 17.

of education reform. The explicit concerns named and generated by the NAR report are answered by the CCSS. The cultural moment that produced *A Nation at Risk*, and its tremendously popular reception, is defined by decades of social solidarity and struggle for racial equality and civil rights. It is arguably a moment created by a public educational and national discourse characterized by “race” and “rights.” NAR offers up language and conjecture in support of a new era of increased governance, increased surveillance, and a denial of the nation’s racist history in schools and communities. The NAR, like a new national anthem, created a collective “common sense” that is still common today. It is a discourse and ideology that deracinates the past, the present, and the future, in the midst of the greatest racial disparities in educational opportunity, housing, health, and income. Educational reform efforts are but one realm where this discourse functions, but the convergence of post-civil rights reforms, economic and political interests, educational policy, and a new “colorblind” government in the early 1980’s resulted in the production of a discourse that explains the uncritical popular reception of the CCSS to solve the problems posed 32 years ago in the NAR report.

In May 2010, the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University released an influential longitudinal study on the racial wealth gap since 1984. Researchers followed the financial trajectory of a cohort of families over 23 years and concluded the following: the gap between white and African American families quadrupled to \$95,000; beginning middle class white families accumulated an average of \$74,000 while beginning upper-class African American families accumulated only \$18,000 in the same time period. The study also found that by 2007, African American families had doubled their debt and had almost no financial reserves to use during times of economic hardship. In answering the question of just what has happened over the last

25 years to cause such an increase in wealth disparity, the researchers name “public policies” that favor the already-wealthy and redistribute income to the highest grossing individuals. “At the same time, evidence from multiple sources demonstrates the powerful role of persistent discrimination in housing, credit, and labor markets.”²⁵³ If such trends in racial income gaps prevailed over the last 25 years, it is not a stretch to imagine that such inequality exists in many other areas as well. As the Heller researchers explain, such a gap is “opportunity denied.” The racial wealth gap in 1984 was equal to three years of college tuition. The same gap in 2007 is equal to four years at a public university for two children plus graduate school for one. While the study presents a range of data collected over the years, it demonstrates that economically and educationally, there are greater disparities between whites and African Americans today than in the early 1980’s.²⁵⁴

Spanning the same time period as the Heller study, education history and policy scholar, Diane Ravitch has been studying and publishing on education reform. In 1983, just prior to the release of NAR, she published an article in *Phi Delta Kappan* “On Thinking About the Future” of education in the United States:

Any future-thinking about the U.S. school must take into account the history of efforts to change the school. We should begin by noting that the school has not withered away, despite predictions to the contrary over the years. Critics, scholars, and educational leaders have predicted time and again that the school was no longer relevant as a school --- that it had to be turned instead into a social settlement or a vocational training agency or almost anything other than what it was. Yet the school as a school is still with us, which suggests that it serves social purposes that have enabled it to survive even the most vigorous attacks and outspoken criticisms.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Institute on Assets and Social Policy. *The Racial Wealth Gap Increases Fourfold*. Research and Policy Brief, Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 2010.

²⁵⁴ Institute on Assets and Social Policy. *The Racial Wealth Gap*.

²⁵⁵ Diane Ravitch, “On Thinking About the Future.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1983, 319.

In the piece, Ravitch reminds her readership that schools have always been microcosms of society, and that even the best school planners cannot adequately prepare for “changing social and economic trends” and “shifts in the composition of the student population.” Her proposed solution is a reform effort consisting of a “series of small moves in the right direction” that are reliant on a common vision of where “we” want to go: “We know which steps to take; our problem will continue to be ---as it has always been --- reaching agreement on where we want to go.”²⁵⁶ Interestingly, at the very moment when Ravitch was preparing her article for publication, a special federal commission was preparing its report, *A Nation at Risk*, on the state of American schools. Perhaps in response to a common understanding of the historical moment, both Ravitch and the National Commission on Excellence in Education recognized the need for school reform and the need for a common national vision regarding that reform. A closer examination of the cultural context that produced the discourse of educational reform in the early 1980’s may shed some light on exactly what “social purposes” are served by the perpetuation of real or perceived “failing” schools.

Fast-forward to 2010, and Diane Ravitch continues to produce book after book on the state of American schools.²⁵⁷ Ravitch’s high profile education policy papers and books have earned her the moniker of “conservative” over the past 20 years, and it is this “conservatism” which she now explains as the very reason why she can no longer support the current trends in education reform. White, highly educated, and tremendously well-

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 320.

²⁵⁷ Her long and illustrious publishing career includes titles such as, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, *The Schools We Deserve: Reflections on the Educational Crisis of Our Times*, *Learning From the Past: What History Teaches Us About School Reform*, and a host of additional titles. Her latest, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, has been praised by critics for its frank and truthful summation of all that has gone wrong in education reform since the early 1980’s.

resourced, Ravitch is oft-quoted by journalists and policy makers. Having been professionally active in the field of education since the late 1960's, Ravitch is respected as a significant scholar in the field of education and educational history and policy. The New York Times even describes one of her latest books as being written with "enormous authority and common sense."²⁵⁸

Viewing herself as liberal and progressive, yet siding with republican conservatives on nearly all aspects of education reform since the Reagan administration, Ravitch is an interesting representative symbol of thinking, discourse, and educational "common sense." The trajectory of her life and work is rich fodder for another research project, but a few of the most salient points from one of her recent books are worth considering on the cultural front. In her introduction, "What I learned About School Reform," Ravitch uses her own story to frame the "common sense" that developed amongst the powerbrokers in education policy-making:

Market reforms have a certain appeal to some of us who are accustomed to "seeing like a state." There is something comforting about the belief that the invisible hand of the market, as Adam Smith called it, will bring improvements through some unknown force. In education, this belief in market forces lets us ordinary mortals off the hook, especially those who have not figured out how to improve low-performing schools or to break through the lassitude of unmotivated teens. Instead of dealing with the rancorous problems like how to teach reading or how to improve testing, one can redesign the management structure of the school system and concentrate on incentives and sanctions. One need not know anything about children or education.²⁵⁹

She cites the privatization movement in education, including the popularity of school choice and vouchers, as indicative of a bipartisan (re)turn to capitalist priorities. While Ravitch offers a powerful discussion with reference to specific sources and events

²⁵⁸ Diane Ravitch. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010, back jacket matter.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

throughout the 20th century history of education reform, she never once discusses race, racism, or the impact of school integration in her analysis. What is not said and what is constituted by the lack of articulation is significant. As a figure who taught during the controversial implementation of the *Brown* decision, who lived through the Civil Rights Movement, who spent a lifetime studying urban schools, living in urban communities, and writing books about educational policy decisions, Ravitch is astoundingly silent on the racialization of education reform. Her silence suggests the power of the deracinated discourse in education reform.

In her 2010 book, Ravitch offers a fleeting but useful analysis of the *A Nation at Risk* report and its impact on public education and policy-making. Her discussion is a good starting point for a retrospective on the legacy of this dramatic document and the “common sense” it has instilled in the nation. Ravitch takes several pages in the introduction of her book to credit the NAR report with being the impetus for all current educational reform. She describes the report as an “immediate sensation,” a “blockbuster,” containing “incendiary” and “alarming” language. She then defends the success of the report in that it accomplished what it set out to do: get the public’s attention. Written in “plain English” and “with just enough flair to capture the attention of the press,” the report, according to Ravitch, “thoughtfully addressed the fundamental issues in education.”²⁶⁰ She is careful to point out that the report did not mention privatization or stress the importance of governance and management (elements she later attributes to the republican agenda). And, she emphasizes, the report only refers to testing

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

“in passing.” Ravitch defends the report as more of an “impassioned plea” to “make our education system live up to our nation’s ideals.”²⁶¹

The one time Ravitch mentions “race” at all, it is to contrast the moral authority of a report that is about improving education for *all* children with some unnamed, yet assumed “other” kind of approach to educational improvement:

It [NAR] warned that the nation would be harmed economically and socially unless education was dramatically improved for *all* [emphasis hers] children. While it did not specifically address issues of race and class, the report repeatedly stressed that the quality of education must improve across the board. What was truly at risk, it said, was the promise that “all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.”²⁶²

Ravitch finds that the universal language of improvement for *all* children is a strength of the *Nation at Risk* report, and contributed to its wide popularity and comprehensive appeal. Ravitch even contrasts the rhetoric of the report with the language of the No Child Left Behind law, and concludes that *A Nation at Risk* “looks positively idealistic, liberal, and prescient.”²⁶³ The one flaw she finds with the report is its over-emphasis on the problems in high schools, while neglecting the deficiencies in middle and elementary schools.

While Ravitch is a pivotal figure in the last 30 years of public education in the national imaginary, her views and the story she tells about herself in relation to the historical, political and social evolution of public education reform are not unique. According to scholar Jack Schuster, “federal involvement in education reached its zenith in 1980, as symbolized by the opening that year of the U.S. Department of Education and

²⁶¹ Ibid., 25.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid., 29.

as substantiated by the unprecedented federal aid-to-education budget enacted for fiscal year 1981.”²⁶⁴ Schuster’s article, “Out of the Frying Pan: The Politics of Education in a New Era,” was published in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1982. It chronicles the changes in federal education policy since 1965, but does not lay claim to the causes of the changes themselves. He does, however, name the five factors that created this new era: dispersion of politics, deregulation, consolidation of programs, cutbacks in education spending, and menacing attitudes toward the role of the federal government in education. The process of these changes had been gaining momentum since the federal government increased its involvement in education in order to mandate racial integration of schools in the mid-1960’s. By 1980, Carter created an official cabinet-level department, and by the time Reagan stepped in, the movement to shrink the role of the federal government in education was already afoot.

Schuster also outlines one final influential element in the new era: the role of the states. He cites that the simultaneous movement to decentralize and cut back on education spending meant that states would have to take on a greater role in managing federal education programs. Many states did not have the people and structures in place to manage the big monies of Title 1 and Title V, so most states were in the process of building the capacity of their own departments of education. Schuster’s final point, made before the release of NAR, is that there was currently no one group in education who could command the attention of the public. Under the new process of dispersion and decentralization, the office of the President of the United States was left with an enormous power to set the national agenda in education.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Jack H. Schuster. “Out of the Frying Pan: The Politics of Education in a New Era,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1982, 584.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 583-591.

A few months later in September of 1982, *Phi Delta Kappan*, a leading magazine in educational policy and leadership, carried an article by Hans Weiler called, “Education, Public Confidence, And the Legitimacy of the Modern State: Do We Have a Crisis?” Weiler, a professor of education and political science at Stanford University, presents his study of a decade of Gallup Poll data regarding public attitudes toward education. He argues that the evidence suggests that “the decline of public confidence in education is a reflection of a much more encompassing and pervasive erosion of confidence in public authority and public institutions.”²⁶⁶ His study noted that attitudes, while in decline since 1974, reached the tipping point in 1981, “when bad grades outweighed good ones by 18 percentage points.”²⁶⁷ Weiler links these attitudes toward public schooling with a citizenry generally dissatisfied in their government:

If, as some theorists suggest, the state is progressively losing its capacity to satisfy its citizens’ expectations (both in terms of material benefits and moral leadership), or if the mechanisms of representation are becoming increasingly impermeable and sclerotic, or if an inherent contradiction actually exists between the capitalist norms of production and accumulation and democratic norms of participation and equity, then it is not at all surprising that people’s views of the state and its institutions are becoming progressively more cynical. And public education is a prime candidate to share in this more general disillusionment. After all, education is the primary mechanism not only for socializing the young but also for allocating social status and the rewards that accompany it.²⁶⁸

Thus, Weiler links these attitudes to a question of whether there is a “crisis” in education that might also be indicative of a “crisis” in public confidence of the state itself. According to Weiler, prevailing attitudes toward education are symbolic of a citizenry

²⁶⁶ Hans N. Weiler. “Education, Public Confidence, and the legitimacy of the Modern State: Do We Have a Crisis?” *Phi Delta Kappann International*, 1982, 9.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

with no confidence in public authority. It would be a matter of months before the NAR report hit the newsstands in early 1983.

On September 6, 1975, the College Board released a report citing the greatest decline in SAT scores since 1963. The press immediately picked up the story and the September 6th edition of the *NY Times* featured the front-page headline, “College Entry Test Scores Drop Sharply.” *Times* education writer Edward B. Fiske wrote a significant article summarizing the findings of the report: “Numerous explanations have been suggested by educators, parents and others alarmed about the downward trend. These include too much television-watching, lack of concern among educators for the three R’s, and a changing mix in the college-going population.”²⁶⁹ In the two years that followed, scholars and educators discussed the significance of the decline in scores and debated the causes and solutions. Leading education journals such as *Phi Delta Kappan*, *Education Week*, *The English Journal*, *The Science News*, *The High School Journal*, and many more continued the examination and speculation of what such a decline might mean for American education and the nation as a whole.

Depending on the writer’s perspective and political agenda, the tone of each article might take a decidedly moral direction, apply an economic lens, or outwardly blame the decline of scores on the increase in the number of “blacks, women, and students from low-income families.”²⁷⁰ An article in *The Science Journal* explains that the data shows a “two-phase” decline whereby the “compositional changes” in college-going students, coupled with what the authors present as overall lower score averages for black, low-income, and female students, only explains the decline to 1970. The

²⁶⁹ Edward B. Fiske. “College Entry Test Scores Drop Sharply,” *NY Times*, September 7, 1975: 1

²⁷⁰ Society for Science and the Public. “On Further Examination: The SAT Score Decline.” *Science*, September 3, 1977: 148-149.

continuing decline from 1970-1974, according to the writers, is “pervasive forces” like the increasing numbers of single-parent households, the “inadequacy of parents” to support the academic work of their children, and the increasing numbers of mothers who work outside the home.²⁷¹

They also cite the College Board panel as recommending that “texts and classes should offer stimulation and challenge to all levels of students, not just the lowest common denominator.”²⁷² Even while the language of the article points to a correlation between increasing numbers of students of color and the tanking of the American school system, the article also mentions that 1970 saw the highest number of high school graduates going on to college: twice as many as in 1963 at the proposed zenith of SAT scores. So even though 50% of all high school graduates in 1970 were heading to college, the editors of the *Science News* presented the decline in the SAT score as a more significant indicator that racially integrated schools were resulting in the overall decline of the American citizenry. The linking of “pervasive forces” in the aftermath of the most significant legal gains in civil rights again reinforces the conclusion that increased access and opportunity for people of color was a direct cause of national decline.

One article from *The High School Journal* in 1977, takes a more scientific approach and attempts to break down the validity of the SAT test itself, and also explore the methodology for linking the results of the test to social factors. The article includes a full-page outline of the most common hypotheses for the linking of SAT scores to social factors. The outline is organized into the four broad categories of “Values,” “Technology,” “Family,” and “General.” Among the most common hypotheses are

²⁷¹ Ibid., 148.

²⁷² Ibid., 149.

“Widespread Egalitarian Principles and a Belief in Equality for All,” “Social Alienation” including a loss of confidence in national leadership, “Rapid Rate of Change in Modern Society,” and “Civil Rights” including equal educational opportunity.²⁷³ After 15 pages of dense description and analysis, this article, like nearly every article on the topic in the two years following the release of the College Board report, could find no definitive causes for the decline in SAT scores, and so could only speculate at best.

The English Journal offers an article just a couple months later in 1977 which criticizes the report as presenting “data” that cannot possibly support the conclusions drawn. In this editorial, the author analyzes how the panel report warns about making sweeping interpretations with inconclusive data, and then proceeds to make these very biased and sweeping generalizations in their very own report. The author compares the language and oversimplified conjecture to the *Newsweek* article, “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” from 1975.²⁷⁴ Indeed, the December 8th, 1975 edition of *Newsweek* featured a front cover portrait of a well-groomed white young man in a red V-neck sweater who appeared to be perplexed at the pen and paper on the desk before him. The *Newsweek* article described, in general terms, a concern with the inability of even college graduates to write. Providing a litany of opinions on the decline of the literate American, the oft-quoted *Newsweek* seemed to symbolize the worst fears of the literate American population in the mid-1970’s: the nation is headed for disaster because American education is in decline. This literary “crisis” served the narrative of social decline that would continue to fuel the modern standards movement and serve as the catalyst for the

²⁷³ Timothy R. Sanford. “The Test Score Decline,” *The High School Journal*. 1977: 302-316

²⁷⁴ Stephen Judy. “On Second Thought: Reviewing the SAT Decline,” *The English Journal*, 1977: 5-7

evolution of literacy policy that eventually led to the creation of the CCSS (see Chapter 5).

While the hype surrounding the decline in SAT scores seemed to strike a chord with the American masses, by 1985 Carl Kaestle and other scholars had published studies in many of these same journals to question the significance of a score decline and the data used to support it. There were many other standardized high school tests in the 1970's for which there was no score decline at all, and even some with an increase, so why such concern and public outcry at the decline of education in America during the 1970's?²⁷⁵ Putting causes and motivation aside, the result is the same; when smart, educated, and socially respected people spend two years “speculating” on causes for the decline in SAT scores with hypotheses that demonstrate foregone racist conclusions, the result is a pervasive belief in the link between the increase in the number of civil rights for people of color and a decline in the quality of the national citizenry.

A NATION AT RISK

In 2009, history scholar, Maris Vinovskis published a book called, *From A Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind*. In keeping with his thorough scholarship, Vinovskis offers a comprehensive look at the evolution of federal education policy and reform over the last 30 years. And while he has clearly done exhaustive research, even this renowned scholar is at a loss for explaining just why *A Nation at Risk* had the profound impact that it did. He summarizes the report by explaining that it presented a “dismal picture of American schooling,” yet he also notes: “At one point, *A Nation at Risk* did acknowledge that average citizens at the time of publication were better educated and more

²⁷⁵ Lawrence C. Stedman and Carl F. Kaestle. “The Test Score Decline is Over: Now What?” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1985: 204-210

knowledgeable than their counterparts from a generation earlier, but the report quickly reverted to its more pessimistic message.”²⁷⁶ Vinovskis is careful to present the reader with the spectrum of opinion on the report, including scholars and analysts who proclaimed it a misuse of data, and accused it of working too hard to “portray a decline in the quality of American schools” and creating a “false sense of impending doom.” In the end, Vinovskis sticks to the facts: “*A Nation at Risk* hit a very responsive chord and was accompanied by the release of several other reports on education, reinforcing the growing impression that American education was in decline.”²⁷⁷ Vinovskis’ discussion of *A Nation at Risk* leaves the reader wondering why such a flawed, overly pessimistic and dramatic indictment of education would resonate with so many powerbrokers in American society at the time. And while his is but one account, many scholars have since tried to explore and explain the impact of the report on society as a whole. As Vinovskis reminds us, over a million copies of the report were distributed, and countless newspaper articles written about it upon its release and since. The report has even been translated into over a dozen foreign languages. The incredible reception, the impact on educational reform, and the continued influence of the report’s narrative of educational and national decline suggests that it served as symbol, as rallying cry, and as the mark of a new national anthem. So while the formal racial integration of schools served as a “triggering” event for the panic over standards, the NAR report became the actual catalyst for the modern standards movement.

What is particularly significant about the timing and tone of the *Nation at Risk* report, is that the data about the racial and educational achievement gap, as well as data

²⁷⁶ Maris Vinovskis. *From A Nation At Risk to No Child Left Behind: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy*. New York, New York: Teachers College Press, 2009, 16.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

regarding income disparities, show that the 1970's demonstrated the greatest gains in education and income for people of color in this country. The "gaps" were at their narrowest and black and Hispanic students were attending college at nearly the same rate as white students.²⁷⁸ The United States has always prided itself on the ideal of "equality for all," so why would an educational commission publish an alarmist report about the "rising tide of mediocrity" threatening our schools and nation? And why, when this data is readily available and well-documented, would smart well-meaning people continue to let it dictate educational reform efforts? Some scholars in educational history have noted that governmental commissions often publish reports not based on data, but rather based on bias regarding their pre-conceived notions. If this is true, what were the governing notions of the immediate post-civil rights era that allowed many a white liberal radical to, like LBJ, abandon the idea of "equality of results" and embrace the notion of "equality of opportunity"?²⁷⁹ While LBJ and Moynihan chose to emphasize the "family" unit as the nexus of moral concern and order, the public moral panic caused by the manufacturing of the "scandalous" rise in female-headed households was enough to divert public attention away from "equality" altogether. Arguably, the *Nation at Risk* report served as the public announcement of a manufactured full-blown crisis that could rally the nation, on national terms, to ignore its racist past and value only what the present could tell us about the nation's impending doom. The new national anthem constructed out of the myth-making needed to generate such a report emphasizes racial injustices as past, threats to the nation as within its own borders, evidence of the threats (female-headed households, racial

²⁷⁸ Linda Darling-Hammond. *The Flat World And Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2010. 20.

²⁷⁹ See LBJ's speech on "The Great Society," written by Patrick Moynihan and published in 1965. Found at sheg.stanford.edu.

integration, rapid technology gains), evidenced by the declining state of American schools, and rationalized by the expanding global market and international economic competition.

There seems to be general disagreement as to just why the Honorable T.H. Bell asked the National Commission on Excellence in Education to write its influential report on the state of American education in 1981. What reporters and scholars appear to agree on is that Bell felt that education was very important, more important than the current federal administration seemed to think. Some scholars comment on how the Reagan administration was looking to dissolve the Department of Education, and Bell creating the commission was a result of the administration stripping him of his authority as Secretary of Education within a vanishing department. For whatever reason, political or otherwise, Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education and asked it to write a report. Multiple sources claim Bell's intention with the report was to show the positive and optimistic state of affairs in education and to argue that the improvements were largely the result of increased federal action and support. This would have certainly been a good political move, as an administration that could argue it has improved education is an administration with instant popularity in the polls. Yet, the report that came back was not optimistic at all. In fact, it is arguably alarmist and indicting. The public and professional response to *Nation at Risk* was undeniable. And the enormous response was bipartisan. In the interest of centralizing authority for the public institution of education, the Reagan administration seized on the "popularity" of the report itself, rather than improvements in education, and the Department of Education continues to exist today. In keeping with American culture, it seems there is nothing as popular as a good melodrama, and the *Nation at Risk* definitely delivered at a time when the nation

needed a unifying rallying cry and a new national myth. Coming off of decades of social struggles, confronting years of injustice, the 1970's American public was displeased with its government and looking for change. That same government would need to construct a narrative in keeping with the nation's ideals of equality and freedom that could allow the nation to mobilize resources and re-allocate power. *Nation at Risk* provided the nation with a crisis, victims, an opportunity for national rescue, and an excuse to redistribute wealth and authority.

The opening document of the *Nation at Risk* is a letter from Commission Chair, David Pierpont Gardner, and addressed to T.H. Bell. According to Gardner and the members of the committee, the commission viewed its directive as providing a report on the "quality of education" in America. "Our purpose has been to help define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions, not search for scapegoats."²⁸⁰ Already in this first page, *Nation at Risk* is explicit about ignoring the past and the players, and focusing on the present and future. The question is, who was and is served by the denial of responsibility for the "problems" *Nation at Risk* outlines? Gardner describes education as "one of the central issues which will define our Nation's future," and one of which the commission was tasked to report "free of political partisanship."²⁸¹ With the opening address, *Nation at Risk* sets the tone for a focus on the present and future, without a need, responsibility, or compulsion to consider historical patterns or legacies of oppression. In fact, in the face of such a national crisis, looking at causation could easily be interpreted as irrational irresponsibility.

²⁸⁰ National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

Though the letter is the first page of the report, it is clearly the last piece written. As a reflective document, the letter communicates the great sense of importance held by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. They recognized their call to provide a foundational report for educational reform moving forward. They openly describe their process as nonpartisan, future-oriented, and objective. And they openly lay claim to providing the necessary resources for any future work in education reform: “We believe that materials compiled by the Commission in the course of its work constitute a major resource for all persons interested in American education.”²⁸² In what might best be described as the “perfect neoliberal storm” of education reform, the *Nation At Risk* served to bring together a professionally diverse set of educators, policy-makers, and community leaders who successfully provided the national crises needed to divert attention away from the recent history of civil rights struggles and legal gains and redirect every individual and institutional energy and resource toward a future absent of its past.

While scholars and reporters claim Bell was looking for the report to portray an optimistic outlook for education, the opening paragraphs of the *Nation at Risk* itself paints another picture:

The Commission was created as a result of the Secretary’s concern about “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system.” Soliciting the “support of all who care about our future,” the Secretary noted that he was establishing the Commission based on his “responsibility to provide leadership, constructive criticism, and effective assistance to schools and universities.”²⁸³

Being a former superintendent, Bell could very well have had the intention of prioritizing education and trying to make it a priority on the Reagan administration’s national agenda.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

The commission's response, however, indicates that the panel assembled was already entering the investigation with a common (cultural) understanding of what was going on in education; the value of the high school diploma was decreasing. Similar to white property values in integrated neighborhoods, when the schools were integrated, there was panic over the perceived decline in the quality of the credential that *Brown v Board* made equally accessible to all. The request to write the report simply provided the vehicle for publishing the consensus. When the commission endorses the research and researchers cited in the report as "major resources for all persons interested in American education," any educator, scholar, or critic would have to know and respond to the *Nation at Risk*'s specific body of information before being able to stake a claim about anything in educational reform. Any research or researchers not found in the report were effectively de-legitimized and marginalized. By locating the perception of the crisis as being the very ambiguous "public perception that something is seriously remiss," any reader disagreeing with the *Nation at Risk* report is now an outlier; an exception to the rule and one who is rightfully dismissible in the larger conversation. If a reader did not believe there was a crisis in education, they might feel it was due to their own ignorance. This silencing effect continues to constrain education reform as the conversations repeat themselves and it is hard to hear a single original thought or idea. Instead, educational reform since *Nation at Risk* has been a repeating pattern of recycled jargon, strategies, and complaints that continue to be supported by millions of dollars and an entire generation of education reformers making a living at researching the problems that persist.

In the introductory section of the report, the commission lists six specific "charges" which govern its findings. These include assessing the quality of teaching and learning, comparing American education with that of other nations, looking at college

entrance requirements and high school achievement and naming the programs that are most successful, defining those challenges which must be overcome “if we are to successfully pursue the course in education,” and lastly, “assessing the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last quarter century have affected student achievement.”²⁸⁴ Interestingly then, the *Nation at Risk* focused its attention on the state of education since the *Brown* decision to legally desegregate schools, and it spotlighted “teenagers” or those students in secondary education. Having limited its focus to that recent history, target population, and focus institutions, the *Nation at Risk* rhetorically establishes itself as an authority on post-civil rights, post-desegregation education without ever using any language about race, rights, or desegregation at all.

In addition to the six “charges,” the commission also lists its five main sources of information: papers “commissioned by experts,” testimonials from people in the schools, “existing analyses of problems” in education, letters from concerned citizens, and “descriptions” of “promising approaches.” Right away, the *Nation at Risk* establishes its ethos by grounding its conclusions in the work of “experts” and the concerns of the public. This once again creates a sense that the report is an all-encompassing authority on the state of affairs in American high schools, effectively silencing any criticism. To guarantee the morality of the *Nation at Risk*, the commission closes the introduction with the following words:

In many ways, the membership of the Commission itself reflected that diversity and difference of opinion during the course of its work. This report, nevertheless, gives evidence that men and women of good will can agree on common goals and on ways to pursue them.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

In one sweeping gesture, the 18-member panel established itself as an equitable representation of the “public” mind, body, and spirit. Anyone who took issue with the report or its findings need not be heard because the panel was clear that it had considered all these opinions. The new authority on the national crisis had drawn its line in the proverbial sand. Nothing currently or previously need be acknowledged before moving forward to take action on this issue.

The *Nation at Risk* report used strong language and dramatic statements to communicate its findings to the public. That same language was also simple and direct, effectively reaching a wide audience. Clearly designed to garner popular support, the *Nation at Risk* was embraced by the press and the public at large. The federal government, the one office that had enough power to set a national agenda, was newly characterized by its conclusion that “Our Nation is at Risk,” and its call to save the nation by reforming the high schools: “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”²⁸⁶ While the report is vague on exactly what caused this “rising tide of mediocrity,” or who is responsible, the message is clear; the US is being attacked by a threat within its own borders.

The *Nation at Risk* uses war analogies throughout the document to emphasize the urgency, national risk, and sacrifice that will be needed to mobilize resources to combat the threat within its own borders. “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”²⁸⁷ The panel claims that “we have allowed this to

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

happen to ourselves” by “dismantling support systems” that allowed for necessary protections. Without naming those supports specifically, the panel does claim that: “We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”²⁸⁸ While the specifics are unclear, the recommendation for action is explicit; the US must “re-arm” itself, re-rebuild something, and re-turn to a state of greatness it once had. The foundation was laid for a nation re-making itself anew through the guise of educational reform.

The report goes on to preface its findings by linking the state of education to undue “financial cost.” The panel invokes then President Reagan to emphasize the “central importance of education in American life” in order to further stake a claim for the report’s legitimacy. It notes that: “This report, therefore, is as much an open letter to the American people as it is a report to the Secretary of Education. We are confident that the American people, properly informed, will do what is right for their children and for the generations to come.”²⁸⁹ Before launching into the body of the report, the panel had created a rhetorical masterpiece that easily fed off the existing anxieties of a newly integrated and destabilized society. If the reader stopped reading on page six, he or she probably felt as if they could already anticipate the findings.

Because there is no official breakdown in the Table of Contents for the body of the report, the reader must either skim the report to see the various headings or simply begin reading. If the report were to have a breakdown of its sub-headings, it might look something like this: “The Risk,” “Indicators of the Risk,” “Hope and Frustration,” “Excellence in Education” (its shortest section), “The Learning Society,” “The Tools at

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 6.

Hand,” “The Public’s Commitment,” “The Findings,” “Recommendations,” “America Can Do It,” “A Word to Parents and Students,” and “A Final Word.” Perusal of the subheadings suggests the trajectory of the tone and the urgency of the message. The findings do not appear until page 18, and come after 17 pages of vague generalizations and conjecture. When the readership finally gets a presentation of findings, there are no specific citations but there are lots of numbers and references to “surveys” and “tests.” By the time the reader gets to this section, the tone has been established and actual evidence only reinforces what has already been named as “common sense.”

The first official section of the body of the *Nation at Risk* is titled: “At Risk.” According to this section, the nation is at risk in the areas of industry, commerce, intellectuality, morality, and spirituality “which knit together the very fabric of our society.” It describes the fate of “individuals” who do not demonstrate the skills needed to compete in an expanding global economy as being a life of disenfranchisement, incompetent performance, and incomplete participation in national life. The report claims that a “high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.”²⁹⁰ To further stress the importance of individual quality and character, the panel includes a quote from Thomas Jefferson about the importance of a “common understanding” for all individuals in a nation.

The final paragraph of the section “At Risk,” discusses the founding national “promise” that is “at risk”:

All regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts,

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 7.

competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.²⁹¹

In what is arguably the most convoluted and confusing set of sentences in the entire report, the panel carefully defines the national “promise” to low-income and racial minorities as a “fair chance.” Linking this “fair chance” to educational opportunity, the *Nation at Risk* effectively makes the institution of education central and perhaps even solely, the arena within which all social, economic, and political racial inequalities can be concentrated. The simple message: provide every individual with a fair opportunity to get educated, and the nation will right all historical racial wrongs without needing to change anything else. After all, as the report suggests, what matters most is the individual and his virtue to seize on that opportunity. Such a message is in keeping with the discourse still alive and well in the 2010 CCSS in ELA and Literacy, which purports that personal merit is the primary factor in individual success, and to judge the success or failure of an entire group is to undervalue the power of the individual and to deny him his very virtue.

The second section of the body of the report is entitled, “Indicators of the Risk,” and it lists thirteen primary items for consideration. Of these thirteen indicators, 12 are based on reported test scores, and of these, three cite the College Board SAT (of which David Coleman, CCSS creator, is now President). According to the list, many Americans are alarmingly illiterate, getting less intelligent by the year, and failing miserably in comparison to other countries around the world. Even the gifted students are underperforming on tests compared to their school achievement. Three indicators derived from SAT scores alone indicate a “virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980,” “consistent declines” in English and physics, and scores of the highest achievers

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

“dramatically declined.” There is no critical discussion of the validity of the tests used, and no definition of how “school achievement” is measured, but rather the report assumes a vested authority in its sources of information. The panel refers to the list of thirteen “indicators” of risk as national “deficiencies” that impact the economical future of the nation.

After four pages of describing and contextualizing the “indicators” of risk, the commission closes the section by saying that the average American citizen is actually more educated today than he was a generation ago: “Nevertheless, *the average graduate* of our schools and colleges today is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high school and college.”²⁹² Again, there is no discussion about the racial, ethnic, or class make-up of the current graduates as compared to 25 and 35 years ago. What is not in the report, is that at the time of *Nation at Risk*’s investigations, the racial gap in educational achievement was at its narrowest, but the pinnacle of test performance for the highest (white) achievers had occurred 25 years ago. Thus, the interesting conclusion of this zero-sum interpretation is a national crisis worthy of urgent address.

The next section, “Hope and Frustration,” begins with the leading statement “Statistics and their interpretation by experts show only the surface dimension of the difficulties we face.”²⁹³ After 11 pages of broad generalizations and conclusions, the panel alludes to the previous sections as being all about “statistics.” Giving them permission to contrast these “statistics,” the commission then presents their authority to characterize public opinion as a “tension between hope and frustration” where many

²⁹² Ibid.,11.

²⁹³ Ibid.

express “a growing impatience with shoddiness in many walks of American life, and the complaint that this shoddiness is too often reflected in our schools and colleges.”²⁹⁴ The umbrella term “shoddiness,” never particularly defined, transforms into a “national sense of frustration” at the “dimming of personal expectations and the fear of losing a shared vision for America.” The report calls for a recognition that that this sense of frustration has political implications that across races, ages generations, and classes and impacts all of the citizenry. The panel calls for a renewed sense of national unity to rally people to “forcefully act” to improve the schools rather than “search for scapegoats.”

In its shortest section, “Excellence in Education,” four paragraphs continue the theme of individualism and emphasize the importance of a public commitment. In a telling series of sentences, the commission links racial integration to a decline in the quality of education by using ambiguous language and leaving assumptions unnamed: “The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or in practice.”²⁹⁵ The answer, according to the report, is an explicit focus on the development of every individual “to their fullest.”

The theme of offering an educational opportunity to every individual continues throughout the remaining sections of the report. Even in the list of the “Tools at Hand,” the characteristics of each individual are separated out as “tools” to be employed in reshaping American “mediocrity.” The bullet-point list of nine tools includes the following: “natural abilities,” one’s “dedication” and “commitment,” “superior effort,” “ingenuity,” and “voluntary efforts” of each individual. The list also includes particular

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 13.

beliefs and national norms, such as the “persistent and authentic American dream” in merit equating to a rise in social stature, and the “sound tradition” that the Federal government should be involved in supporting local education efforts.²⁹⁶

When the report does make a very specific citation on page 16, it does so in an effort to justify federal involvement in education. Immediately following a quote by President Ronald Reagan is a reference to the Gallup Poll in 1982, which surveyed public attitudes about the nation’s schools. The panel indicates that the report “strongly supported a theme heard during our hearings: People are steadfast in their belief that education is the major foundation for the future strength of this country.”²⁹⁷ The use of the Gallup Poll sets up the opening line of the “Findings” section: “We conclude that declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted.”²⁹⁸ The use of passive voice and the general allusion to “disturbing inadequacies” allows the reader to fill in the gaps.

The *Nation at Risk* report relies on common sense, or “cultural” sense, in that it creates a rhetorical situation that *requires* the audience to co-construct the meaning being made. Readers are intentionally invited to fill in gaps and to make connections between racial integration, educational decline, and national prosperity. By design, the *Nation at Risk* report was a watershed moment in both educational and national history whereby a new era of post-civil rights discourse intersected with an urgent redistribution of power back to the wealthiest class of Americans. Arguably a perfect neoliberal storm, the process of convergence that occurred to produce the *Nation at Risk* is still serving as the guiding system of educational reform.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 15-16.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 18.

While the report went on to make general recommendations and suggestions for reform, it is the tone and *narrative* it established that held the real impact on the nation and on education. Indicative of larger trends and shifting power, the *Nation at Risk* report serves as a watershed moment in the nation's racialized history as well. It marks a very public shift from a discourse of race and rights to a discourse of racelessness and colorblindness that concern some of today's scholars and even fewer of today's educators.

The NAR report provided the formal articulation of the crisis and served as the impetus for the modern standards-based reform movement. One of the threats identified in the NAR report included the fear that all current curriculum and educational practices had been dumbed-down to serve a common reductionist denominator for the purposes of achieving higher levels of functional literacy across the nation. This argument was loosely grounded in ambiguous evidence precipitating a fear of international competition, a fear of public outrage over glaring inequalities, anxieties over what a qualified citizen would need to look like in the 21st century, and panic that our current labor force would not suffice in propelling the economy upward. The conversation thus turned from one focused on the need to have new standards, to one focused on the need to have *higher* standards.

Policymakers and educational leaders that were once at odds over if or how to mandate the racial integration of schools could now unite under the moralistic banner of raising standards for all. This is why, under the Clinton administration in the mid-1990's, a national commission of governors, congressional and policy leaders, opted to forgo the notion of a national competency test in favor of a system centered around state-defined standards and assessments. This system became national policy in the reauthorization of

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act known as “Goals 2000.” The federal government tied Title I monies to proof of students meeting these standards. The groundwork was laid for a national focus on standards and assessments in the name of equalizing opportunities for poor and racial minority students.

DEBATING THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Early on in the modern standards movement, the question of educational equity was bantered about in partisan debates as republicans argued in favor of an emphasis on “outputs,” while more liberal policymakers advocated the need for standards regarding “inputs.” The debates were perhaps best captured in an *Education Week* article in 1994: “Opportunity to Achieve: The Debate Over Standards and Equity.”²⁹⁹ In a time when high stakes tests were used only to assess basic competencies, the standards for an “opportunity to learn” could be broad and ill-defined. But as policymakers called for higher standards and harder tests as the answer to the perceived “Nation at Risk” for mediocrity in education, equity advocates worried over the impact of raising the stakes, standards, and accountability without also equalizing the material resources and opportunities to learn to support children in achieving these new and ambitious goals.

In the article, education research scholars Diane Ravitch and Andrew Porter argue their respective positions alongside members of the House Education and Labor Commission, New York democrat Major Owens, and Pennsylvania republican, Bill Goodling. Ravitch and Goodling both offer common conservative opposition to opportunity-to-learn standards in the form of concerns over who would write them and

²⁹⁹ Bill Goodling, “Opportunity to Achieve: The Debate Over Standards and Equity.” *Education Week*. March 23, 1994. www.edweek.org.

how they would be implemented and enforced. Their biggest concern involved too much federal government oversight, which they felt could easily turn into unfunded mandates and erosion of local and state responsibility for education decisions.

Ravitch outlines how opportunity-to-learn standards, as expressed in the House version of the Goals 2000 Act of the Clinton administration, includes “the quality and availability of curricula, instructional materials, technologies, teacher quality, access to professional development (including the ‘best knowledge’ about teaching and learning), school facilities, libraries, and laboratories.”³⁰⁰ She questions whether the newly established National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) is qualified to judge whether states have met such standards. At worst, explains Ravitch, states and districts could be open to lawsuits from families who claim that such opportunity-to-learn standards have not been met. Goodling supports Ravitch’s concerns, adding that opportunity-to-learn standards are often mistakenly viewed as a “panacea” to solving the ills of American education that could “compel your school to use scarce local dollars on such things as developing a ‘gender neutral’ curriculum, reducing class size, or building a laboratory.”³⁰¹ Both Ravitch and Goodling stress that emphasizing the “outputs” (performance standards) over the “inputs” (resources) will produce higher academic achievement in American public schools.

Porter, like Ravitch and Goodling, believes that a focus on inputs will only distract the conversation away from a focus on student accomplishment. In his opinion, “Opportunity standards might identify instances where a student has been denied access to a quality education, but that will not solve the equity problem. Neither will sparing

³⁰⁰ See Diane Ravitch in Bill Goodling "Opportunity to Achieve," 1994.

³⁰¹ Goodling, "Opportunity to Achieve," 1994.

[sic] a student from undergoing an assessment that identifies that student's educational deficiencies. Either way, the student is a loser."³⁰² In what would later become the central operating philosophy of NCLB, Porter suggests instead that law makers abandon the idea of opportunity-to-learn standards in favor of simply wedding the measures of student and school achievement: "Student achievement is the joint product of what students and schools do together, so why not hold schools and students simultaneously accountable on the same measures of achievement?"³⁰³ This, he felt, would motivate students to do their best work, and schools to provide their best instruction without the need for specific opportunity-to-learn standards. Porter's pro-accountability argument would later become the basis for new federal laws in education.

House democrat, Major Owens, articulates the only position in favor of fully instituting opportunity-to-learn standards. "If their constituents are told what their schools should be providing children to educate them effectively, they might actually insist that elected officials give it to them. Though the governors are eager to hold students and schools to high standards and punish those who fail to meet them, they shudder in horror at the idea that they, too, might be expected to do something other than give speeches."³⁰⁴ In contrast to conservative arguments, Owens contends that opportunity-to-learn standards would encourage states and districts to focus on which "inputs" are most needed to provide an equal and equitable education for all students. Owens offers the "voluntary" element of opportunity-to-learn standards as proof that there can be no federal mandate.

³⁰² See Andrew Porter in Bill Goodling, "Opportunity to Achieve," 1994.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ See Major Owens in Bill Goodling, "Opportunity to Achieve," 1994.

Indeed, hindsight shows that the voluntary adoption and implementation of opportunity-to-learn standards under Goals 2000 eventually led to the disappearance of these standards altogether. The education reform discourse evolved to include a bipartisan consensus on accountability and “outputs” and an historical amnesia regarding the impact or importance of “inputs” to achieving equity and equality in education.

Most of the scholarship and discourse on the standards movement in education through the year 2000, includes explicit mention and definition of at least three and sometimes four different types of standards; content, performance, opportunity-to-learn, and sometimes curriculum standards³⁰⁵ (at times, content and curriculum standards get combined). Following the debates surrounding the Clinton administration’s “Goals 2000” education plan, opportunity-to-learn standards had been dropped from the discussion altogether. With the invention of the CCSS, all of standards-based reform is narrowed to just two types of standards: content and performance. The trajectory of the discourse surrounding standards in the modern standards movement illuminates the impact of shifting political priorities and arrangements.

When articles discuss content or curriculum standards, the consensus is that these standards refer to a central or core body of knowledge and skills that teachers must teach and students must learn. This can sometimes be as broad as “curriculum frameworks” within specific subject areas, or as specific as the mastery of particular skills at a given grade level. Content standards could be found in all subject areas, sometimes written by state level panels, sometimes by professional organizations. In any case, the content

³⁰⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the different types of standards and their definitions, see Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education*, 1995; Futrell and Brown in “Should African Americans Support the Current Education Reform Standards Movement?” 2000; and Anne C. Lewis “An Overview of the Standards Movement,” 1995.

standards delineate a trajectory of specific knowledge and skills to be learned within a finite amount of time. Content standards answer the question of “what should be taught and when?” Inequality in the content standards often looks like students in better resourced schools being taught more content and at a deeper level than in schools that were predominantly made up of poor and racial minority students. Also critical for poor and racial minority communities are the questions of “what kind of curriculum or content best serves the academic needs of their students?” as well as “Who should be in charge of determining this content and curriculum?”

Closely coupled with content standards are the performance standards, which answer the question of “To what degree should students learn something?” These kinds of standards get applied to measuring the amount and depth of content standards and skills “mastered” by public school students. Performance standards, once defined, provide a ranking for the learning of content and skills as well as the evidence used to determine such rankings. Inequality regarding performance standards includes the unequal kinds of content provided at various schools as well as the potentially subjective judgment criteria for student work. As advocates of performance standards work to establish common criteria for judgment of student abilities, it’s easy for a “one-size fits all” achievement score to emerge as the leading or only indicator of student abilities without regard for progress or circumstances. A crucial question for poor and racial minority communities then becomes “Will the measurement methods used be more or less equitable for our students than existing standardized tests?” This question resonates with the historical patterns of public education underserving the most needy students and preserving the status quo privilege of better resourced families and communities.

Both the Bush and Clinton administrations acknowledged the inherent inequality of both content and performance standards, and thus they proposed “school delivery” or “opportunity-to-learn” standards. These standards are commonly referred to as “opportunity-to-learn” because this was the name given in the formal articulation of Clinton’s “Goals 2000” education legislation. These standards address the school and district’s capacity to support student learning under defined content and performance standards.³⁰⁶ In keeping with the expanding role of the federal government in education to remedy past injustices, discrimination, and low test scores, the Clinton administration sought to institute standards for schools in the kind of support a given campus would provide for students to master the expected content and skills. The National Governor’s Association, a proponent of Goals 2000, however, opposed these standards because it would put an undue amount of burden on the states, and potentially endorse the increasing federal education mandates. The state leaders viewed these standards as potentially infringing on the rights of state and local education entities and therefore they endorsed that these standards be “voluntary.”³⁰⁷

In the end, the most controversial element of these and all the standards was the question of who would do the defining and enforcing of standards. State leaders wanted and needed the funding from the federal government to make needed reforms in education, but they also did not want the federal regulation and requirements to get it done. Thus, by the end of the 1990’s, state leaders had endorsed curriculum frameworks, the expansion of standardized tests, and various reform initiatives to address the capacity of schools to provide the improved instructional programs on a “voluntary” basis. This

³⁰⁶ Traiman, Susan. *The Debate on Opportunity-to-Learn Standards*. National Governors Association, 1993.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

would become very important in the climate of the CCSS as the “voluntary” nature of standards adoption resulted in the careful selecting out of opportunity-to-learn standards alongside the ratcheting up of academic rigor, expectations, and stakes for students and teachers.

The challenge for realizing the possibilities of improved racial equality in education as a result of improved standards is the fact that there is no longer language or institutional memory available for arguing the racial achievement gap as a gap in equal opportunities to learn. While school integration as a result of the *Brown* decision demonstrated the most rapid gains in opportunity and academic achievement for African American students, the negation of any official “opportunity-to-learn standards” compounded by the courts gradually chipping away at affirmative action policies and the increased residential segregation have created a public schooling climate that undermines increased opportunities to learn.

Without an equal opportunity to learn, African American students, and any poor and/or racial minority students, as a collective, face the probability of failing further and faster in the American education system. The CCSS have led to increased performance demands at the same moment that American policymakers have embraced a “post-racial” colorblind approach to education policy. This has translated into a stark divergence between education reform discourse and the material reality of poor and racial minority students:

Poor and minority children also are more likely to have teachers who completed an alternative certification program and are more likely to have more substitute teachers. The poor and minority children who increasingly reflect the norm in our schools are more likely to attend schools that are in substandard condition, lack state-of-the-art technology, and do not offer a diverse, rigorous curriculum. Further, these are schools and school districts where teachers do not have access

to sustained professional development opportunities. In addition, studies show that disadvantaged, rural, and minority students are less likely to receive program planning counseling than their White counterparts and other students who are more advantaged. Inferior instructional materials are more likely found in schools where students are poor than in schools where students are affluent.³⁰⁸

When content and performance standards assume a level playing field, the differentiated impact on particular communities easily gets relegated to an “accountability” issue at yet another “failing school.”

Overwhelmingly, African American scholars and advocates have been staunch supporters of the standards reform movement in education, despite its limitations. In part, this is because they cannot afford to oppose the movement. According to Futrell and Brown, the history of discrimination and denial of equal opportunity in education has led the African American community to consistently and publicly support the ideal that all children should be held to high standards and be provided with rich curriculum. High standards alone should not be the challenge for African American students, or racial minority students anywhere, however, “standards are a starting point, not a panacea.”³⁰⁹ In a climate where “equal” has come to be defined as “the same,” differentiating resources, tutoring, materials, funding, and additional investments for poor and racial minority students mostly gets publicly attacked as “racist” and/or unfair. Post-racial colorblind discourse and policies assume a “post-racism” educational system.

Despite the fact that the current reality of post-racial colorblind discourse and policies suggest otherwise, civil rights organizations have leveraged considerable power and influence within and throughout the standards movement in education. Contrary to the work of many scholars who cite the conservative right as the dominant force behind

³⁰⁸ Mary Hatwood Futrell and Walter A. Brown. "Should African Americans Support the Current Education Reform Standards Movement?" *The Journal of Negro Education* 69, no. 4 (2000): 294.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

setting standards in education, scholar Jeffrey Rhodes argues that civil rights groups have provided the impetus for current “federal standards” because they have consistently argued that such standards are an effective way of advancing the opportunity, access, and educational outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged students.

This convergence of political civil rights actors and education policy developers provides another example of where the discourse of civil rights and the new neoliberal economic discourse have overlapped to form the appearance of a common agenda. Because federal education policy has primarily focused on serving traditionally marginalized students and families in the public schools, many civil rights advocates have successfully leveraged their political power to influence federal education policy. This reality complicates the common scholarly position that the education reform movement has been chiefly a conservative, nativist push.

According to the findings of Rhodes, many civil rights organizations have actively advocated for rigorous education standards, increased testing, and greater accountability in public education precisely as a way to better serve historically underserved populations. “... certain civil rights organizations---which I call civil rights organizations for standards and accountability, or CROSAs---have played a central role in developing and promoting standards, testing, accountability, and limited school choice policies in order to achieve what they view as fundamentally egalitarian purposes.”³¹⁰ Rhodes’ list of such organizations includes many advocates for the CCSS, such as the Education Trust, the Citizens’ Commission on Civil Rights, La Raza, the NAACP, and the Education Equality Project. Such organizations, Rhodes asserts, acted as “political

³¹⁰ Jesse Hessler Rhodes. "Progressive Policy Making in a Conservative Age? Civil Rights and the Politics of Federal Education Standards, Testing, and Accountability." *Perspectives on Politics*, September 2011, 520.

entrepreneurs,” “developing many of the policy initiatives that eventually became enshrined in law, building diverse coalitions in support of these measures, and working closely with presidents and mainly Democratic members of Congress to enact them.”³¹¹

Perhaps the clearest example to support the claim that education standards have been used as a tool to right the historical wrongs of racial injustice is the work of the Commission on Chapter 1 in December 1992. The report, titled “Making Schools Work for Children in Poverty” presented a new framework for the first chapter of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The members of the committee found that “the low expectations in our suburban schools are high in comparison to expectations in urban schools and rural schools with concentrations of children in poverty.”³¹² The Commission goes on to argue that the culture of low expectations for “minority and low-income children” are the chief cause for the low test performance of these same children in relation to their white and higher income peers. The commissioners go on to say

...we know how to educate poor and minority children of all kinds---racial, ethnic, and language---to high levels. Some teachers and some entire schools do it every day, year in and year out, with outstanding results. But the nation as a whole has not yet acted on that knowledge, even though we need each and every one of our young people to master high-level knowledge and skills.³¹³

The Commission concludes that chapter 1 of ESEA has made a tremendous difference in educating poor and minority students since its enactment, citing statistics such as increased test scores and higher graduation rates. Yet, as they state, “the rules of the game have changed. Basic skills no longer count for as much as they once did.”³¹⁴ The

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Commission on Chapter 1. *Making Schools Work for Children in Poverty: A New Framework*. Commission on Chapter 1, 1992, 1.

³¹³ Ibid., 2.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

argument for revamping chapter 1 reflects a strategic compromise whereby individual schools retain control of how their federal dollars are spent, but the federal government gets to hold them accountable for the results. In essence, the Commission's report is arguably the foundation for NCLB and a civil rights claim that high standards and accountability will redress historical injustices for "poor and minority children." This groundwork sought political compromise in a maneuver to attempt to leverage the federal government to exercise more power and authority in making schools teach poor and minority children better.

"But how does a federal program that has focused on services for 27 years begin to transform whole schools, especially when program funds amount to only a small fraction of the elementary and secondary education budget?"³¹⁵ Their answer: "First, each state must set clear, high standards for what all students should know and be able to do."³¹⁶ Thus, the groundwork for the CCSS was laid. The initial widespread support for the CCSS across party lines, ethnicities and races, incomes, and geography makes sense when the CCSS are viewed in the historical context of the standards movement in American education. "Standards" seemed to be the common solution to many problems in education, not the least of which was racial justice and equitable education for the nation's traditionally underserved populations. However, the process, oversight, and accountability measures for meeting such standards remain a highly politicized and unresolved issue.

In the early attempts at expanding federal education policy to better serve traditionally disadvantaged students, the political (and arguably economic) compromise

³¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

was to advance the development of content and performance standards while basically dropping school delivery or “opportunity-to-learn” standards. Indeed, many a scholar has argued that NCLB legislation equated to raising the bar while essentially defunding the programs to help students meet the higher standards. While the CROSAs of which Rhodes speaks may have succeeded in important, albeit incomplete, expansion of federal education policy, the politics of federal versus national standards continued to play out along party lines. By the time the NGA launched the CCSS, they were hoping to lay claim to a national standards achievement divorced of federal oversight or mandate.

As Rhodes explains, the influence of conservative alliances in the field of social policy has also arguably shaped the recent thinking on education policy. This has meant that education, like many programs serving the poor and disadvantaged, has been actively constructed to serve well-positioned market actors while disciplining poorly-positioned market actors to comply with marketizing forces. “In contemporary conservatism, the state works actively to promote both a market-oriented economic order in which individuals compete for opportunities and take responsibility for their own self-care, and a conservative political and moral environment emphasizing personal responsibility, self-regulation, and acquiescence to authority.”³¹⁷ Many scholars have endorsed this situation as producing greater economic inequality with an emphasis on increased constraints for low income, racial minority communities.

As the promise of integrated schools failed to yield equitable access, opportunity, and results, CROSAS amassed evidence that the status quo looked like discriminatory low standards and expectations for disadvantaged students in the public schools.

³¹⁷ Rhodes, “Progressive Policy Making,” 522.

According to Rhodes, this was enough to push CROSAs to further pressure the federal government to expand its oversight and accountability measures:

Yet whereas conservative political entrepreneurs were seizing on these policy ideas to reconstruct areas of social policymaking on more conservative, inegalitarian lines, the case studies show CROSAs intended to adapt them to pressure the federal government and the states to focus on raising the achievement of disadvantaged students and take action if these students did not make progress. Indeed, in one sense, the CROSAs' strategy could be seen as a new twist on the traditional civil rights strategy of attempting to leverage federal authority and resources to overcome states' and localities' habitual tendency to neglect disadvantaged populations in the context of education.³¹⁸

Indeed, the federal government's involvement in public education post-*Brown* defined its role as enacting policy and law enforcement in the name of serving traditionally underserved students and communities struggling to access equal education under generations of racial discrimination.

Rhodes chronicles the evolution of recent federal education policy and contends that the impetus for these reforms is not easily attributable to traditional conservative intentions or designs. Rather, Rhodes finds that this inconsistency in the creation of laws like NCLB suggest that there are other political actors with considerable sway over the making of educational policy. "Even in the case of NCLB, Republicans only backed the law because their president had staked his political credibility on it, not because they agreed with its policy features."³¹⁹ Indeed, in education, "standards" have been employed as both a tool for and a weapon against racial justice, equitable education, and federal economic policy.

Currently, as all education reform gets consolidated under the aegis of "high standards," the priority and purpose of education as a democratizing force gets lost.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 525.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 524.

Despite the many promises of the standards movement, the recent pre-occupation with writing, measuring, and implementing the new standards-based reforms has created, however intentional or unintentional, a very “repressive climate” for any other reforms aimed at increasing democracy and racial justice. At best, school leaders and policymakers will realize the limitations and damages of a singular focus, and take steps to encourage the use of standards as a way to open up space for more democratic discourse and inquiry. For instance, the use of clearly defined standards can make visible the learning expectations that might otherwise be implicit.

This transparency makes it easier for those individuals and groups not normally brokering the power in education to see the rules and play the game more effectively. Everyone is clear on the criteria for judgment and rewards. In other words, the standards movement itself cannot be classified as antithetical to racial and social equality efforts in public education.³²⁰ Unfortunately, what is more likely and already underway, is that the democratizing potential of public education gets perceived as a threat to the standards and accountability movement, making the elimination of democratic equality a necessary result of the standards movement itself.

The idea of “standards” is supported by the assumption that everyone has an equal opportunity to learn and achieve these standards. While history demonstrates that the playing field has never been level regarding the opportunity to learn, standards assume it is. Because the current standards reform movement has been in place for 40 years and the racial achievement gap has only grown wider, the policy focus has shifted in recent years from creating standards to measuring “mastery” of standards, and most recently to

³²⁰ For further discussion on this point, see Anita Perna Bohn and Christine Sleeter, "Will Multicultural Education Survive the Standards Movement?" *Phi Delta Kappan* (Phi Delta Kappa International) 82 (October 2000): 156-159.

punishing those schools that demonstrate an “inequality” of test score performance. Because standards assume an equal opportunity to learn is in place for all, proponents will often question the strength and incentive offered by state and federal accountability programs, leading to a “shame and blame” game for campuses with “underperforming” students. In a climate where budgets are increasingly slashed, the question of adequate resources has been silenced. Under NCLB, each year a school failed to demonstrate a uniform success rate on standardized tests (annual yearly progress or AYP equaled 10% fewer students failing the state standardized test each year), the school and district lost more of its local control. By the time of the CCSS release in 2010, the majority of failing schools were under so many sanctions and mandates that many large cities were closing them down and selling them off to private charter management organizations in record numbers. Overwhelmingly, black and Hispanic children in low-income urban neighborhoods attend these failing schools.

Many scholars have made it abundantly clear that issuing the same standards will not guarantee that everyone has the same education, curriculum, or outcomes. Standards are not a silver bullet, but they have succeeded in paving the way for the proponents of stricter accountability measures. Clearly defined standards make for uniform standardized tests and support the increased value of the test score as a way of measuring student performance on standards. The more uniform the standards, the cheaper it is to develop and mass produce tests. According to scholars like Michael Apple, the standards-based assessment industry is “reform on the cheap” that will only serve to widen the existing gaps between social classes; classes that remain racially color-coded.

Under such a system, the focus on standardized outputs can easily lead to an emphasis on the need for standardized inputs. This trend increasingly views human

variation as a deficit, a problem, and a threat. This view can often lead to an environment where educators and policymakers actively seek to standardize the curriculum and minimize the “problem” of differences in learning styles, content, and processes. This contributes to the much-documented over-reliance on textbooks for curriculum, created by publishers with a history of reducing and essentializing content into pre-digested bits of knowledge for mass consumption and regurgitation.

This very outcome is counter to the kind of thinking and education recommended for innovation in today’s technology-driven information environment. This kind of educational outcome also results in a curriculum that presents a world-view that is predominantly and comfortably white, Christian, male, and middleclass, professionally oriented, and consumerist.³²¹ Textbooks tend to avoid conflict, tension, and controversy, instead favoring a worldview that features benign issues, uncritical heroes, and unquestioned victories. Students develop their literacy skills by reading content that reinforces the idea that racial injustice is a thing of the past, absent of perpetrators or a legacy of any kind.

The lack of critique in textbooks, standards, and “free” lessons packaged for teachers connects to an implicit statement that the current system is fair and equitable for all. Coupled with a teaching force that is 85% white and middleclass, students have a very slim chance of receiving instruction in a classroom where the teacher’s worldview differs from that of the textbook. In a climate where the gaps between the wealthy and the poor, the white and the non-white continue to grow, the majority of children in public

³²¹ Bohn and Sleeter, "Will Multicultural Education Survive the Standards Movement?" *Phi Delta Kappan* (Phi Delta Kappa International) 82 (October 2000): 156-159.

education are receiving the same message about their disparate realities: the playing field is level, and high standards make it so.³²²

The CCSS are only the most recent product of the modern standards movement in education reform, however, the wide bipartisan consensus for this new set of “common” standards in literacy reflects a more effusive social acceptance of rationalization, order, and neoliberal principals in the governance of public education. The CCSS, just the latest iteration in the third wave of standards movements in education, contribute to the latest version of top-down rational administration in schooling. Indeed, this fact explains one reason why the CCSS seemed like “common sense” to so many so quickly. The cultural sense shared by most people includes a familiar feeling and experience that rational administration will make things more aligned, coherent, and efficient. There is a prevailing belief that scientific management of schooling will fix the problem of what feels like chaos in the current public school system. Despite the historical amnesia of current educational and political actors, we have been down this path before. The popular belief being that a little order and clarity would really improve our educational situation. However, when viewed in the context of the history of shifting power and governance generally, the CCSS serve a crucial role in that they can be seen as an attempt by the state leaders and second-wave influential organizations to regain and retain the power they once had over the management of schooling. In this context, the CCSS could be understood as both the last gasp of state leaders to hold on to educational administration, or the first breath of a new era where the education managers are new entrepreneurs of educational markets.

³²² Ibid.

In many ways, the CCSS seems to be the final missing piece of the century-long effort to achieve national uniformity across all schools in the country. Many contemporary pundits debate the role of the CCSS in the creation of a national curriculum dictated by the federal government. This has made the once bi-partisan project of the CCSS into a political wedge issue for state-level elections. In any event, there is something culminating and resonant about the CCSS for both educators and non-educators alike. For lack of a better word, the CCSS “clicked” for a lot of people across social divides. Rather than being a revolutionary redirection, the CCSS might just possibly be the evolutionary missing link in the peak of the latest movement for the rationalization of public schooling. As the CCSS creators explain, only “common” standards that are “fewer, clearer, higher” can solve the crisis of educational decline.

THE CASE FOR THE COMMON CORE

The CCSS are often portrayed as either “evolutionary,” or “revolutionary.” David Coleman, credited by most stakeholders as the leading founder of the CCSS and the primary writer of the ELA and literacy standards specifically, has emerged as a prime example of the power and authority of the new “edupreneur” in education. Not unlike the majority of education reform’s most influential players, Coleman is the product of a privileged upbringing that included elite schooling resulting in a degree from Yale, Oxford, and Cambridge. Also, like many of today’s education reformers, Coleman’s professional trajectory does not include ever being employed as a teacher or leader in the nation’s public schools. Coleman, rather, found his calling, influence, and success in the private sector working for non-profits, founding non-profits, and amassing a wealth of

funding and networks that eventually landed him on TIME Magazine’s list of the 100 most influential people of this century.

The common creation story of the CCSS goes something like this: Coleman and his colleague, Jason Zimba, had been working in the private sector to increase the alignment between school districts and assessment use. Before this, they had studied together as students and Jason Zimba eventually took a faculty position at Bennington College in 2004, where David Coleman’s mother is president. In 2000, Coleman and Zimba formed a company called the Grow Network, which was eventually acquired by McGraw-Hill Publishing Company in 2004. Coleman and Zimba stayed on to manage the work of the organization until they left to work on various projects including starting up “Student Achievement Partners” in 2007. It is not entirely clear which came first, Coleman and Zimba’s proclamation about standards, or the NGA and CCSSO’s search for someone who could lead the charge in this direction. In either case, all perspectives refer to the common point of origin as being a specific memo that Coleman and Zimba addressed to the Carnegie-IAS Commission on Mathematics and Science Education in 2008, regarding the need for states to “distill content standards in math and science.”³²³

The 2008 address, “Math and Science Standards That Are Fewer, Clearer, Higher to Raise Achievement at All Levels,” features Coleman and Zimba making a case for “distilling,” differentiating, filtering, and simplifying standards. This includes shifting the focus of the school day to independent work, and doing all of this in the name of serving high-performing low-income racial minority students better. Their thoughtful argument begins by making an appeal to the Carnegie Commission to use its powers to effect

³²³ David Coleman and Jason Zimba. "Math and Science Standards That Are Fewer, Clearer, Higher to Raise Achievement at All Levels." Memo prepared for the Carnegie-IAS Commission, 2008.

change in the process and criteria for state standards in Math and Science. In the course of making their case, Coleman and Zimba argue that the leading disciplinary organizations in math and science, as well as current state-led efforts in standards writing are limited and flawed at best, that the very definition of education standards must change, and that the impetus for change is the moral obligation to better serving the academic achievement of high-performing racial minority students from “poor schools.” In shaping their four-pronged action plan, Coleman and Zimba draw on the research and expertise of seven white men and one Asian American woman who specializes in European psychology to defend their position that standards must be “fewer, clearer, and higher.” Their recommendations include a “distillation of content standards in math and science,” a more “pragmatic analyses” of workforce readiness, and an ethical appeal to “dramatically” raise the “number and diversity of students performing at the highest levels” by re-focusing the school day on cultivation of “deliberate practice” in solitary learning.³²⁴

Coleman and Zimba assert that there is growing “consensus” around the need to revise math and science standards, which, according to their introduction, have sufficiently baffled both school leaders and classroom practitioners. They cite the ongoing work of the National Council on the Teaching of Mathematics (NCTM) and the National Academy of Sciences to support their notion of a rising tide of support for standards reform. At the same time, they also call attention to the limits of the work that both of these organizations have done, as well as the shortcomings of the work of the states of Florida, Pennsylvania, and Washington. While the byline of the memo names David Coleman of “Student Achievement Partners,” and Jason Zimba of “Bennington

³²⁴ Ibid.

College,” the authors point out that “We offer these suggestions not as representatives of the organizations to which we belong, but rather in our private capacities as concerned citizens and observers of American education.”³²⁵ By locating themselves as private citizens, Coleman and Zimba disavow themselves of the networks of privilege and capital which shape both their material realities and their social influence. The fact is, ordinary private citizens would not get an audience with the Carnegie Commission. Coleman and Zimba identify as private citizens who can simultaneously speak to the growing consensus among leading content organizations, state institutions, and Carnegie Commission members.

Coleman and Zimba are careful to respectfully acknowledge the good work being done by states and organizations while stressing this point as evidence for urgent reform in the standards making process. The authors suggest that these organizations “show the way” but do not “lead the way” in making standards “fewer, clearer, and higher.” Coleman and Zimba argue that one of the most urgent matters to address is how the current standards across states in Math emphasize “proficiency” at the expense of “mastery.” Not only does their language literally harken back to slavery (‘mastery’), but it also justifies inequality as a matter of personal “will” as they continue to argue this problem can only be rectified by dividing standards into those that “everyone learns,” and those that “everyone *can* learn” (emphasis theirs). They explain that the first category of standards is the foundational big concepts that all must know for basic life skills and social functioning. The second category is the advanced technical skill that must be made available to those students who have both the desire and commitment to do this level of learning. “Rather, when we say that ‘everyone can learn,’ what we mean is that structures

³²⁵ Ibid.

are in place to ensure that everyone *who wants to, and who remains committed to doing what it takes*, can” (emphasis mine). Because none of the professional discipline organizations nor any of the states, were demonstrating awareness of the need for this conceptual shift in thinking about standards, Coleman and Zimba are able to value existing standards reform efforts while simultaneously urging that significant change is needed.

In their discussion of the need for standards that are fewer, clearer, and higher, Coleman and Zimba assert that such standards will offer a variety of benefits, not the least of these being better test design, with “more useful and reliable information on students’ strengths and weaknesses to support instruction” (yet state tests are always given at the end of a course or grade with no opportunity for teachers to apply information learned from such a test). They also cite benefits to diverse learners and teachers who will now have more time to go deeper and to practice, streamlined textbooks, and more valid data from standardized tests. The authors also offer the following description of the likely outcomes of their standards reform plan:

Briefer standards will likely bring different states’ standards closer together, leading to greater ease of transfer for best practices. Life and work present unexpected, unpredictable challenges. Non-standards-based exams like the SAT reward a kind of flexibility and power that we should be seeking to instill in everyone. Raising standards should mean giving assessments that not only assure topic proficiency but also put students off-balance, asking them to demonstrate a forward stance towards unfamiliar problems. Emphasis on topic coverage has prevented us from focusing on teaching the expert mentality.³²⁶

This description of the “flexibility” and “power” that successful students demonstrate on the SAT is here attributed to the high standards to which only some students now have access. The converse of these statements suggests that low performing students are less

³²⁶ Ibid.

powerful, less flexible, accustomed to being on-balance, unaccustomed to solving problems and thus suffering from a deficient mentality.³²⁷ This cultural articulation of an academic issue perhaps says more about the values and beliefs of the authors and their perceived audience than it does about the actual impact of standards and education reform.

The authors advocate higher standards as a way to instill a certain kind of entitlement and ownership over academic learning that low-income racial minority students are described as lacking. The authors even invoke John Dewey himself to support the importance of cultivating a “widening spread and a deepening hold of the scientific habit of mind.”³²⁸ By the authors’ own account, this struggle over standards reform is nothing short of a sort of culture war. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, the explicit and implicit references to “masters” and “slaves” should be noted. The language employed by Coleman and Zimba in this memo and in subsequent public speaking engagements and promotional materials, reflects an attempt to rationalize racial and social inequality by suggesting that low-income racial minority students and communities simply do not have the desire for “mastery,” and therefore, *choose* their own social location and material conditions. By framing academic success for low-income racial minority students as a matter of personal will for “mastery,” Coleman and Zimba’s memo suggests a much deeper and more disturbing corruption of content and performance standards in education. It should also be noted that the language of standard

³²⁷ It should be noted, that when taken in conjunction, the language of students who *can* and *want* to learn vs. those who lack the will and commitment to do so, paired with the language of “teaching the expert mentality” for “mastery” of the standards, more closely parallels the language of antebellum Southern white democrats seeking to justify the morality of a master/slave system than it does the language of 21st century social reformers who are opposed to racial injustice.

³²⁸ Coleman and Zimba, “Math and Science Standards,” 2008.

“mastery” is ubiquitous in the field of education as an antidote to the language of “proficiency,” which, for many, came to be equated with what George W. Bush once called “the soft bigotry of low expectations.” I call attention to this pattern not to condemn individuals, but rather to expose an ideological framework that has always been present in U.S. history, and is therefore not likely to be rendered impotent unless it is named and explicitly countered.

Coleman and Zimba’s third recommended action for the Carnegie Commission is an explicit appeal to the group’s moral and ethical obligations regarding low-income racial minority students. The author’s contend that for too long, the country has focused on bringing all students to the level of “proficiency,” thus neglecting the development of advanced students who are already beyond proficiency.³²⁹ “States and districts typically do not even report widely the statistics of how many students proceed beyond proficiency, and almost none disaggregate these data to reveal how many minority students achieve the highest levels of performance. When examined, this data reveals a persistent and stark racial, economic and often gender gap in the number of exceptional performers.”³³⁰ The authors go on to cite a study by the Jack Kent Cooke foundation and a personal communication from one Bill Sanders, to endorse the idea that high-performing racial minority students “in poor schools,” are currently the most neglected group of students in the public education system. According to Coleman and Zimba, a significant cause of racial minority student underperformance is insufficient data collection and reporting practices. This line of reasoning posits that if the academic

³²⁹ Again, taken in the larger context of language and phrasing throughout this memo, calling attention to how the students with the “will to mastery” are neglected under the current educational system further supports the master/slave narrative underpinning the CCSS ideology.

³³⁰ Coleman and Zimba, “Math and Science Standards,” 2008.

performance of such students was better tracked and monitored, then such students would not be so neglected by the current education system. In this case, racial justice is invoked to support the moral argument for better data management that can only result from these new standards and the possibility for new measurement systems that could now be put in place.³³¹

Coleman and Zimba are very clear that this racial achievement gap is indicative of a waste of human potential that is going untapped as a national resource. “Taking action on this problem is both a smart thing to do and the right thing to do. The systematic frustration of human potential that is evidently now occurring on a national scale cries out for action on ethical grounds---especially when the dynamics are strongly biased racially and economically.”³³² The authors make the case that to better serve top performing racial minority students from low-income communities “amounts to wisely conserving a precious natural resource.”³³³ And to do this would position the country to better compete with the nations of China and India. “The United States may not be able to double its population to compete with India and China, but we believe it is possible to double the pool of exceptional performers who will lead and innovate in the decades to come.”³³⁴

Interestingly, though the authors assert that high-performing racial minority students from poor schools are the most neglected and underserved population, they do not raise the question of what happens to high-performing racial minority students from schools that are not poor? If said students are currently demonstrating that they are

³³¹ It should also be noted that a colorblind system *relies* on visible racial exceptionalism. The success of a select few low-income racial minority students does not disprove systems of control based on colorblindness, but rather supports its premise that anyone who has the will to succeed can make it, regardless of any racial or income inequalities.

³³² Coleman and Zimba, “Math and Science Standards,” 2008.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

reaching their academic potential in greater numbers, such a statistic would indicate that money and social resources, rather than higher academic standards alone may also play a significant role in addressing the “gap” they describe. As they state in the beginning of their memo, they sometimes take a (privileged) position “to invite counterarguments” rather than to argue for a best solution.

As Coleman and Zimba move into a further discussion of the need to make the standards writing process more “innovative” and “pragmatic,” they return to the claim fewer, clearer, and higher standards can only be achieved if the process changes. “The process should attend to relevance in more pragmatic ways, and there should be procedural safeguards against the ‘pork-barrel’ effect that occurs when multiple stakeholders all advocate for pet topics.”³³⁵ The solution recommended by Coleman and Zimba includes the use of a more complex set of criteria for refining or “filtering” standards, and the use of content area experts to lead this process. Without such changes to the process, the authors contend that we will continue to repeat the same vague standards that are only designed to get everyone to relative “proficiency” rather than “mastery” of essential knowledge and skills in mathematics.

The fourth and final action Coleman and Zimba recommend is that the Carnegie Commission “evaluate deliberate practice as a means of achieving a significant increase in the number and diversity of high performers.”³³⁶ They summarize the research of K.A. Ericsson to argue that specific patterns of behaviors---such as solitary study, prolonged blocks of concentration, and relevant feedback and revision---rather than innate intelligence, support the development of expertise in specific disciplines. The authors

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Ibid.

thus conclude their memo to the Carnegie Commission by arguing that a focus on “deliberate practice” might be a useful way to reflect on needed changes to existing structures that will better foster intensity and motivation, high achievement as opposed to remediation, and a more successful transition from high school to college and career. Thus, the authors conclude their argument with specific recommendations for structural change in the school day, in the teacher-student relationship, and in the culture of teaching and learning in American schools.³³⁷

While offering a very detailed and somewhat lengthy memo, Coleman and Zimba write with the authority of well-educated men supported by political and social capital to influence change in the national public education system. Yet, they identify themselves as speaking from the place of the private concerned citizen, thus disavowing themselves of the very system and structures that have allowed them to enter this conversation. The pretense of humility aside, this letter to the Carnegie Commission is often cited by CCSS stakeholders as the impetus for the National Governor’s Association (NGA) to approach Coleman and Zimba to head up an organization to design the first official set of common standards across the states. However, despite the fact that these authors make their case for changing the standards of math and science, it is the standards in English Language Arts and Literacy that are the first to emerge on the public scene.

The important takeaways from this initial memo include the philosophy and political location of Coleman and Zimba, who will soon become architects of the CCSS.

³³⁷ Through the lens of master/slave narrative, the fact that white women dominate the teaching field complicates the idea that public schools can cultivate “mastery.” Women have never been masters in U.S. history. This could explain the weight of men at the top? When the purpose of schooling is democratic equality, women qualify as gatekeepers for the development of future generations of citizens. However, when the purpose of schooling shifts to “mastery,” women are no longer qualified. This explains the rise of accountability on the backend. There will now need to be additional authorities and measurement systems to ensure mastery is achieved. For further discussion see Erica Meiners, *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons and the Making of Public Enemies*, Routledge, 2007.

Coleman is of special interest because it is he, along with Susan Pimentel, who are named as the creators of the standards in ELA and literacy. Coleman's explanation of the problems good standards can solve include the race, class, and gender achievement gap, national global competitiveness, individual social mobility, and the inadequacy of existing standardized tests to measure academic performance. This is where the public discourse on the CCSS as we know them begins. However, Coleman and Zimba were not the first to make many of these suggestions. The Commission on NCLB published a Gates-funded report in 2007 called "Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to the Nation's Children" that includes research and even specific phrases that appear in the Coleman memo written a year later.³³⁸ And in 2006, Governor James B. Hunt Jr. of North Carolina convened education policy leaders to discuss the idea of common standards across states.³³⁹ Interestingly, as of March 2015, the Carnegie memo has been "re-issued" online at opportunityequation.org, with a modified title and a new publication date of 2007 instead of the original 2008. The change in date from 2008 to 2007 now allows Coleman and Zimba (and Carnegie) to claim authorship rights to ideas and words originally published in earlier reports by different organizations---most of which were sponsored by Gates.³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Commission on No Child Left Behind. *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children*. Aspen Institute, 2007.

³³⁹ See Robert Rothman in "How We Got Here: The Emergence of the Common Core State Standards" *Implementing the Common Core*, The State Education Standard: The Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education, August 2012, 4-8.

³⁴⁰ The "Opportunity Equation" website is managed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York/Institute of Advanced Study Commission on Mathematics and Science Education for Citizenship and the Global Economy. At Carnegie.org, the description of "Opportunity Equation" includes a launch date of June 2009. The core report that provides the impetus for the "Opportunity Equation" website, is the newly rendered Carnegie memo by Coleman and Zimba. The change in date from 2008 to 2007 now allows Coleman and Zimba to claim authorship rights to ideas and words originally published in earlier reports by different organizations.

Even before Coleman and Zimba published their influential letter to the Carnegie Commission, the push for common standards that were at least higher and aligned with college and career readiness had already begun in political circles around the country. As more stakeholders joined the campaign, the argument for common standards expands to include a broader swath of perspectives and stakeholders.

The original case for common standards across the states included Coleman and Zimba's mantra, "fewer, clearer, higher" as first seen in their memo to the Carnegie Commission in 2008. In 2011, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania published the results of a study based on an analysis of the similarities and differences between the CCSS and the states' existing standards. They used the most comprehensive database available on state standards, which lives at the University of Wisconsin. Because only 25 states are included in the database, the study is based on comparisons for only half the states. The researchers also conducted comparisons between the CCSS and the countries against which they have determined "international benchmarking." It should be noted here that the CCSSO, founding sponsor of the CCSS, is listed as the funding party for this study. Though the dataset is limited and the funding source biased, this study provides the only empirical evidence for actually measuring the claim of the CCSS in terms of their mantra, "fewer, clearer, higher." Until this study, the primary mechanism for determining the quality of any standards was left to the evaluation process of Chester Finn and the Fordham Institute that provided various states and the CCSS with a simple letter grade of A-F. The findings in the UPENN study reveal at least a more detailed account of how the CCSS varies from the states' and also from the countries against which they have been "internationally benchmarked."

The findings published by the UPENN team are important to consider both for what they report and also for what they do not report. The researchers include the rationale, explaining that the CCSS in math and ELA are important to study because by the end of 2010, they had been adopted by 36 states and Washington DC making the CCSS an inevitable influence on state education policy. The researchers also frame the study with a synopsis of the argument for the “benefits” of a “national curriculum:” shared expectations across state lines, more focused curriculum aligned with other high-achieving countries, greater efficiency for the “education business,” and higher quality assessments for testing.³⁴¹ Using a nationally recognized “content analysis procedure,” the team sought to determine the “extent to which two documents have the same content message.”³⁴² In doing this, they offer findings regarding the comparison of the CCSS with existing state content standards, the alignment of the CCSS with existing state assessments, a comparison of the CCSS benchmarks and those of the highest performing state on the NAEP assessment (Massachusetts), and a comparison of the CCSS and the international benchmarks of high-scoring countries. Essentially, what the study seeks to reveal is the similarities and differences in what the various sets of standards say about what children should know and do at various grade levels.

In sum, the UPENN researchers report their conclusions that the CCSS will represent “considerable change from what states currently call for in their standards and in what they assess.”³⁴³ The most significant differences for ELA and literacy are in the areas of cognitive demand, reading comprehension, and language study: “In ELAR

³⁴¹ Porter, Andrew, Jennifer McMaken, Jun Hwang, and Rui Yang. "Common Core Standards: The New U.S. Intended Curriculum." *Educational Researcher* (AERA) 40, no. 3 (2011): 103-104.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114.

[English Language Arts and Reading], we saw a decrease in emphasis on reading comprehension and an increase in emphasis on language study in the Common Core. These shifts may represent important increases in quality, but we are not prepared to make that judgment.”³⁴⁴ In regard to ELA, the researchers report that the CCSS are not more focused than existing state standards, and that they have significantly different benchmarks than those of the highest performing countries for which they are supposed to align. “Top-achieving countries for which we had content standards put a greater emphasis on ‘perform procedures’ than do the U.S. Common Core standards. High-performing countries’ emphasis on ‘perform procedures’ runs counter to the widespread call in the United States for a greater emphasis on higher order cognitive demand.”³⁴⁵ On this last point, the researchers state: “For each country, approximately 75% of the content involves ‘perform procedures,’ whereas in the Common Core standards, the percentage for procedures is 38%.”³⁴⁶ The study also compared the content message of the CCSS against the highest performing U.S. state on NAEP (Massachusetts) and found that it varies significantly from the Massachusetts standards, especially in the CCSS emphasis on the writing process and applications over reading comprehension.

In the end, the study presents a mixed bag of findings that do not definitively tell us much about what is, but they do inform us about what is not the case. Their alignment to NAEP is not statistically higher or lower than the current highest performing state. And from these findings we can see that the ELA and literacy CCSS cannot be called “internationally benchmarked” in the name of global competitiveness because they vary too much in statistically significant ways. The CCSS are not statistically “fewer” or

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 111.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 115.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 113-114.

“clearer” than the existing standards of other states, so the new standards are often longer and less focused than many existing state standards according to the UPENN study. In terms of “higher,” the study does show that the CCSS place an emphasis on cognitive demand, but this flies in the face of the argument for the CCSS being internationally benchmarked. In the end, the CCSS do not stand to significantly aid states in implementing fewer standards, they will not support an internationally benchmarked performance in literacy, and they will not increase the quality of standards in already high-performing states. This begs the question of who or what is served by the CCSS.

The CCSS are billed as taking up 85% of the standards in each subject area and/or 85% of the instructional time. The remaining 15% is for states to determine and assess. Despite having this option, however, the overwhelming majority of states chose not to add or incorporate anything additional to the CCSS. This suggests that states were opting for the CCSS precisely because they were presumed to be aligned, generic, and uniform across states and populations. As of a survey conducted in late 2011, 11 states elected to add standards to the CCSS in their state: AL, AZ, CA, CO, IA, KS, MA, MN, MT, NM, NY. According to the analysis of the survey data, the additional standards in the 15% include the incorporation of earlier state-specific standards, standards developed in response to legislative mandates, and/or standards reflecting cultural and community-based interests.³⁴⁷ Of these 11 states adding content, 9 expect to do it in ELA. These 9 states added content in all four strands--- reading, writing, speaking, and listening. MT,

³⁴⁷ Kendall, John and Susan Ryan. "Opportunity and Challenge: The 15% Rule." *The State Education Standard: Implementing the Common Core* (The Journal of the National Association of State Boards of Education), August 2012: 29-35.

MN, NM, and NY all added content that somehow addressed the incorporation of “diverse cultures.”³⁴⁸

According to the analysis of the survey data, inclusive language around diverse cultures makes up the majority of additions to ELA and literacy standards under the 15% rule. Within these kinds of changes, only three states--- MT, MN, and NM--- incorporate explicit racial or ethnic group references, while states such as NY, KS, CA make important but vague references to “diverse” peoples or cultures. MT and MN incorporate Native American references and examples into the content standards for ELA and literacy, and NM makes the most significant changes with the addition of 78 new standards to the Common Core in ELA and Literacy. Within this legislative document is explicit reference to Native American and Hispanic texts, the definition of oral history as historical perspective, and the importance of students being able to compare and contrast representations of events and “develop an understanding of people, cultures, and societies...”³⁴⁹ These standards are inserted for both elementary and secondary levels.

While all nine states incorporate some kind of language to be more broadly inclusive of acknowledging the importance of “diverse cultures” or communication skills for a “pluralistic society,” it is only NM that takes advantage of the 15% rule to actively construct standards that work against prevailing attitudes about race and culture in dominant society. At the K-5 level, beginning in third grade, students are to “understand that oral tribal history is not a myth, fable, or folktale, but a historical perspective.”³⁵⁰ The

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

³⁴⁹ See Public Education Department, New Mexico. "Primary and Secondary Education Standards for Excellence: English Language Arts Common Core Standards." *Public Education Department*. October 29, 2010. www.nmcpr.state.nm.us. Specifically: www.nmcpr.state.nm.us/nmac/parts/title06/06.029.0013.htm (Accessed June 29, 2013).

³⁵⁰ See Public Education Department, New Mexico, “Reading and Literature: Key Ideas and Details: Standard 4 part C,” www.nmcpr.state.nm.us. (Accessed June 29, 2013).

language of the new standard is careful to point out what oral history is not as well as what it actually is. The same is true for the standards newly written for grades 6-8:

(a) analyze how a cultural work of literature, including oral tradition, draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types, and how the differing structure of the text contributes to society, past or present; (b) analyze works of Hispanic and Native American text by showing how it reflects the heritage, traditions, attitudes, and beliefs of the author and how it applies to society; (c) use oral and written texts from various cultures to cite evidence that supports or negates understanding of a cultural value.³⁵¹

By the time students reach high school level, the new standards stress the application of all skills to “significant works, including Hispanic and Native American oral and written texts.”³⁵² The explicitness of the New Mexico legislation assumes that there is no question regarding the existence, role, or value of texts, both oral and written, that derive from Native American and Hispanic peoples and cultures. The language of the new standards focuses on students articulating how these texts shape people and societies. The language of these additional standards also ensure that schools will actively seek out such texts as content materials, and give priority to these texts over more traditional canonized works of British and European origin as these kinds of texts are no where explicitly named by law.

The New Mexico standards are an interesting case to contrast with the CCSS because they demonstrate how state educational leaders and policymakers recognize the power dynamics of the society they are preparing their students to navigate. The creators of the New Mexico standards actively sought to name that which they felt was absent in the original CCSS so that the development of student skills in ELA and Literacy would also foster the appreciation of Native American and Hispanic people and cultures in the

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

context of US education. The fact remains that New Mexico is the only one of 44 states now using the CCSS in ELA and Literacy to recognize the need for such additions.

If the addition of New Mexico's 78 standards represents taking full advantage of the 15% rule, then the total number of standards being counted in the CCSS is 520; significantly more than the average state had in place before the CCSS, and contrary to the impetus to develop standards that are "fewer, clearer, and higher." It is not clear as to why more states did not take advantage of the 15% rule, but the time constraints of RTTT applications, shrinking budgets, and pressure to align curriculum and standardized tests might explain some of the oversight. The existence of New Mexico's explicit standards serves as an important contrast to the material, values, and priorities that are present and dominant in the CCSS as they are currently written. In the simplest terms, if the CCSS in ELA and Literacy were already structured to reflect the value of Native American and Hispanic cultures and histories, NM would not have needed to use the 15% rule in the first place.

While the CCSS are not technically "federal education policy," they are descendants of the movement for standards in American education nonetheless. The introduction of standards as a solution to the problem of racial inequality in today's schools allows for the wide acceptance of a new narrative in education that reframes the civil rights era's calls for racial justice. Standards as the solution does not allow for the critique of who writes the standards, who develops the criteria for standards, who delivers the instruction to meet the standards, whose voice and view shapes the standards, and whose fault it is when the standards fail to solve the problem. Standards within a racially stratified and unequal society encourage prescription and alignment rather than allowing for complexity and variety. This prescription supports the notion that fairness is sameness

and sameness is equality. The new narrative of racial justice values individual liberty as the key to individual success and failure without any regard for the success or failure of the education system to serve the individual.

And who controls this nation-state? According to Professor Howard Fuller, the very leftist, anti-bureaucratic activists of the 1960's civil rights movement figure prominently amongst those who now contribute to and protect the government bureaucracy of today. Fuller claims that this group of activists, with which he identifies, has now lost their perspective on the meaning of "power to the people."³⁵³ Having once demanded that this state reform its racist and unequal practices, the once-leftist leaders of today's state bureaucracy view themselves as victorious in the battle to win a more racially just state, and view the current bureaucracy as fair and necessary to protect those hard-won victories. Yet, according to Fuller, the battle over power and control continues. He urges us to view school districts as economic rather than educational organizations, to realize the need to support vouchers to empower parents to choose better schools for their children, and to equate this work as bringing "power to the people" in the new millennium. According to this perspective, the emergence of new public education reforms, new political alliances, and new elite venues for policy-making is nothing short of a modern-day power-grab.

³⁵³ Howard Fuller. *Power to the People: a conversation with Dr. Howard Fuller*. Prod. Illinois Policy. Youtube, May 28, 2013.

Chapter 6: (Re)Purposing Conditions Real and Imagined: “A Growing Chorus” Focused on Literacy to (Re)Place Race and Inequality

“Thus for modernity the space of race is that of the outside---the external, the distant. The trick of race in either case then was to turn imagined conditions, those conditions (re) created and (re) produced, into the presumed and discovered, the given because natural.”³⁵⁴

In this chapter I attempt to explore the historical, political, and economic context that generated the consensus for the need to create the CCSS. I locate the CCSS within the tensions of American public schooling, the dominant neoliberal economy, and the anxieties of a post-9/11 nation to show how the literacy standards are borne out of existing discourses that serve a racialized, neoliberal agenda. Borrowing on post-civil rights rhetoric and embodying familiar literacy myths, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy continue to expand stratified vertical pathways (intellectual white flight) for students who are already successful in schools, while at the same time narrowing the possibilities and targeting the very populations of students and communities that most need better access to resources to achieve more advanced forms of school-based literacy. In the discussion, I chronicle the political turn from an educational focus on “equity” to a focus on “excellence” with the rise of the “education governor.” I also demonstrate the growing anxieties about the value of a high school diploma post-*Brown* as reflected in the literacy policy documents since 2001, and the escalating separation of the politics of race and class from the material realities of traditionally marginalized communities.

Public policy statements about literacy always respond to the larger conversation about our continuing national identity formation, and are thus participating in on-going

³⁵⁴ David Goldberg, *The Racial State*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002, 93.

dialectic relationships with other kinds of representations. Literacy policy, then, must be investigated by examining the relations between the policy statement itself, and these other significant representations, such as conceptions of the literate and illiterate, the consequences of certain literacy practices, and the value of particular literacy skills. It is through these relations that literacy policy participates in the continuous re-articulation of national identity through the educational rhetoric of “crisis” and the national rhetoric of “racial progress.” This participation in social and political constructions creates the common logics used to reduce diverse perspectives into what some scholars call a new national “common sense.”³⁵⁵ As literacy policy constructs meanings and effects in both of these conversations, it forms new alliances, makes new connections, and contributes to policing the borders of personhood, power, and privilege in the highly racialized era of 21st century neoliberalism.

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION FROM TOLERATING TO ENDORSING INEQUALITY

The idea of public schooling for social mobility experienced a renaissance after the events on September 11th, 2001. Throughout the last 40 years of significant social transitions, literacy was used to assert a kind of Eurocentric moral authority and maintenance of the façade of democratic equality in a public education system that was fast becoming a “private good.” As the divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots” widened, the discourse on literacy crisis grew louder and more ubiquitous. However, despite the demonstrated 21st century need for better writing and writers, the major

³⁵⁵ For a discussion of this new common sense, see the work of Michael Apple, *Educating the “Right” Way*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer, 2001; the work of Kristin Buras, *Rightest Multiculturalism: Core Lessons on Neoconservative School Reform*. Routledge, 2008; and Kevin Kumashiro, *The Seduction of Common Sense: How the Right Has Framed the Debate on America’s Schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2008.

literacy policy documents since 2001 show an historically familiar emphasis on the importance of reading. September 11th, 2001 disrupted the status quo authority of federal and state leaders and shook the foundation of America's own sense of its international dominance and power. Many things changed after 9/11, and educational policy was not an exception. The federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) just after 9/11, and in the years that follow, there was a renewed focus on a national adolescent literacy crisis coupled with a potent discourse on social mobility for national economic prosperity.

An examination of representative literacy policy documents reaching from 2001 to the 2008 recommendation for the Common Core Standards in the *Benchmarking for Success* report, reflect a reconfiguration of the educational landscape in service of the now dominant neoliberal economic and political philosophy. Harkening back to a familiar purpose of literacy, education policy-makers attempted to reframe the education reform conversation in an effort to make it better complement new market economy expansion. Literacy and economy are increasingly linked in these documents, and the value of a high school diploma is often the focus. As the documents move closer to the year 2008, they demonstrate new attention to low academic performance by race and class as evidence of the economic crisis facing the nation. Improving literacy is the popular rallying cry. By 2008, the NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve, Inc. organizations issue the report on *Benchmarking for Success*, and use the international "low" performance of U.S. students in Math to make the case for internationally benchmarking standards for both math and literacy. Despite the lack of evidence that U.S. students are "less" literate than their international peers, the report includes the need to change the literacy standards

to make them more narrowly defined, measurable, and directly tied to college and career preparation.

The discourse of these documents reflects a desire to prepare individuals to attain the best possible jobs, to view a high school diploma as currency in the new knowledge economy, and to be aware of social inequalities insofar as this awareness serves to motivate students to make the best choices and win. The new consumerist view of education values individual choice, personal responsibility, and private rights. Within this new discourse, education is a private good and a commodity for exchange. These policy documents show that such a transformation also involves increased standardization of the education experience, suggesting that an “equality of opportunity” must be demonstrative in order for the “inequality of outcomes” to be effectively attributed to the personal failure of the individual. The self-consciousness of such a self-serving and self-centered public education system is best masked by the long tradition of moral authority that comes with promoting “better” literacy for all of America’s citizens. Shifting from a focus on improving “equity,” to a focus on improving “excellence,” literacy policy increasingly reflected a separating out of the “equal opportunity” to achieve “excellence” from the material realities of racial and income inequalities.

While race was the “hot potato” that encouraged elected politicians to avoid asserting their influence or authority over public schooling throughout the 1960s and 1970s, economic recession created a new, less racially charged avenue of political influence. In 1982, 32 states had adopted austerity budgets as a result of recession, and governors commonly linked education to saving state economies and creating better job

opportunities.³⁵⁶ When NAR was released in 1983, the education reform movement was reframed as an economic issue rather than a racial equity issue. Race was still addressed in the NAR, but the racial achievement gap was now repurposed as but one boat that would be raised with the rising tide of “excellence” in the public schools. “Excellence” for economic gain was definitely an issue elected politicians could firmly and safely support.

The education reform conversation quickly turned to a focus on excellence over equity. The rhetoric became so unanimous and ubiquitous, that to raise the specter of racial inequality was often viewed as endorsing “low standards” in education. The NAR report reframed education as an economic development issue in terms of international competitiveness. This, in turn, encouraged the separation of education from the politics of race and class. Those politicians who had longed for control over education monies but were loathe to deal with the issues of race and class could now safely focus on standards and economics to temper the divide. With the narrative of educational equity reframed as a need to return the American education system to its place of pride, governors, presidents, lawmakers, and a host of other elected politicians embraced education reform (for the first time since the *Brown* decision) as an essential plank in their political platforms.³⁵⁷

While the civil rights gains of the 1960’ and 1970’s emphasized the goal of equity in the schools, the 1980’s ushered in a new emphasis on “excellence.” The national shift to more centralized governance in combination with a post-*Brown* interest in “raising

³⁵⁶ Jeffrey R. Henig, *The End of Exceptionalism in American Education: The Changing Politics of School Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013, 34.

³⁵⁷ For a discussion of the power of reframing narratives, see the work of Joe Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. Routledge, 2010.

standards” in the employment sector meant new attention was being paid to changes in authority and relationships between traditional powerbrokers. As many scholars have pointed out, those who can effectively frame a narrative can often win the war of influence amongst the shifting stakeholders.³⁵⁸ In many ways, the NAR report successfully reframed the education reform narrative displacing the emphasis on equity with a new call for excellence. “What had been a focus on inputs and equity---on improving education by adding more resources to a proven model and by ratcheting up expenditures in communities where resources historically had been constrained---began to shift to a focus on outputs, on holding schools, teachers, and students accountable for meeting measurable standards of academic achievement.”³⁵⁹ At the same time, states had been gradually increasing the formal power of their governors. Between 1980 and 2010, the number of state governors holding total or partial appointment power of state boards of education would rise from 5 to 37.³⁶⁰ At the peak of their educational influence, Governors and district leaders partnered with a non-profit entity to produce the CCSS in ELA and literacy. Perhaps sensing the tenuous nature of their influence on public education, Governors and the CCSSO embraced the available new political arrangements to control the direction of educational policy.

The CCSS in ELA and literacy were sponsored by the National Governor's Association (NGA), and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), who together joined up with individuals already attempting to influence education reform, and created a non-profit organization called "Achieve, Inc." The NGA had an existing

³⁵⁸ For a more detailed discussion of narrative frames, see the work of Joe Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. Routledge, 2010.

³⁵⁹ Jeffrey R. Henig, *The End of Exceptionalism in American Education: The Changing Politics of School Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013, 34.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

"Center for Best Practices" (a 501(c)(3) organization) to channel its education advocacy research and efforts, but the Achieve organization allowed it to jointly create an entirely new product outside of any pre-existing structures. This new alliance communicated a philosophy and vision of literacy that followed from years of education experience and policy making agendas. The trajectory of this alliance and the seemingly "sudden" development of a consensus about the need and definition for a new recipe for literacy was an evolutionary rather than revolutionary phenomenon. The series of major literacy publications released by the NGA, the Gates Foundation, the Education Testing Service (ETS), and additional representative literacy policy reports, further illustrate the development of neoliberal pedagogy that both relied on the existing inequalities of race and class while organizing the new literacy policy in such a way that it would lead to the system of public education being more compatible with neoliberal hegemony, which in turn tolerates and creates increased gaps in inequalities of all kinds.

The formation of the nonprofit organization, Achieve, Inc. is especially interesting in light of the mission of the NGA and its existing Center for Best Practices. According to the mission statement, the Center for Best Practices "is the nation's only dedicated consulting firm for governors and their key policy staff."³⁶¹ The Center's mission statement includes the purpose of developing and implementing "innovative solutions to public policy challenges." Despite the Center's role and work, the NGA and the CCSSO needed to team up with a private organization to develop the CCSS. This new assemblage of political actors demonstrates the desire of state leaders to assert their

³⁶¹ National Governors Association. *Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*. Guide, NGA Center for Best Practices, NGA Center for Best Practices, 2005.

power while at the same time acknowledging the new political configurations that can now exert policy-making power and influence under neoliberalism.

In order to preserve their moral authority, demonstrate their renewed commitment to the economic success of the country, and assert their political power in a shifting array of new political configurations, the state leaders joined together with a private non-profit organization to take control of education reform for the 21st century. Now that education reform efforts had become about economics and not racial equality, the state's elected officials were willing to become "education governors," dedicated to remaking the greatness of the United States through remaking the public schools. They employed literacy as the vehicle through which they could accomplish their goals.³⁶²

The representative maxim, "Read everyday, lead a better life," (Scholastic, Inc.), led to questions about what students should read and what a "better" life might look like.³⁶³ Policy makers actively created new accountability systems to set the terms for what would be read, who would be reading, and what "better" life was attainable to those who stayed the course. In a system of public education predicated on equality and "choice," this new education reform had to promote winners and losers while maintaining the face of democratic equality.

To accomplish this task, the NGA and its partner organizations renewed the call to improve literacy for adolescents. In keeping with the familiar U.S. ideology of literacy and its mythical powers, the policy makers, state leaders, educational entrepreneurs, and their private funders had to advance the notion that literacy was an achievable status that led to better citizens through the promotion of social mobility and equality. Therefore,

³⁶² See Henig, *The End of Exceptionalism*, 42.

³⁶³ This is the slogan for Scholastic, Inc., leading organization producing reading materials for K-8 schools.

they had to articulate and promote a literacy agenda that defined literacy in the following ways: (1) literacy as being a race-neutral set of isolated skills for individual advantage; (2) literacy as newly defined for the 21st century, beyond critique, reproach, and conventional notions of democratic accountability; (3) literacy as efficient and measurable; (4) literacy as abstracted from any meaningful histories of race and class. These specific traits together form a constellation of factors that allowed the CCSS to complement existing policies and practices for redistributing wealth upward and further entrenching neoliberal hegemony across the country.

In 2008, the NGA and CCSSO, in conjunction with Achieve, Inc. issued the report that would serve as the foundation for the argument that the new standards in ELA and Literacy were “internationally benchmarked:” *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*.³⁶⁴ The most relevant aspects of the report include evidence for international benchmarking that is almost exclusively based on math data, an explicit use of current racial and social inequality to rationalize the need for international benchmarking, and a narrowly constrained purpose of education exclusively for economic gain. The report serves as a call to action for state leaders to lead the charge of providing stability to the nation’s economic and global status through the restructuring of the public schools. The report presents the issue of educational improvement, especially in math and literacy, as nothing short of national survival in a globally competitive world: "America cannot maintain its place in the world---economically, socially, culturally---unless all of its students gain the skills that allow them to compete on a global scale. The United States will only achieve true international

³⁶⁴ National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, and Achieve, Inc. *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*. Achieve, Inc., 2008.

competitiveness when state education policies and institutions are restructured to meet 21st century realities.”³⁶⁵

It is worthwhile to take a moment and walk through the language and content of this report to establish the CCSS in ELA and Literacy as being an evolutionary step in state-led efforts, consciously framed within a racially unequal context. The authors actually employ the language of racial inequality to make an argument in support of new standards, new assessments, and new international benchmarks. The report stresses the need to improve literacy in terms of reading, but does not go beyond the skills needed to “communicate effectively.” Math and reading are the real focus in the report, with math discussed primarily throughout. Most of the sources cited in the report are economic and work force groups, with a couple specific academic studies used to support the case for international benchmarking. Most of the document is about convincing state leaders to take the necessary actions recommended by the report, including the adoption of a “common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K-12 to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive.”³⁶⁶

The authors encourage the state leaders to “tackle ‘the equity imperative’ by creating strategies for closing the achievement gap between students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds...”³⁶⁷ The reasons they give for needing to address the “equity imperative” are phrased like this: “Reducing inequality in education is not only just, it's essential for ensuring that the United States retain a competitive edge.”³⁶⁸ After

³⁶⁵ *Benchmarking for Success*, 37.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

grounding the "equity imperative" in the terms of democratic equality with an economic rationale, there is a paragraph devoted to "research" that supports the current equity situation: "Research shows that education systems in the United States tend to give disadvantaged and low-achieving students a watered down curriculum and place them in larger classes taught by less qualified teachers---exactly opposite of the educational practices of high-performing countries."³⁶⁹

The authors justify the need to address the "equity imperative" by employing political philosophy regarding the development of nations. In this discussion, they return to the myths of literacy to solve national problems. They also imply that the U.S. currently has an unacceptable low level of literacy. They explain that it is essential to raise the skills of the many over producing a skilled elite. They cite the Hanushek report that set out to determine which was better, having a substantial pool of elite performers, or raising the basic level of performance for the many. "Another recent study of 14 developed countries concluded that 'increasing the average level of literacy will have a greater effect on growth than increasing the percentage of individuals who achieve high levels of literacy skills.'"³⁷⁰ This is followed by a statement of reassurance: "Fortunately, international assessments also show that it is possible to realize high average performance alongside more equitable performance. Across several continents, countries like Japan, Korea, Finland, and Canada demonstrate that students from disadvantaged backgrounds need not automatically perform poorly in school."³⁷¹

They go on to explain that achieving equity has serious implications for the U.S. given that it will be a country of "minorities" by 2039. The report then cites the dismal

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 14.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

test scores of Hispanic and black students: "America cannot remain competitive if half of its population graduates from high school so poorly prepared that it is unable to thrive in the global knowledge economy. States that plan to grow their economies must find ways to close their achievement gaps."³⁷² The report then attempts to address critics of the international assessments who "claim that America's disappointing performance is inevitable precisely because of its demographic challenges. But the data do not support such beliefs."³⁷³ This section finishes by citing the latest TIMSS report (international math assessment), which finds that the U.S. ranks in the top quarter of the most unequal countries in the world. They include an entire page devoted to the presentation of a bar graph representing international "minority" performance on math and science tests. According to the graph, U.S. Hispanics are 4th from the bottom and African Americans are at the very bottom.

To address the "equity imperative," the report recommends that state leaders approach equity like an "interdisciplinary" issue that cuts across all areas and action steps. They point out that the U.S. falls short in the following three areas: (1) an opportunity gap in access to qualified teachers that is among the largest in the world; (2) we are the only country where "lower performing students and children with less-educated parents are likely to be taught in larger classes;" and (3) math teachers are less likely to include conceptual strategies in their instruction. While there is clearly language in the report to indicate that the people and organizations who drafted the CCSS in ELA and Literacy recognized at least the importance of the illusion of democratic equality as a

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

priority in education, there is other language to suggest that, at best, democratic equality is not the most significant priority.

The authors also make distinct recommendations that address the role of the federal government in relation to the leadership role of the governors in leading this charge. They recommend the federal government take the "enabling" role of funding, conducting additional research, and "streamlining" assessment strategies that "facilitate cost-effective international comparisons of student performance."³⁷⁴ They then recommend the federal government reward states who are meeting these "important milestones on the way" by providing "tiered incentives" like "flexibility" in the use of federal funds and in meeting federal requirements. "Over the long term, the federal government will need to update laws to align national education policies with lessons learned from state benchmarking efforts and from federally funded research."³⁷⁵ The authors argue that states should "lead the way" in "seizing the historical moment" to use education to strengthen our economic position globally.

The report closes the section on recommendations with a quote by Andreas Schleicher, head of the Indicators and Analysis Division at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Directorate for Education: "The world is indifferent to tradition and past reputations, unforgiving of frailty and ignorant of custom or practice. Success will go to those individuals and countries who are swift to adapt, slow to complain, and open to change."³⁷⁶ This quote appears to be something of a mantra for the authors, who decide to include it in not one, but two pullout text boxes

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 7.

before the end of the report. It is also similar to Coleman's later quote about how people don't care about what students think or feel.

The "equity imperative" is not the only discussion offered as a rationale for taking action on the report recommendations. The authors also spend significant time describing the economic circumstances driving the reform effort. They explain that International benchmarking is all about "boosting performance" in comparison to other countries and governments, and that the job requirements no longer involve traditional rote blue-collar tasks because those jobs have been computerized or out-sourced. The report describes the difference between the old labor demands and the new by distinguishing between vertical tasks (done in a sequence) to horizontal tasks that companies can ship out and have done simultaneously. Because of this, more countries can compete for what were once considered to be American jobs.³⁷⁷

They continue the argument for improving education by connecting the quality of a high diploma to the economic future of the nation. They provide statistics credited to Harvard scholar, Richard Murnane, about how households headed by someone with a college degree saw a 40% increase in income between 1973 and 2006 compared to a 6% increase for a high school diploma.³⁷⁸ The authors state that, "Fortune may favor the prepared mind, but it also favors the prepared place---whether that place is a nation, a region, or an individual state. To lay a solid foundation for widespread economic growth, governments around the world are adopting policies aligned with a 21st century economy that is increasingly knowledge-fueled, innovation-driven, and global in scope."³⁷⁹ They affirm the exigency of the situation by closing the section with a statistic that claims

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 9.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

improving student performance on international assessments could raise the GDP by 36% by 2080.

The authors claim that the U.S. is losing its edge in the game of international human capital, citing decreasing high school graduation rates in support of the slippage. Echoing the memo to Carnegie, the report declares that we can no longer compete in quantity (claims China and India will beat us) of college grads, so now we must compete in quality of STEM graduates instead. The report then cites math assessments to say we are not where we need to be. In terms of reading, the authors find that we do pretty well internationally: "American students tend to perform better on international assessments of reading than they do in math and science," but then goes on to say that 15 year olds are only average, and fourth graders have been stagnate while other countries make gains.³⁸⁰

Interestingly, the report says students need more "global awareness" then they have now so that they will be able to "collaborate on international work teams, manage employees from other cultures and countries, and communicate with colleagues and clients abroad." They cite a warning from the National Academy of Sciences: "a pervasive lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and foreign languages threatens the security of the United States as well as its ability to compete in the global marketplace and to produce an informed citizenry."³⁸¹ In my research, this recommendation did not appear in any literacy report before or since, and is not mentioned anywhere in the CCSS.

The report is careful to point out that it is stagnation, rather than slippage, that is at the heart of the U.S. losing its "competitive edge." The report gives a run down on what various countries are doing to internationally benchmark their students' progress in

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 10-12.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 12.

math and science: "Such attitudes stand in stark contrast to the United States, which so far has largely ignored the international benchmarking movement in education."³⁸² They cite part of the downfall as being our federated system that does not provide states the opportunity to compare themselves to other countries. They do say that a strength of the American system is the performance of students in civics and engagement, and that developing democracies can learn from the U.S. about how to prepare students for active participation as citizens in a democracy. This suggests that the authors still consider democratic equality an important purpose of public schooling, but then they close the section with a second gray scale pullout box with Schleicher's comment once again: "The world is indifferent to tradition and past reputations, unforgiving of frailty and ignorant of custom or practice. Success will go to those individuals and countries who are swift to adapt, slow to complain, and open to change."³⁸³

When the report outlines the "five steps toward building globally competitive education systems," the authors reveal the early conversations they have already been having about the standards that would soon move from being a theory to becoming a phenomenon. Their first step: "Upgrade state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades k-12 to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to be globally competitive."³⁸⁴ They then provide a report from Bill Schmidt at MSU, who says that the three biggest differences between international standards and those of the U.S. are: focus (depth over breadth), rigor (we are two years behind), and coherence (we have no logical

³⁸² Ibid., 19.

³⁸³ Ibid.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 24.

progression).³⁸⁵ This language will later be used verbatim by Coleman when describing the problems the CCSS seek to solve. They then mention the "common core state standards initiative, an upcoming joint project of NGA, CCSSO, Achieve, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the James B. Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy."³⁸⁶ The authors explain that the ADP already had good standards and that Achieve was working to "calibrate" them to include international benchmarking claims so that the CCSS will be fewer and clearer to clean up the "clutter" in education topics. They close by again citing Schmidt and his study.

The report continues to cite the Schmidt study as it asserts its first public argument for the upcoming project of developing the CCSS. The Schmidt study is about math, and the language making the case for the CCSS in the report stays grounded in math. The authors recommend the CCSS because it is tightly aligned and can support the development of better assessments and more streamlined materials from the publishing industry. The report continues to make claims that this new international benchmarking will allow the U.S. to adopt models of schooling parallel to Finland and Singapore (performing best on assessments currently). In passing, the report includes some interesting questions raised by Kati Haycock, President and CEO of the left-leaning organization, Education Trust who wants to know what the international best practices say about the immediate needs of teachers in the U.S.: "how to teach kids who arrive way behind, teach language minority kids, and differentiate for interest? To which the authors reply: "Since educators ultimately will be responsible for ensuring that students meet the

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

new globally competitive standards, policy makers should take care to incorporate such questions into their benchmarking research."³⁸⁷

This is the report that officially announced the case for the CCSS to the education policy-making public and private circles, and it remains the report that substantiates the “evidence” for the CSSS today. This is the report that makes the case for the need to internationally benchmark by state, except it is based almost exclusively on a math study done by MSU and the TIMMS. International benchmarking has not been established for reading, writing, and/or literacy. When they did stretch to make this case, they were forced to say that U.S. students actually do well according to PIRLS, and the most critique they could offer was "stagnation for fourth graders." While this is not exactly a case for international benchmarking in literacy, the report remains the source of international reading data to support the need for the CCSS. The NAEP draws on this same data, and so future arguments about the CCSS in ELA and Literacy will often refer to the NAEP as “further” evidence of the need to change the standards. In the end, this example is one among many where a report cites another report that cites another report and results in the interpretation of three independently generated pieces of “evidence.” Between the politics of policy-making and the pattern of presenting a fiction as truth, it is difficult to determine what counts as qualified knowledge in the world of literacy policy.

In 2001, before the planes struck the Twin Towers in New York City, the State Education Improvement Partnership (SEIP) issued a report called, “Within Reach: Realizing the Vision of High Standards.” At the time, both the NGA and the CCSSO, along with three additional organizations, were members of the State Education Improvement Partnership (SEIP). The report outlines the education strengths in nearly

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 28.

every state, and focuses on making recommendations for states in moving forward on standards-based education. Based on information in the report, the “vision” referenced in the title, is the vision of raising the quality of U.S. education through raising standards (the vision of *A Nation at Risk*), and developing tests to measure achievement on those standards.

This report is an interesting representation of the views and priorities of state leaders in the days and weeks preceding the tragedy of September 11th, 2001. It is focused on the standards movement and offers only implied references to literacy in its larger discussion of higher standards needed to successfully navigate the “New Economy.” However, in the extra-textual features, the pie charts and bar graphs show writing to be a concern. The report cites a Public Agenda “Reality Check 2000” article depicting pie-chart results of surveys given to college professors and business leaders. Again, “writing clearly” received the highest number of poor or fair ratings, but the SEIP report makes no mention of this in its call for higher standards.

Instead, the emphasis of the report is promoting higher standards and standardized testing for accountability purposes:

To make higher expectations a reality for students, we must do more to raise the quality, rigor, and appropriateness of standards. We must deepen standards to spell out not only what students should know but also the levels of academic performance they need to demonstrate. We must provide the standards-based curriculum materials, training, and technology needed to help teachers realize the vision of standards in the classroom. Finally, we must continue to build understanding about this new approach to education among teachers, administrators, students, parents, government leaders and others.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁸ State Education Improvement Partnership (SEIP). *Within Reach: Realizing the Vision of High Standards*. Policy, State Education Improvement Partnership, 2001, 11.

The report cites “Promising Practices” from various states, with quotes from governors in the pullout boxes. Overall, the SEIP attempts to help governors "chart a course for standards-based reform" by providing an overview of "where we have been---and where we still have important work to do." It outlines three aims: to provide a national update and context on standards-based reform, share "promising practices" by other states, and "spur continuing actions."³⁸⁹

While there is no formal bibliography and only one footnote, the report does mention ten different surveys and reports to support the SEIP assertion that high standards and high-stakes tests are the way to raise the achievement scores of low-income students. The report also makes an investment pitch to the state leaders, encouraging them to plan ahead for the expanding market of “supplemental education services” (SES) that will be needed to support students in meeting the new standards. The only footnote in the report serves to tell the reader about the Rand Corporation study featuring David Grissmer’s investigation of academic performance in North Carolina, Connecticut, and Texas. In the study, Grissmer concludes that it was common standards aligned with state tests that contributed to gains on NAEP for these respective states. Additional sources cited in the report include the Business Roundtable survey on public attitudes about standards; Public Agenda survey, "Reality Check 2000," on public attitudes about education; NAEP; 1999 National Education Summit; GAO stats predicting that demand for SES would quadruple between 1997 and 2002; NGA Center for Best Practices Survey of state practices in 1999; Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy analysis that shows the percentage of well-qualified teachers in a state is the most powerful and consistent predictor of states’ average achievement on NAEP; A-Plus Communications

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.

And Education Week report on report cards for schools; and the Partnership for Learning and the report "Making Standards Work" which, according to this article "confirms that schools can make gains despite having relatively high proportions of students from low-income backgrounds."³⁹⁰ Based on the language of the report and the research base used as evidence, the SEIP is encouraging states to both plan for and target low-performing students and families in new literacy policies and practices.

The idea that states employ standards-based education reform as a way of targeting low-performing students and their parents is further endorsed by the way the report uses the language of "rights." There are two mentions of "rights" in this report. The first example is intended to depict the states' current challenge to instituting these reforms as the civil rights advocates who are seeking to claim a bigger stake in the political process: "Groups representing parents, civil rights advocates, and local control proponents have sought to undermine high-stakes assessments in some states. The complaints leveled against assessment systems highlight the challenges faced by states."³⁹¹ The second example refers to the right of parents to know the qualifications of teachers. This discussion is followed by a conflation of standardized test scores with public good: "'Just as report cards for students grab the attention of parents, report cards for schools have an audience that is ready to listen," according to Reporting Results, a report by A-Plus Communications and Education Week, "poll after poll shows that improving education is the public's top priority. Accountability reports that document these improvements provide education leaders with a magic moment to communicate with their community. The challenge is to take advantage of that moment."³⁹²

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 27.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 12.

³⁹² Ibid., 24.

The SEIP report never explicitly mentions racial inequality, the racial achievement gap, or the importance of literacy in solving the problems in public education. However, the report does mention the “shared responsibility” of various stakeholders to sustaining the accountability system. This system, made up of state tests and articulated standards, presents measurement as a public good. Literacy is only suggested indirectly by certain pie charts, and implied through larger discussions about higher expectations generally. Overall, the SEIP report reflects a right-wing conservative tone that emphasizes continuing the work of focusing on high standards and high stakes standardized testing. The authors cite this as strategic to prevent parent, civil rights advocates and proponents of local control from undermining these efforts, making sure there are “fair consequences” for failure and “shared responsibility” with the parents and others for school success. In the first major literacy documents following 9/11, the language and priorities are much more explicitly focused on literacy, race, and class.

THE LEGACY OF NCLB

It is no accident that the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law in the midst of the response to the events of September 11, 2001. The act itself served to link prior conservative American agendas with the country’s historically preeminent institution for social control: the public school. While the public schools in America have certainly gone through many variations of reform and transformation, the institution itself has remained an opportunistic place for instituting a national hegemonic agenda. In the years following 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act became a strategic element of Bush’s anti-terrorism efforts. As he and others painted the new world climate as one where the enemies of good, moral freedom and democracy are not always nation-states,

and the combatants are hard to distinguish from the non-combatants, Bush established an anti-terrorism plan that required a constant state of fear, war, and defense of homeland. It assumed that the people of the country were not able to govern themselves under such conditions, and so must be “controlled” for their own safety in much the same way that the colonization and conquering of peoples and foreign lands had been justified in the past.

The NCLB Act signaled that some of the nation’s enemies were perceived as domestic, and therefore the act was designed to target increasingly surplus populations of low-income racial minority communities. The complex history of this relatively young country suggests that imperialist tendencies were part of the fabric that made up the founding documents of the country itself. The legacy of oppression, exploitation of labor, and continued capitalist structure in U.S. history provide the backdrop for NCLB, making it an example of domestic cultural imperialism.

In her article, “Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War---A Critical Review,” Jessica Geinow-Hecht chronicles the intellectual discourse surrounding notions of cultural imperialism. She traces the many dimensions of its definitions from the time of World War II. Ultimately, the conversation on “cultural transfer” turns to an academic discussion of culture as an instrument of power.³⁹³ “Dissatisfied with the realist approach of scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and others, a new generation of ‘revisionists’ shifted the study of the international system to the impact of domestic ideas as well as economic and social forces on U.S. diplomacy.”³⁹⁴ Because survival of the capitalist economy depends on expansion in foreign markets, the U.S. had to find a way to gain

³⁹³ Jessica Geinow-Hecht “Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War---A Critical Review.” *Diplomatic History* 24 no 3 (Summer 2000) 465-495.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

support from the public for its involvement in foreign markets and affairs. Geinow-Hecht discusses one of four strands of cultural imperialism as being “media imperialism.” According to the author’s research, media imperialism is that form of psychological warfare used to “conquer the minds” of people, forcing the dominated to see themselves as the conquerors see them.³⁹⁵ Also in the 1970’s, Herbert Schiller identifies a “strong link between the domestic business, military, and governmental power structure on the one hand and the ‘mind managers’ (that is, leaders of U.S. communications) on the other, who had conspired to manipulate minds at home and abroad.”³⁹⁶ The Watergate scandal is a telling example. These emerging ideas of cultural imperialism continued to develop into the 1980’s and 1990’s. The growing global domination of consumer capitalism shows culture being used as a tool to “integrate different societies into one international economic system.” Collective cultural diplomacy emerges as a primary tool of foreign policy in that it can be used for “purposeful cultural conquest.”³⁹⁷ As powerful as it is abroad, cultural imperialism is arguably necessary for the colonization of the country’s own peoples so as to prepare them for globalization and domination.

Geinow-Hecht notes that the focus of the debate on culture and its imperialist uses is shifting from one of nation-states to one of “individual entrepreneurs” or private business. This moves the focus away from politics and places it squarely on capitalism. “These four points, the fracturing cultural consensus within the United States, the revitalized worry on the part of many Americans regarding their image abroad, the global shift of the cultural debate from politics to capitalism, and the lack of research for the decades before World Wars I and II, may serve as inspirations for future research in the

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

field of American culture abroad.”³⁹⁸ As national geographic borders fail to ensure loyalty or define enemies of empire, the need to control the masses for their own “protection” merits further studies of cultural imperialism on the domestic front. It is upon this stage that the No Child Left Behind Act makes its appearance.

Given this history, it is not surprising that NCLB would continue in the tradition of deculturalization and Americanization. While the efforts of dominant cultural groups to sustain their power base within the country is not a new idea, the urgency of mobilizing these efforts for control of the international stage becomes paramount in the post-9/11 United States. The battle for power within the country has been an on-going struggle most recently manifesting itself in the revolutionary civil rights movements of the 1960’s, where racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, and ability “minorities” mobilized to make demands for change on all fronts. The battleground for much of the political activism and resistance on all sides was the local public school.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which is in the process of being ratified in 2015, was the latest in a series of educational reforms that began with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The ESEA was initially signed into law by the federal government to “address the inequality of educational opportunity for economically underprivileged children.”³⁹⁹ The act was intended to support the efforts of state and local institutions to fund educational opportunities for students living in some of the poorest urban and rural areas. The provisions of the comprehensive federal plan included support for the first Title I programs that became the basis for special education in the public schools. Following on the heels of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Peter Wright W.D.esq., Pamela Darr Wright, and Suzanne Whitney Heath. *Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind*. Hatsfield,VA: Harbor House Law Press, 2004, 9

that officially desegregated elementary schools in 1954, and coming in the midst of the civil rights movement, the ESEA successfully sent a federal message of support to many individuals and groups who were mobilizing for societal change on many fronts. Schools would now be in a better position to provide the needed support for special education students and students deemed “different” and “deficient” by the teachers who taught them.

At about this same time, educators in the post-WWII Intercultural Education Movement were rallying for an increased focus on love, respect, and better communication within schools in an effort to bridge the gaps between “differences” and bring people together. Most of the time, these “differences” included an increased presence of students of color and disabled students in mainstream white classrooms across the country. There was also a movement in higher education to create greater opportunities for the study of particular groups in this country, and colleges saw the creation of ethnic studies, women’s studies, and even labor studies.⁴⁰⁰ The consciousness-raising efforts of pockets of people and organizations across the country were having a “bottom up” effect on public education, and the ESEA provided much needed funding to create schools that could best serve all the children previously marginalized in the nation’s public schools. While the institution of this act did not remove the responsibility of education from the state and local authorities, it did define a distinct responsibility for the federal government in the allocation of much needed funding.

The ESEA was amended by congress several times since 1965. The administrations of presidents Johnson, Ford, and Carter attempted to reallocate more

⁴⁰⁰ Christine E. Sleeter and Carl A. Grant. *Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*. New Jersey: Merrill, an imprint of Prentice Hall, 1999, 31.

monies in an effort to bolster the quality of education for many of the nation's children. Each time the law was amended, the presidents called attention to the importance of the federal government's role in supporting public education as being crucial for America's future, a signal of "national commitment to quality education," and Carter even mentioned his reforms as evidence of an "evolution of the Federal role in education."⁴⁰¹

In 1995, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) published The Nation's Report Card describing their findings on American public schools 15 years after *A Nation At Risk* was published. The NAEP was established as a national accounting organization to monitor the learning of students in America's public schools. The NAEP only conducts assessments in the content areas of math, reading, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and the arts. Working with their results, the United States Department of Education released the following information: since 1983, "per pupil spending increased by 75 percent, the number of students per teacher fell 25 percent, the number of teachers with advanced degrees more than doubled, and student achievement remained flat."⁴⁰²

The No Child Left Behind Act was an amendment to the original ESEA of 1965. It differed from the Clinton era reforms in significant ways. For one, this new act now added sanctions for schools that did not demonstrate "adequate yearly progress." The centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind Act was the requirement that public schools bring all students to proficiency in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year. Each school's progress will be measured with reading and math proficiency tests of all students. The school will report on students by subgroup (i.e., ethnicity, disability,

⁴⁰¹ Wright, Wright, and Heath, *Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind*.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 11.

English language learners, and low-income). To meet the No Child Left Behind standard, all subgroups must make sufficient academic progress to ensure that all students are proficient by 2014. If the school does not educate any subgroup, the school will fail to meet this standard.⁴⁰³

In the thousands of pages that contain the actual written law itself, the Bush Administration articulates in detail, the new role of the Federal government in education: complete control. Bush, calling himself the ‘education president,’ sufficiently shifted the responsibility for public education from the states to the federal government, a move that surprised many of his fellow republicans. Bush had bipartisan support for this act and its promise of 24 billion dollars to fund it.⁴⁰⁴ As 2005 approached, many scholars, educators, activists, and politicians cried “foul.” As the hard data and personal anecdotes poured in, the No Child Left Behind Act proved to be nothing less than a contemporary example of U.S. cultural imperialism.

The power of a few individual men to render such an effect on a nation was an uncomfortable idea for citizens of a supposed democracy. However, a focus on individualism is a long standing American value instilled by the Anglo Protestant men of colonial times, and enforced in the deculturalization and Americanization efforts of the boarding schools established for Native Americans in the 1800’s. Part of the rhetoric behind the reformation of education is to create educational opportunities so that every child may succeed. The notion of meritocracy runs deep in contemporary American culture, and it has served to alleviate the guilt of the dominant members of American

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Alvarez, Lizette. “House Votes for New Testing to Hold Schools Accountable.” *New York Times* (1857-current file): (May 24 2001); ProQuest Historical Newspapers (database) *The New York Times* p. A1

society for the poor state of affairs that exist for everyone else. In a meritocratic system, an individual succeeds because he/she has “worked hard,” and those who are in positions of power are there because they “deserve to be.” Conversely, those who are not as successful have only themselves to blame. The merit system is a useful tool of the American ideology in garnering support for its foreign and domestic policy decisions. Belief in the myth of meritocracy also prevents the citizenry from closely examining the inequalities of a system that advantages some people and disadvantages others:

To establish equality, major changes in society must take place. This process is very difficult when power is held by those who believe in a meritocratic system. ‘Its proponents turn their principle into a defense of the status quo, that is, of unequal privileges already won in the past’ (Green, 1981, p. 167). On the other hand, the advocates for equality support the dictum, ‘from each according to his [her] ability, to each according to his [her] needs.’⁴⁰⁵

With the enactment of NCLB, the Bush administration set into motion a system of education that ignores social causes for poor performance in schools and instead relies solely on the results of standardized testing. Based on test scores, students could be denied a high school diploma while others get public school money to attend private religious schools. Teachers could be promoted based on “merit,” and schools could be closed or reconstituted at the discretion of the federal government and the private organizations it employs. The test score becomes paramount not only for students who are looking for a high school diploma, but also for teachers that would like to find or maintain a teaching position, for schools who want to continue their efforts to serve students, and for state and local constituencies that want to retain jurisdiction of educational expenditures.

⁴⁰⁵ Donna M. Gollnick and Philip Chin. *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*. New York: Merrill, an imprint of Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990, 27.

Many critics of NCLB claim that the ultimate purpose of NCLB is the destruction of public schools in an effort to make way for privatization of education. They cite a laundry list of evidence for how NCLB dooms public schools to failure under the requirements of the new act. In the Bush administration's push for an "ownership society," it is hard not to see education as part of a larger pattern of privatization involving other public welfare institutions like healthcare and social security. The process of destroying public education for eventual profit gain fits Geinow-Hecht's analysis of culture being used as a tool to "integrate different societies into one international economic system."⁴⁰⁶

The process of destroying an institution that has existed for hundreds of years will not happen over night. The No Child Left Behind Act is a powerful weapon because it will slowly destroy the system from within, while maintaining the façade of "reform." Many believed that the rhetoric of accountability, transparency, and high standards to combat "soft bigotry," would serve to confuse well-intentioned members of the U.S. populace just long enough to allow the federal government to sabotage the public school system and send it to its demise. The gaps of achievement and wealth would continue to rise and the only good education would eventually become the one you can buy.

"The biggest problem with the NCLB Act is that it mistakes measuring schools for fixing them."⁴⁰⁷ This, according to Linda Darling-Hammond will only exacerbate inequalities already present in schools. The incorporation of "norm-referenced tests" guarantees a school the inability to meet the 100 percent proficiency requirement when,

⁴⁰⁶ Geinow-Hecht "Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War," 2000.

⁴⁰⁷ Linda Darling-Hammond, "From 'Separate but Equal' to 'No Child Left Behind': The Collision of New Standards and Old Inequalities" in *Many Children Left Behind*. Deborah Meier and George Wood, eds. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, 9

by definition, at least 50 percent of students must score below the norm in order for the test to be considered “valid.” A certain portion of those 50 percent below the norm must also fail, or fall below a designated “cut-off” number in order for the test to retain its validity. The tests, produced by private testing companies, were bought and purchased by states across the country. “One analyst has calculated that it would take schools more than one hundred years to reach such a target in all content areas if they continued the fairly brisk rate of progress they were making during the 1990’s.”⁴⁰⁸

In addition to guaranteed failure of meeting federal “proficiency” requirements, schools were declared “failing” if any one of the subgroups did not meet the “adequate yearly progress” (AYP). This placed a disproportionate pressure on schools in low-income areas where the greatest improvement had to be made. Thus, schools received what Darling-Hammond refers to as a “diversity penalty:”

For all of these reasons, two separate teams of researchers have found that, in the early years of NCLB implementation, schools serving poor, minority, and LEP [Limited English Proficient] students and those with a greater number of subgroups for which they are held accountable are disproportionately identified as ‘needing improvement.’⁴⁰⁹

Under such criteria, even schools where test scores showed significant improvement were recognized as “failing.” Such labeling, intended by NCLB as an accountability strategy, served to further undermine the efforts of these schools to serve students. Such schools then faced a greater challenge of attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers. Thus, the NCLB Act denied a quality education for the very students it claimed to be protecting.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

For many students, education under such conditions is not an option. Students who are already struggling in school now have reduced resources to support them. Dropout rates have risen 300% in some school districts as students with low test scores eventually just leave. One of the results of NLCB was that schools no longer had an incentive to retain, attract, or encourage struggling students, because a reduction in low scoring students meant the school proficiency rates would rise. With the institution of standardized testing a graduation requirement in Massachusetts, the graduation rate of African American students went from 71% to 59.5%, and for Latinos 54% to 45%.⁴¹⁰ The number of students dropping out or being pushed out of school under these conditions was disproportionately represented as students of color, low-income students, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities. “In a growing number of states, high school completion rates for African American and Latino students have returned to pre-1954 levels.”⁴¹¹ The limited options available to low achieving students resulted in greater numbers of these students joining the military, entering minimum wage jobs, or ending up in prison.

The only schools that stood a chance of passing the requirements of NCLB were those schools in the wealthiest suburban districts who had the fewest numbers of “subgroups” for which they were held accountable for educating. If a school had few, or no students in the low income, bilingual, learning disabled groups, then their chances of reaching proficiency by 2014 were expedited. The more culturally, linguistically, and racially homogenous the suburban school, the more likely it would be labeled as an NCLB “Blue Ribbon” school. According to educator Stanley Karp, understanding how

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 23.

AYP works is the key to understanding how limited the positive results would turn out to be:

AYP is the rate of improvement schools must make on their state test scores to reach 100 percent within the allowed time frame. Schools must meet separate AYP targets for up to ten different student categories...In each category there are two mandates: 95 percent of the students in each group must take the test, and each group must make its annual AYP target, which is the steadily rising percentage of passing students needed to stay on pace to reach 100 percent by 2014...Schools that miss any single target for two consecutive years get put on the 'needs improvement' list and face sanctions. After two years, they must use federal funds to support student transfers. Three years brings 'corrective action' and vouchers for supplemental tutorial services; four years brings 'reconstitution,' including replacement of school staff; five years brings 'restructuring,' which can mean anything from state takeover to imposing private management on public schools.⁴¹²

Under AYP regulations, a student who improves by 40 points from one year to the next receives no credit if the score is not "passing." Students who miss the passing mark by one point count for nothing. The narrow constraints of the federal accountability and measurement designs were further preventing students, teachers, and schools from meeting the goals of a quality education.

According to a Rose and Gallup poll taken in 2000, most Americans believed that the single most important purpose of public education was to prepare "responsible citizens."⁴¹³ The implications of the NCLB Act indicated that the Bush educational agenda defined the ideal citizen as one who believed that if he just works hard enough, he will succeed, that success is measured by numbers and dollars. A good citizen is one who speaks English only, follows directions, and does not question the power of authority. He

⁴¹² Stanley Karp in *Many Children Left Behind*. Deborah Meier and George Wood, eds. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004, 54-55

⁴¹³ Lisa Guisbond and Monte Neill, "Failing Our Children: No Child Left Behind Undermines Quality and Equity in Education." *The Clearing House*. Washington: 78 no 1 (Sept./Oct 2004) 12-17.

believes that the country is run by men who earned their leadership position through hard work, and that their friends, the CEO's of America's wealthiest businesses, are benevolent, philanthropic souls. Thus, the ideal citizen would sleep well at night knowing that America rules the world because it is virtuous and grounded in freedom, democracy, and free enterprise for everyone.

In his article, "Reading Between the Lines: The New Education Law is a Victory for Bush—and for His Corporate Allies," author Stephen Metcalf discusses the significance of one of the founding documents of NCLB; "Reinventing Education: Entrepreneurship in America's Public Schools." The document was written by Lou Gerstner, the chairman of IBM, and it describes school children as "human capital, teachers as sellers in a marketplace and the public school system as a monopoly."⁴¹⁴ Having CEO's be leaders of education reform efforts will undoubtedly produce corporate rhetoric. The language of "sanctions" for schools is a telling example. When the President surrounds himself with corporate CEO's in his cabinet and on his education reform committees, the process, products, and benefactors of new educational reforms is no surprise. As the chairman of McGraw-Hill publishing put it, "It's a great day for education, because we now have substantial alignment among all the key constituents---the public, the education community, business and political leaders---that results matter."⁴¹⁵ The results that matter will be the profit margins of big business that will have plenty of labor and consumers at home to support their expansion overseas while being protected by bolstered military.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁴¹⁵ Stephen Metcalf, "Reading Between the Lines." *Nation*. 274 no 3 (January 28, 2002) 18-23.

The Business Roundtable, a group of CEO's who focus on education reform and would later support the efforts to develop the CCSS, posted a position paper that named the opponents of NCLB as being made up of teachers and parents. It quickly dismissed this constituency as being ill informed about the importance of measurement tools and standardized testing. For CEO's and "compassionate conservatives" alike, "education has become a sentimental and, all things considered, cheap way to talk about equalizing opportunity without committing to substantial income redistribution."⁴¹⁶ Such a position also endorsed the Reagan-era blaming of progressives, multiculturalists, and whole language advocates as being responsible for the dismal state of public education. Educators who oppose assessment through testing alone get labeled as "irrational" and "ill-informed." The rational and logical measurement of testing would provide the numbers argument to support the potential takeover and privatization of public education.

The incentive for large corporations to support NCLB has already been demonstrated. Testing and textbook producers have always been very profitable industries, but since the passage of NCLB, the profits have skyrocketed. In the first five years state testing expenditures tripled and continue to grow. The makers of the SAT, Educational Testing Service, launched a new for-profit k-12 company called "ETS K-12 Works, to provide testing and measurement services to the nation's elementary and secondary schools."⁴¹⁷ As it turned out, the largest test and textbook producing companies were identified as "Bush Stocks" by the Wall Street Journal.

The case of the personal relationship between the President of the United States and the chairman of McGraw-Hill illustrates the significance of these executive,

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

educational, and corporate links in the era of imperialistic American anti-terrorism doctrines and U.S. global expansionism. The combination of an imbalance in executive office power, close ties with corporate conglomerates, and the looming threat of terrorism post- 9/11 served to solidify the federal role of public schools for private gain:

Harold McGraw Jr. sits on the national grant advisory and founding board of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. McGraw in turn received the highest literacy award from President Bush in the early 1990's, for his contributions to the cause of literacy. The McGraw Foundation awarded current Bush Education Secretary Rod Paige its highest educator's award while Paige was Houston's school chief; Paige, in turn was the keynote speaker at McGraw-Hill's 'government initiatives' conference last spring. Harold McGraw III was selected as a member of President George W. Bush's transition advisory team, along with McGraw-Hill board member Edward Rust Jr., the CEO of State Farm and an active member of the Business Roundtable on educational issues. An ex-chief of staff for Barbara Bush is returning to work for Laura Bush in the White House--- after a stint with McGraw-Hill as a media relations executive. John Negroponte left his position as McGraw-Hill's executive vice president for global markets to become Bush's ambassador to the United Nations.⁴¹⁸

This same small circle of executive, corporate and educational leaders would remain very influential in education policy. During his time as Governor of Texas, George W. Bush hosted countless meetings with members of the textbook industry trying to define reading curriculum that would qualify as "scientifically valid." Most of the consultants at these meetings were McGraw-Hill executives who eventually earned a large chunk of the Texas textbook market which saw a boom under Bush. McGraw-Hill also eventually purchased the "Grow Network" non-profit founded by David Coleman and Jason Zimba of the later CCSS Initiative. The bottom line is that learning and teaching under NCLB looked like the purchasing of new books and tests, the paying of new consultants to train instructors how to present the new textbooks, and all the subsequent worksheets,

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

handouts, and tests that accompany them. As Gerald Coles, author of “Reading Lessons: The Debate Over Literacy,” states: “Phonics is a way of thinking about illiteracy that doesn’t involve thinking about larger social injustices. To cure illiteracy, presumably all children need is a new set of text books.”⁴¹⁹

The revolutionary educators, parents, and community leaders called for people to remember that NCLB was tied to government funding. Their argument was that if schools could find alternative funding, they could retain some control of educational expenditures and assessments. Unfortunately, these funding sources were hard to come by and were often supplied by private organizations. Thus began the move to seek out private funding for public education.

The dumbing down and segregation through disaggregation would eventually isolate groups of people and impede the potential of the U.S. citizenry to critically evaluate their situation. The thousands of students pushed out of school faced limited financial opportunities resulting in more recruits for the military and the low-end labor market. As philosopher and writer Kenneth Burke once stated, “one owns his social structure insofar as one can subscribe to it by wholeheartedly feeling the reasonableness of its arrangements.”⁴²⁰ During the post-9/11 years, NCLB became an effective tool for finalizing the colonization of the American peoples and paving the way for the global domination of America in the name of “freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.”

One of the most significant features of the NCLB Act, is that it became the first federal education act that was explicitly designed around the academic performance of low-income and racial minority students. This population was its center. Scholar Connie

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ See Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front*. Verso, 1997, 440.

Wun argues that NCLB enacts the fantasy of the black subject as a permanent failure.⁴²¹ In much the same way that the educational discourse post-civil rights has presumed low-income and racial minority students are strangers to the educational system, NCLB perpetuated and extended an overtly anti-black educational structure. The conversations about education reform have consistently been about race, with the black subject constructed as a perpetual problem, locus for charity, focus for philanthropy, and an expected failure. Since NCLB, standards and accountability measures have been employed to audit and monitor the rate and degree of this failure, the process of school closure and displacement, and the ultimate rationale for repurposing resources once again. The emphasis on the racial disparities and the achievement gap serve to help such a system maintain the status quo without being called on the racism inherent in the laws and structures of this system. In the literacy documents that emerged in the years following NCLB, it is apparent that literacy is believed to solve all the past problems of racial injustice for nativist whites, making the invocation of literacy and standardized testing a potentially redemptive exercise. Individual performance on literacy tests supposedly negates racist ascriptions. Literacy serves an explicitly racist agenda when it is defined as objective, equal, and race-neutral within this existing political, economic, and social reality.

In the wake of NCLB, there was an absence of significant literacy policy documents. This is likely due to the process of enactment of NCLB throughout 2001-2002. Beginning in 2004, adolescent literacy and the value of a high school diploma dominated the energies of both the left and right-leaning educational think tanks. I next

⁴²¹ Connie Wun. "The Anti-Black Order of No Child Left Behind: Using Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Critical Race Theory to Examine NCLB." Academia.edu, 2011, (accessed December 17, 2014).

want to spend some time presenting on the patterns and trends in some of the representative documents that led to the release of the report, *Benchmarking for Success* in 2008, so that we might see how influence of neoliberal economic structures, meshed with post-9/11 anxieties and a long-standing national need to “overcome” a history steeped in racial inequality.

The first, and perhaps the most foundational of the post-NCLB reports was put out by the American Diploma Project (ADP), featuring the collaborative efforts of the Education Trust, the Fordham Institute, and the non-profit organization, Achieve, Inc. Nearly all significant literacy documents published after this report, including the CCSS, reflect the findings and recommendations of the ADP report. The title itself implies that the high school diploma is no longer an adequate educational credential for life in the 21st century. The report presents a proposal for a common set of benchmark standards that will serve to elevate the high school diploma and make it once again “count.”

Arguably, the CCSS are an extension of the ADP benchmark standards. Given that these standards were collaboratively written and endorsed by a reputable civil rights advocate organization, a conservative think-tank, and a private non-profit, the foundation for widespread appeal and consensus was established with this report.

The CCSS in ELA and Literacy, and the majority of policy documents generated after 2001, reflect the findings and recommendations of this initial ADP report. The ADP report is a collaboration between Achieve, Edtrust, and Fordham. The Edtrust is a known civil rights advocate. Fordham leans right, and Achieve was a relatively new non-profit organization. This report actually offered the Massachusetts English Language Arts frameworks as ideal though not perfect. This begs the question of why the proponents of

common national standards do not simply advocate that everyone use the standards of Massachusetts? What changed between the ADP benchmarks and the CCSS in ELA?

ADP 2004	CCSS 2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less prescriptive • 8 strands • Recommends the Massachusetts list of frameworks and diverse texts as good • No mention of literacy for global competitiveness • Concerned for the upward mobility of the <i>individual student</i> • Promotes literacy for the sole purpose of college and career • No mention of racial achievement gap • Worries over decreasing value of high school diploma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More prescriptive • 10 or more strands • Offers its own canonical list of texts in the “Publisher’s Criteria” • Emphasizes improved literacy for global competitiveness • Concerned for the <i>fate of the national economy</i> • Promotes literacy for college and career success • References to the “diversity” thesis but does not include specific standards or texts to explicitly combat racism or structural inequality

Table 4: Changes between the ADP benchmarks and the CCSS in ELA

Beginning with the formal release of the American Diploma Project’s report, the common belief in the de-valuing of the high school diploma became a foundational element of literacy policy discussions. In some ways, locating the problem with the value of a high school diploma is arguably a backhanded commentary on the impact of *Brown v. Board*. It could be read that school integration has led to the de-valuing of a high school diploma and the need to create a more stratified system of educational attainment credentials. This idea is implied in the ADP report and emphasized in the CCSS. The main distinction between the two reports is that the ADP frames its intentions as a

concern for the student in terms of upward mobility, but the CCSS frames it as a concern for economic competitiveness of the nation.

Does the ADP report mark a shift in the discourse? Yes. It marks the shift from social efficiency to social mobility as the projected purpose of public education. This is why the CCSS and the literacy policy reports leading up to it had to bring in the issue of racial and social equality in a new way. Because the “social mobility goal puts a democratic face on the inequalities of capitalism.”⁴²² Perhaps in keeping with a post-9/11 apocalyptic call to arms, the beginning language of the ADP report is disheartening in its emphasis on broken promises. It desires to make the high school diploma “count” again. According to the authors, equal opportunity is achieved by and through standards-based education. The CCSS thus become a more entrenched and standardized version of standards-based education. Ultimately, solidifying “equal opportunity” is the only way that education can be fully absorbed into the neoliberal system.

In essence, the release of the 2004 ADP report marks a call for a new social contract in public education.⁴²³ In its simplest terms, the education reform conversation needed to be reframed at this point because the official transformation of state institutions from “racist” in the 1960s to “raceless” in the new millennium, was now publically acceptable as “complete.” Meanwhile, the social reality was still very much unequal and color-coded. Despite the gains of the modern civil rights movement, white supremacy was still the rule in governance and in education. The discourse in education had to shift from one focused on systemic “racial achievement” gaps, to one of personal merit-based “achievement gaps.” One way to accomplish this, was to create a standardized set of

⁴²² Labaree, “Public Goods,” 1997.

⁴²³ For further discussion of the idea of a new social contract for education, see John Kendall, *Understanding Common Core State Standards*. Alexandria: McREL, 2011.

educational outputs and expectations, which endorsed the idea of a “level playing field” across race and class. At the same time, such discourse had to appeal to a significant public base still living under very real inequalities of race and class in their everyday lives. Hence, the discourse demonstrates a post-9/11 surge of moral appeals to racial and class justice through standards-based education and accountability.

The new social contract in public education requires that citizens agree to value their own personal right to choose between different types of schools, different programs of study, and different vocational opportunities. They must, however, value “choice” over equality, thereby relinquishing the state institutions from any responsibility in the inequality of results that remain. In reality, exercising one’s right to choose their education requires that some schools, programs, and teachers be worse than others. Such is the case with parents who wish for their child to attend a “good school.” In order for there to be “good” or “better” schools, there must be “bad” or “worse” ones. Inequality is required in such a system. Such an education system now mirrors the free market economy. The challenge of education policymakers following in the footsteps of the ADP report was to convince a wide array of constituents that “choice” was the best way to obtain equality of results.

In 2005, The NGA published a statement about the worst problem in education for the 21st century. The declaration was captured by the National Clearinghouse. The most remarkable thing about this very brief synthesis piece, is that the NGA explicitly defines the achievement gap this way: “The ‘achievement gap’ is a matter of race and class. Across the U.S., a gap in academic performance persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts. This is one of the most pressing

education-policy challenges that states currently face.”⁴²⁴ The report goes on to say how NCLB has made it so that schools will have to use supplemental education services (SES) and change governance structure if they are not closing the achievement gap. “In other words, schools now are considered successful only if they close the achievement gap. Many schools are struggling to meet this benchmark.”⁴²⁵ Interestingly, between this declaration in 2005 and the Achieve, Inc. report the following year, the “achievement gap” would change to the “expectations gap,” thus marking the reframing of the conversation from one of systemic reform, to one of individual opportunity.

In 2006, the Alliance for Excellent Education prepared a report for the Carnegie Corporation of New York that outlined the current state of reading and recommendations for next steps to improve adolescent literacy across the nation’s public schools.⁴²⁶ The report is authored by Harvard Scholar, Catherine Snow, and an advanced doctoral student at Harvard, Gina Biancarosa.⁴²⁷ The report’s “Foreword” explains that it is generated in response to the decades-long focus on early literacy at the expense of adolescent literacy. The authors of this report make a case for a renewed focus on reading comprehension, which they describe as “learning while reading, reading in the content areas, and reading in the service of secondary or higher education, of employability, of citizenship.”⁴²⁸ They offer their rationale for improving literacy as also grounded in economics and a changing world:

⁴²⁴ National Governors Association. "NGA Clearinghouse." *NGA Center for Best Practices*. 2005. <http://www.subnet.nga.org/educlear/achievement>.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Biancarosa, Gina and Catherine Snow. *Reading Next---A Vision for Action and Research in Middle School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington D.C.: Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2006.

⁴²⁷ Both Snow and Biancarosa would later serve on formal committees of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.

⁴²⁸ Biancarosa and Snow, *Reading Next*, 2006, 1.

In 1950, when opportunities to achieve economic stability and a middle-class standard of living were open to those without a high school diploma, students unable to convert their third-grade reading skills into literacy levels useful for comprehending and learning from complex, content-rich materials could drop out of high school and still hope to achieve a reasonably comfortable and successful lifestyle. In 2004, however, there are few opportunities for the high school dropout to achieve a comparable way of life; jobs, welfare and social safety nets will no longer be available as they once were.⁴²⁹

Having established their purpose as supporting the social and economic mobility of individual students in the new millennium, Snow and Biancarosa then offer a set of specific literacy skills that are now necessary in this era, and it is these skills that they claim comprise the definition of “comprehension.” They also offer “15 Elements of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs,” which include the use of diverse texts, intensive writing, and the use of technology “as a tool for and a topic of literacy instruction.”⁴³⁰ They authors stress, however, that is it is very important that implementation of any literacy programs that combines these elements be “balanced” with the appropriate research on the outcomes for students: “By collecting data according to the recommended design, public and private funders, districts, and researchers will be able to disaggregate students and describe the different sources of their difficulty and the differentiated effects of programs and program components.”⁴³¹ The goal, they argue, is to understand exactly “what works, when, and for whom.”⁴³²

Since the 1983 federal report, *A Nation At Risk* (NAR), the NGA Center for Best Practices has released 21 articles focused on literacy. Collectively, the total sum of the article emphasize the importance of improved reading skills for global economic competition in the 21st century. One of the more pivotal and substantial reports, "Reading

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 13.

⁴³² Ibid.

to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy," echoes the popular axioms in the discourse surrounding literacy in 2005, and is even authored by one of the same people who wrote the Reading Next report.⁴³³

The overall purpose of the report is to make a convincing argument as to why all states should focus on providing literacy instruction to students in grades 4-12 with the same importance as states currently provide literacy instruction for the early primary grades. This, argues the report, is necessary to meet NCLB adequate yearly progress (AYP), "raise graduation rates, increase the value of the high school diploma, and close the achievement gap."⁴³⁴ And the report's rationale for the exigency of this work:

To compete in the global information economy, young people today need literacy skills far more advanced than have been required of any previous generation. Strong reading, writing, and thinking skills are essential not only for success in school and the workplace, but also for participation in civic life. Yet many youth lack the requisite literacy skills. Only three out of 10 U.S. eighth-graders are proficient readers.⁴³⁵

Of particular note is the emphasis on global economic competition, the use of changing times calling for changing literacy skills, the inclusion of writing and thinking alongside reading, and the notion that the right kind of literacy leads to the right kind of democratic participation as a citizen. In a few short paragraphs, the NGA establishes a crisis that involves the economic fate of the nation, the persistent inequalities between the races, and the remaining education reform efforts; all of which hinge on the quality of school-based literacy.

⁴³³ National Governors Association. *Reading to Achieve: A Governor's Guide to Adolescent Literacy*. Guide, NGA Center for Best Practices, NGA Center for Best Practices, 2005.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

Based on the recommendations of the 2006 NGA report, the groundwork for the acceptance and need of CCSS is clear. The "Adolescent Literacy Advisory Panel" who contributed to the content of the report, suggests that governors pursue "five strategies to improve adolescent literacy achievement." The first of these strategies is for each state to "build support for a state focus on adolescent literacy" through launching a literacy campaign and improving the data and information systems for collection of literacy performance data. The second strategy is for states to "raise literacy expectations across grades and curricula," including aligning assessments, curriculum, and professional development for teachers, as well as "promoting literacy rooted in academic disciplines."⁴³⁶ This first strategy employs a top-down system of state leaders guiding districts and schools on what to "include in the literacy plan." The fourth strategy, which appears as an anomaly in the literacy recommendations of the time, encourages state leaders to build educator capacity through offering monetary incentives for literacy success. The 5th strategy resonates with the modern standards movement by encouraging governors to measure literacy progress at the school, district, and state levels. The report states:

Governors have the unprecedented opportunity to draw attention to the adolescent literacy crisis. Knowledge about what works for struggling adolescent readers is increasing, and new funding sources for adolescent literacy initiatives are beginning to emerge. By pursuing strategies to improve literacy achievement, governors can set the stage for a revitalized education system that prepares students for the increasing literacy demands of work, education, and civic participation in the 21st century.⁴³⁷

In what would become a recurring pattern in the literature base leading up to the creation of the CCSS in literacy, reading is identified as the most important literacy skill, despite

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

the fact that one of the biggest differences in 21st century literacy practices is the need for writing skills, and the fact that anyone, anywhere, at anytime can now be an author, thanks in part to social media and the internet. The significant power of authorship recurs as an undercurrent of anxiety in the ambiguous discussion of "21st century literacy," but it never trumps reading as the most valued foundation of 21st century literacy efforts.

Like the majority of literacy policy reports between 2001 and 2010, the 2006 NGA report mentions the importance of writing, but then spends the majority of pages talking about reading. This, too, is indicative of the moral impetus of literacy. Given the common arguments of state and business leaders regarding the importance of literacy in the 21st century, it is writing that serves as the *product* of that literacy. According to prevailing studies, writing is the skill needed most for college, for jobs, and for educational advancement.⁴³⁸ Yet, like the majority of products generated by the education publishing industry, it is reading that promotes the “right” kind of values, the “right” kind of citizen, and the “right” kind of social participation.

This report includes a reprinting of information and recommendations as found in the other reports of the same year, suggesting that there was common understanding and consensus on literacy needs at the time. For example, it includes a list of effective elements of adolescent literacy programs as found in the Alliance for Excellent Education Report, “Reading Next” from 2006. This list includes a recommendation for incorporating “Diverse Texts” so that students “have access to, and experience with, texts at a variety of difficulty levels that vary in the styles, genres, topics, and content areas

⁴³⁸ See the work of David Conley at the Epic Institute (2007), the National Writing Project (2004), and the College Board (2005).

they cover.”⁴³⁹ The list also recommends “Intensive Writing” as “vehicles for learning and as a measure of comprehension and learning across content areas.”⁴⁴⁰

In the section on “Assess Real-World Literacy Demands and Raise Standards,” the report summarizes the work of the American Diploma Project and discusses the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges survey of business leaders. “These surveys found that both business leaders and college presidents expect high school graduates to possess sophisticated literacy skills, such as being able to choose words well, alter their writing style and voice appropriately, and gather and synthesize relevant information from multiple sources.”⁴⁴¹ Despite the explicit connection between colleges, business leaders and 21st century literacy skills, there are only two other cursory mentions of the importance of writing in this report that emphasizes reading as the most valuable aspect of literacy.

The work of Achieve Inc. is also mentioned in this report with the citation stating that it came from a personal email communication. The sentence mentioning the organization only says that they are working on “identifying literacy skills such as logic and research that could be effectively taught in courses representing different disciplines.”⁴⁴² This suggests that the discourse regarding the standardization of expectations across the country was already in motion in 2006.

This was the first report published by Achieve, Inc., following their convening of a National Education Summit on High Schools. Achieve, Inc., is a non-profit created jointly by governors and business leaders to “raise academic standards, improve

⁴³⁹ National Governors Association. *Reading to Achieve*, 9.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 16.

assessments and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work, and citizenship.”⁴⁴³ In 2005, the NGA had defined the “achievement gap” as a “matter of race and class” and as representing one of the most pressing issues in education policy. By the following year, the “achievement gap” had been re-framed as the “expectations gap.” Not unlike George W. Bush’s proclamation that raising standards would cure the “soft bigotry of low expectations,”⁴⁴⁴ the Achieve, Inc. report draws on the philosophy of NCLB to drive the exigency of the situation as an economic issue for state and business leaders. The first item on the National Education Summit on High Schools Action Agenda: “Restore value to the high school diploma.”⁴⁴⁵

The report is clear to point out that the purpose of defining and raising academic standards in high schools is to better prepare students for post-secondary vocational experiences. The problem, according to the report, is that high school curriculum has previously been structured according to what disciplinary scholars have “desired” for student learning, rather than allowing workforce needs to dictate the knowledge and skill sets taught to students. Achieve, Inc. argues that high schools should use “standards with real-world expectations,” so that states can “articulate the core knowledge and skills that students should learn from kindergarten through grade 12.” These standards, according to the report, are very significant because they will provide a “foundation for decisions on curriculum, instruction and assessment, and they communicate core learning goals to teachers, parents and students.”⁴⁴⁶ According to Achieve, Inc. it is the responsibility of postsecondary institutions and business leaders to articulate these “expectations” for the

⁴⁴³ Achieve, Inc. *Closing the Expectations Gap: 2006*. Article, Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc., 2006.

⁴⁴⁴ Bush, George W. "Bush's Speech to the NAACP." *Transcript of George W. Bush's speech delivered at the NAACP 91st annual convention*. Washington DC: Washington Post, 2000. 8.

⁴⁴⁵ Achieve, Inc. *Closing the Expectations Gap: 2006*.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

high schools. However, the report cites Achieve Inc.'s initial findings on the mark of a career and college ready high school education begins with required completion of 4 years of English and successful completion of Algebra II. The report cites the work to date of specific states and the public commitments of additional states to work toward the agenda items covered at the National Education Summit on High Schools. Under this agenda, the purpose of public education and the goal of reform is to create a system of schooling that prepares students to fill the needed jobs in society (a social efficiency goal).

The discourse of this report is representative of the new narrative of educational reform. It takes persistent and common education policy issues and brings them altogether in one report, divorced from historical patterns and social structures, to pave the way for reformers to proceed without reproach. Instead of examining historical patterns of inequality in terms of access and opportunities to learn among and between various populations in the school system, this report frames the national economic crisis as resulting from an overall “inadequate education:”

The Summit helped focus the nation’s attention on how our schools, our students, and our economy intersect. The U.S. economy can no longer absorb employees with inadequate educations into low-skill jobs, as it has in the past decades. Those jobs no longer exist or are fast disappearing. Jobs that pay well and support a middle-class lifestyle require higher-level mathematics and communications skills than ever before. Even those students who attain a high school diploma will have a hard time achieving career success without college experience or postsecondary training... If U.S. workers cannot meet the demand, highly skilled jobs will go to other countries such as India and China --- a move that will diminish U.S. competitiveness and affect the living standards of millions of citizens.⁴⁴⁷

The extent of the “inadequate education” is now supported by the high rates of black and Latino dropouts. But, as the report states, “Even if they do earn a high school diploma,

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

their prospects for meaningful employment are slim and getting slimmer. Even if they do earn a diploma and enroll in college or enter the workforce, many high school graduates lack the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed.”⁴⁴⁸ The implication is clear: students who do not earn the right kind of education will continue to populate the ranks of unemployed or underemployed, and the right kind of high school education is one designed by business leaders to prepare students for the needed vocations.

This particular report, though perhaps not the only policy publication espousing these tenets at the time, significantly reframed the education reform conversation by integrating all pressing reform issues under the economic umbrella. According to the report, it is primarily business leaders who should be setting English skill expectations, and it is state leaders who should streamline their systems of governance to allow this to happen more efficiently. The racial achievement gap, literacy crisis, and 21st century skills are all brought together to spur change that will result in restoring “currency” to the now devalued high school diploma. Their arguments employ popular ideas afloat in the education reform discourse to reframe the narrative to focus on an economically driven education agenda emphasizing alignment to vocational skills and anchored in marketplace decision-making. The organization that published this document is the same organization that would release the CCSS in ELA and Literacy only four short years later.

The “Closing the Expectations Gap” report became an annual publication for the American Diploma Project. Each year, the survey data and recommendations became a driving force in high school education reform. Since 2006, Achieve, Inc. has conducted these surveys for the report. Beginning with their next report in 2007, Achieve, Inc.,

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

working with the same contributing authors, and the same Board of Directors, had now somewhat streamlined their presentation of data and analysis. Achieve's Board still consisted of seven CEO's of fortune 500 companies, five sitting state Governors, and the President of Achieve, Inc. The only significant difference in the Board was the addition of a CEO and the loss of a Governor. The newly articulated Executive Summary now featured a concise statement wherein the National Education Summit on High Schools set out to "address a critical problem in American education: Too few high school students graduate prepared for the demands of postsecondary education and 21st century jobs. At the Summit, it was widely acknowledged that if states do not dramatically raise expectations and achievement in their high schools, America's competitive position in the global economy could be at risk."⁴⁴⁹

While much of the language and research base cited in the 2007 report was the same as in the previous year, there were some significant differences. For instance, in addition to the diminishing of U.S. economic competitiveness on the global stage, the report now claimed that "even more is at stake." Prefaced with the statistic regarding the 50% failure rate of black and Latino high school students, the 2007 report includes a more specific list of 21st century skills, an explicit connection to civic engagement and citizenship, and a new "moral imperative" for each state:

To become engaged and productive citizens in this increasingly knowledge-based world, students will need to comprehend complex written and mathematical information to make important decisions about issues such as their finances and health care. They will need to communicate in sophisticated ways and use technology in their daily lives.

⁴⁴⁹ Achieve, Inc.: American Diploma Project. *Closing the Expectations Gap 2007: An Annual 50-State Progress Report on the Alignment of High School Policies with the Demands of College and Work*. Annual, Achieve, Inc., 2007.

Individuals who lack these skills will be left behind with few opportunities for civic engagement. States have a moral imperative and an economic incentive to better prepare young people for the world they will enter after high school.⁴⁵⁰

It is unstated as to exactly “who” or “what” will be leaving people behind, but the outcome is clear: there will be non-participatory citizens, and a potentially surplus population within the nation’s borders. And these poor and disengaged citizens will not be just anyone, they will be black and Latino students and families. These same students provided the core around which NCLB was formed and implemented, and their presence now clearly centers the reform work of high schools and standards-based education efforts at the state level.

The 2007 report also differed from its predecessor in that it includes more conclusions and analysis from one year to the next. For example, while the 2006 report included information on state standards work, the 2007 report makes the following statement: “Unfortunately, very few states anchored their K-12 standards in the skills necessary for postsecondary success, so these ‘first generation’ standards have had a limited impact on the preparation of high school students for college and careers.”⁴⁵¹ While the report acknowledges the work of individual states to develop, revise, and align the standards, the authors are still able to say why these efforts remain less than successful.

In addition, the 2007 report includes “Lessons from Aligning High School Standards with the Demands of College and Work,” which purportedly reviews findings from the American Diploma Project’s efforts to design model standards for states, set

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

benchmark criteria for the secondary level, and support state efforts to engage postsecondary institutions and business leaders in the articulation of key knowledge and skills. By 2007, the report includes a specific section on the findings for English Language Arts and Mathematics. While there is an “Endnotes” section to the 2007 report, only some of the numbered entries correspond to specific citations in the text. The section on English Language Arts, for instance, does not include a specific citation for these “lessons” or a reference to a specific endnote in the document. However, the ambiguity of source material does not preclude the authors from making very significant statements about English Language Arts, much of which is reiterated as a “research base” in later reports, supporting the notion that such statements represent an axiom rather than actual evidence.

According to the 2007 report, the following is an important lesson emerging from the research of the ADP:

Although high school English standards and courses tend to emphasize literature, most of the reading students will encounter in college or on the job is informational in nature (e.g., textbooks, manuals, articles, briefs and essays). Most of the writing students will do in college and work is to inform or persuade, often requiring students to use evidence to support a position. Research also is cited as an important skill for college and work. State standards tend to give these types of writing short shrift, emphasizing narrative writing instead. The ability to work in teams and orally present one’s work is cited by professors and employers as critical for success. State standards do not always sufficiently cover these skills.⁴⁵²

These three points exactly match the rationale for the changes in the CCSS in ELA and literacy released three years later. The named architects of the CCSS in ELA, including David Coleman and Susan Pimentel, repeat these same points in their published materials defending the creation of the CCSS in reading and writing especially. In the “Endnotes”

⁴⁵² Ibid., 9.

section, the only note pertaining to this information is note number five, which claims that:

ADP research found that there is a common core of knowledge and skills, particularly in English and mathematics, that students must master to be prepared for postsecondary education or careers...The English benchmarks demand strong oral and written communication skills and considerable research and analysis. Logic and reasoning skills also are a critical element of the benchmarks.⁴⁵³

This new version of the report also provides expanded sections on recommendations and challenges to states. In the section regarding aligning high school and workplace expectations, one of the challenges for states is named as “Providing Student Supports.” In this column, the authors offer stats on the current poor reading performance of 8th graders on NAEP, while conceding that “Students who are furthest behind tend to be concentrated in high-poverty schools and districts.”⁴⁵⁴ The authors also state that “It will be much more difficult for poorly prepared students to meet higher expectations and complete high school than their better-prepared peers.” The report then cautions that this is not a good reason to lower expectations for students, but rather states should focus on better supporting these students through “required” adolescent literacy programs to help such students strengthen their “literacy skills.” These recommendations are made alongside general references to the need for better teachers, preparation, and collaborative work of community-based organizations to provide students with additional services.⁴⁵⁵

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation issued a report in 2007 with a title to suggest that their recommendations will build on those of the NCLB Act of 2001. The Commission on No Child Left Behind, co-chaired by two sitting governors, begins their

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

report with the following: “We see every day that we are letting our children down. We hear news stories about low reading scores for young children and teens; we see unconscionably high numbers of students dropping out of school; we hear business owners express frustration at their workers’ lack of skills and the costs of training them; and we spend millions annually on remedial courses for college freshmen.”⁴⁵⁶ Once again, the narrative of crisis is supported by “low reading scores” and a worthless high school diploma. Though at this point the report does not provide the details behind these broad statements, the citations and studies that follow support the continued link between literacy, race, and economic development. The high numbers of dropouts are overwhelmingly students of color in high-poverty urban areas. The surveys from the community demonstrate business leaders being especially frustrated with employee writing skills, and the perpetual remediation needed by college freshmen is because all high school diplomas are not equal in quality or currency. “Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation’s Children” emphasizes the need to address a continuing generic “achievement gap” between poor and racial minority students, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities. While it grounds its concerns in a failed promise to each child, it frames the impetus for reform in national economic terms: “Failing to take sustained action will not only result in the continued tragedy of unfulfilled potential, but will also threaten our nation’s economy and future competitiveness in the world.”⁴⁵⁷

The report is authored by the members of the Commission on NCLB, which professes to include two sitting governors, one Republican and one Democrat, as well as “13 members who represent the full spectrum of interests in this law, including K-12 and

⁴⁵⁶ Commission on No Child Left Behind. *Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nation's Children*. Aspen Institute, 2007, 7.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

higher education, school and school system governance, civil rights and business.”⁴⁵⁸ The report boasts of conducting public meetings across the country and basing their recommendations on the personal testimony of countless individuals directly affected daily by NCLB. On rare occasions, a quote is offered in the report that gets attributed to an anonymous parent in a given city and state.

Though the report explicitly mentions the gap in academic performance between various racial groups, it does not attribute this to historical or social patterns of racism or systemic bias. Instead, the report uses racial categories to describe sub-populations but locates the systemic bias in “geography:” “In 2002, this law [NCLB] signaled an important change in federal education policy by focusing on accountability for results rather than simple compliance and by seeking to set the performance bar high for all children, regardless of where they live.”⁴⁵⁹ The overall tone of the report is to support the work of NCLB, to show that the principles of the law have wide-spread bipartisan support across the country, and to make recommendations for bringing more students to “proficiency,” the report does not name or consider civil rights violations in the educational system, nor does it criticize a system based on high standards. The report actually recommends “common” national standards upon which individual states could model their own standards, and it also condones the increased use of testing and data. Together, these recommendations support the continued belief that high and common standards in literacy will close racial achievement gaps and lead to greater racial equality: “...regardless of how people feel about the individual aspects of the law, they generally support its goals of requiring high standards, raising student achievement and closing

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 7.

achievement gaps.”⁴⁶⁰ The report concludes that such efforts will ensure that “the nation can remain preeminent in the world economy.”⁴⁶¹

In an introductory section of the lengthy report, “A New Day in American Education,” the Commission on NCLB sets the tone and context for their recommendations with the following statistics: “The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment reveals a troubling truth---that African American 17-year-olds read at the same level as white 13-year-olds.”⁴⁶² Though it is literacy that consistently gets invoked to persuade the audience of a national crisis, it is mathematics that is used to prove the crisis exists at the international level. Nowhere, in any policy document, does anyone provide evidence for international crisis based on reading scores, yet nearly every report names literacy performance as being “internationally benchmarked.” The reading scores of African Americans leads off a discussion that goes on to chronicle the poor academic performance of US students in comparison to students in other countries. And the final conclusion is that our students will not be prepared for life in a “rigorous” (read “competitive”) global economy: “Expectations for too many students are not high enough to ensure that America can succeed and remain competitive in a global economy.”⁴⁶³ Despite repetitive calls for raising expectations, the report is vague on what exactly states should be specifically demanding to see.

The system must ensure that children are academically proficient, are able to meet the demands of good citizenship and have a sense of self-worth and accomplishment that comes from a high-quality education and the opportunities it affords. We must close achievement gaps and raise achievement for all so that

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 9.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 10.

each child can be prepared to succeed in the future and the nation can remain preeminent in the world economy.⁴⁶⁴

Though the report is explicit about naming citizenship as paramount, it never says what qualities define “good citizenship,” or how current achievement levels are resulting in “bad” citizenship. “Proficiency,” also named as a goal, is not precisely defined, leaving the vision of achieving these goals open to interpretation.

Under the section, “NCLB: What We Have Achieved, What Challenges Remain,” the report writers cite the words of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education that describes the goals of NCLB as “audacious” but “morally right.” This same panel is quoted as describing the NCLB law as having “the potential to improve public education more than any federal education initiative since *Brown v. Board of Education*,’ adding, ‘*Brown* set the historic precedent for equality in education; NCLB could set the precedent for quality.’”⁴⁶⁵ In this statement, equality is actually juxtaposed to “quality, as if the latter was the most morally righteous of the two. In 2007, the predominant perception was that the principles and intentions of NCLB were directly related to improving racially just outcomes through higher standards for low income and racial minority students. While never going so far as to say that the playing field has never been level, the report does describe both the text of the NCLB law and the context for the NCLB law as being racially motivated. Thus, any policies following from the Act continue to draw upon this same reservoir of moral justification.

Reading scores are also used later in this same section of the report to demonstrate minimal progress that is “moving in the right direction,” but that cannot be accelerated unless states solve the problem of varying and insufficient standards across the country.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶⁵ Chubb, 2005, cited by the Commission on No Child Left Behind. *Beyond NCLB*, 13.

“Most significantly, the fact that NCLB allows states to set their own standards has led to wide and unacceptable variations in expectations across states. Many states have not set standards high enough or they have chosen to set a low bar for what constitutes proficiency.”⁴⁶⁶ The report offers stagnant and “stalled” reading scores as evidence that things are not improving enough under NCLB, creating the space for continued conversations, including Coleman’s and Zimba’s argument to the Carnegie Commission the following year that “proficiency” as a goal must be replaced with “mastery,” and that states must all have common standards to ensure success under globalization.

By 2007, the Alliance for Excellent Education published a report focusing on the importance of teaching literacy across the content areas in secondary schools. The report was titled, “Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement,” The authors couched their concern in the interests of better preparing students for “college, work, and citizenship,” and that students must be encouraged to move beyond a “modest level of proficiency in reading and writing.”⁴⁶⁷ Even the title of the report suggests that there was already a growing consensus on the need for a common “core” in literacy reform efforts. The third page of the report even features a pullout box listing the 14 recent (since 2005) “high-profile” reports they perused to arrive at the conclusion that there is a “growing chorus” of concern for addressing adolescent literacy across the content areas.

The report draws on statistics that are now familiar to the conversation about a literacy crisis and an economic crisis. The number of high school graduates reading and writing below grade level is described as an impending national economic crisis where

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁶⁷ Rafael Heller and Cynthia Greenleaf. “Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement,” Alliance for Excellent Education, June 2007.

the labor force will be unqualified or incapable of filling needed jobs. Though the report shies away from naming “race” explicitly in its discussions, it does refer to students of “all backgrounds.” The authors cite the “flat” performance of secondary students on NAEP since the 1970’s, and included a specific reference to an international assessment given to English-speaking countries where the U.S. ranked 15th by comparison on reading performance.⁴⁶⁸

In many ways, the CCSS in ELA and literacy are a direct response to the urgent call in this report: “At present, no state in the nation includes specific reading and writing skills in their standards for each academic content area (ACT, 2005; Lee and Spratley, in press).”⁴⁶⁹ The authors recommend that states and districts take the steps necessary to ensure that literacy is systematically taught across all subject areas. The tone and approach of this report, however, emphasizes that reading and writing instruction require time and training for teachers, and a significant process for students. The authors advocate holistic approaches to improved literacy that allow students to read and write like “experts” in the various disciplines. At the same time, the report also encourages state assessments to include important reading and writing test items. While they present this point as a way to ensure the respect and accountability is there, this soon became the driving force for defining literacy skills in the CCSS.

With the adoption of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy by as many as 46 states at the peak of its popularity, one would think the need for an actual campaign would be a moot point. The movement for redefining literacy really happened with the modern standards movement, and is captured in the patterns and trends of rising literacy

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

expectations. The policy documents also reflect the increases in measurable kinds of reading and writing, and standards designed for the individual consumption of equality. The promise of the movement: learn these isolated skills and perform them accurately on a standardized test and you, too, will achieve “equal” status in society. Equal here being defined as earning a high school credential that is exchangeable on the market for better credentials and higher paying jobs. With so many states having signed on to this system, it is interesting to note that the actual campaign for the CCSS did not begin until adoption was complete.

Chapter 7: (Re)Production of Consent: Selling Literacy

"...what we examine here is not a conspiracy, nor a functionalist set of representations in the service of power, but a process of convergence, in which historical events, overlapping representations, and diverse vested interests come together in a powerful and productive, if historically contingent, accord."⁴⁷⁰

In this chapter I present the research available regarding the history of literacy campaigns and movements in other countries and even in the U.S., to understand how to find evidence of methods used to drum up public participation and the political will to make necessary literacy policy changes for the development of the nation. I then explain why the CCSS do not qualify as a traditional literacy campaign or a social movement. This leads many to describe the CCSS as “a policy without a public,” a media blitz, a federal takeover, and the next step toward privatizing education. Everyone seems to agree that the CCSS timeline was unusually fast, the consensus uncharacteristically broad, the standards process uniquely confidential, and the political landscape exceptionally different than with previous literacy standards efforts. In this chapter I explore this landscape and investigate the making of the public image of the CCSS in the midst of neoliberal practices and classic tensions in the purposes of public schooling. I explain the role of nostalgia, the implicit but now dominant purpose of public schools, and the neoliberal context for public institutions as being part of the appeal for a broad consensus around new literacy standards for the most literate nation in the world.

Much of the literature on literacy campaigns and social movements suggests that an emphasis on literacy is tied more to the centralization of power in a time of social

⁴⁷⁰ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East Since 1945*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005, 8.

transition than to the skills of literacy in and of itself. Arnove and Graff even refer to literacy campaigns as the “moral equivalent of war.”⁴⁷¹ But war against what or whom? H.S. Bhola, who studies international social movements and literacy campaigns, points out the following pattern:

The transformation of communications, including electronic technologies and economies of scale in the publishing industry, further facilitates printing and dissemination of literacy texts, and transmission of messages and symbols relating to a campaign. The combination of technology and concentration of political power also may portend greater opportunities for the monitoring of, and social control over, the uses of literacy.⁴⁷²

I argue that the CCSS in ELA and Literacy did not result from a deliberate social movement of a targeted literacy campaign, but rather it was the culminating effect of the modern standards movement in education, which was triggered by the racial desegregation of schools and the tangible political and economic gains of the Civil Rights Movement. The *Nation at Risk* report became the catalyst for the modern standards Movement. By the time the Common Core standards are proposed in 2008, the country was in the midst of a perfect storm of shifting political, economic, and social dynamics that generated new and old anxieties about the future of the nation.

In their extensive investigation of international literacy campaigns, Arnove and Graff conclude that there are several lessons to be learned since the literacy campaigns of the Protestant Reformation. Among the most salient of these lessons are the following: literacy must be conceptualized in relationship to other critical factors (such as economic realities, social and political structures, and cultural patterns), not just viewed in and of

⁴⁷¹ Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, ed. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008, 3.

⁴⁷² H.S. Bhola. *Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences of the Twentieth Century, with a Memorandum for Decision-makers*. Paris: UNESCO, 1984, 3.

itself; literacy efforts need to last long enough to be effective; local initiative should be mobilized in conjunction with national will; and there will be a significant minority who will oppose or not be reached by literacy efforts of centralized authorities.⁴⁷³ They find that literacy campaigns can function as both social and political movements, typically linked to social transformation, order, and control.

In the later half of the 20th century, especially in northern and western societies, there was a shift from a focus on “functional literacy,” to a focus on “critical” literacy. Arnove and Graff suggest that this shift is tied to an idea of literacy as a means to help people cope with the forces and circumstances of their lives in an unequal society. As such, they find that literacy campaigns are typically part of a larger transformation in society where there is a need to integrate more individuals into more comprehensive communities. In order to do this on a national level, literacy campaigns almost always advocate a particular doctrine, and they do so by incorporating heroes, martyrs, and other symbols of the values they wish to instill.

THE APPEAL TO A LITERATE AND UNEQUAL SOCIETY

In order to discern the existence and characterization of a literacy campaign, Arnove and Graff recommend we look at several categories of information: namely context, goals, mechanisms, organization, materials and methods, teachers, and consequences. They describe the typical context for a literacy campaign as including some kind of significant or tragic social event. In the case of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy, I suggest that the triggering event was the *Brown v. Board* decision within the larger gains of the Civil Rights Movement. The “tragedy” was not articulated until the

⁴⁷³ Arnove and Graff, ed. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements*, xii.

Nation at Risk report in 1983. The report served as the catalyst for the modern standards movement in education, which was responding to the perceived educational decline in the nation. The racial achievement gap was consistently offered as proof of educational and social decline. Beginning just after the *Brown* decision, the media featured stories of the nation descending into the depths of illiteracy. While the literacy crisis continued to feed the rationale for a racial achievement gap, it took center stage in the policy discussions post-9/11.

Arnové and Graff also suggest that the goals of 20th century campaigns tended to focus on shaping a “new kind of person in a qualitatively different society.”⁴⁷⁴ Arnové and Graff explain that history has also shown that literacy campaigns are never centered on the skills of the individual to read just anything, but rather they always advocate a certain kind of reading or a certain kind of text. This is connected to the unbridled fear of people having new visions or revolutionary thoughts, as when Freire advocated the concept of literacy as “cultural action for freedom.”⁴⁷⁵ As of 1975, the most comprehensive definitions of literacy were about man bettering himself and his governing systems.⁴⁷⁶

When considering the mechanisms of a literacy campaign, the lessons from around the globe demonstrate that centralized authorities consistently make efforts to move the control of literacy away from “unregulated” or “unschooled” situations. This has sometimes fostered a national campaign that amounts to a “war on ignorance.”

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷⁵ See Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. Herder and Herder, 1971.

⁴⁷⁶ Arnové and Graff, ed. *National Literacy Campaigns and Movements*, 9.

Literacy campaigns also tend to feature charismatic individuals who serve to represent ties to something larger than themselves, like “salvation, redemption, recreation.”⁴⁷⁷

Arnové and Graff find that historically in the U.S., women have been viewed as having a mission to educate future national citizens, and have therefore had high rates of literacy, but men have benefitted most from these educational campaigns. This counters the usual patterns in other countries, where women, along with racial and ethnic minorities, as well as members of the lower classes, are typically the last to gain access to advanced literacy learning. In the 20th century, as more people gained access to higher levels of literacy coupled with the idea that increased literacy could mean increased personal and political access, there were shifts in the materials and methods of campaigns from those focused on collective nation-building, to those focusing on individual empowerment and liberation.⁴⁷⁸ In the case of the United States, one could argue that the pendulum has now swung in the other direction and a reformulated centralized authority is now advocating a new kind of literacy to once again build a collective sense of national identity. And while nation building is not in and of itself a negative aspect of literacy campaigns per se, it has a differentiated impact when it is designed to counter the rights and freedoms gained by individuals working in solidarity during the Civil Rights Movement.

According to the literature, there can be many consequences of literacy campaigns, not the least of which is new definitions of literacy and illiteracy. Arnove and Graff point out an interesting dilemma regarding contemporary assumptions about what literacy and illiteracy means in the U.S.:

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 19.

If comprehension, understanding what one reads, is a critical feature of literacy, then, even in the more wealthy school districts of the United States many teenagers may be classified as illiterate; they do not understand their school texts or major stories in newspapers. Arno and Arboleda remark that if illiteracy refers to the ability to understand the basic issues confronting individuals in contemporary society, then illiteracy is pervasive in many industrially advanced nations with extensive systems of schooling.⁴⁷⁹

Such realities may encourage centralizing authorities to standardize schooling and curriculum in an effort to control the dissemination and understanding of the “right” kind of information in the “right” way. This can also lead to central authorities extending membership in the nation to new groups who have been traditionally marginalized, effectively wedding equality with exclusion. In the U.S., consider the push to write new national literacy standards alongside the legalization of same-sex marriage for instance. Such consequences of literacy campaigns could indicate the formation of new political alliances that re-center authority and control by bringing more people into the fold while simultaneously creating new structures to push others out. In any event, each literacy campaign takes place in its own unique time and social context.

In the case of the modern standards movement that culminated in the creation and adoption of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy, the campaign to address the literacy crisis has functioned with such urgency that it might qualify as “something of a crusade.”⁴⁸⁰ But with the simultaneous onslaught of new technologies and methods for disseminating information, policy makers experienced both heightened anxieties about their own authority coupled with new opportunities for the monitoring and control of literacy.

Interestingly, as I will discuss below, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy did not present itself as a traditional literacy campaign by scholarly accounts, but it has become

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁸⁰ H.S. Bhola. *Campaigning for Literacy*, 3.

one retroactively, suggesting that the effort was more about public image than public support. The real literacy campaigning could be said to have come on the heels of the NAR report and the birth of the modern standards movement in the early 1980's. The media attention to the crisis of literacy in America, the escalating federal focus on literacy policy, and the evolution of language in the literacy policy documents suggest an evolving momentum to counter the crisis of "educational and social decline" with new literacy policy. Once the CCSS had been endorsed and adopted by nearly every state, the campaign to convince the teachers and school leaders officially got started. Though the political will of the people was technically not necessary, the illusion of standards in the name of democratic equality required it. Because the crafters of the new literacy standards began stumping after the adoption of the CCSS, this suggests there was more to the agenda than political support.

In a time of great transition where social media has undermined traditional notions of authority, authenticity, and legitimacy, the CCSS answer the call to conserve a particular form of national identity, restore political power to the old guard, and support the neoliberal economic agenda that will allow the powerbrokers to sustain their privilege of decision-making. Rather than a movement to improve literacy in the most literate nation in the world, the CCSS in ELA and Literacy employ a restorative form of nostalgia to "return" the nation to a time before traditional powerbrokers seemingly lost control. This is why the language of the standards is wrought with exclusive and immeasurable qualifying terms like "right," "certain," "high-quality," "often quoted," "classic," and "proven." It is also why the Publisher's Criteria and the Student Achievement Partners organization focus on providing specific texts and lessons that can move the national curriculum in the CCSS direction. So while the standards claim not to

tell anyone how to teach, the supporting materials and the free resources will ensure that the small group who drafted the standards will retain control over a majority of the content, curriculum, and teaching methods in the nation's public schools. Borrowing a page from E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge playbook, nothing will guarantee consumption of the product like offering it for free in a time of austerity in public education.

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as follows:

Nostalgia is an ache of temporal distance and displacement. Restorative nostalgia takes care of both of these symptoms. Distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of a desired object. Displacement is cured by a return home, preferably a collective one. Never mind if it's not your home; by the time you reach it, you will have already forgotten the difference. What drives restorative nostalgia is not the sentiment of distance and longing but rather the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition.⁴⁸¹

When E.D. Hirsch proposed his finite list of necessary "core knowledge" for all Americans in the late 1980's, he was engaging in a type of restoration of something he and others like him believed was missing in the contemporary and fast-changing world of new technologies, new civil rights, and new voices of authority. The CCSS continue in this effort by attempting to restore an imaginary "home" in the pre-civil rights past that draws on literacy as a means for "restoring" the memories of racial unrest--of overt violence by whites directed at the black community, of inequalities due to racial discrimination, of human suffering due to white racism and exploitation--with bucolic images found in historical documents, personal narratives and speeches, and expository essays and literary works that are not allowed to speak of the context within which they were produced. Such works are not allowed to identify perpetrators, oppressors, events,

⁴⁸¹ Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia*. NY, NY: Basic Books, 2001, 44-45.

or political solidarity beyond the self-comforting images created by the nostalgic “fetish object” of literacy. “Nostalgia here becomes a protection against such anxieties of history.”⁴⁸²

In the case of the CCSS, the anxieties nostalgia seeks to mediate are those regarding authorship, authority, and authenticity. In an effort to “restore” the status quo moral authority of the ruling elite, the creators and advocates of the CCSS propose a type of national literacy imperative to re-establish the criteria for “true” authorship moving forward into the future. This happens at a time when social media technologies have made it so that anyone with a cell phone and an internet connection can appear just as much an authority on anything as the classically trained PhD who publishes the monograph after years of research. The social media consumer bloc of the 21st century is more interested in “consuming” information than in “curating” it. If the information is there, shared, and public, it is often taken as “truth” and passed along as such.

Members of the privileged classes who are accustomed to viewing themselves as “creators” of legitimate publications and policies face a realistic undermining of their assumed authority and authenticity. To preserve their entitlements, they must redefine “authentic” authority in a time of expanded authorship. They are now vulnerable to unpredictable forms of questioning, attack, and erasure: hence the “closed door” nature of the design and creation of the CCSS. Collaboration was something to be curtailed and controlled to prevent public transparency and accountability to the very masses that now have access to the technologies of critique. The creators of the CCSS thus employ nostalgia as a defense for protection of their presumed right to define literacy and to use it

⁴⁸² Derek Hook. "Screened History: Nostalgia as Defensive Formation." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* (American Psychological Association) 18, no. 3 (2012): 225-239.

as a means of creating a collective fantasy that serves to obfuscate the material realities and structures of inequality that allow for the active redistribution of income and wealth. The CCSS thus serve the greater neoliberal economic agenda, while attempting to restore the power and privilege of the people who are best served by the status quo. They use the terms of race and class to legitimize their authority to act like a state. As such, they attempt to return to a time when they themselves experienced comfort and confidence in their state to protect them. School-based literacy policy is ripe for the redefining as the history of public schooling has always been wrought with contradictions about what its goals should be.

An argument can be made that there is a campaign for the new literacy standards. Much of what is known about literacy campaigns resonates with the post-adoption marketing of the CCSS. With the literacy policy adopted and being implemented, what would be the point of generating the political will of the public who is already subjected to the top-down mandates of the CCSS? What is it that they want us to remember? What do they want us to forget? What is the public consuming when it buys into the CCSS? Perhaps the campaigning is about more than college and career preparation.

The emphasis on measuring the mastery of standards has accomplished two significant effects on public education that have contributed to the wide-spread consensus for standards in general and the CCSS in particular. Gallup polls and recent research show that parents and the public at large experience the discourse around standards as confusing and distancing, while at the same time embracing the idea that standards, accountability, and standardized tests are the unqualified best approach to improving student academic achievement in schools. Ironically, this effect is counter to the intentions of the standards movement itself, which originally wanted to increase public

awareness about accountability and involvement in education. The result is a burgeoning publishing industry that produces textbooks and standardized tests that go unquestioned by parents and educators. It also results in policymakers failing to clarify that measuring student performance on standards alone will not improve academic achievement. Public schools and districts experience the strangle-hold of pressure to perform on standardized tests from above, while the local community is focused on the capacity of the schools to prioritize the development needs of their children.⁴⁸³ What is arguably the latest development in the evolution of the standards movement, the “unquestioned wisdom” of standards to improve educational outcomes, has helped pave the way for the successful creation and adoption of the CCSS without the need or will of the public in the process.

In these CCSS conversations, hard facts are often arbitrary and it is rather the shared conclusion that stands on its own as evidence. As Robert Rothman explains in his officially commissioned account of the CCSS:

While the standards writers based their decisions about which topics to include and when to rely on evidence about college and career readiness, the research base is not rock solid in every case. In the cases where the research base was slight or ambiguous, the writers used the best available evidence. As noted in chapter 3, the validation committee, a panel of experts and practitioners appointed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, concluded that the document did in fact reflect available research on college and career readiness, as well as international benchmarks.⁴⁸⁴

This statement attests to how Rothman might be trying to address and perhaps justify the discrepancies in the CCSS. He also illustrates what policy scholar, Sandra Stein finds to

⁴⁸³ Laura Leftkowitz and Kirsten Miller. "Fulfilling the Promise of the Standards Movement." *Phi Delta Kappan* (Phi Delta Kappa International) 87, no. 5 (January 2006): 403-407.

⁴⁸⁴ Robert Rothman. *Something in Common: The Common Core Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011, 99.

be true in educational conversations: that if it is “shared” then it is good enough, which gives new meaning to “research and evidence-based” in education circles.⁴⁸⁵

Despite the contemporary push for “evidence-based” policies and practices in education, empirical studies and raw data about the CCSS in literacy is arbitrary at best. In such an environment, it is pre-existing ideological frameworks that structure the belief systems and allow for cultural commonality to pass as persuasive argument. There are very significant axioms at play in such discussions, and these axioms are based on the common experiences of the people making the policies rather than on the lived experiences of those on the ground suffering under the differentiated impact of these policies. Policy makers and advocates who publicly supported the CCSS in literacy did so because they saw the CCSS as a way to simultaneously accomplish racial justice (redemptive) and also protect white entitlements (possessive). The focus on individualism and the equality of opportunity that literacy could offer was highly attractive. Under such conditions it is imperative to tease out the purpose of order (or “allure of order” as Mehta suggests) that “common” standards serve, and where the interests of people and groups diverge. Despite the many factors that have contributed to a growing consensus or “common sense” in education, the fact remains that by 2010, political will was not even necessary in garnering the support and adoption of the CCSS.

In 2011, Robert Rothman and Harvard Education Press published a book called, *Something in Common: the Common Core Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education*. To date, this is the only existing book that professes to tell the story of the formation and adoption of the CCSS. The CCSS in ELA and math were not formally

⁴⁸⁵ For more discussion, see Stein, Sandra J. *The Culture of Education Policy*. Teachers College Press, 2004.

released to the public until June 2010, and were adopted by most states in August of the same year. As discussed earlier, Rothman himself was shocked by the tight deadline for the completion of the book. It will be important to note what Rothman emphasizes about the role, function, and purpose of standards generally, and how Rothman renders this definition for his audience. He is a well-respected educational journalist, and he is the author of many articles on the CCSS. I will be relying on his record to provide the "standard" parameters for the common sense narrative on the story of the CCSS.

To begin, it should be noted that the Rothman book is one volume in the Harvard Education Letter Impact Series, which professes to "bring many voices into the conversation about issues in contemporary education, and to consider reforms particularly from the perspective of--and on behalf of--educators in the field."⁴⁸⁶ As an authority on the topic about which he writes, Rothman and contributing authors set the tone for our common understanding of the CCSS and what we need to know to move forward with our work and research. According to the Acknowledgements, Rothman names his employer, Alliance for Excellence in Education, as being a key player in the development of the CCSS. He is also emphatic that the writing of the book has had nothing to do with his "official duties" at the Alliance. Rothman goes on to thank the "leaders of the initiative," and names, in this order, "Governor James B. Hunt Jr., Judith Rizzo, Dane Linn, Stephanie Shipton, Carrie Heath Phillips, Chris Minnich, Chris Cross, Sally Hampton, David Coleman, and Jason Zimba."⁴⁸⁷ Rothman also credits the draft of a paper on the state implementation plans written by an educational consultant in Tasmania, named Michael Watt. The remainder of the Acknowledgements section

⁴⁸⁶ Robert Rothman. *Something in Common*, front matter.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

expresses the urging and urgency Rothman felt from fellow educators who wanted this story out there in print as soon as possible. What follows is intended to be the authoritative version of the story of how the CCSS came to be. It is this version which frames our examination of the role and function of these new standards relative to the perhaps little known, but existing history of standards in American education.

The Rothman book begins with a foreword written by former Governor James B. Hunt of North Carolina. Hunt identifies himself as someone who has been "engrossed in the standards movement for decades," and speaks on behalf of the National Governor's Association when he says: "these standards are the product of the belief among governors and state school heads that they needed---and wanted---to join forces and commission the best minds in the fields of math and English language arts, resulting in what are a superb set of standards."⁴⁸⁸ Hunt himself identifies the CCSS as the crowning achievement of a "movement" in education. What Hunt then goes on to present, is his case for why these standards are so significant given the history and trajectory of American education.

Governor Hunt, again professing to speak as a representative of all the state leaders, presents three primary reasons for support of the CCSS: equity, economy, and an "ironclad process." Hunt's language is sometimes vague, but his points are concise, and it is worthwhile to examine Hunt's explication for each of these three reasons. First, he discusses "equity," which he explains was established "long ago," when "an equitable education" was considered a "civil right for all Americans."⁴⁸⁹ While he does not provide us with any more clarity about how long ago, or whether through formal legislation this

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., ix.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid.

civil right was established, Hunt does link the idea of standards, and the CCSS specifically, as a direct solution to the continuing problem of inequity in education:

Having been adopted by nearly every state, these new standards will ensure that a child's education is not largely determined by where he or she lives, rather than his or her abilities. We must close gaps in opportunity and achievement that obstruct the success of all young people. Doing so improves their lives, helps sustain our democracy, and strengthens our nation.⁴⁹⁰

If we are to take Hunt's proclamation at face value, then geography is seemingly the leading cause of students receiving an inequitable education. But he does not elaborate on how geography plays a role in creating the persisting "gaps" in opportunity and achievement of which he speaks, but he is very clear that the governors link educational equity to quality of life, democracy, and nation.

Hunt presents the second primary reason for supporting the CCSS as economic. While he spent one brief paragraph on equity, he spends two full paragraphs on the economics of the CCSS, connecting the initiative to addressing the new situation of globalization, the increasing transience of the children of military personnel, and the demands of the business community. "Now we are poised to bring about what the business community has long recognized as essential reforms. And for business, it's about more than the bottom line. It's about recruiting graduates who can read with high degrees of comprehension, are active listeners, and can think critically."⁴⁹¹ By implication, then, the former system of public education is viewed as not being equipped to produce adequately literate workers for the globalized 21st century.

Hunt's third and final primary reason for supporting the CCSS at this time is the process used to create the CCSS itself. He supports Rothman's depiction of the

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., x.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

"movement as an initiative that arose entirely from state leaders who, too, recognized the importance of equity and the economy."⁴⁹² According to Hunt, the key elements in this process include "experts in the field," and "masters of the best science available about learning, teaching, English language arts, and math."⁴⁹³ Hunt also argues that these standards "were tested against standards from other nations to ensure they would meet the test of competitiveness."⁴⁹⁴

The remaining three paragraphs in the Forward are devoted to a defense of the standards as a state initiative that in no way equates to federal standards or a national curriculum. "These new standards have not been imposed on states; they have emerged from states, much as the United States did almost 225 years ago when the Constitution and Bill of Rights were adopted."⁴⁹⁵ Having successfully linked the CCSS to the most significant founding documents of the nation, Hunt's representative perception of the weight and importance of the CCSS to the future success of the nation is made clear: "if we are to improve the lives of children for generations to come and reassert America's world leadership, we must all share a common understanding of this important development in our nation's history. Rothman's contribution here is immense."⁴⁹⁶

Hunt does not try to mask the anxieties of state leaders about the current or future prominence of the nation on the international stage. Hunt's Forward sets the stage for framing the conversation of standards, the CCSS initiative, and the way the field of education and all of American society is supposed to view the intentions and political will of the governors to support such a step in education at this time. To Hunt and his

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

contemporaries, "standards" encourage uniformity, and uniformity breeds commonality, which then translates into "equity." By this definition, "equity" means sameness, but sameness of what, exactly? And does Hunt's description also suggest that the state leaders are overlooking the causes of geographical inequities in education? A closer look at Rothman's investigative account of the birth, evolution, and successful adoption of the CCSS will yield more insights about why people believe educational standards of any kind can solve the problem of educational inequities.

Rothman begins his account of the CCSS with a comparison to the transformative power of transportation standards in American education. Perhaps appealing to the audience's nostalgia regarding the iconic yellow school bus, Rothman sets up the CCSS initiative as similarly noble, similarly transformative, and predictably just as iconic:

The Common Core State Standards set expectations for student learning in English language arts and mathematics at each grade level. Like the school transportation standards, they were designed to address the problem that state standards varied widely and, in some cases, harmed children. They were also aimed at making it easier for test developers and curriculum designers to come up with better products, rather than having to address the needs of different states. Most importantly, they were intended to bring about improvements in education overall. A century after educators and policy makers fought to expand access to schools, the Common Core State Standards were designed to ensure that students who graduate from high school learn what they need to know and be able to do in order to be prepared for post secondary success.⁴⁹⁷

According to Rothman, supporters of the CCSS believed that variation in educational standards was a bad thing, previous products from test designers and curriculum developers were of poor quality because of state variation, and that somehow standardized uniformity would in and of itself improve the system of public education. It is also interesting to compare these purposes to the three primary reasons why the

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 2.

governors supported the CCSS according to James B. Hunt: equity, economy, and an ironclad process.

As Rothman moves through his account of the CCSS, he makes a couple of very interesting observations and omissions. First, he states that standards alone do not transform education. He also asserts that one motivating factor for the design of the CCSS was that the American people needed to be convinced that states would game the system in testing if left to their own devices. This suggests that the CCSS developers see the initiative as an intervention of the private to regulate the public dishonesty of institutions. This last point supports that a leading incentive to create the CCSS is a neoliberal agenda of increased surveillance, measurement, and efficiency as much as it might be about student learning. And while Rothman comments on the exceptionally broad consensus of approval for the CCSS as evidenced by the number of states quick to adopt the standards, he mentions the federal government's Race to the Top funds as an incentive.

Rothman is explicit about the political nature of the CCSS. Where once education was a local issue, for the last 30 years or so, it has been gaining ground as a normalized political situation. As Rothman carefully points out, the supporters and developers of the CCSS have always taken great pains to establish this particular standards movement as being a state-led effort with no federal involvement whatsoever. The first public unveiling of the standards happened in Georgia and not Washington DC, the NGA and CCSSO leading the charge. This was a fine line to walk given that the National Secretary of education, Arne Duncan, and even Obama himself voiced the "national challenge" of creating consistently high standards across state lines. The organizers of the CCSS movement also argued that such common standards across states would serve a national

agenda. In a time of increasing globalization and communication, physical boundaries like state lines and even national borders are easily transgressed and jobs and communities opened up based on political, social, and other shared interests. Given the rhetoric of the CCSS, it is hard to tell whether the potential for increased competition or increased solidarity is the biggest threat to national stability.

Like most contemporary references to standards in American education, Rothman's book focuses exclusively on what is described as a twenty-year engagement in "standards-setting and standards-based reform."⁴⁹⁸ It is important to recognize then, that Rothman's account is not intended to contextualize the CCSS within a larger discussion of the role, purpose, and function of standards in American education over the course of American history. According to Rothman's version of the CCSS creation story, there are four distinct characteristics of these standards that set them apart from any previous reform attempts made since the early 1980's. Keep in mind that every state had painstakingly developed their state standards within these same two decades. One of the obvious critiques of the CCSS would be a question of state motivation for adopting this set of standards when a state has its own, and for high-performing states like Massachusetts for instance, why adopt the CCSS when your own research and test scores tell you that your state tests and curriculum are better preparing students for the NAEP test than anyone else's? Indeed, many critics have asked such questions as, "why not have every state adopt the standards of Massachusetts?" Though Rothman does not take on this debate directly, he does present his own case for what the CCSS both is, and is not.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 12.

First, according to Rothman, the CCSS is designed to target college and career readiness, as opposed to the standards of other states that were developed by “consensus panels of educators and subject-matter experts who were focused only on what they thought students needed to know at each grade level...”⁴⁹⁹ As Rothman points out, such state standards “may or may not have been validated by entry-level expectations in colleges and work-training programs.”⁵⁰⁰ Just how many states’ previous standards fell into each of these categories is not mentioned by Rothman.

Rothman lists the second outstanding distinction of the CCSS as being the fact that the CCSS are “internationally benchmarked.” Rothman explains this to mean that they are “explicitly designed to compare with the expectations for students in high-performing nations, those that regularly outperform the United States in international comparisons of student achievement.”⁵⁰¹ Interestingly, Rothman provides an endnote where he names the source from which he reports the evidence that “many state standards fall short of those of other countries.” This source is a study comparing mathematics scores on the TIMSS test as presented in the book by William Schmidt et al in 2001. This study is the same one cited in the Benchmarking for Success report in 2008. No sources are provided regarding studies that support international comparisons in literacy.

In addition to college readiness and international benchmarking, Rothman names the third distinguishing characteristic of the CCSS to be that the “Standards are intended to send clear signals to students, parents, and educators about what is most important to learn at each grade level,” as opposed to vague lists of topics “teachers cannot possibly

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

cover in a year.”⁵⁰² According to Rothman, then, the CCSS is clearer in its language about what is most important to know and do than the existing standards of the states. No endnote or source information is provided to support this point.

The fourth and perhaps most contentious distinction, is that “the standards are intended to be common across states. In contrast to the current system in which each state defines for itself what its students should learn, the standards are from the outset intended to represent a consensus among states about the knowledge and skills all students, regardless of where they live, are expected to develop.” This “consensus among states” was intentional in the design of the CCSS according to Rothman. As is supported in many other materials describing the CCSS, the success of this initiative seems to hinge on the perception that it was a collaborative, voluntary, state-led, entrepreneurial effort as opposed to a federal reform effort. One could draw the conclusion that the CCSS reflect an anxious skepticism about the role of the federal government in securing the welfare of the nation on the international stage.

Rothman is careful to present a set of three limitations of the CCSS, including an explicit reference to literacy. The first limitation is that the CCSS only address math and English Language Arts, which at the time Rothman wrote his book, was true. However, within the last two years, the CCSS in science and social studies have emerged. Regardless of this fact, Rothman explains that “The English language arts standards set goals for the literacy abilities in subjects like science and history, but they do not consider the science or history content students might need to develop. They are a core, but not a complete program.”⁵⁰³

⁵⁰² Ibid., 11.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

In addition to the limited subjects covered by the CCSS, Rothman also points out that the CCSS are also limited in that they represent only academic competencies, which do not in and of themselves, guarantee a college-ready student. Rothman explains that additional skills like collaboration and good work habits are also needed for success in college and work. Rothman describes the CCSS as but a mere “first step toward school improvement.” According to Rothman, “even the most passionate advocate of standards would agree that the statements of expectations are hollow without efforts to ensure that teachers are prepared to teach to the standards and that students receive the support they need to learn what the standards expect.”⁵⁰⁴ Notably, Rothman personifies standards and credits the standards themselves, as opposed to the teachers, with having high expectations for student learning.

As Rothman sets the stage for outlining the narrative of what the CCSS are and are not, how they came to be, and what they represent as an evolutionary step in American education, it is important to revisit a moment in Rothman’s introduction to the book, where he references Thomas Boysen, the former commissioner of education in Kentucky:

Thomas Boysen, the former commissioner of education in Kentucky, who oversaw the implementation of a complete overhaul of that state’s education system, described that state’s standards-based reform as the ‘second greatest revolution’ in education in the United States. The first, he said, began in the early part of the twentieth century to increase access to schools and provide a basic education to as many children as possible. Kentucky’s reform, Boysen said, ‘has the intention of giving every child the right to succeed in school.’⁵⁰⁵

In keeping with the prevailing pitch for the CCSS, Rothman presents the story of the CCSS as one of increasing democratic equality and equity in the name of social mobility.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 7.

However, because the country has never been able to consistently agree on what, exactly, schools should produce, the CCSS may very well serve to reproduce many of the conditions it claims to counter.

THE NEW CONTEXT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

To better understand the motivations of literacy policy since 9/11, it is useful to consider why education is an attractive market for those seeking to exercise power and influence over national political issues. David Labaree provides a useful history of the shifting purposes of public schooling. His research and conclusions are worth summarizing here to give us a context for understanding why public education is in a constant state of flux and even chaos. Labaree poses three questions that are central to any discussion about the goals of public education: "Should schools present themselves as a model of our best hopes for our society and a mechanism for remaking that society in the image of those hopes? Should schools focus on adapting students to the needs of society as currently constructed? Or should they focus primarily on serving the individual hopes and ambitions of their students?"⁵⁰⁶ These tensions are framed by the Jeffersonian notion of political equality and the Alexander Hamiltonian notion of economic reality. "Unfettered economic freedom leads to a highly unequal distribution of wealth and power, which in turn undercuts the possibility for democratic control; but at the same time, restricting such economic freedom in the name of equality infringes on individual liberty, without which democracy can turn into the dictatorship of the majority."⁵⁰⁷ It is

⁵⁰⁶ Labaree, "Public Goods," 41.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

this reality that encourages the goal of schooling for social mobility to dominate the language, practices, and solutions regarding public schooling.

At the same time, as Labaree points out, the traditional goals of democratic equality and social efficiency push back on the discourse and demand recognition in current reform efforts. Advocates on all sides often find common ground by supporting a system of public education that advertises success based on individual choice and merit while at the same time channeling the masses of students into needed vocational slots. Within a neoliberal economy, the result is conservative control of an educational system that is highly stratified based on race and class yet manufactures consent by appearing to be “equal” in terms of access, expectations, and opportunities.

The political goals of schools designed for the purpose of democratic equality include the training of citizens, the belief in equal treatment and equal access. As Labaree suggests, "Fearful of the social differences and class conflict that arose from the growth of capitalism and immigration, the founders of the common school argued that this institution could help provide citizens of the republic with a common culture and a sense of shared membership in the community."⁵⁰⁸ Those who believe schools should aim for democratic equality have attempted to reform schools in the pursuit of equal treatment and equal access. They have de-tracked, more fairly funded, and supported anything else that might help level the playing field for students and families whose ascribed status in previous generations (based on race, gender, class, etc.) prohibited their access to education. "In addition, the requirement that education at all levels should be open to all segments of the population--and not just the most privileged or even the most able--has

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 45.

exerted a profound effect on all aspects of the institutional structure.”⁵⁰⁹ This has resulted in the proliferation of programs, materials, professional development, and structures designed to help teachers and administrators deal with the burgeoning quantity and diversity of the student population in the public schools.

The goal of “social efficiency” in public schooling has been about vocationalism and stratification, with the understanding that no matter what schooling did for them, everyone had to eventually enter the work force, so vocational training was at least practical. Schools having the purpose of training students to take on jobs in the early 1900's represented a shift from "a lofty political goal (training students to be citizens in a democratic society, perhaps to be president) to a practical economic goal (getting students ready to enter the workforce, preparing them to adapt to the social structure)."⁵¹⁰ This goal offered compelling logic and practicality. Social efficiency is evidenced in nearly all reform rhetoric that makes reference to the need to improve education for competitive edge in a global economy. This is true in the 21st century discourse of literacy policy, education reform, and the most recent CCSS. It amounts to stratified education for the public economic good. This goal is embraced and approved by the business community because it has direct outcomes that can be measured in dollars. Business leaders see an economic payback on their investment. This conflict of interest has often resulted in the undermining of the goal of democratic equality in education: "over the years, the idea that schools should be making workers more than making republicans has undermined the ability of schools to act as a mechanism for promoting

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 47-48.

equality of access and equality of treatment."⁵¹¹ As a result, schooling has become more stratified, which poses a serious problem to the goals of democratic equality.

Educational equality works against capitalist markets and is at best irrelevant to bettering the gross national product. Schooling under this goal creates a vertical pathway where the degree of schooling correlates to one's job in the marketplace. Those who drop out earlier enter lower paying jobs than those who stay in education and exit later. So while education reform in recent years has led to increased access to more schooling for nearly everyone, the schooling is still stratified and unequal: "Thus while the goal of democratic equality promotes schools that prepare students for the full range of political and social roles in the community, the social efficiency goal promotes a structure of schooling that limits these possibilities in the name of economic necessity."⁵¹² Still, this model promotes valuing good learning by every student at every level of schooling. "From the social efficiency perspective, society counts on schools to provide the human capital it needs to enhance productivity in all phases of economic life, which means that schools must assure that everyone engages in serious learning--whether they are in college or kindergarten, suburb or inner city, top track or bottom track."⁵¹³ Hence, social efficiency sees education as being for the public (economic) good. Individual outcomes are subordinate to the collective outcomes that all jobs be filled with competent people.

The goal of social mobility is fueled by the belief that schooling should provide individual students what they need to get ahead in the current structure (or maintain their current social status and not slip down). Unlike the social efficiency goal, which sees schooling as something to support the economic system as a whole, social mobility

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 49.

⁵¹² Ibid., 50.

⁵¹³ Ibid.

accepts the inequalities and prepares students to be "winners" in this system. Individual outcomes are what matters most. The emphasis is on "individual status attainment."⁵¹⁴ Advocates of the social mobility goal see education as a private good for personal consumption. By definition, some schooling will be better than others, some jobs better than others, etc. Social mobility relies on inequality in order for one to compete and "win" by arriving at the most desirable position. "The aim of pursuing education is for the individual student to accumulate forms of educational property that will allow that student to gain an advantage in the competition for social position. This means that what I gain from my educational experience is my own private property..."⁵¹⁵ The better the property one has, the better their chance of winning the best social position.

Accordingly, parents do not seek out equal opportunities for their children, they seek out the best possible opportunities, which means some child somewhere is getting something not as good. Under the social mobility model, the opportunity to gain the upper hand, to have an advantage over others is one of the most attractive features of the educational system. This is currently how the value of a school or school system is determined: by its reputation for positioning its graduates upon completion. This is seen in the differentiating value of college degrees too, where the highest tuition reflects the most value, despite the quality of learning that goes on there. Therefore, institutions differ, and then there is a further stratification of opportunities within a given institution (programs, tracks, etc.) The original social position of the consumer is important here, because those at the bottom of such a system are looking to have schools contribute to social mobility, but those already at the top are looking for schools to help students

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 51.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

maintain what they already have. These expectations help shape schools in wealthy suburbs versus schools in low-income neighborhoods. Therefore, social position impacts how one sees her/his own educational needs.

The social mobility model operates based on a rate of exchange, where students exchange their education for something perceived to be of equal or greater value, like a job, a credential, or a grade. In such a system, these credentials are not valued because of the knowledge they represent, but rather only for their exchange value. Reflecting the values of a market system, even the student doing an individual class assignment will try to strike a bargain with the teacher for the best deal; cheapest effort for most valued credential. "The effect on education is to emphasize form over content--to promote an educational system that is willing to reward students for formal compliance with modest performance requirements rather than for demonstrating operational mastery of skills deemed politically and socially useful."⁵¹⁶ Such a system falls prey to meritocratic forms of reward and justification.

Meritocracy has really come to define the structures of conventional schooling: "the self-contained classroom, the graded curriculum, simultaneous instruction, and individual evaluation."⁵¹⁷ This idea also helps to explain norm-referenced tests and bell curves. Scholars have found that it is this kind of environment that is ideal for fostering competitiveness and individual achievement. The impact of this system again falls differently depending on one's social location: at the top of the social system, competition is fierce and pressure to be the best is sometimes extreme. At the same time, the closer one is to the bottom of the social ladder, the weaker is the drive to compete and achieve

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

in education for a variety of reasons. "Students from the lower and working classes see the possibility of social mobility through education more as a frail hope than a firm promise, since the experience of their families and friends is that the future is uncertain and the relevance of education to that future is doubtful."⁵¹⁸

These three goals of public schools, to make republicans, workers, and/or winners, are useful in looking at the priorities of education since the 1960's. As the civil rights movement reached its zenith, there was a resurgence of the demand for democratic equality in our system of public education. This continued on into the 1970's until a shift occurred where once again the pendulum swung and social efficiency and social mobility resurfaced. Labaree explains it this way:

By the 1960's and 1970's, however, the tide turned toward democratic equality (in conjunction with social mobility) as the national movement for racial equality infused schooling and spilled over into efforts to provide an education that was socially inclusive and offered equal opportunity across lines of class, gender, and handicapping conditions as well as race. Then, in the 1980's and 1990's, the momentum shifted toward the movement for educational standards, which emphasized social efficiency again in conjunction with social mobility.⁵¹⁹

According to Labaree, this later shift reflected a "growing concern about economic competitiveness and the need for education to supply the human capital required for increased economic productivity."⁵²⁰ It also seems to show a growing anxiety over the exchange value of education for credit, grades, and credentials, as these are now increasingly more available to the masses.

Because these three goals of democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility jockey for the dominant position in shaping educational history, they often

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 58-59.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 59.

interact in ways that can both undermine or promote one another. In the case of the current dominant goal, social mobility, its tenets sometimes reinforce democratic equality and sometimes work against it. In the current educational rhetoric, liberals often support the idea of social mobility (as a means to greater equality) and the conservatives typically support social efficiency (limiting access to only what is needed to satisfy workforce supply needs).⁵²¹ In recent years, social mobility has garnered tremendous power and support expressly because it can be seen as a method for improving democratic equality through increased access to educational opportunities. This translates into "everyone should have an equal chance to get ahead."⁵²² And when students are being evaluated on their individual achievements, this can be perceived and experienced as definite progress compared to the discrimination faced by generations of students due to their ascribed status based on race, gender, or class. Given the country's social and educational history, it is no wonder that the goal of social mobility is often embraced by civil rights leaders and organizations who then rationalize advocacy for high academic standards as a way to give more traditionally underserved students an equal shot at academic opportunities which they can later exchange for increased social and economic opportunities.

The overlap between the two goals of democratic equality and social mobility is defined by educational opportunity and individual achievement. Together, these issues have defined the "core of a consensus that has driven progressive educational politics in this country for the last century and a half."⁵²³ This explains the wide variety of support garnered for the progressives in education (women, racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities). "For the middle and upper classes, the progressive program offered the

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² Ibid., 60.

⁵²³ Ibid., 61.

chance to move up the ladder a rung or two or to reinforce an already comfortable social position with the legitimacy that comes from being seen as having earned this position through educational achievement."⁵²⁴

Progressive education supporters have been a powerful coalition in education reform. Perhaps their greatest achievement has been the "strong trend in the United States toward a system of allocating status on the basis of a formal educational voucher of individual merit--that is, hiring persons because of their educational credentials rather than their ascribed characteristics."⁵²⁵ This was considered a tremendous intervention in previously discriminatory processes exclusively governed by racial prejudice and bias.

According to Labaree, the proponents of social efficiency disagree with the progressives. They worry about the cost of supporting a public education system that goes beyond minimal supply and demand for the economic security of the nation. They work to contain the costs and limit the access. They occupy higher social positions and do not expect schools to get their children ahead as much as keep them where they are, in part because where they are is very comfortable. As such, conservatives would set up vocational schools, and progressives would work the system to make those schools function as social mobility institutions. "The end result of this conflict between progressive and conservative visions of schooling has been a peculiarly American educational structure, characterized by a bold mixture of purposes."⁵²⁶

Neoliberalism encompasses the presuppositions that undergird free market capitalism. Currently, it is not uncommon for political and economic scholars to discuss neoliberalism without ever mentioning race, and it is equally typical for scholars who

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 64.

discuss the impact of race and racism to neglect to mention neoliberalism. And so the once hotly debated topic of “race or class” as the cause of all inequality in the U.S. has been reduced to promotions of individual possibility and personal responsibility. A society centered on social group solidarity in the 1960’s had become a nation of individuals who promoted individual choice over collective equality by the end of the 1970’s.

In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, scholar David Harvey usefully chronicles the significant events, people, and circumstances that shaped the trajectory of neoliberalism in the United States. And due to increases in technology and the expansion of the market worldwide, it is important to look outside the country as well as within the country to understand the unique path of neoliberalism. According to Harvey, there were four significant world events in the years between 1978 and 1980 that helped solidify neoliberalism in the US. The first of these is Deng Xiaoping taking the first steps toward making China a major capitalist contender. Then, in 1979, Paul Volcker, leader of the US Federal Reserve under President Carter, shifts the monetary policy from increasing employment at all costs to decreasing inflation over all else. Also in 1979, Margaret Thatcher is charged with dissolving trade union power and fixing Britain’s inflation issue. Her notes from this time period contain interesting insights into her own thinking about the threat of group solidarity to national power, and her emphasis on the individual over the collective as the way to neutralize the threat. The crowning event came with Reagan’s election in 1980, whereby Reagan purported to support Volcker’s philosophy and “curb the power of labor, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage.”⁵²⁷

⁵²⁷ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 1.

Interestingly, Volcker would be in attendance at the meetings of the National Governor's Association in the early 1980's.⁵²⁸

The culminating influence of these four events was the philosophical foundation of neoliberalism that could argue the urgency of international competition, exercise the power of the federal government in protecting capital over citizens, and ideologically take the moral high ground in privileging the rights and opportunities of the individual over the collective. In many ways, it was a return to the fundamental founding principle of protection of private property. Again, consciously or unconsciously, a new discourse was created to rationalize, justify, and sustain the new mobilization of wealth and accumulation.

Harvey's description of neoliberal history and development, though devoid of a racial analysis, is tremendously useful in understanding the economic contribution to the now cultural public pedagogy in a nation where all people are now virtually reduced to the "color of money."⁵²⁹ "The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as the 'central values of civilization'... These values, they held, were threatened not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism, but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgment for those of individuals free to choose."⁵³⁰ When such thinkers encountered the collective power of social solidarity as seen in the Civil Rights movement, the drive to emphasize the rights and freedoms of the individual over the group would have served to sound equitable and perhaps even politically aligned with the

⁵²⁸ National Governors Association, "Meeting Summary," NGA winter meeting, Washington, DC, February 26-28, 1984.

⁵²⁹ Goldberg, *The Threat of Race*, 206.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5

thinkers and leaders of the civil rights movement at the time. And so in the US post-civil rights movement era, the public demand for a change in racist government practices was answered with a call to “equality of opportunity” for every individual to freely choose within a competitive market designed to create competition for “best of choice.”

The assumption that market freedoms also dictate individual freedoms has long been a tenet of neoliberal thought and US foreign policy according to Harvey. The marriage of neoliberal thought with the post-civil rights socially liberal thinking created the stuff of which a new national “common sense” could be molded. Combined with post-modernist tendencies toward temporary states, and the modern belief in time and change always leading to improvements, the cultural context for reading, analyzing, and interpreting the state of public education was complete.

As it stands, under the rubric of individual freedom to choose, leaders and policy makers are inadvertently free to provide unequal education to children according to race and class, free to create systems for carefully monitoring this status quo, and free to privilege systems of information and accountability over equitable outcomes. Any attempts at “social justice” would require some kind of social solidarity; and such solidarity is now viewed and discussed as being in opposition to individual freedoms. The NAR report was the social impetus for creating the apparatus that would allow neoliberal or “american racialization,” to flourish in the post-civil rights era. This apparatus is what we call today, the “modern standards movement” in public education. Standards assume a level playing field (see chapter 4), and literacy assumes race-neutrality. Together, literacy standards serve as the bedrock for the eventual creation and ubiquitous adoption of the CCSS.

Chapter 8: (Re)Making Public Pedagogy: The Political Economy of Race and Literacy in the Making of Neoliberal Hegemony

"Equality is an empty vessel with no substantive moral content of its own. Without moral standards, equality remains meaningless, a formula that can have nothing to say about how we should act."⁵³¹

In this chapter, I try to bring together the CCSS contribution to the ideas of literacy, racial justice, social reform, citizenship, and globalization by explaining the appeal of the CCSS project for the neoliberal state. Ultimately, I argue that the CCSS conception of literacy lends credence and moral authority to aggressive capitalist ventures in an increasingly market society *through* the terms of race and class. In short, it is a political intervention into the pedagogies of citizenship for the 21st century. In order to illustrate this, I introduce the impact of “debt” and “indebtedness” for the African American community and the resulting political impact of possessive individualism and personal responsibility. I then discuss the common themes of recent influential “education presidents” and their representative views of needing to transcend the country’s history of racism in part, through the redemptive qualities of specific literacy myths. I then explain the compatibility of the CCSS with neoliberal hegemony, and the political implications of valuing non-fiction over fiction.

When I first embarked on this project, I came to the table with many unanswered questions. I eventually reframed some of these questions as “things we do not yet know

⁵³¹ Best, Stephen. *The Fugitive’s Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004, 274.

about the CCSS in ELA and Literacy.” We did not know how the CCSS functioned as a literacy movement, what literacy myths might be embedded in the standards, and what ideologies and discourses could shape the implementation of the CCSS in the classroom. We did not have a good understanding of how or where the CCSS were located within earlier education reform efforts, and most importantly, how these standards related to social, political, economic, and cultural change. From my initial understandings, we did not know how the CCSS construct race, nor the ways in which it produces racial power or reproduces racial dominance. We also did not know how the CCSS participated in “racing” society. These became important points of investigation in order to determine if the new rules, practices, and policies for literacy actively worked to reproduce existing inequalities, or if they were designed to work against these structures and practices. As I unveiled some answers to these questions, I shaped my inquiry in more specific terms: How did the discourse employ the rhetoric of racial reform to manufacture consent for neoliberal practices? How did people come to embrace neoliberal practices as a method for racial justice and equality? How was “equality” being defined in these stories that were getting told about what literacy could do for the individual and the nation?

In order to answer these and other questions, I decided to pursue the CCSS standards in ELA and Literacy as a possible avenue for addressing one of the most ubiquitous problems in American education: the racial “achievement gap.” The achievement gap has become one of the most popular rallying cries for education reform since school desegregation. Racial inequality in public schools remains a problem that no one and nothing has been able to definitively solve. I wondered how the CCSS, adopted just two years after the nation elected its first African American president, was going to address the problem of racial inequality in our school system and in our country? I

wondered, given the country's historical commitment to the principles of democratic equality and participatory citizenship, why and how did this document get so much approval so quickly, with seemingly so little critical examination? Hopefully, this project has at least illuminated how literacy links the discourse on education reform (policy) with the discourse on economic policy to show how racial reforms and "rights" conversations get used to further an economic agenda that also promises a form of racial redemption given the country's racist history and present-day inequalities.

INFLUENTIAL "EDUCATION PRESIDENTS"

Some of the cleanest and most relevant examples of the link between race and literacy in recent times can be found in the speeches that U.S. presidents make to predominantly black audiences. While not a quantifiable data source, these speeches are arguably indicative of the most commonly held beliefs about the role of literacy in the country's supposed steady march toward racial progress. They are a good place to see the national narrative of racial progress, and its intersection with literacy. As these speeches demonstrate, notions of individualism, debt, freedom, choice, self-making, free-will, mastery, contracts, and the merits of individual hard work assume that there is some kind of democratic distribution of opportunities and rewards, which has never been the case for the African American community within the United States.⁵³² Abstractions of equality obfuscate white privilege and domination. The virtue of a new contract preserves morality for the privileged. Such contracts have a history of also preserving the indebtedness of the subjected individual within such a system. In certain ways, this is

⁵³² For an in-depth discussion of this history from slavery through emancipation and reconstruction, see Sadiya Hartman's, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

what literacy standards do; they offer an abstracted version of equality through a new social contract based on the “mimicry” of the privileged white male subject who has never been made to experience the same conditions of repression.⁵³³ The black student is free to study the same books and take the same tests as his white classmates, but in reality, his citizenship will likely be questioned, conditioned, and redefined. He will find himself having to “qualify” for his right to democratic equality over and over again.

On November 13th, 1993, then president Bill Clinton delivered a speech to a predominantly African American audience at the Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee. At the time, Clinton had been in office for a mere 10 months, but in the speech, he is quick to name his presidential accomplishments as shared points of pride with his audience: “...for without you I would not be here today as your President.”⁵³⁴ Using a variety of rhetorical moves that allow him to be included in the personal pronouns of direct address throughout the speech, Clinton sets himself up not only as a member of the African American community of which he speaks, but also as the community’s chosen President. It is from this interesting position of both insider and outsider that Clinton directly addresses the state of “our common efforts” to “restore the economy,” “reverse the politics” of elitism, “bring our people together across racial and regional lines,” “make a strength of our diversity,” “reward work and family,” and to “move us forward” into the 21st century. According to the remaining content of Clinton’s speech, the march of racial progress must happen in the black communities, for Clinton asserts that everyone does have an equal opportunity now if they just work hard. The

⁵³³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997, 130-144.

⁵³⁴ Bill Clinton. "Remarks to the Convocation of the Church of God in Christ in Memphis (November 13, 1993)." Memphis: Miller Center, 1993.

greatest obstacle facing the black community is described as being black-on-black violence, apathy, child abandonment, and a general “crisis of spirit.” Clinton’s suggestion for countering the “guns” and “despair”— “hope” and “books.”

Not unlike the Presidents who come before and after him, Clinton invokes an iconic historical figure to legitimize his point of view. For the members of the African American community gathered at the Church of God in 1993, that figure was predictably, Martin Luther King Jr., who himself had delivered his last sermon at that very church. Clinton establishes his connection to this audience through the lenses of both religious and racial connection. In this speech, Clinton faces the unique challenge of needing to recognize himself as a chosen member of the African American community despite being white, while at the same time respecting the specific concerns of the religious community of which he and his audience are also members. Invoking MLK brings together the ideas of African American activism and religious morality as experienced through the medium of the spoken and written word.

While the formal parameters of literacy have historically been defined and policed within and through elite venues such as the courts, corporations, ivory towers, and political offices, MLK represents the pinnacle of the bottom-up struggle for literacy as liberation from oppression. He is the community pastor, educated activist, and master speech-writer. With MLK as his mouthpiece, Clinton both condemns and enlists the black community in the nation’s march toward racial progress.

Clinton begins by listing out his revolutionary presidential accomplishments thus far, but he ends in the familiar place of equating opportunity with racial equality. According to Clinton, the shared concerns of himself and his audience over African American representation in the Cabinet of the United States have been addressed; issues

of the economy and healthcare, addressed; supports for family and higher education, addressed; tax and voting laws, addressed; job opportunities and supports for the poor and middle classes, addressed. “But I guess what I really want to say to you today, my fellow Americans, is that we can do all of this and still fail unless we meet the great crisis of the spirit that is gripping America today.”⁵³⁵ According to Clinton, “the great crisis of the spirit” is illustrated by crime, violence, and drugs. Clinton asks his audience to imagine what kind of report card MLK would give “us” regarding the preceding 25 years, “You did a good job; you did a good job in opening opportunity.”⁵³⁶

Switching from second person to first person direct address, Clinton moves from being a common receiver of King’s hypothetical message to being MLK when he delivers the litany of problems in the African American community: “I did not live and die to see the American family destroyed. I did not live and die to see 13-year-old boys get automatic weapons and gun down 9-year-olds just for the kick of it. I did not live and die to see young people destroy their own lives with drugs and then build fortunes destroying the lives of others. That is not what I came here to do.”⁵³⁷ Clinton continues in this vein, occasionally interjecting a third person pronoun—“he would say”—to remind his audience that he is mindful of the fact that he is not actually MLK, while still invoking his privilege to speak as such. “I fought to stop white people from being so filled with hate that they would wreak violence on black people. I did not fight for the right of black people to murder other black people with reckless abandon.”⁵³⁸

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Ibid.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

After presenting anecdotes and statistics on gun violence, Clinton shifts pronoun usage again to bring the African American community and himself under one national umbrella: “If you had told anybody who was here in that church on that night that we would abuse our freedom in that way, they would have found it hard to believe. And I tell you it is our moral duty to turn it in around.”⁵³⁹ The conflagration of personal pronouns in this sentence allows Clinton to speak with the authority of the morally righteous, the condemnation of the religiously devout, and the humility of one implicated in the cause of the crisis.

Now ready to deliver the recommendations for fixing these problems, Clinton returns to the national narrative of progress, emphasizing that the country is already a place of equal opportunity for all if one is just willing to work hard and play fair. Separating himself out in his position as President, Clinton then moves to identifying the changes that must happen from the “outside in,” and from the “inside out.” He locates the office of the President and the Congress as having the responsibility to work from the outside in, but he locates the members of the church before him as responsible for working from the inside out.

So I say to you, we have to make a partnership, all the Government agencies, all the business folks; but where there are no families, where there is no order, where there is no hope, where we are reducing the size of our armed services because we have won the cold war, who will be there to give structure, discipline, and love to these children? You must do that. And we must help you.⁵⁴⁰

Moving into his recommended actions, Clinton returns to iconic examples of national progress—winning the cold war, countering communism and nuclear threats, developing technologies like cable and the VCR—and creating a meritocratic system of equality:

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

“Yes, without regard to race, if you work hard and play by the rules, you can get into a service academy or a good college, you’ll do just great.”⁵⁴¹ Implicitly, Clinton locates the main obstacle to racial progress as the deterioration of the black community from within. He asserts that the “freedom to succeed” is there, but only for those who do not choose the “freedom to destroy.”

In one final request, Clinton takes on the formal role of preacher and asks his audience to make a personal commitment before God to “turn this around” through literacy: “We will give these children a future. We will take away their guns and give them books. We will take away their despair and give them hope. We will rebuild the families and the neighborhoods and the communities. We won’t make all the work that has gone on here benefit just a few.”⁵⁴² Once again, reading is held up as a moral act, as a way to ensure that one is embracing the appropriate values of citizenship in the democracy and membership in the human race. The act of reading and the access to books is not a privilege, according to Clinton, it is a *requirement* for racial progress and a remedy for social decline.

While Clinton’s speech to a predominantly black audience linked individual literacy to the morality needed for the African American family and community salvation, George W. Bush names literacy as the key commodity for national economic prosperity. By the time Bush is in office, literacy has become a social and economic responsibility of every citizen. Though Clinton returned to the recent era of civil rights and the figure of Martin Luther King Jr. to make his points, Bush takes his audience back

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

to the time of slavery and emancipation to reframe the narrative of racial progress and literacy's role within it.

On July 10th, 2000, 10 years before the CCSS in ELA were released to the public, then President, George W. Bush, delivered a speech to the NAACP, where he reframed the national narrative of racial progress by linking literacy to self-liberation. In what would later become the infamous "No Child Left Behind" law, Bush presents his vision of education reform as an explicit response to the effects of slavery on the nation. In no uncertain terms, Bush claims that "our nation is harmed when we let our differences separate us and divide us," though he never explicitly acknowledges his definition of "differences."⁵⁴³ Through humor and performative humility, Bush pokes fun at his own political party and his unpopularity with members of the NAACP. Despite his self-proclaimed inadequacy as a good-faith racial progress candidate, Bush declares he is "proud" to be delivering a speech that might foster the uniting of both white conservatives and black activists to come together to "advance racial harmony and economic opportunity."⁵⁴⁴

Employing a common strategy to frame the narrative, Bush attempts to align himself with the cause of racial progress by acknowledging that "slavery is a blight on our history and that racism, despite all the progress, still exists today."⁵⁴⁵ He reminds his audience of Lincoln's words and actions, and then declares "there is no escaping the reality that the party of Lincoln has not always carried the mantle of Lincoln."⁵⁴⁶ Once he established himself as someone aware of the republican party's limitations in advancing

⁵⁴³ Bush, George W. "Bush's Speech to the NAACP." *Transcript of George W. Bush's speech delivered at the NAACP 91st annual convention*. Washington DC: Washington Post, 2000.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

racial equality, Bush was free to present himself as someone more comparable to Lincoln. Bush declares that "recognizing and confronting our history is important. Transcending our history is essential."⁵⁴⁷ With this statement, Bush reveals the ideology of racial liberalism, which embraces the eventual redemption of white America's racist story. Bush hints at the impact he expects his reforms to have; they are going to lead everyone down the path to a post-racial, post-racism, America.

Bush's vision for the new national "commitment to equality and upward mobility to all of the citizens," includes actions for addressing the problem of segregated "aspiration," unwilling hearts, and the "gap of hope." Offering up classic tokenized examples of African Americans who "made it," Bush implies that the "differences" between the races include a uniquely African American unwillingness to succeed at the American Dream. Bush lays the responsibility for this motivational challenge at the feet of institutions within the black community.

For his part, Bush commits to enforcing the civil rights already established under the law as a method of broadening the "opportunity" for growing the African American middle class. "Discrimination is still a reality, even when it takes different forms. Instead of Jim Crow, there's racial redlining and profiling. Instead of separate and equal, there is separate and forgotten."⁵⁴⁸ In an interesting rhetorical move, Bush promises to make civil rights enforcement a "cornerstone" of his administration in an attempt to focus on the "forgotten." In the following year, it would be no surprise that NCLB was designed to target low-income children of color by raising the stakes of academic achievement without raising the resources or providing the support. At the time of his speech,

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

however, Bush named the form of bias his actions would target as "the soft bigotry of low expectations." In a few short sentences, Bush declared himself as the civil rights crusader who would solve the achievement gap by raising the academic expectations for African American children across America. He declared that with regard to the racial achievement gap, "whatever the causes, the effect is discrimination."

To illustrate his vision, Bush then employs the specific example of reading as the "new civil right" that he intends to enforce. "Equality in our country will remain a distant dream until every child, of every background, learns so that he or she may strive and rise in this world. No child in America should be segregated by low expectations, imprisoned by illiteracy, abandoned to frustration and the darkness of self-doubt."⁵⁴⁹ Connecting his intentions to the historical belief in illiteracy as a plague on the nation, Bush offers up new education reform as the best way to enforce the civil rights of which he speaks. He outlines this reform package as including higher standards, measured progress toward these standards, a spotlight on failure, and increased school choice for parents; "and also remember, the role of education is to leave no child behind." Invoking the motto of Marian Wright Edelman's, Children's Defense Fund, Bush implicitly aligns himself with the famous African American activist who leads the organization with the mission to "leave no child behind" in matters of health, education, safety, and morality as they transition from childhood to adulthood "with the help of caring families and communities."⁵⁵⁰ After appropriating the words and philosophy of an African American woman to whom he never credits, Bush legitimizes his credibility as an authority on African American school achievement by reminding the audience that "... African

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ See Children's Defense Fund, <http://www.childrensdefense.org>.

American fourth graders in the state of Texas have better math skills than any other students---African American students in any state in the United States of America."⁵⁵¹

The solution Bush offers to close the "achievement gap" is to measure every child and "blow the whistle" on failing schools. He outlines how his presidential agenda includes giving schools three years to "produce results, "meet standards," and prevent students from being "mired in mediocrity." Drawing on the familiar language first laid out in the Reagan administration's *Nation at Risk* report, Bush reminds the audience that he is continuing on with the national project in education reform. Instead of providing schools with adequate resources or additional resources to get the job done, he promises only to "measure" them while the additional resources he will funnel to individual parents so that they can choose a different school.

At this point in his address to the NAACP, Bush has argued for his future education reform law, NCLB, as the solution to the racial achievement gap. He proposes that increasing school accountability through standardized testing and raising the academic expectations of individual students through instituting higher standards will result in more equitable outcomes for black students. In essence, Bush's speech foreshadows the first federal education law that would center these populations perceived

⁵⁵¹ Bush, "Bush's Speech to the NAACP."8. It should be noted that Bush's speech was being delivered on the heels of his claims that Texas had achieved a "miracle" in education outcomes due to the state standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The No Child Left Behind act was modeled on the Texas system and gave all states 2012 years to achieve 100% proficiency in reading and math. By 2003, leading researchers had uncovered that many authorities in Houston and around the state excluded many students from taking the test, failed to report dropouts and transfers, and engaged in other gaming strategies to assert falsely high outcomes on the TAAS. Among the many articles regarding this situation, see Dianna Jean Schemo and Ford Fessenden. "A Miracle Revisited: Measuring Success; Gains in Houston Schools: How Real are They?" New York Times. Dec 3, 2003. www.nytimes.com (accessed July 2, 2013).

as failures in the current educational system; low income students of color. In Bush's words, "Either the United States will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States."⁵⁵² This could very well be a line taken directly from John Eaton's speech in 1882.

Not surprisingly, Bush presented his education reform plan as the primary component of his new proposed "prosperity initiative" that would emphasize the government's role in increasing opportunities for people to obtain more private property. "I believe in private property," Bush declares. "I believe in private property so strongly I want everybody to have some."⁵⁵³ In retrospect, much of Bush's plan sounds like initiatives proposed under Obama a decade later. Bush spoke of "communities of promise" that resonate with Obama's "promise zones," where the role of government would be to "help people build the confidence and faith to achieve their own dreams." Bush compares his prosperity initiative to the "spirit of Lincoln's reforms," because it will help every man get ahead. He even employs the example of the Homestead Act, but fails to mention that the only people who benefitted under that historic land grant movement were white and male. Bush's reforms are aimed at giving the poor more tools to overcome their "own condition" and "move beyond it." In front of the NAACP, Bush frames the narrative of racial progress as the story of people having an equal opportunity to prosper if they are willing and able to work hard. Such a frame would become very useful for assigning the blame for failure to the individual who does not have the appropriate desire or effort to succeed.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

The focus on "opportunity" rather than results is in keeping with the theme of Johnson's Great Society ideals. However unfortunate, the modern standards movement would later reveal that the standardized testing movement became exclusively about results at the same time that everyone stopped keeping track of measuring the opportunities. Within such a framework as Bush presents in his 2010 speech, literacy is the antidote to social "imprisonment" and ignorance, two longstanding myths in the history of literacy in this country. Because the emphasis in this narrative is on individual opportunity, literacy then becomes a subjective commodity where some kinds of literacy are better than others. NCLB would later purport to measure appropriate literacy effects without accounting for equitable literacy opportunities. The CCSS notion of "sameness" in expectations would universalize this "opportunity" to acquire the right kind of literacy, thus making anything but success the fault and responsibility of an individual's failure to assert the proper desire, will, and effort.

When Obama delivered the centennial celebration speech to the NAACP in New York City in 2009, he referenced the Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and the Civil Rights Movement. He mentioned King, Howard University, and the importance of the NAACP organization in the history of the African American struggle. Obama, in contrast to Clinton and Bush, names structural inequality as the "racial barrier of our time." And just like Clinton and Bush, Obama, too, argues that we must "move forward" on the march of racial progress, raise standards, and remember that education is one of the keys to overcoming the obstacles that prevent the nation from achieving its ideological dream of racial equality. Like Clinton and Bush, Obama also expresses a nostalgic "return" to an earlier era as a solution to some of the current problems. In Obama's speech, it is "education" generally, rather than literacy specifically that gets endorsement in the

struggle for racial equality and the American Dream, but the tenets of neoliberalism are far more pronounced and stand in for the demand for an equal system.

Like the office of the president, the National Governors Association (NGA) is the public face of the elite venue known as state leadership. Just as the heads of the country have communicated particular messages linking literacy with racial gaps and progress, so too, has the NGA communicated that message on behalf of heads of state. The NGA runs its own website, archive, and database, as well as the NGA Center for Best Practices in Education. The NGA is one of two organizations—the other being the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)—that backed the writing and dissemination of the CCSS. Throughout the recent standards movement in education, the NGA has competed with the federal administration as to who should exert the most influence and control over education policy. While the office of the President views itself as having the right and purview of ensuring equal rights and opportunities in education, state leaders have always asserted that education is exclusively a states' rights issue. Just as the presidential speeches reflect a common and dominant national narrative of racial progress and the role of literacy, the NGA publications reflect similar patterns of shifting ideologies and perpetuation of certain myths. Given that the NGA is the political face of the CCSS, the trajectory of their beliefs about the intersections of literacy and racial justice directly impact the shape and purpose of the CCSS in solving the problem of the racial achievement gap in education. Just as “standards” arguably reflect white racial anxiety, the CCSS in literacy reflect a post-civil rights discourse that embraces a nostalgic “return” to something that has only ever existed as narrative fantasy.

HISTORY, NOSTALGIA, AND COMPATIBILITY

Most often, nostalgia gets discussed as a positive term that refers to longing for the past as it pertains to memories of happy experiences and comfort; almost akin to "homesickness." Such a conception of nostalgia implies that it can possibly be transformative by allowing an individual or a group to "unseat prevailing norms and orthodoxies," in effect approaching a revolutionary form of resistance. Derek Hook, however, finds that in post-apartheid South Africa, the predominant form of nostalgia is more sociopolitical than individual. Sociopolitical nostalgia is nostalgia that functions "within the parameters of popular discourse."⁵⁵⁴ This form of nostalgia functions both for the individual and for the larger society in terms of what one person, group, or collective finds "nostalgic," thus revealing how an individual, group, or collective sees their own perspective in relation to their social reality.

According to the CCSS, the "right" kind of literacy in today's American society is unfortunately the kind that represses the power of the past to transform the present and future. This requires careful engineering and oversight. In this way, the CCSS function as a narrative in and of themselves. This narrative has value, and arguably "purchase power."⁵⁵⁵ It can be exchanged and traded for education credentials, improved access to citizenship privileges, and participation in the American Dream. Viewing the Common Core in this way allows us to see this independent narrative as demonstrating the continuing effects of racism on our structures, our leaders, and our policymakers. Literacy, nostalgia, and new political alliances contribute to the current racialization

⁵⁵⁴ Norman Duncan and Garth Stevens and Cristopher C. Sonn. "Of Narratives and Nostalgia." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* (American Psychological Association) 18, no. 3 (2012), 226.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

processes in our present, and therefore, must be interrogated to deepen our understanding of the impact of these processes on shaping our future.

According to Derek Hook, nostalgia operates "1) in the economy of the ego, 2) in the mode of the fetish, 3) in the service of fantasy, 4) as an effect concealing anxiety, 5) as screen memory, and 6) as means of reifying the past or present rather than attending to relations of causation obtaining between past, present, and future."⁵⁵⁶ Hook and his team embarked on a project to try and recover "discomforting historical memories of South Africa's oppressive apartheid past," and discovered that there was much resistance on the part of both those who suffered under apartheid and those who benefitted. Hook is especially interested in the explosion of "nostalgia" as a post-apartheid trope in literature, media, and popular culture. He found that the "bittersweet enjoyment of memories of apartheid seems morally dubious," and indeed, the function of nostalgia in post-apartheid South Africa appeared to be as an obstruction to the actual truth of the past:

For if what divides communities is in part a function not only of history, but of partially recollected and/or differently recalled histories, then an exploration of different modalities of memory constitutes a clear sociopolitical imperative. Such projects of historical retrieval, of different types of remembering, hold out the promise of viewing the past anew, and consolidating a new order based on a joint commitment to confronting and 'working through' a divisive history.⁵⁵⁷

Hook's study of the function of nostalgia in post-apartheid South Africa is applicable to the presumed "post-racial" and "post-racist" United States. The emergence of the need for common state standards across the country and throughout the political spectrum speaks to the possibility and power of nostalgia as an operative force in the CCSS.

⁵⁵⁶ Hook, "Screened History: Nostalgia as Defensive Formation." 226

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Apartheid Archives Project are two attempts to collect and preserve the narratives of the past in a transitional society trying to overcome its racist and unequal history. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused on collecting the more famous and “representative” narratives of the apartheid experience, while the Apartheid Archives Project seeks to collect the narratives of “ordinary” people and their lived experiences under apartheid. The South African example is a useful comparison to a similar historical moment in the U.S., where we are currently undergoing a transitional time of shifting global economic patterns, rationed resources, redistribution of wealth, and the rise of the private over the public. All these transitions are happening in the same moment that the U.S. is attempting to define a new era for itself: the “post-racial” era. In this new era, race, racism, and racialization remain powerful forces as demonstrated by the material realities of America’s masses. Thus, the rights and entitlements of defining this era are still being negotiated. The CCSS implicitly serves a similar purpose: to archive narratives of the past in an effort to retain control and power over defining the present and future. To view the CCSS in ELA and literacy as an archive of narratives, as a project that endeavors to preserve a certain vision of the past in order to reify the present, allows us to examine the continuing effects of racism on American society through the political economy of literacy itself, the function of nostalgia, and the context of a hegemonic neoliberal pedagogy of education, resource distribution, and demarcated membership in the nation.

The CCSS in ELA and Literacy as a narrative project presents an attempt to bring coherence to a post-civil rights American society. Interestingly, it is the traditional guard of white wealthy elites who are experiencing profound incoherence about their own

identity as a collective authority with unchallenged access and privilege within American society. In truth, the social location and material realities of low-income racial minority families has not changed all that much as a result of new laws, policies, or “improved” degrees of literacy.

Hook discusses how the literature of psychoanalysis presents the idea of a “repressed” memory as an event that is somehow unresolved until there is a second event that provides perspective and thus resolution to the original event that has been preserved in memory. Hook refers to such memories as “screen memories” that provide a clue as to what has been “cut out, forgotten, repressed.”⁵⁵⁸ Screen memories represent something that has become “extra memorable.” The preservation and reinterpretation of the memory often includes embellishments, vivid imagery, and expressive details that do not accompany memories of other events connected to the screen memory. In the case of collective historical memory, the concept of “screen memories” is useful in analyzing the birth and use of a myth. Take the example of Rosa Parks and her brave action of sitting in the “white” section of the bus. The way this event gets told and retold portrays Rosa Parks as an elderly woman who got tired and inadvertently ended up reminding white authorities of their humanity. The nostalgic presentation of Rosa Parks as a little old lady on a bus disguises the actual truth of the historical event which threatens to rupture the fragile narrative of progressive and now, “post-racial” America. In actuality, Rosa Parks was 41 years old, active in political organizing and resistance to a racist society, and her arrest was strategically planned. Eclipsing the deliberate political organizing and replacing it with a screen memory of a harmless and tired old woman serves contemporary notions of the present and future. In truth, this history has not yet been

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

resolved. Racial segregation is still rampant, and structural inequality is worsening. The nostalgic presentation of Rosa Parks effectively disconnects this history from the present and preserves the conservative notion of America as always advancing toward equality in a linear fashion that involves the march of time and thus the temporal notion of “progress” through chronological progression. Such a portrayal does not allow for a nonlinear approach to this history as if it were still acting on the present and still a force in shaping the future. Those who write the narratives do so as unconscious expressions of their anxieties about the truth and power of history to act on the present and future identity of the nation.

Divorcing an historical text or event from its original context (decontextualization) allows the event to be “recontextualized.” Nostalgia serves the function of allowing an individual or group to recontextualize threatening historical traumas in order to render them impotent in determining the present or future. The very concept of time as linear and change as progress make it extremely difficult to retrieve such a screen memory and connect it differently to the past and present. Nostalgia tries to preserve the past as in the past—a temporal constraint—that is therefore disconnected to the present or future. Looking at the presence and role of nostalgia in rendering a “guilt-free” history demonstrates quite the opposite; historical happenings remain “simultaneously active” in shaping the present and future, and certain individuals and groups have definite anxieties about this. As Hook reminds us in his discussion of the impact of nostalgia on post apartheid South Africa, we remain aware that such history continuously shapes our present:

It means that today’s post apartheid era is still effectively under defined, subject to revision. It likewise means that the post apartheid future necessarily holds the

promise of traumatic recursions of inadequately processed or ‘ungrieved’ events the significance of which have yet to be realized.⁵⁵⁹

The same is true of a “post-racial” era America. In the United States, the so-called “post-racial era” is still trying to define itself against an overtly racist national past that is still very present. The civil rights era divides the two historical time periods, however unconsciously, and those who see themselves as politically powerful are anxious to define the post-racial era as opposed to the racist past while at the same time disavowing the structural inequalities that continue to characterize the racist present.

One of the effects of nostalgia as employed by the CCSS, is its ability to “de-familiarize the present” by reframing the conversation on racial inequality. The CCSS vision of a literate person, recommended content readings, narrowly defined reading and writing strategies all encourage a “reification of the present” by forcing a disconnect between the writings of the past and their historical context. The CCSS and their advocates have taken great pains to control for how the texts of the past are used in the present. They have engineered a method couched in the popularity of high standards that effectively “preserves select elements of the past while enabling a structured forgetting of others.”⁵⁶⁰ In this way, nostalgia serves to protect those groups experiencing guilt and shame over their perceived culpability in benefiting from the privileges of a racist system; nostalgia as defensive formation against these feelings. Those who view themselves in this way are highly motivated to revise historical understandings that will allow the current political powerbroker to stay grounded in their own fantasies of philanthropy and benevolence. They view themselves as keepers of the American Dream. And they want to preserve their morally righteous position to continue in that role

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 237.

moving forward. In essence, nostalgia serves the purpose of encouraging everyone to forget that we have a racist past, still have a racist present, and will undoubtedly have a racist future. This function of nostalgia is hard to detect in a society that typically views nostalgia as “romantic sentimentality” akin to kitsch trends and hipster fashion. In the case of the CCSS, the nostalgic vision of literacy demonstrates the incredible anxieties of policy makers and political entrepreneurs who seek to remedy their privileged legacy through reification of the present society as equal, meritocratic, and dependent on individual actions and responsibilities. The past in truth is irrelevant and even dangerous to such a vision.

Using literacy as a revered object becomes the mechanism for articulating a “safer before” in the vision of a literate person who is idealized as someone who reads the right documents in the right way as to not threaten the established order of the nation, not challenge power structures or inequality. In the words of the CCSS, this person stays within the “four corners of the text” in order to relegate the versions of truth and the past that could render an alternative interpretation of events, change the meaning of the historical documents, challenge the very creed of the United States. Literacy in the CCSS is thus necessarily conservative of a “safer before” that never actually existed except in narrative form for white elites. There is a longing for this virtual past in order to stabilize the shifting forces of identity at play today: the fast rise in technology, the availability of authorship to anyone, the egalitarian nature of social media, the rise of China, the flattening of the global world and the perceived fear that the US will not remain an empire. Literacy as fetishistic object within nostalgia allows the creators of the CCSS and the consumers of the standards (political leaders, etc.) to engage in a romantic fantasy that somehow the right kind of literacy will take us back to the moment just before the

civil rights era resulted in actual change: just before what some psychoanalytic scholars call “the perceived moment of castration” for the white male establishment. According to the NCTE review, this means a return to the early 1950’s. To present us with literacy as a way to suddenly expand membership in the nation and equalize access to its privileges for all the low income racial minority students in the public schools is to try and shape a vision of the future that conserves a faith in the American creed while simultaneously divorcing knowledge construction and the meaning of equality from the sphere of material reality.

In trying to understand the widespread and rapid consensus for the CCSS in ELA and Literacy, I especially appreciate the work of scholars like Michael Apple, Kristen Buras, Carol Lee, and Lisa Duggan. From their work, I was able to analyze the “common sense” required for new literacy standards, the cultural and racial work of this kind of literacy at this time, and the economic agenda behind it all. In presenting my conclusions, I will take some time to revisit their research so that I may situate my conclusions within this larger conversation about race, culture, literacy, and neoliberalism.

Scholar Michael Apple refers to the neoliberal turn in the US as tantamount to the “reconstruction of common sense” that has effectively produced a new alliance of power brokers committed to finding neoliberal answers to all of society’s problems. With education being one of the most contested and unresolved “social problems” in the country, the field is ripe with what Apple calls the “new managerialism” or middle class, devoted to the technologies of accountability, measurement, and surveillance. Such an assemblage of power cuts across party lines and religious affiliations. It results in an unexamined easy consensus of institutional management. Indeed, much of the literature on education reform is a literature of rhetorical blaming where the left criticizes the right,

and the neoconservatives wage war on the liberals. And while each side has certainly helped shape the federal policies and state structures that have gotten us to where we are today, the results suggest that players on all sides share a new and revised form of “common sense” that serves a neoliberal agenda.⁵⁶¹

In 2008, Kristin Buras set out to investigate the project of conservative modernization and its impact on schools. This "rightist formation" practices a "politics of restoration aimed at undermining the limited, progressive gains of the past several decades and delegitimizing the political demands of oppressed groups for cultural recognition and economic redistribution."⁵⁶² Buras draws on Apple's work where he identifies four specific groups whose interests and resources have coalesced into a powerful force: neoliberals, authoritarian populists, a "technically-skilled fraction of the middle class," and neoconservatives.⁵⁶³ While each group had its own motives and particular struggles, the four agendas have found common ground in the field of education. With neoliberals arguing for the market-driven privatization of education, authoritarian populists seek to maintain moral authority through religious dictates, textbook revisions, and tax credits for homeschooling or voucher programs. The new managerial middle class seeks to dominate the expanding professional bureaucracies of accountability, testing, and surveillance within education, and the neoconservatives seek a "return" to a mythic past of higher standards and national supremacy through a restoration of some idealistic social order.

⁵⁶¹ Michael Apple. *Educating the "Right" Way*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001.

⁵⁶² Kristin Buras. *Rightist Multiculturalism: Core Lessons on Neoconservative School Reform*. Routledge, 2008, 3.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

It is this last group who focuses on curriculum and pedagogical concerns. Buras' work sheds light on the efforts of this last group to bring about reform in education through an emphasis on content knowledge and curriculum reforms. She focuses on illuminating the influence of E.D. Hirsch and the Core Knowledge movement begun in the late 1980's. Her findings represent an important modern trend in ideology regarding literacy and national identity.

Buras determined that educational initiatives, like the Core Knowledge movement, designed to push back against the "threat" of multiculturalism appealed to members of traditionally marginalized groups. She concluded that a "decisive compromise" was reached, where "through such compromise, select reforms partly speak to the concerns of marginalized communities and often with their consent while they simultaneously sustain relations of cultural domination."⁵⁶⁴ Buras discovered that neoconservatives felt that multiculturalism was divisive to the national culture, and so they sought a way to "return" America to its greatness by defining and sharing their definition of "cultural literacy" through specifically identifying content to be studied at each grade level of schooling, translations of this content in multiple languages, and supplementing this content with additional tools for use by parents and teachers.

Unlike other conservative organizations, Hirsch and the Core Knowledge Foundation did not espouse a separatist agenda, but rather took what they qualified as a "unifying" approach. Where some conservative organizations hoarded resources and sought to protect members of their own ilk, Hirsch and his foundation published books like *What Your Kindergartener-Sixth Grader Needs to Know* series, translated it into Spanish, and offered the materials free of charge. The result was a very successful

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 7.

hegemonic strategy which Buras labels “rightist multiculturalism.” Hirsch and his foundation compromised on their inclusion of canonical texts by incorporating a handful of representative works by women and people of color in order to appeal to the masses of Americans who were looking to “belong” in the annals of American history and society. What Buras concludes is that this “rightist multiculturalism” appealed to the “cultural sensibilities of marginalized groups while at the same time steering those sensibilities in dominant cultural directions.”⁵⁶⁵

Much of these same conclusions can be drawn about the CCSS with regards to literacy. There does exist an elitist, conservative tenor in the content and methodology recommended for the teaching of literacy. There is also ample evidence to suggest the influence of neoliberalism. My project builds on this research base by extending these into the 21st century and looking at the nuances of these trends on the making of the most significant education reform document in the history of U.S. public schools.

To answer my own original question of why there is such tolerance for growing inequalities and such consent for the structures that exacerbate them, it is not just "common sense" that we collectively experience, but rather it is "compatibility" with the new politics of equality under neoliberalism. There is no cognitive dissonance when we unconsciously seek out compliantly neoliberal options for organizing the narrative of our reality. The CCSS is compatible with this new reality and serves to provide a moral narrative that purports to support equality through neoliberal principles. Thus, it seems compatible, and we find ourselves wondering why we didn't do this sooner. For many of us, the new literacy standards just seem to be the logical next step in the march toward coherence and alignment in education. The CCSS in ELA and Literacy use our cultural

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

sense, including a nostalgic return to a particular time in the nation's history, to achieve a two-fold purpose: to reconstruct knowledge and to redefine equality in ways that make public education compatible with the growth of free markets. The racial and cultural nature of the literacy document thus produces both new and reified effects.

How has this literacy document, the CCSS, eluded traditional democratic accountability measures and become the organizing force for school reform in the US? In short, the answer is that the CCSS in ELA and Literacy provide a democratic face for the exacerbated inequalities of neoliberalism, thereby generating the support of liberals and conservatives, democrats and republicans, the under-resourced and the wealthy. Widespread consensus was achieved because the CCSS maintain the illusion of democratic equality while serving the agenda of neoliberal hegemony. Borrowing on Lisa Duggan's notion of how neoliberal hegemony gets produced, I conclude that the CCSS in ELA and Literacy have presented literacy as a "neutral" means for economic ends, that the standards have served to obscure the real agenda, and that the contemporary political context has allowed for new assemblages of individual "edupreneurs" and new policymakers that do not require a public or a government to govern.⁵⁶⁶

Because the CCSS in ELA and Literacy have been presented as a "neutral" means for economic ends, the standards have been able to draw on the moral authority and mythical qualities of literacy to avoid the traditional processes of democratic accountability. In national and educational discourse, advanced literacy is consistently equated to national development. Focusing on improving literacy is typically considered to be beyond reproach. When the CCSS designers locate the need for better literacy to

⁵⁶⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the framework for neoliberal hegemony, see Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003.

help remedy the impending U.S. international economic “crisis,” the case for presenting measurable skills for “college and career readiness” can appear to be a foregone conclusion.

The CCSS have presented literacy as a neutral and technical set of isolated skills that are in the best interest of the individual student who wants to be successful and upwardly mobile. This fits with the popular vision of 21st century life, personal devices, and increased access to literacy resources. These isolated skills suggest that literacy is an achievable status broken down into a specific set of autonomous skills packaged for consumption and intended as a private good for exchange in the free market. This efficient and measurable set of literacy skills is completely divorced from meaningful histories, relations, or effects of the ascribed identities based on race and class. While relying on the very real inequalities created by the history of racism and oppression in this country, the CCSS offer literacy as anti-dote expressly because they believe it to be race-neutral. This false neutrality encourages the further separation of the arenas of race, economics, and politics. What remains is a new politics of equality where, like literacy, equality is repackaged as an achievable status: accessible, measurable, and most importantly, consumable.

The CCSS in ELA and Literacy also serve the development of neoliberal hegemony by obscuring the real agenda of contemporary reform actions. In this environment, education reform is presented as a rhetorical battle between liberals and conservatives where the former is accused of acting exclusively on identity politics and the latter is portrayed as right-wing elitists only promoting economic principles that serve the 1%. In actuality, we can see from the policies generated by the Reagan, Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations as being closely aligned, despite their perceived party

affiliation. For example, the Bush administration is responsible for the design and enactment of the NCLB law, by all accounts the closest demonstration to federal overreach in education to this day. Meanwhile, the Obama administration runs a competition for educational grants that endorses the adoption of the CCSS; a process overseen by an education secretary who is on record as saying that the racial integration of the public schools should be voluntary.⁵⁶⁷ The title says it all: *Race to the Top*. The traditional demarcations between the conservative and liberal political leaders have eroded in favor of a common economic agenda that emphasizes the upward flow of capital, the centralization of governing authority, and the value of merit-based competition---all done in the *terms* of race and class---that continues to grow the social and racial inequalities that define our reality.

The shifting political landscape under neoliberalism has resulted in new political assemblages that have succeeded in redirecting education policy projects to a tiny group of elite individuals whose qualifications are reduced to having the desire, the will, the network, and the marketing skills to get the product developed and sold. Operating almost exclusively on private funding, the processes and products are no longer subject to traditional forms of democratic accountability. The explosion of the private sector, including exponential numbers of foundations and non-profits, now control the direction of education reform. With political leaders embracing education as an economic issue and not a traditionally racial issue, state leaders took advantage of the new climate to join forces with the private sector and potentially regain some of the lost power and influence of the gubernatorial position.

⁵⁶⁷ Richard Rothstein, "What Arne Duncan's Comments On Racial Integration Reveal," Economic Policy Institute, 2013.

At the risk of reducing a valiant effort to craft standards and improve education, I must point out that the intersection of the profit-driven private sector with the potential \$7 billion education market resulted in some predictable outcomes. Corporate monies were made available to serve corporate intentions. And while many would argue this does not have to be viewed as a bad thing in and of itself (career preparation through public education), the successful marketing of the new product meant selling a new kind of literacy to the most wealthy and literate society in the world. This led to economic goals being framed in terms of race and class (cultural meanings) that falsely resonated with the impact of social realities and daily material life for so many people. While the original CCSS project was rhetorically represented as being done in the name of racial justice and social equality, the literacy standards were designed in such a way as to evade a terrain saturated with race and class inequalities.

The new neoliberal politics of equality requires that "equality" be understood as a status to be achieved, separate from economics and politics. It requires that public education be compatible with the new upward culture of redistribution, which means that all students must focus on the economic requirements to achieve equality: mastering the new brand of CCSS literacy to get the college degree that can be exchanged for the job that will lead to a lifetime of economic security. At face value, this is a real improvement from being pre-emptively excluded from such opportunities based on racial discrimination. Instead of examining the reality of the relations that have led to inequalities based on the real categories of meaning like race and class, we are now only allowed to focus on private goods, social mobility, and institutions that provide the commodities for exchange. The expedited closing of schools that fail to meet standard is one example of how this new equality politics works. Upwards of 85% of the school

closings are in predominantly low-income neighborhoods with an overwhelming majority of black and brown students. Capital must move and these schools represent surplus populations in the new political economy of schooling, not unlike the fate of poor Black neighborhoods in the gentrification of cities. The CCSS in literacy serve as the moral rationale for transitioning the once public institution of schooling to a privatized citizen-production system that maximizes profit and efficiency and is compatible with the latest phase of neoliberal hegemony. And it does this through supporting--however consciously or unconsciously—the separation and removal of literacy from any real material outcomes of social and racial inequality.

Coleman’s proclamation that “People really don’t give a shit about what you feel or what you think,”⁵⁶⁸ in addition to being a media sensation, became the mantra for education policymakers and leaders; student thoughts and feelings simply don’t matter in public education policy-making. In one sentence, Coleman summed up the underlying rationale of a decade of federal and state literacy efforts that culminated in the eventual creation and adoption of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy: we must emphasize isolated informational facts over the stories that can tell us the truth about the world in which we live.

One of the outstanding characterizations of the CCSS in ELA and Literacy is that they undermine the credibility of fiction as a possible critical authority of the American experience. In literature, fiction has traditionally been seen as privileging feeling, intuition, emotion, and narrative over the mere presentation of historical “fact.” There is a long and rich literary tradition of fiction written by members of historically oppressed

⁵⁶⁸ David Coleman. Video: “Keynote Speech from David Coleman: Contributing Author of the Common Core Standards.” June 10th, 2011, presented to Chancellor Walcott’s Principal Conference, NYC.

groups in this society. The African American, Hispanic/Latino-a, Native American and Asian American communities have employed story telling as a method of political and social critique for centuries.⁵⁶⁹ Such literary movements have often been classified as a “revolt” against the long-term effects of nationalism that involve the formation of oppressive government structures, social and political norms, and “rationalization.” When the CCSS claim to emphasize the importance of “informational texts” over “literary texts,” the explicit message is “fact over fiction,” but the implicit message is a complete redefinition of the quality of knowledge itself; “fiction is not informative and has nothing practical to teach us.”

How might this emphasis on informational texts advance the agenda of upward redistribution of resources? Non-fiction is defined as "practical" because it is vocational, rational, literal, and descriptive. Non-fiction is safe and compatible with the tenets of neoliberal equality politics. Fiction, on the other hand, is dangerous because it is interpretive, creative, volatile, inspirational, and figurative. Such analysis provides a social commentary by depicting the actual relations of power that exist between peoples, groups, nations, and economic forces. Both non-fiction and fiction use the same set of words drawn from the same linguistic resources, but the structures, purpose, and organization of information is often very different. Non-fiction reports the truth, but fiction can construct the narrative and empower a student's ability to make connections and see a system or structure for what it really is. Such perspective can be dangerous in a

⁵⁶⁹ For a discussion of modern black American political thought through the works of fiction, see especially Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Harper Perennial, 1944; Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Vintage International, 1947; Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Plume, 1987; and Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*, Amistad, 2004.

market society focused on law and order and the culture of upward redistribution of resources.

While the European model of human growth and development identifies major milestones, stages, and other common factors that mark a typical experience of one child traversing from infancy to adulthood, Lee maintains that African American students, and the children of many racial and ethnic minority families in both urban and rural areas, had to be prepared to manage the “normal” obstacles of adolescence while at the same time dealing with the racism that constrained their opportunities in unique ways. “Thus, the developmental challenge for this youth is to manage both the normative challenges, for example, of adolescence, and the challenges that he or she faces attributable to societal stigmatization. The work of schooling sits inside this quandary.”⁵⁷⁰

The work of James Anderson and Vanessa Siddle-Walker among others demonstrate that schools existing at the height of Jim Crow succeeded in successfully preparing students for both academics and life.⁵⁷¹ In these schools, children encountered “multiple safety nets” that allowed them to connect with their communities and develop relationships with adults and resources that increased the social networks and supports they needed to understand themselves at school and in life. Lee points out that:

Despite living at the height of de jure segregation and Jim Crow, these schools were organized to create multiple safety nets for youth (i.e., working relationships between families and schools, caring teachers, a culture of high expectations, and an expansive rather than a restrictive curriculum) with the goal of teaching them

⁵⁷⁰ Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity," 75.

⁵⁷¹ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*. University of North Carolina Press, 1988; Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: an African American School Community in the Segregated South*. University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

not to be beaten down by overt racism and discrimination but to excel in spite of it.⁵⁷²

Historically, academic subjects, especially literacy, have played a role in the development of resilience to racial discrimination and injustice. However, scholars of color consistently argue that school programs must provide the language and explicit knowledge of histories and cultures of racism in order to contribute to this resilience. Without such an explicit purpose and message, any school program, policy, or practice risks contributing to an erasure and denial of this history, further enabling the invisibility of cultures of resilience in the face of injustice, cultures of literacy for liberatory purposes, and histories of individuals and communities thriving despite the racist constraints of society.

In contrast, the CCSS present historical documents for textual analysis as a bucolic civics lesson for all US students. In the CCSS, the language of discrimination is reduced to a few token readings of MLK et al, devoid of historical context. These readings are presented for analysis as a document of the past, something now gone, rather than a commentary on the present or future. Students are expected to rely on self-help, a positive attitude, and an unquestioning faith in the American education system and institutions to treat everyone equally and therefore provide them with equal opportunities, experiences, and resources to help them thrive in society. However, because of the denial of material reality, many of these students would be forced to denounce their own families and communities in order not to experience the dissonance required for academic success with the CCSS. While the drafters of the CCSS went through schooling with state help (in the form of scholarships and financial awards) poor and racial minority students are supposed to make it on their will alone. Yet in their world, school has not necessarily

⁵⁷² Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity," 76.

raised up their community, and it has not significantly increased the living wages of their family members. Under the CCSS, students are supposed to view the members of their own communities as failures and reminders of the worst that can happen. In essence, the CCSS requires that students not see these people as mentors or support networks, but instead as failures worthy of condemnation.

Ultimately, Lee argues that schools must play a significant role in helping students manage the dissonance that occurs between their informal and formal settings in order to help children make sense of their world. Lee cites the scholarship of many regarding the relationship between “political views of equality and fairness and achievement in school.”⁵⁷³ Low-income students of color often have to contend with such dissonance about their own lived experience versus the narrative of equality and fairness they receive at school. Within such a climate, the CCSS at best offer a “race-neutral” package of color-blind high expectations. The result is further dissonance for students and for some, a forced rejection of family and community.

Lee argues that any and all reform efforts currently underway, name equity as a goal, and simultaneously assume the same approach will create equity for all students. At the same time, none of these programs is demonstrating any kind of significant or sustained equitable outcomes for students from non-dominant groups.⁵⁷⁴ Because of this, Lee attempts to offer a model of “informal settings” that will accomplish the goal of equity by taking the ecological and cultural context of individual students into account. She notes:

These commonsense, everyday efforts to facilitate the development of our children are possible by recognizing salient aspects of their identities, their

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 76.

perceptions of themselves and the tasks that we want them to master, the ways in which their emotional states influence their efforts, and the kinds of guided supports they need to feel competent. We consider the influences of their peers and what is happening in their neighborhood that helps or hinders, but we do all of this work with the explicit expectation that we will succeed and that our children are capable. This is work that both middleclass and lower income parents alike do, despite arguments to the contrary.⁵⁷⁵

Lee's approach views the context within which students live as essential to their successful academic learning. This context is made up of historical as well as contemporary players and dynamics. It involves working for and against influential factors in the everyday material reality of children. This is the complete opposite of the CCSS philosophy of literacy learning. While Lee explains what must be recognized for children to feel valued and be able to use their academic pursuits as a way of understanding themselves and society better, the CCSS practically require that children from non-dominant groups leave their identities, cultural and ecological contexts, and historical legacies at the classroom door. If they want to become that vision of the literate person for the 21st century, today's student must be willing and able to believe in the abstraction of text, the isolation of literacy practices, and the denial of literacy effects.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

Chapter 9: Conclusion: Addressing the National Education Debt

In this final chapter, I revisit the potential for the CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy to enhance an equity agenda by resolving the ubiquitous racial achievement gap in education. Returning to the concept of “debt” and “indebtedness” as applied to the African American community, I explore the promise and the limitations of school-based literacy standards to solve what have become permanent social, political, economic, historical, and moral problems in American society.

The African American community in particular, has been wrestling with the notion of “debt” since long before the official neoliberal economy hit the US in any organized way in the 1970’s. Debt has always been a feature of African American citizenship and enfranchisement. Post-emancipation debt, described by DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, served to keep everyone working and toiling constantly.⁵⁷⁶ And Saidiya Hartman also discusses debt and indebtedness as permanent condition for African American community post-emancipation.⁵⁷⁷ She claims that to be responsible is to be blameworthy, and that this is part of the burden of so-called freedom. “Undeniably, inequality was the basis of the forms of economic and social relations that developed in the aftermath of emancipation.”⁵⁷⁸ Arguably, this same dynamic characterizes today’s social relations. “In short, to be free was to be a debtor---that is, obliged and duty-bound to others. Thus the inaugural gestures that opened these texts announced the advent of freedom and at the same time attested to the impossibility of escaping slavery.”⁵⁷⁹ One of

⁵⁷⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Bantam Classic, 1903. See especially chapter VIII: “The Quest for the Golden Fleece.”

⁵⁷⁷ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997. See especially chapter 5: “Fashioning Obligation: Indebted Servitude and the Fetters of Slavery.”

⁵⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

the first projects for newly emancipated peoples was school-based literacy set up by the Freedman's Bureau with instructional delivery happening largely at the hands of white women who came down from the Northeast to teach. With federally supported education efforts starting off on unequal grounds, the progress toward democratic equality would be a long, slow, and differentiated journey for members of the African American community.

Public Education is a central institution of American governance and it affects the shape of our disciplinary fields, the abilities of the scholars who enter these fields, and our conceptualization of what it means to be American today. Education, and by association, literacy, is quintessentially a nation-making project. So what does it mean for this nation that in education, there is a persistent pattern of money, resources, high test scores, and accumulated wealth following the concentrations of white students in our public schools? Conversely, there is a persistent pattern of chronic failure, underperformance, and generations of poverty following the concentrations of racial minority students in this country. This pattern, commonly referred to as the racial "achievement gap," exists alongside the national narrative of racial progress that includes the election of the first African American President of the United States, the overturning of affirmative action policies, and the legal nullification of key aspects of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As an American studies researcher, I can ask, "In what ways is the Common Core State Standards an answer to the persistent problem of the 'achievement gap' in education?" I turn to scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings' argument for a reduction in the national education debt to see what the CCSS in ELA and Literacy might do.

In 2005, I attended the American Educational Research Association's annual conference in San Francisco. Gloria Ladson-Billings was the acting president of the

organization at that time, and delivered the traditional Presidential Address. This address, titled, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools,” was Ladson-Billings’ argument for how contemporary measures targeting the present problem of the achievement gap would surely fail because they did not make a dent in the national education debt. Ladson-Billings delivered this argument alongside slides of children and families struggling to cope with the recent devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The hurricane exposed a differentiated impact on racialized communities in New Orleans depending on their geographical location, the integrity of the buildings in various neighborhoods, and the accessibility to help and resources following the storm. While all neighborhoods suffered in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, some suffered more and for longer because the state of their pre-hurricane communities made them disproportionately vulnerable in the face of the storm. This analogy provided the framework for Ladson-Billings argument that we must approach education reform as a long-term problem resulting from an enormous national education debt. The education debt, according to Ladson-Billings, is comprised of four components: historical debt, economic debt, sociopolitical debt, and moral debt. If any sweeping reform efforts are to eliminate the achievement gap, she contends, they must first propose plans for consolidating and eliminating the accrued national debt in all four areas.

According to Ladson-Billings, the historical aspect of the education debt includes a laundry list of educational inequalities that have persisted since the country was founded.

In the case of African Americans, education was initially forbidden during the period of enslavement. After emancipation we saw the development of freedmen's schools whose purpose was the maintenance of a servant class. During the long period of legal apartheid, African Americans attended schools where they received cast-off textbooks and materials from white schools. In the South, the

need for farm labor meant that the typical school year for rural Black students was about four months long. Indeed, Black students in the South did not experience universal secondary schooling until 1968 (Anderson, 2002). Why, then, would we not expect there to be an achievement gap?⁵⁸⁰

The case of Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans also reflects a similar struggle for education throughout American history. The result is a compounded accumulation of education debt. Ladson-Billings is careful to point out that such results did not happen by accident, but rather by the design of the nation's leaders.

It is important to point out that the historical debt was not merely imposed by ignorant masses that were xenophobic and virulently racist. The major leaders of the nation endorsed ideas about the inferiority of Black, Latino/a, and Native peoples. Thomas Jefferson (1816), who advocated for the education of the American citizen, simultaneously decried the notion that Blacks were capable of education. George Washington, while deeply conflicted about slavery, maintained a substantial number of slaves on his Mount Vernon Plantation and gave no thought to educating enslaved children.⁵⁸¹

Racism has not been an exception to what has otherwise been an equitable institution, but rather racism is a founding pillar of both the nation and the nation's system of education. The structures and practices that preserved the racial boundaries, effects, and privileges have worked. We have inherited the unequal results of generations of unequal treatment in the nation and in the educational system. One of the many outcomes of this history has been what Ladson-Billings calls the "ironies of the historical debt," namely, that the fruits of the labor produced by enslaved and exploited peoples was used to profit those white communities who already had the benefits of education. Historically, national education was at times denied, rationed, restricted, and indifferent for poor and racial minority communities. Fast-forward to 2015 and we see education by fiat, mandated, racially

⁵⁸⁰ Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt": Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools." *Educational Researcher* (American Educational Research Association) 35, no. 7 (October 2006): 5.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

concentrated, highly surveilled, constantly measured, and overwhelming penal for poor and racial minority communities.

While the Common Core State Standards are devoid of any explicit mention of centuries of racial injustice, the formation and adoption of the CCSS by the majority of states happened in response to a racialized context and a new acceptable definition of “race” in educational discourse. Indeed, proponents of the CCSS often cite “standards” as the way to advance an “equality of expectations” for “all” students. Underlying this statement is the belief that the last 40 years of “declines” in education are a direct result of low expectations for students in the public schools. Just who has these low expectations or who is responsible for their appearance is never clearly articulated, but the chronic pattern is commonly known as the racial “achievement gap.” President George W. Bush named the “soft bigotry of low expectations” experienced by racial minority students as a common root cause of the achievement gap. The president claimed to counter this bigotry by his signature “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) law of 2001. The connection between NCLB and the CCSS can be found in the standards movement in education. Both the federal law and the national initiative of the CCSS rest on the assumption that higher academic standards will result in higher academic performance on standardized tests. In actuality, this assumption did not begin or end with George W. Bush, but rather, like many education reforms, this assumption is rooted in the demands of civil rights organizations that advocated on behalf of racial reforms in education. By 2005, the National Governor’s Association (NGA) named the achievement gap as a “matter of race and class.”⁵⁸² By 2007, the NGA sponsored non-profit organization, later

⁵⁸² National Governor’s Association webpage, “Closing the Achievement Gap,” (Achieve, Inc 2006) www.NGA.org. Interestingly, this web page has since been pulled from the NGA website.

the hub for all things CCSS, reframed the achievement gap as an “expectations gap” existing between those who are “proficient” and those who are truly “prepared” for college and careers.⁵⁸³ Borrowing from the rhetoric of these organizations, the CCSS became the antidote to the achievement-gap-turned-expectations-gap that would qualify states for the significant monies available to the winners of President Obama’s “Race to the Top” (RTTT) competition in 2010. Because the RTTT applications required states to have College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS), the CCSS filled this need, earned each adopting state a chunk of points on their application, and saved the state from having to fund such a standards revision process of their own. In short, the CCSS borrow from the rhetoric on standards and expectations to support the argument that “equality of expectations” will be enough to level the academic playing field once and for all. Rather than redress historical wrongs, the CCSS supports the notion that “equality of opportunity for success” in 2015 is sufficient to level the playing field for all of America’s students.

Ladson-Billings describes the economic aspect of the education debt as being borne of a consistent and persistent disparity in monetary support for schools serving predominantly poor and racial minority children and families. While she reminds us that correlation is not necessarily causation, she does wonder “why the funding inequities map so neatly and regularly onto the racial and ethnic realities of our schools.”⁵⁸⁴ She explains how the availability of resources “rises with the rise in White students,” so while many will claim that we can no longer say that schools are not adequately funded because of their demographic, she does call attention to how the correlation remains an historical fact.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸³ Achieve, Inc., “Closing the Expectations Gap,” American Diploma Project Network, 2006.

⁵⁸⁴ Ladson-Billings, “From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt,” 6.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

According to Ladson-Billings, another aspect of the economic education debt involves the earning ratios of various racial groups related to years of schooling. She notes that wages of black high school graduates in relation to whites went up in the 1970's, then back down in the 1980's and 1990's. "While earnings ratios show us how people are (or were) doing at particular points in time, they do not address the cumulative effect of such income disparities."⁵⁸⁶ She cites the work of economists Altonji and Dorzelski (2005) on the difference between a wealth gap and an income gap. Ladson-Billings concludes, "So while the income gap more closely resembles the achievement gap, the wealth disparity better reflects the education debt that I am attempting to describe."⁵⁸⁷

The CCSS professes to address the wealth disparity among racial groups by offering the promise of individual social mobility upon mastery of its prescribed 21st century literacy skills. The economic prosperity of the nation is by far the most popular justification for the creation and implementation of the CCSS.⁵⁸⁸ However, there is a conundrum in its premise. The CCSS present public schooling as being for the purposes of a private good. In other words, literacy is offered up as a commodity that students later trade in for degrees, jobs, and income. Equating private goods to the overall public good assumes that we are all consumers of an education where the purpose of schools is to make us "winners." In his excellent analysis of the "American Struggle Over Educational Goals," scholar David F. Labaree usefully outlines the goals, purposes, views, functions, beliefs, and results, of such approaches to schooling. True to the current political and

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.,7.

⁵⁸⁸ For further support of the economic justification for adoption of the CCSS, see the press releases of supporting governors, *Something in Common*, and additional books and articles by journalist and education historian, Robert Rothman.

economic trends in this country, advocating the purpose of schooling as being for the upward social mobility of the individual student fosters capitalist markets, private rights, individual liberty, and social inequality. After all, the only social inequality that exists under such a model is the inequality of preparation in the competition for the best market roles. According to Labaree, “The social mobility goal puts a democratic face on the inequalities of capitalism.”⁵⁸⁹ Far from countering the longstanding income and wealth gaps resulting from a long history of racial injustice, the CCSS completely abstracts literacy from the lived realities of students, denies the existence of wealth disparities, and offers the promise of an “equality of opportunity” as a sufficient strategy to win a social mobility game that has been rigged for centuries.

In discussing the extent of the sociopolitical aspect of the national education debt, Ladson-Billings reminds of the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civil process. She recalls historical examples of how communities of color have had little or no access to the franchise. She cites the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as a significant and bold attempt to surpass case-by-case litigation and seek to cast a wider net and make the widespread changes necessary to eradicate this debt. She says it is hard to imagine such an equally drastic legislative action on behalf of our children in schools:

Imagine that an examination of the achievement performance of children of color provoked an immediate reassignment of the nation’s best teachers to the schools serving the most needy students. Imagine that those same students were guaranteed places in state and regional colleges and universities. Imagine that within one generation we lift those students out of poverty.⁵⁹⁰

She cites affirmative action as the closest comparison. She says that "Rather than wait for students of color to meet predetermined standards, the society decided to recognize that

⁵⁸⁹ Labaree, "Public Goods," 72.

⁵⁹⁰ Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt," 7.

historically denied groups should be given a preference in admission to schools and colleges."⁵⁹¹ She also points out how white women have proved to be the group that has benefitted most from affirmative action policies.

In the end, Ladson-Billings reminds us that “a major aspect of the modern civil rights movement was the quest for quality schooling.”⁵⁹² She cites scholars like James Anderson, whose work showcases the historical efforts of families of color to provide and sustain a quality education for their children. However, she maintains “their more limited access to lawyers and legislators has kept them from accumulating the kinds of political capital that their white, middle-class counterparts have.”⁵⁹³

In response to this debt, the CCSS offers little or no remedy. It does not discuss the limitations of representation on the committees formed to draft and review the standards, it does not offer a warning about the potential for standardization with common standards,⁵⁹⁴ and it does not offer a plan for how traditionally underserved students should transgress years of inadequate education to suddenly and successfully meet these standards. It does, however, profess to prepare all students for “college and career success.” In other words, the students who can meet these standards will have achieved “equality of preparation.”

Ladson-Billings draws on the work of sociologists both here and abroad to argue that we must acknowledge what we owe to entire groups of historically oppressed people in order to redress the moral aspect of the national education debt. She cites David Gill and his book, *Being Good*, when she says,

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ibid.

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of these concerns over common standards leading to standardization of education generally, see the work of Alfie Kohn.

We bemoan the loss of civil discourse and rational debate, but the real danger of our discussions about morality is that they reside solely in the realm of the individual. We want people to take personal responsibility for their behavior, personal responsibility for their welfare, and personal responsibility for their education. However, in democratic nations, that personal responsibility must be coupled with social responsibility.⁵⁹⁵

She discusses the idea of “moral panic” as something that happens when we realize the disparity between what we owe and what we actually do. She even cites Saint Thomas Aquinas and his definition of moral debt as what we owe to each other when we fail to give the honor to some that is due to them. She says we have no problem recognizing the moral debt we owe to some people of color, like MLK, but "...how do we recognize the moral debt that we owe to entire groups of people? How do we calculate such a debt?"⁵⁹⁶ She claims that this is a tremendous undertaking given "that the labor and efforts of people of color have sustained the nation."⁵⁹⁷

Again, the CCSS does not explicitly address the implications of this debt on the educational achievement of poor and racial minority students. In fact the CCSS do explicitly claim that the “standards should be recognized for they are as well as what they are not.” The CCSS in English Language Arts and Literacy names the following six “intentional design limitations” as being the following: the standards do not define how teachers should teach, they are not the same thing as curriculum, they do not “define the nature of advanced work,” they do not define the “intervention methods or materials necessary to support students who are well below or well above grade-level expectations,” they also do not define the supports necessary for the success of ELL

⁵⁹⁵ Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt," 8.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid.

students, and they do not “define the whole” of college and career readiness.⁵⁹⁸ Loosely interpreted, the CCSS does not provide anything in the way of moral debt reduction. According to the explanation of what the CCSS are not, they almost guarantee the reproduction of inequality that exists currently.

When put to the test of reducing or eliminating the national education debt owed to generations of poor and racial minority peoples, the CCSS fails miserably. It falls short of being a true social movement or literacy campaign because the standards have arguably been adopted and implemented without the support of the public itself. Without being tested, critiqued, or revised, the CCSS is a case in point of how reforms in public education are supporting the upward distribution of wealth to the few without the consent of the many. Encouraging a top-down managerial approach to education reform, the CCSS does not address or redress the national education debt, but it does serve the evolving neoliberal project in a racially unjust society by providing the 21st century rhetoric, rationale, and reproduction of the status quo.

Lee et al maintain that schools today must actively and consciously participate in creating learning environments and social networks that will allow students from non-dominant groups to acquire flexible knowledge in the context of cultural and ecological awareness.

One problematic issue for teaching generative knowledge in schools serving minority youth from low-income communities, particularly in schools and districts with long histories of low achievement, is the limitations of traditional educational approaches to understand the points of leverage between everyday

⁵⁹⁸ Common Core State Standards Initiative. "Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects." *Common Core State Standards*. Common Core State Standards Initiative. 2010. <http://www.corestandards.org>. 6.

knowledge rooted in the routine experiences of these youth and the demands of specialized learning in the content areas.⁵⁹⁹

Because the CCSS offers a very prescriptive program of standards and recommended texts, and even specific lessons, teachers and school leaders will likely place even less emphasis on the incorporation of relevant cultural and ecological knowledge into everyday schooling for students. Instead, the CCSS encourages students to learn content only from the texts, to make meaning only from information contained in the texts, and to analyze this meaning only in relation to race-neutral assumptions and an assumed colorblind American history. Rather than building off the long and extensive research that shows how much better students of color do in school when the material takes into account these factors, the CCSS imposes an “external locus of control” to send the message that the right kind of literacy develops when the student reads, writes, and thinks as if context did not matter.

Given the well-documented culture of low expectations in schools with concentrated populations of poor and racial minority children, the CCSS offer an even higher, abstracted academic bar for which even more students will be expected to fall short. The assumption that the existence of higher standards will mean that individual teacher expectations will change is a naïve one. Given that over 80% of teachers are white and not of the communities within which they teach, the likelihood that teachers will assume a deficit model is even greater. Contrary to the preachings of the CCSS proponents, making the tasks and tests even harder and more abstract almost guarantees that students will fail out and believe they have only themselves to blame.

⁵⁹⁹ Lee, "Historical Evolution of Risk and Equity," 83.

Glossary

AEA	Adult Education Act
AYP	Annual Yearly Progress
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
CCSSO	Council of Chief State School Officers
CROSAS	Civil Rights Organizations for Standards and Accountability
CRT	Critical Race Theory
ELA	English Language Arts
ESEA	Elementary and Secondary Education Act
IRA	International Reading Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
NAGB	National Assessment Governing Board
NAR	Nation At Risk
NAS	National Academy of Science
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCTE	National Council on Teachers of English
NCTM	National Council on Teachers of Mathematics
NLA	National Literacy Act
NGA	National Governors Association
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RTTT	Race to the Top
SAP	Student Achievement Partners
SEIP	State Education Improvement Partnerships
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VC	Validation Committee

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