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Literacy's Levels: An Analysis of Neoliberal Literacy Sponsorship in the U.S.

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LITERACY'S LEVELS: AN ANALYSIS OF NEOLIBERAL
LITERACY SPONSORSHIP IN THE U.S.

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
the Louisiana State University
and Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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Dedicated to The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

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Abstract

While much scholarship has considered Deborah Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy, there remains a need to consider relationships between literacy sponsors and larger implications of literacy sponsorship at national and institutional levels. Utilizing academic theories, U.S. federal government budgets and financed reports, and discursal analysis, this dissertation investigates literacy sponsorship at the federal, postsecondary institutional, postsecondary institutional writing programmatic, and individual levels to tease out how, and in what ways, through "enabling" and "supporting" literacy these sponsors also "regulate, suppress, and withhold literacy" (Brandt 166). Rhetorical analysis determines that, at the U.S. federal level, literacy is promoted as a means to economically compete on a global scale. An analysis of diversity initiatives that do not address literacies learned in class at postsecondary institutions reveals this market-centered, or neoliberal, aspect, which is reflected through promotion of competition. Similarly, at the writing program level in postsecondary institutions, investigating assessment practices that erase labor in favor of competition reveals a neoliberal bent in literacy sponsorship; however, a way to expose the ideological nature of literacy's values becomes apparent in disclosing the relationships and discussions that occur around literacy and writing program assessment. Alternatives to literacy that primarily promote neoliberalism can be found in a particular type of cyborg writing that urges individuals to question basic assumptions about reified ideologies. The dissertation recommends analyzing literacy sponsorship at larger governmental levels (such as international) and smaller levels (such as state or regional) to further understand how literacy is influenced by neoliberalism.

Introduction

Literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the 20th century: a lubricant for consumer desire; a means for integrating corporate markets; a foundation of the deployment of weapons and other technology; a raw material in the mass production of information.

- Deborah Brandt
“Sponsors of Literacy”

Those without financial means are discounted, vilified, and held up to ridicule in our society. To be without money in our society is to be oppressed in the most structural of ways that literally put the body at risk: homelessness, unemployment, poverty, violence.

- Donna LeCourt
Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse

Introduction

As a kid whose only escape from the harsh realities of poverty seemed to be reading and writing, I look back on my relationship with the books I read and the short stories I wrote with a fondness that can only be described as formative to everything I am today. From what I recall, my interests in reading began with the *Little Miss* series, followed by *The Boxcar Children*, then *Harry Potter*. Much to my mother’s chagrin, I also enjoyed reading *The Weekly World News*. Writing began with keeping a diary that contained events of the days and ridiculously short stories about bats. But I was also reading and writing for standardized tests like the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the Florida Comprehension Assessment Test (FCAT). Of course, during my K-12 years, I remained unaware that what I was practicing, enjoying, and being tested on with my reading and writing was called literacy. I only saw what I did as reading words and responding to questions, going on adventures with an author, or inventing another world with my own pen.

However, reflecting on that past with the above quotes and my current scholarship in mind has loosened my grasp on what it means to *read and write*, and finds my memory of such things

destabilized. And yet, I would still say that my relationship with literacy formed much of who I am and where I am now. So, how can that be? This is my dissertation, which is clearly on literacy—reading and writing, right? So, I’ve read a lot, written a lot, talked a lot, and thought a lot about literacy—that should count for something. In the context of this project, I specifically consider literacy in terms of Brandt’s above quote. She establishes that literacy is “one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage of the 20th century,” which leads to anticipating that this fact has grown to be truer and more solidified in the 21st century. The cause for concern, as Stuckey outlines, is wrapped up in the interests of those who possess power, which, in terms of the monetary security and stability that is required to live in a capitalist society, those seem to be shrinking to fewer and fewer. Thus, the rest of us find literacy to be a game of catch up in which the stakes are making a living to the point of just surviving.

So, in order to understand more fully how literacy imbues and supports a competitive culture within the United States, my project, *Literacy’s Levels: An Analysis of Neoliberal Literacy Sponsorship in the U.S.*, analyzes ideological influences provided by what Deborah Brandt calls “sponsors of literacy.” Her definition of “sponsors of literacy” is, in many ways, the lens through which this dissertation proceeds: “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way¹” (Brandt 166). Throughout working on this endeavor, I have found that the idea of “sponsors of literacy” acts as a powerful lens for studying how members of a public, specifically the United States public, come to interconnect and interact with each other concerning literacy. I have also discovered that Brandt’s concept provides a framework in which

¹ She illustrates this idea further by stating, “Just as the ages of radio and television accustom us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use” (166).

to parse out the ways literacy is contextualized and presented by those in power and how that influences its effects. Benefits for these sponsors don't rely solely on introducing the masses to their own brand of literacy. So, going by Brandt's definition, this project is mostly concerned with the regulation, suppression, and withholding of literacy. These aspects sponsors include guarding literacy and what it means to be literate. So, rather than focusing on sponsors of literacy who support its potential expansions, my analyses place emphasis on ways in which literacy is regulated, suppressed, and withheld by its sponsors and how their guidelines affect both individuals and groups. In other words, this project primarily emphasizes the ideological implications of broadening understandings of literacy but defining it and restricting it to benefit its more powerful sponsors. This is not to say that all literacy sponsorship is always negative. In fact, I will complicate literacy by exploring sponsors of literacy that make it possible to enlarge definitions and understandings of literacy that encourage development of new literacy practices.

If it is true that "We believe that the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy" then uncovering the "mythology" surrounding reified perceptions of literacy can, as Elspeth Stuckey states in *The Violence of Literacy*, reveal class structures (vi). But, as this dissertation will prove, this type of myth exposure can also reveal ideological apparatuses at work behind that power and class structure as well as who implements them and in what ways. This includes the ideological instruments by which that power is attained and sustained, making the instruments at play in these power structures more concrete. Within that tangibility questions can begin to arise and challenge accepted and enforced approaches to a status quo that disadvantages many while only benefitting a few. The importance of bridging the gap between the ideological and the tangible lies in the absolute truth that the ideological produces material effects that can, and habitually do, negatively impact and exploit many

individuals and groups so that some can thrive. Literacy, then, is tangled up in matrices of power disguised as absolute certainties. However, literacy is a melee of ideologies presented as natural discourses shaped by sponsors of literacy in a way that seeks to maintain power for their own benefit. While this dissertation is realistically incapable of examining every sponsor of literacy and the rhetorics they deploy in order to gain and maintain power, it can survey a few in hopes of illustrating how those sponsors influence ideological structures that scaffold generally held definitions of what it means to be connotatively literate.

My main goal in this dissertation is to utilize sponsors of literacy as a lens for considering ideological influences and influencers of literacy itself. In her *College Composition and Communication* article, Brandt mostly discusses literacy sponsorship from employers and organizations that address employment issues (such as unions), which makes sense since she was coining a term and leaning heavily on the economic impacts that influence literacy (and vice-versa). And, yes, she even addresses ideology. However, my curiosity and anxiety about sponsors of literacy who have been invisible to the United States public motivate this project. Since her “Sponsors of Literacy” article in 1998, she’s also published *Literacy in American Lives* in 2001 and *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy* in 2015. Her 2001 publication, an important discussion on how literacy has changed between 1895 and 1985, still utilized her 1998 concept. She later published *The Rise of Writing*, inviting a more expansive look at how the American public can come to understand literacy and how it effects their lives in a more contemporary way. Her analyses depict a concept of literacy in which writing becomes the focal point, as opposed to the oft-thought reading. In particular, she points out that “writing is crowding out reading” because “Through words and actions taken on a daily basis, members of the ‘writing class’ lay down the conditions with which others must cope” (157). In short, when

thinking about literacy, by Brandt's view, writing tends to wield the most power between itself and reading. Power exists in terms of making decisions, but more importantly it exists in terms how broadly those decisions affect others. So then, due to sponsors of literacy, writing has become the center for literacy. Taken with my interest in exploring the ideological aspects further, as this project proceeds, writing is the crux of literacy and, in many cases, the focus of sponsors of literacy's attention.

Some Definitions for Literature Review

Literacy

We cannot have a conversation about literacy without first defining the common language for this discussion. Defining "literacy" can be tricky in this project because I would want to broaden accepted definitions of it, yet I would also like to be clear about what I'm discussing as my arguments and analyses progress. Above, I say "reading and writing" for simplicity. However, literacy goes beyond reading and writing both in terms of definition but also in forms (such as digital literacy, information literacy, numerical literacy, and the list goes on). So, to begin, literacy is, without question, reading and writing. But it's also social, which means it consistently happens, and is developed, within a social context. In *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology and Discourse*, James Paul Gee argues "that what we say, think, feel, and do is always indebted to the social groups to which we have been apprenticed" (vii). He goes on to explain that the ideological model of literacy takes the view that literacy is embedded in concrete social practices. This aspect is important because it illustrates that literacy is not neutral, which makes it highly susceptible to influence from its sponsors. Acknowledging literacy's inherent social aspects also clarifies that the ways we come to understand literacy are not necessarily natural, rather groups of individuals who either want or need to communicate for

their own benefit create overarching ideas of literacy. (I will discuss literacy as a technology more in Chapter 4.) Opposite to the ideological model is the autonomous model of literacy. To view literacy as the autonomous model view does is to limit understanding of the literacy to only a set of skills. The autonomous model rejects the political and cultural characteristics inherent in literacy as a form of social communication. This approach to literacy is problematic. In simple terms, Hanna Arlene Fingeret and Cassandra Derennon state that “Viewing literacy as skills or tasks does not adequately encompass the complexity of the experience of literacy [...] Meaning reflects shared cultural heritage, individual personality, and unique life experiences [...] technical skills are useless without social knowledge that attach meaning to words *in context*” (62 [emphasis in original]). In a nutshell, the autonomous model of literacy posits that literacy, how it is defined and implemented, is objective and holds no implications beyond simply enacting it for communication. The ideological model of literacy acknowledges that literacy, its definitions and enactments, does not, cannot by its very definition, occur in a vacuum. Literacy must be contextualized. Because literacy sponsorship provides a context and influence literacy, this project takes the ideological model of literacy as the definitive outlook on literacy practices.

This dissertation will consider varying explanations of literacy and many different types of literacy. Each definition and form of literacy that I employ takes its cue from literacy beyond reading and writing as skills and into the ideological view that considers social aspects (race, socioeconomic class, ability, etc...) of meaning and meaning-making. To be more direct and succinct with my definition of literacy in this project: Literacy is any perceived communication within a given social context that is recognized by the rhetor and/or audience as literacy.

However, my usage of *literacy* will be contextual in that my focus is primarily writing². So,

² In *The Rise of Writing*, Brandt also explains, in terms of seeing literacy as writing and particularly social, “Writing develops as part of surviving and striving, self-defending, seeking to belong, and responding to surprise or change,

when I employ the word *literacy* I'm considering writing and reading in its social context, with writing as the dominant aspect I consider. So, *literacy* within the context of this dissertation is any perceived communication within a given social context that is recognized by the rhetor and/or audience as literacy, the impetus of which is ideologically driven, normally associated with at least one sponsor of literacy, to produce material and social effects.

Power/Knowledge

I provide a more extensive definition of Foucault's "power/knowledge" in Chapter 2, but for now this tidbit should suffice: "power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (*Discipline and Punish...* 27-28). In *Power/Knowledge* he further clarifies that, "All power [...] is actually presented in a more-or-less uniform fashion throughout Western societies under a negative, that is to say a *juridical* form [...] the language of power is law" (201). What Foucault means is the law provides definitions for, or names, the world we live in. Of course, his focus is prisoners—we know what a prisoner is because the law deems an individual guilty and sentences them to live in a prison. The prison is directly defined by the law, in terms of standards and punishment. As an inhabitant of a prison the individual becomes a prisoner. But if we were to extend this idea, we could also say the law decides what a student is. Every year, when someone in the United States files taxes, they have to respond as to whether or not they are a student, and even

but especially by noticing one's standing as a writing person among other writing people" (157). She builds on the idea of power in these relationships by stating, "the force of other people's writing not only enters the thoughts, perceptions, and actions of individuals in every day but also helps to constitute the material structures in which an individual works and acts" (155).

then, there exists a demarcation between full-time and part-time. In short, there is a lot of power involved in naming, a lot of power particularly in naming what an individual is or is not.

Building on this idea, when I discuss knowledge or anything pertaining to epistemology and expected behaviors in terms of literacy, I directly imply power. Any time I discuss power (I use the term most frequently in Chapter 1), I directly imply knowledge. Power/knowledge, as my project sees it, is how the empowered (or sponsors of literacy) use accepted knowledge to benefit themselves and create a definition of knowledge that ensures their continued empowerment. So then, some sponsors of literacy, who wield power/knowledge, will continue to safeguard their own interests, as my dissertation will illustrate. Some sponsors of literacy can and will use that power/knowledge to advance multiple understandings and purposes of literacy. This project sees both power and knowledge as irrevocably intertwined. Additionally, In *Bootstraps*, by discussing Gramsci's connection to language and epistemology with Kenneth Burke's "ultimate terms," Victor Villanueva reasons that "In the absence of alternate terms, reform might be sought and accepted, but substantive, revolutionary change remains virtually unthinkable" (124). So then, this project also sees power and knowledge, or power/knowledge, as directly connected to language because if power names the world and there is no alternative to that naming, then the path to sustained change that may disable powerful sponsors of literacy is thwarted by the language which we use to discuss their power.

Additionally, even when I'm not using the terms *power* or *knowledge*, I want to make clear that larger matrices of power are always in play. This project works within the understanding that standards in the Western world, primarily in the United States, privilege white cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper- and middle-class white men. Any markings outside of these parameters on an individual or group constitutes a disadvantage in terms of recognition

and accessibility for the individual. My assertion is not to suggest that people who are systemically and systematically disadvantaged maintain no power, rather that power for these individuals is limited, questioned, de-valued, and often completely denied in a multitude of contexts, particularly social and institutional contexts.

Neoliberalism

Of particular interest to my project is the competitive aspect of neoliberalism. It is part of my contention that competition spurred by neoliberalism is often inherent in particular sponsors of literacy's contextualization of literacy. This perspective on literacy limits its abilities and purposes in the larger structure of society and culture. Specific to neoliberalism's ideology is its advocating "for the greatest degree of unrestricted free trade and open markets and the free flow of capital" (Goldstein 30). In other words, neoliberalism invites unfettered competition. What's more, is that a number of scholars (such as Susan Braedley, Meg Luxton, and Philip Mirowski) argue that this economic ideology has imbued everyday life by prioritizing market-value politics that effects individual identity. Raewyn Connell provides succinct reasoning as to how that path emerges when they state, "it [neoliberalism] seeks to make existing markets wider and to create new markets where they did not exist before," so neoliberalism "goes beyond the strategy of deregulation, and into a strategy of endless commodification of services." Basically, public services have been subsumed by neoliberalism inciting privatization of those services and the resources they offer, which has come to include education (23).

Connell goes on to state that privatization of public services and assets is the "most dramatic form of commodification" (23). Public education undoubtedly falls under the umbrella of a "most dramatic form of commodification." And because education is rooted in literacy, literacy is also affected by neoliberalism. In this project I am principally discussing sponsors of

literacy that adhere to neoliberal philosophies that permeate competitive attitudes to reach those market-centered goals. The Introductory sections of both Chapters 1 and 2, will heavily build on this understanding of neoliberalism as it relates to the United States Federal Government and postsecondary institutions as sponsors of literacy. The remaining two chapters will continue to utilize the concept; however, the point will be to consider ways in which the smaller sponsors of literacy discussed there can sponsor literacy beyond neoliberalism.

Literature Review

As already I've already discussed a bit, the stimulus for *Literacy's Levels: An Analysis of Neoliberal Literacy Sponsorship* was out of a desire to continue the work of Brandt's concept of literacy sponsorship. But Donna LeCourt's *Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse* remains a seminal text to my interest in any composition and rhetoric, pedagogy, or literacy scholarship. Considering that literacy itself has sponsors alongside the fact "that all identities, including my own, are constructed within lived experiences" (LeCourt 12) brings to light complications that arise in negotiating one's lived experiences within hegemonic characterizations of education and literacy. The complications arise because sponsors gain advantage in some way by shaping access to literacy, which suggests that sponsors can, and I argue powerful ones do, withhold literacy from individuals and groups based on their social identities and worldviews. They do so because those groups' identities and worldviews do not benefit the sponsor. Further still, this endeavor builds on understandings of *learning, education, literacy, public, social, and cultural power* under *cultural capital*. *Learning* and *education* are frequently employed interchangeably. I assert that these two terms are, in fact, conflated when they should not be. This project sees *learning* and *education* as the two concepts upon which the meanings of the other classifications concerning literacy depend.

Reviewing the etymology of the words “learn” and “educate” for comparison provides some grounding in how to approach what I see as a problem. The more familiar understanding of “educate” comes from *dūcere*— “to lead.” However, *ēducāt-* means “to rear, to bring up (children and animals).” “Rear,” coming from Icelandic, means “showing a causative formation.” In comparison, “learn” comes from the Old English *leornian* which is “to acquire knowledge.” In the latter, the idea is to simply acquire knowledge, while the former is to direct such knowledge. My project is concerned with that directing, or the idea of education. Of direction itself, in *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed states,

directions take us somewhere by the very requirement that we follow a line that is drawn in advance [...] a direction is what we are asked to follow. The etymology of ‘direct’ leads to ‘being straight’ or getting ‘straight to the point’ [...] Within the concept of direction is a concept of ‘straightness.’ To follow a line might be a way of becoming straight, by not deviating at any point (16).

Taken this way, the traditional intention of public schools is to educate—to direct what students learn, how, and in some cases why. To do so, with Ahmed’s understanding of direction, students follow lines that have already been drawn, and drawn straight at that. Within the context of this dissertation, sponsors of literacy draw those lines and ensure their continued maintenance. If students don’t follow, they are subjected to what could be connotatively considered punitive measures. These punishments manifest as longer time in the academe and possibly paying more money to continue a particular line of study. Ahmed goes on to elucidate that “Lines are created by being followed and followed by being created [...] they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition” (16). The element of directing is also of a special concern in that literacy is only dispatched by sponsors who stand to “gain advantage in some way” by dissemination of their preferred definitions of literacy, regardless of an individual’s lived experiences or alternatives that benefit

others. Thus, sponsors of literacy direct individuals towards specific forms of literacy. In this formula, literacy can potentially doom individuals and groups to repeat social practices that continue to exclude and disadvantage others, and in some cases themselves.

Additional complexities arise in “Intellectuals and Education” where Antonio Gramsci pronounces, “For instruction to be wholly distinct from education³, the pupil would have to be pure passivity, a ‘mechanical receiver’ of abstract notions [...] In school, the nexus between instruction and education can only be realized by the living work of the teacher” (312-13). This project does not take the view that students are passive. Rather, students are, as Gramsci states, “active and creative” (319). The student not only actively works towards finding the path in which they’re being directed, but they can also be creative in embodying the ideologies that direct them there. However, for the teacher to be the nexus between instruction and education, they too must be creative and active in both recognizing and exemplifying these distinctions. Further still, though the teacher indeed works for the institution, to chalk up their sole purposes within an economic context would be to concede education as purely for market purposes and contribute to neoliberal ideologies that fuel sponsors of literacy as market-driven for their own power.

Moreover, the concept of democracy must be taken into consideration because the United States claims itself to operate under a representative democratic government. For education in this democracy Gramsci argues, “It [education] must mean that every ‘citizen’ can ‘govern’ and that the society places him [...] in a general condition to achieve this” (318). But if the society revokes the person’s individuation by “educating” them, (or directing them in terms of what’s been done before) then it’s not a citizen entering into politics so much as an automaton fulfilling

³ “Education,” for Gramsci, is directly related to work.

a pre-determined role whose main goal is preserving the status quo. Following this line would result in “credentials” that “contribute to ensuring reproduction of social inequality by safeguarding the preservation of the structure of the distribution of powers through a constant re-distribution of people and the titles characterized by [...] a systematic bias in favor of the possessors of inherited cultural capital” (Bourdieu and Passeron xi). In short, citizens and non-citizens, including teachers and students, could theoretically participate in democracy as a result of remaining ignorant to the difference between education and learning, but this approach runs the risk of only being a repetition of what’s come before—especially if sponsors of literacy safeguard that ignorance.

To further illustrate the general implications relating education with sponsors of literacy, in *Democracy and Education* John Dewey explains what he believes to be the best *education* philosophy. He highlights the three functions of school in relation to democracy: “[1] Simplify and order factors of the disposition it is wished to develop; [2] Purify and idealize existing social customs; [3] Create a wider and better balanced environment than alternatives” (17). Dewey’s list fits well with *educate* as a directed line of study. Notice that his first assertion is passive—who wishes to develop? The second asks for purification—what should be gotten rid of, what is a stain? Lastly, who determines which environment is better, and for whom? Within these circumstances, I maintain that an individual could certainly both learn and acquire an education in schools; however, if learning is the goal, then a teacher is not necessary. (Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers* and Rancier’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* illustrate this point in some ways.) But, if the purpose is to educate, then a teacher, by definition, is always directing the course of study for students. That course of study, then, must consider social, political, and

institutional values as outlined by hegemonic discourses. And, beyond that, an analysis of these answers must consider the overarching ideologies and constraints placed upon that teacher.

These conceptions of learning and education complicate demarcations of literacy in that the terms are often dictated by social customs that assume some level of education. For example, John Ogbu describes “literacy” as “synonymous with academic performance” (540). But literacy has also been described in a number of ways in attempts to break that association. To illustrate, Gee portrays literacy as “a mastery of secondary Discourse,” which means any notion of literacy must respect multiple discourses to account for how they interact and influence each other (176). In relation to multiple discourses defining different literacies, Brian Street argues that “dominant conceptions of literacy are constructed in such a way as to marginalize alternatives [...] and to control key aspects in language and thought” (106). Following this line of reasoning, dominant conceptions of literacy as connected to education serve to de-value and dis-count other forms of literacies because education directs away from them in favor of the hegemonic understandings of literacy to account for aspects of education such as standardization and assessment. Street extends this understanding into the personal by stating that the “uses and meanings of literacy entail struggles over particular identities up against other identities, often imposed ones” (134). Because of social implications linked with literacy, I work within the realm of New Literacies Studies for this project. Jonathan Alexander explains that “New Literacy Studies challenges older, cognitivist approaches to literacy acquisition that figured literacy development along (at times) somewhat universal continuums,” and he even includes sexuality among new multiliteracy practices (58). It is primarily in this spirit of acknowledging multiple literacies and their social nature that learning can coincide with education to work towards an understanding of

what Gee calls “literacy in terms of concrete social practices” that builds on Street’s ideological model of social literacy (80).

Keeping in mind this charting of literacy, Barthes explains the power dynamics that interact with the social in terms of writing. While he discusses writing in connection with literature, his definitions of writing as choosing a social group of “self-same society” and “an ambiguous reality,” highlight the complications in putting pen to paper or blinking cursor to blank document (15-16). Simply put, one must interpret a society as their own in order to write, which leads to an ambiguous reality embodying our daily lives. In line with Barthes’ interpretation, Stuckey claims that “literacy is considered an ‘inside’ phenomenon” and that there exists within United States society an understanding of illiteracy as an “incivility” (36). So, then, to be labeled “illiterate” is to lose value, protection, consideration, and overall acceptance from that society.

Discussing neoliberalism and its competitive drive may help in highlighting and specifying the clash between democracy’s goals and the goals of capitalistic economics in terms of education. Literacy within the context of the United States connects to neoliberalism by way of Deborah Brandt’s argument in *The Rise of Writing* in which she states, “writing has become a dominant form of labor as it transforms knowledge and news into useable, shareable forms” (16). Recalling that learning is to gain knowledge and educating is to direct that knowledge, schools educate students to write in preparation largely for labor. She goes on to say that “mass writing has grown up under forms of sponsorship and control that do not necessarily honor the integrity and freedom of the individual literate” (18). “Mass literacy,” then, is connected to “work and practical living,” not to citizenship nor belonging to society outside of adhering to accepted forms of assumed objective communication (2). Taken together, these points indicate that the

goal of teaching literacy, particularly writing, in schools is not to obtain knowledge of writing nor consider uses pertaining to community or cooperation, but to direct it towards reapplying notions of a society that seeks to primarily fuel labor and productivity in order to support capitalistic maintenance and expansion. Some sponsors of literacy deny access to opportunities that contribute to and benefit from society's productivity to those who cannot afford access (such as attending postsecondary institutions, whether because of monetary reasons, time constraints, or social positioning). This denial can be intentional or unintentional, either it stems from neoliberalism's demands and constraints. More the point, some sponsors of literacy deny civility to those individuals from the society it builds based on the literacy they place restrictions around.

As I will repeat in Chapter 1, Nancy Fraser explains that "In stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles" (65). So then, subordinated groups are denied social and cultural capital. While Bourdieu and Wacquant outline three different types of cultural capital: objectified, embodied, and institutionalized, the one to focus on within this context is institutional, which indicates licensed academic credentials (133). In "The Forms of Capital" Bourdieu defines "social capital" as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition, or in other words, to gain membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word" (n.p.). Concerning social capital, the authors state, "exchanges instituting mutual acknowledgment [of social capital] presuppose the reacknowledgement of a minimum of objective homogeneity, and because it exerts a multiplier effect on the capital he possesses in its own right" (n.p.). While a distinction exists between cultural and social capital, cultural capital

weighs heavily on social. Social capital, however, perpetuates that cultural capital in a given context as seemingly objective and value-less. However, as LeCourt elucidates in terms of academic discourse, students “feel a *personal* inadequacy at now struggling with a discourse they presume they should, if they were ‘smart’ enough, be able to produce [...] sensing any alterity between the self and academic discourse can only produce feelings of personal inadequacy;” she highlights that, “students desire identifications with academic discourse for [...] the material pursuit of capitalist success and its ability to confer cultural capital” (152 [emphasis in original]). Students desire cultural and social capital from postsecondary institutions by way of entering into appropriate discourses, under the belief that these types of capital are easily attained if only they work hard enough for them. As a result, students are affected individually and invited to shed or alter self-identifiers and worldviews in exchange to benefit from partaking in the dominant discourse. This movement refuels hegemonic understandings of what it means to be literate and educated as members of the public by unifying understandings of what public identity should be in terms of *educated* and *literate*. (I will further elaborate on the notion of public in Chapter 1.)

Notes on Interchapters and My Positionality

Looking back on my life, it seems as though I was always reading and writing, but I now read and write about reading and writing. To illustrate my relationship with literacy and education and how it has changed, between each chapter lives an interchapter that highlights some turning point in my life in relation to literacy and obtaining an education. A common theme among these interchapters is my frustrations with literacy and education. As the process of writing them developed, I discovered that I genuinely did experience an inner struggle to see myself as better than I was before pursuing education into my adulthood; however, my initial

intention with these snippets from my life was to piece together how I embodied the neoliberal subject up until a point. I wanted to illustrate how coming from a poverty-stricken homelife and working through the United States educational apparatuses changed me, resulting, in some way, my own refusal of the competitive expectations that placed me in a terrible spot to begin with. As I wrote and reflected on those times, I began to doubt my ability to recall facts and feelings correctly. I began to doubt myself and if I'd actually found some real way to reject the dangling carrot of financial stability in exchange for submitting to a literacy that I knew somebody had paid for, literacy that I, in a different way, also paid for, literacy that others who had not made it to college, or even through high school, paid for.

So, I am a queer, white, able-bodied woman who just so happened to have been homeless for a couple of periods of time in my life, subjected to poverty, abuse, and the effects of addiction. These descriptors of me and my life experiences can get complicated and have presented challenges that, in my experience, many people do not consider, or may even be incapable of considering (given their own life experiences); however, I recognize my privilege in not only being white, but being a white able-bodied woman who can, and most of the time I do, pass as straight or heterosexual. I may have obtained the customer service jobs I hate so much because I was white and required no physical accommodations to complete the jobs. I am also privileged in terms of making it this far in a Ph.D. program at an R1 Carnegie Classification Research Institution. All of this being said, I realize that recognizing my own advantages and privileges in this culture and society are important, but do not quite make things any better for anyone else. Neither does being an ally. Rather, my role as an individual with these advantages is to be, as Bettina L. Love puts it, a coconspirator with those who do not possess these privileges nor advantages. In a 2019 interview, she explains that a coconspirator goes beyond reading the

popular books and “showing up to meetings.” A coconspirator uses their privilege to put something on the line, takes a risk for somebody. In *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, she states, “The work is not a one-time conversation; it is who you become in and outside the classroom” (119). Thus, my research and scholarship does not seek to speak for others nor to earn reward through exploiting the willingness of others to accept help. Rather, I have taken “the time to reflect on my own educational resources and endeavors in relation to the issues” that my “students and communities face” (Love 118). So, while this dissertation is admittedly more about myself in many ways, I hope that my work in Critical Race Studies and Disability Studies, as well as volunteering at local high schools and implementing critical pedagogy in my classrooms, act as an invitation for others to self-examine their roles as privileged in society. I also hope my actions in and outside of the classroom and in writing this dissertation underwrite a wider acceptance of a multitude of cultures and languages that contribute to a desire for others to go beyond allyship and even sponsorship, to become coconspirators.

A Word of Caution About a Suspicious Narrator

Knowing that my interchapters are memories threatens the chokehold of nostalgia on them. Because it isn't always necessarily associated with fond memories or good times, nostalgia is oftentimes where the doubt in myself arises. Nostalgia, as a longing for familiar surroundings, can, and I would think undoubtedly does, include even those not so affectionate moments that warm up our past through an obscured lens of time. Nostalgia edits our memories, occasionally leaving the real pain and regret on the cutting room floor. In other words, nostalgia for a soreness or pain that we are familiar with can remain attractive when piecing together the past. So, while I've attempted to compose my memories in a cohesive way so as to lay out a followable narrative, withholding pieces that I would prefer to keep close to me or that would interrupt a

more linear and therefore clean depiction of parts of my life, much is left to be desired in terms of the whole story. I am an unreliable narrator insofar as we all are because we choose what to expose and conceal for our own purposes, or we conceal things from ourselves. The only lies inherent in my interchapters are those I tell myself, so I want to assure you that I'm only trying to present the facts, or, at least, what I imagine them to be.

Chapters

I organize the chapters in *Literacy's Levels: An Analysis of Neoliberal Literacy Sponsorship in the U.S* as a funnel—an absolute tornado of researched analyses in conversation with both logical, grounded arguments and the occasional platitude. The first chapter discusses what I see as the largest sponsor of the literacy in the United States, the United States Federal Government, primarily examining K-12 education. I then work my way down to postsecondary institutions, then Writing Programs. Far from a conclusion, the final chapter works to make meaning out of what writing has become and can be within the context of their individual levels, or what I outline the previous chapters. If literacy shapes social and cultural identifiers, and this project sees writing as the crux of literacy, then much of how we can begin to see ourselves develops from notions of writing and literacy. It should never escape our attention that literacy is always sponsored. To put it in a more cryptic way, someone is always paying for it⁴.

In Chapter 1. United States Federal Government as a Sponsor of Literacy, I analyze the U.S. Government's discursal involvement with literacy by way of how they support education

⁴ Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton's *Paying for the Party* illustrates some aspect of how this payment occurs in an R1 institution that they called "Midwest University" by way of sororities (1). The researchers found that working class female students face a myriad of challenges in attempting to insert themselves into social hierarchies in Greek life. In trying to join Greek parties and the school requiring first-year students to live in dorms, these students' experiences caused them to lack in "drive, energy, motivation, and resilience of the upwardly mobile women and seemed to passively accept what ever came their way" because they were forced to contend with their high-income peers who often rejected them (225). Low-income students either then would dropout their first year or take over five years to graduate.

financially and portray it as an economic endeavor through the language of national defense. I open by discussing the factors delineating citizenship and Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner's concepts of "public," or "publics." My main argument is that the United States Federal Government encourages neoliberal ideology that obstructs access to determine what it means to be *educated* or *literate* despite the many way in which one can *read and write*. The result of which, I explain, is a restrictive understanding of what it means to be literate outside of economic endeavors that benefit the nation in terms of global competition. Overall, the focus on competition in this chapter, from the neoliberal standpoint, views the existence of the United States public (or its multiple publics) as constituted by the struggle for education and literacy. I take *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education Reform*, a study commissioned and dispersed by the United States Federal Government, as an artifact illustrating this sponsor of literacy's connection between national defense and global economy. Using analyses from Mark Hlavacik's *Assigning Blame* and Eli Meyerhoff's *Beyond Education*, I pull the ideas of both accountability and individual failures together to illustrate the United States public's involvement with public education as a shifting of blame from the public itself to the individual. I finally conclude with a vision of shared hope that benefits everyone, or at least hopefully benefits the most people, as opposed to promoting competition, both global and individual, as means to an end to the advantages of both the United States public and individuals.

Chapter 2. Postsecondary Institutions as Sponsors of Literacy builds on my argument from Chapter 1 to explain some ways in which postsecondary institutions act as sponsors of literacy in order to resume the competitive leaning of literacy attainment as enacted by the United States Federal Government. I contend that postsecondary institutions, or colleges and universities, continue placing education and literacy within a neoliberal agenda, which is to say

promoting economic competition. As an example, I take the competitive nature of simply applying to colleges as evidence of this economical leaning. This chapter focuses primarily on the power/knowledge developed by postsecondary institutions in terms of literacy and how sponsors of literacy propagate it in the form of literacy. While a multitude of social factors influence how to determine who benefits from this power/knowledge and who finds themselves at a disadvantage, I build on the work of scholars like April Baker-Bell and Vershawn Ashanti Young to discuss Black Language speakers and code-switching in predominantly white educational institutions to illustrate how social identifiers disadvantage the specific group of Black Language speakers. My point is to exemplify that postsecondary institutions shape students seeking a college-education into commodities through their specific study's forms of literacy.

The tone in Chapter 3. Writing Programs as sponsors of literacy considers Writing Programs as sponsors of literacy that can operate being aware of neoliberalism's influences on writing. It suggests possible approaches to directing Writing Programs that bring to the forefront active ways to address neoliberal influences on the dissemination of literacy in postsecondary institutions. In this chapter I reflect on my potential future as a Writing Program Director and what that will mean for me as both an administrator, beholden to expectations of a postsecondary institution, and as the person responsible for how literacy is framed and promoted throughout a college or university campus. In order to consider these musings in a more scholarly way, beyond my own experiences and anxieties, I review literature from the field of Writing Program Administration. A significant aspect of reviewing that literature is put towards understanding what it means to be a Writing Program Administrator or Director in terms of a working definition in relation to institutional constellations while placing an emphasis on lived

experiences that Administrators often share couched in what Nathaniel Street calls “frustration narratives” (53).

Through these definitions, I deliberate the implications of Writing Programs often primarily being composed of first-year composition classes. I also consider the relationships between Writing Program Administrators, faculty, and their students. To demonstrate the complexities, more specifically ecologies, of these connections I dive deep into the economy of assessment in postsecondary institutions as it pertains to neoliberalism. In the conclusion I consider possibilities for Writing Programs and their Directors to work within the inherent neoliberalism in postsecondary institutions to consider alternatives to competition. Writing Programs can be enabled to contest neoliberalism by way of liberating literacy from it. To do so would involve making clear and visible the ways in which the relationships between Writing Programs and their directors, or administrators, work with students, faculty, and the institution.

Chapter 4. Cyborg Influences on the Self and a Way Out considers a way in which writing instructors can sponsor literacy outside of competitive neoliberalism. By melding Donna Haraway’s cyborg myth and Harvey Graff’s literacy myth, I work to imagine a specific cyborg literacy that can elude the competition inherent in overarching literacy sponsors’ contextualization of literacy as competitive. After presenting writing as a technology and arguing that computer technology is becoming a requirement for the writing classroom, I begin to conceptualize a cyborg writing that writing teachers, as sponsors of literacy, can create conditions for. This cyborg writing intersects with Haraway’s iteration of the cyborg in that the goal would be to “release the play of writing” (54-55).

My conclusion will offer a summation of my chapters in conversation with one another. It will also outline limitations of my research and suggest further research. And, what’s more, it

will provide dessert. This dissertation calls for investigations into literacy sponsorship, educational rhetorics, and neoliberalism (among other things). While much scholarship has been published concerning literacy accessibility and learning, this project asks how and why we come to value literacy based on sponsors of literacy who possess power in discussing literacy, regulating or withholding it, and disseminating it in order to pinpoint its social and cultural influences in the United States.

Interchapter 1

On the dirt road there was nothing but stories. No one debated foreign affairs (everyone agreed non-white foreigners were terrorists). No one discussed literature (except for the Bible).

There was one story about a man who looked homeless. He worked in the concrete plant where everyone in our neighborhood worked because the couple down the street owned the company. They mostly made pools. Words like “shotcrete,” “dry mix,” and “wet mix” floated around bonfires where the grown-ups drank because Friday and Saturday nights were cheaper at home. Anyway, this homeless looking guy went into a bank. Supposedly, none of the tellers wanted to take him. They all gave him dirty looks—clearly judging the guy. He swung a heavy, dirty sock from his hip as he walked up to the counter where a hesitant bank representative stood. He plopped the sock on the counter and mumbled something about a deposit. The teller called the manager over who explained that a minimum deposit was required to open up an account. This guy spilled the contents of his sock onto the counter. The amount of money varied from hundreds of dollars to thousands of dollars to simply enough to shut up the bank teller and her manager. The story always ended the same: “Money talks.”

Not long after, the stories about the woman who cheated on her drunk common-law marriage husband started. They began, and I saw it myself, when the husband and his best

friend/neighbor got drunk one night. The husband, a stout man, slammed the homewrecker on the ground. It was another bonfire night. It must have been summer because I was allowed to stay up late. I find it difficult to remember what happened directly after that, but I'm pretty sure that the next morning my mother brought one of our ratty couch blankets out to cover up my stepdad who'd passed out in the dirt driveway in front of the dirt road.

As the story goes, my stepdad knew without question that his "best friend" was sleeping with his "wife." I'd like to say that this is where the troubles began, but there were always troubles. Lots of moving. Lots of fighting. Lots of drugs. Lots of drinking. Lots of being poor.

The prospect of college, for me, meant leaving the dirt road. It meant leaving the trailer, "the mobile home," that was stuffed with all of my stepfather's hoarded, worthless crap. A college degree carried with it the possibility to rid myself of the weight of exhausting weekends full of alcohol-induced and drug-fueled unpleasanties. The opposite of finding my brother face down on the floor. It meant the opportunity to prove myself worthy of forgetting, to distance myself. Homes are made of people, but also shelter, but also people. The T.V. said it's mostly people, but it's both. It gets cold. I wanted to get further away from the suffocating dust kicked up from work trucks mindlessly piloted by loud, obtrusive men. It wouldn't matter that my biological father never tried to be a father if I proved my value through a college degree. Did he even finish high school anyway? The distant siblings would be so proud of their little sister when they finally met her. They'd find that we shared so much in common that made us different from the parents who kept us apart. Most importantly, leaving the dirt road meant I could live a story that was heard beyond the bonfires.

All the time hiding in my room writing would bear fruits beyond daily escapism: It was my ticket out and away. Neighbors would say I was smart because I sat on the porch and read

instead of sneaking off into the woods to light stolen firecrackers. I was different. I was not like the people who were on the dirt road and deserved to be there. But much to my embarrassment, I'd failed at running away countless times. There was something about the transition from dirt to asphalt at the end of Mangrove Lane that discouraged me, regardless my level of resolve. Maybe it was just too hard. Maybe that's part of the reason why I chose to apply only to community college. The scholarships I won covered the costs, and I would need a part-time job to cover few other expenses. Otherwise, I'd live okay.

Unfortunately, my mother had left me, along with my brother, at my stepdad's, in that trailer, on that dirt road. When my stepdad found out about her affair with his best friend, shortly after smashing his friend's face in the dirt, he tried to kill him. The two of them leaving a bar on Christmas eve, he'd purposely slammed his truck into a telephone pole. Cracked his own sternum. Mom's boyfriend was fine, but she chose to tend to him indefinitely. After a few months, on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, without the semi-protection of my mother's presence, my stepfather repeatedly, drunkenly banged on my door in the night. I sweated. He mumbled things about his rights to me. I'd warded him off with a sudsy spoon once, but I wouldn't always carry a spoon. It couldn't protect me from the vomit-covered carpet and walls outside my room the next morning. The next day, when he was (miraculously) at work, my friends and I gathered my things and I left. Less than a month later, he burned down the trailer. The cat I couldn't take with me, Socks, died in the fire. My stepdad and my brother were now homeless. Soon after, my stepdad was murdered. The story goes that he was helping a prostitute everyone called "Friday" move out of her estranged husband's house. The husband came home. Buckshot. Point blank. I remember the account given by the slack-jawed local on the news. Something about the absence of a face.

But, at this point, I was in college. I was different, right? Who cares if it was community college? I look back at these moments in my life with heavy ambivalence. I was different because I wanted to be, and more importantly because I worked for it, but I now often wonder if I actually was any better. I reveled in the fact that he died so horribly, steeped in his own immorality. That my mother was still on that dirt road, in an even worse trailer (did I mention that her boyfriend/my stepdad's best friend lived down the street?). Really, the work and the desire made me exceptional. I was justified in my self-worth because it wasn't me on that dirt road. I'd escaped. And all I needed, from that point on, was a good job. I didn't need the help or support of family simply because I didn't have it. I didn't have anything to lose, especially with Socks gone. Or so I thought.

Chapter 1. United States Federal Government as a Sponsor of Literacy

Learning to be a good citizen is learning to live to the maximum of one's abilities and opportunities, and every subject should be taught every child with this in view. The teacher's personality and character are of great importance. I have known many erudite and scholarly men and women who were dismal failures as teachers. I have known some less learned teachers who had the gift of inspiring youth and sending them on to heights where perhaps they themselves were unable to follow.

- Eleanor Roosevelt,
"Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education"

Introduction

We all have ideas about the purpose of education, and, subsequently, literacy. At least ideologically, one of the most common assumptions about the motivations for education is citizenship, as illustrated by Eleanor Roosevelt in the above citation from 1930. According to her encapsulating quote, teachers can "inspire youth" and send them "on to heights where perhaps they themselves were unable to follow," or they can be "dismal failures as teachers." Perhaps these valuations in terms of teachers possess some merit; however, explaining the grounds for her assessment, Roosevelt says that "to be a good citizen is learning to live to the maximum of one's abilities and opportunities." This description as a framework for education in the U.S. gives reason for a moment of pause. Within this moment, we realize she makes it unclear what "one's abilities" should be geared towards. So, while it is acceptable to believe that Roosevelt's claim that the purpose of education is centered around citizenship, the statement is overwhelmingly general and vague. Does a "good" citizen do what the nation or government tells them? Do they question directives from the nation or government? Surely, participation in a democracy is a mark of good citizenship, but what about protests that result in governments deploying water hoses and SWAT teams? And, while we are asking these questions, why only citizens? Are undocumented individuals not a part of the United States too?

With questions like these, as well as claims like Roosevelt's, many scholars have taken up the challenge to critique this idea of connecting education directly to citizenship by trying to specify in what ways individuals can transform into "good" citizens by way of education. For example, Django Paris and H. Samy Alim define "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy" as seeking "to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation" (1). Scholars Stacey J. Lee and Daniel Walsh add to this definition. They argue for "the importance of fostering a *justice-oriented* citizenship that encourages youth to be active agents in the political process, encouraging critical dialogues around race, recognizing the evolving and hybrid nature of immigrant youth's identity" (197 [emphasis added]). This notion fits well with John Dewey's claim that "education is a social process" in that it acknowledges and encourages various types of social lives and their struggles within a society; however, Dewey stipulates that "there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a particular social ideal" (59). Lee and Walsh's argument for justice-oriented citizenship as the basis of education hits a snag when viewed from the motivations of U.S. federal ideals concerning the purpose of education. For, as J. Elspeth Stuckey points out, "citizens make their lives according to the economy" (11). Education and literacy, then, are a large part of the lives of both U.S. citizens and non-U.S. citizens and must take the economy into account. Thus, education is tightly bound up with citizenship, literacy, and economy; however, by way of public education, it is also bound up directly with the public.

But, when discussing education and literacy, are we always talking about citizens? My aforementioned questions would lead to an answer of "no." We are talking about society and, because I choose to focus on public education, I am specifically talking about the United States public. Public institutions are allegedly for the public benefit, which is why we call them "public

schools” and “public universities.” The public matters and the public opinion clings to “the notion that poor and minority peoples are deficient in important ways [...] deficient cognitive abilities, deficient language, poor motivation, devaluation of education, poor parenting skills” (Purcell-Gates 3). Noting that among these “deficiencies” is a devaluation of education indicates that the U.S. public values education. However, Christopher Newfield’s book *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*, argues that the great mistake was, in fact, privatizing funding for the university—in other words, privatizing sponsors of literacy. In “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt defines “sponsors of literacy” as “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well a recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). In its most accessible terms, as a sponsor of literacy, the U.S. federal government provides funds to individuals, as well as institutions, to enable literacy; however, and more to the point of this project, it regulates that literacy as an ideological sponsor.

As Nancy Fraser states, “The official public sphere [...] is the prime construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination” (62). If, as Michael Warner says, “they [publics] engage in struggles [...] over the conditions that bring them together as a public,” where would this privatized literacy fit in with public institutions (12)? For educational institutions to privatize sponsorship of literacy is to concede the main struggle to economics, or monetary gain, and to direct knowledge toward those ends. Furthermore, the imaginary U.S. public depends on which cultures, and by extension which individuals, are worthy of belonging to that public by virtue of profitability: Some feel as though they *must* adhere to hegemonically prescribed notions of literacy by exchanging their worldview that is built on their own life experiences. Then there are others who remain unaware of what they may be exchanging to gain

financial and social edge. For example, a low-income college student who used to eagerly question authority learns through social interactions in a classroom not to question a teacher. Or any student for whom Plain Style English sounds wrong because it is not what they speak at home. These exchanges, aware or unaware, often happen with the desire to gain a financial and social edge.

When I say “privatized literacy” here, I begin with Newfield’s understanding that privatization “begins with the presence of private influence on public functions” (28). Further, “Privatization eliminates nonmarket benefits from cost-benefit analysis” (32). Thus, the privatizing of literacy results in literacy only being considered in terms of what it can bring to the table economically for an individual, an organization, or business, as opposed to the public good. To elucidate, if the phrase “public good” is taken to mean “a good whose benefit continues to increase as it approaches universal access,” as Christopher Newfield describes it, then publicly supported literacy would more easily proliferate because it would be recognized as beneficial outside of market value (64). So privatizing literacy takes the forms of scrutinizing ACT and SAT scores to accept a student for an undergraduate degree at a college, thus creating competition and scarcity. A more specific example of privatizing literacy is the driving of students to market-oriented fields in academics (Newfield 261). To illustrate this point by way of postsecondary institutions (which I will discuss more in the next chapter), according to *U.S. News* the top three majors at Louisiana State University are “Business, Management, and Marketing.” As a result, more investment can be seen going into those programs. This becomes apparent when comparing the LSU Business Education Complex to the English Department’s Oscar K. Allen Hall.

Brandt strengthens this linkage of economy and literacy further, while also specifically defining writing as a form of mass literacy. In *The Rise of Writing: Redefining Mass Literacy*, she claims that writing is, in fact, “connected not to citizenship, but to work, vocation, avocation and practical living” (2). At its core, Brandt’s 2015 study emphasizes Stuckey’s point that citizens make their lives “according to the economy.” Brandt argues that literacy now begins with writing (as opposed to reading) and argues that this rise in mass writing as mass literacy is a direct result of economic demands within U.S. society. Within this vein, as Brandt found, writing has become the dominant form of labor because so many jobs require individuals to transform knowledge and news into “sharable forms” (16). Put another way, writing is synonymous with production and productivity. Accordingly, in the U.S., there exists an ideal of education that promotes participation in politics; however, economic concerns overshadow this model in practice. People do not learn to read or write for participation in politics. Rather, when the United States federal government sponsors literacy, it is geared towards economic demands of production and productivity.

My own experience as a sponsor of literacy within educational institutions reinforces, for me, the idea that the United States federal government has consistently framed education as an economic enterprise. This is particularly evident with federal funding for the National Science Foundation when compared to the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2019, the National Science Foundation received \$8.1 billion from the federal government (an increase of \$308 million) (“Final FY19 Appropriations...” n.p.). That same year, the White House requested \$38 million to go towards closing the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2020 (“NEH Statement...”). With this framing, the federal government exchanges the idea of education-for-citizenship in favor of education-for-competition, expressly global competitiveness within the

context of national defense and economic security. Publics exist, and they include those who are citizens and non-citizens and those who are “educated” and “less educated.” Education is a central site for molding those publics and the struggles the publics experience with each other as a result of education and literacy quality. It is difficult to pinpoint how the “public” in “public education” arrives at a functional definition, especially when the U.S. federal government influences a large portion of educational discourse.

With these observations as a backdrop, I outline the ways in which the U.S. promotes neoliberal ideology that hinders access to, and public acceptance of, what it means to be educated or literate. In these ways, governmental ideology deters potential for a more expansive definition of literacy. The power resides not so much in the government’s positionality as a governing body, as state governments themselves often make decisions regarding public education. Rather, the federal government’s heavily influential role in educational discourse, by way of funding for the states, secures the government’s control over educational and literacy discourse. Publics are social formations that give voice to discursive expectations and trends. Essentially, the United States public struggles over, and within, the demands of how to define literacy and who has access to it, while its federal government acts as an ever-looming authority dominating that discourse. As a result, the federal government guarantees some access to literacy through public education. As a consequence of its sponsorship, socially and publicly accepted classifications of literacy serve to reject alternative forms of literacy, which ensures competition for literacy sponsorship at an individual level. Thus, literacy, as a means to economic advancement, falls into the category of global defense—as outlined by the United States federal government—is centered on struggle for work placement.

In “Critical Engagement Through Public Sphere Scholarship,” Robert Asen points out, “Public sphere scholars have viewed subjectivity as relational, transformative, and diverse, while neoliberal models of publics assert a view of the subject as an atomistic individual motivated by their own self-interest” (173). Capitalism via neoliberalism would consume as much as possible in its quest for power—including education and literacy. However, I want to push outside the idea of neoliberalism as “market fundamentalism,” which is where the majority of discussion in terms of pedagogy and education stops (Giroux 6). I seek to develop an understanding of how this ideology consumes the individual in its drive to interpret the public as solely existing for the individual. In turn, that consumption devours individual subjectivity, which undermines alternatives for self-relation and obscures how the individual interacts and participates in a public. That self-interest becomes limited under the auspices of neoliberalism itself, which results in complex subversions of a public and its connections to literacy. In other words, if “social institutions (such as medicine, psychiatry, the human sciences, and penology) make the production of knowledge possible through discursive formations,” and “these discursive formations authorize who may or may not speak, the style of communication or argument, and where/how speaking takes place,” then this chapter interprets the existence of a public (or multiple publics) as constituted by the struggle for education and literacy (Danisch 77). Further, the neoliberal subject aligns education and literacy, alongside self-interest, with competitive capitalism. This “homo economicus,” as Foucault and Ngyuen term it, “is encouraged to calculate and balance their decisions and actions in relation to the maintenance and advancement of their self-interest and self-governance” (Ngyuen 4). All of that to say, “agency operates within limiting structural conditions, even as individual and collective agency may reshape structural

conditions” (Asen, “Introduction” 173). And that limiting structural condition is the neoliberalization of education and the self through dominating literacy practices.

To cultivate an understanding of how the U.S. government frames literacy through entrance into educational discourse, I will discuss how the government has historically couched the discourse within competition. First, I will outline how the government has structured the value of education as a global economic defense in terms of the “warlike” language of 1983’s *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Next, I will make connections between education, literacy, and the individual. In doing so, I will explain the complicating effects of “failure” and “dropout” as an individualized responsibility in concert with these categorizations. Eli Meyerhoff argues that students are given the individual option of succeeding or failing; the latter illustrated with a visual metaphor as the “dropout.” As Meyerhoff explains, “The dropout is framed with a two-sided potentiality. Its image is composed with positive and negative potential life trajectories: as a potential delinquent in the community and as having potential talent realized through education and schools” (94). In short, the blame lies with the individual to choose between succeeding and failing, notwithstanding their given circumstances and access to education and literacy, nor considering the United States Government’s role in educational discourse. This binary framing of success and failure only serves to further perpetuate neoliberal-based advancement and competition within the public sphere.

Furthermore, recent United States presidents have organized movements in education at the federal level in terms of “accountability.” George W. Bush introduced the all-encompassing No Child Left Behind Act, Barack Obama established Race to the Top, and the Trump administration pushed for school choice without considering ramifications concerning

integration and equity⁵. I discuss Mark Hlavacik's take on the coded language of "accountability," actually meaning "blame," and how language has influenced educational movements throughout the public for the last ten years. Accountability, or blame, of failing schools often falls on the teachers and administrators in national discussions, laying the groundwork for blame and accountability as required language in education reform. In my conclusion, I will consider recent movements in education that attempt to shift the framework from economy to care but continue to center individual abilities to contribute to the United States economy. I argue for an educational view at the intersection of politics and hope by way of Harvey Milk's "You Got to Have Hope" speech. For now, what is more important from Milk centers around the connection between the already established "us and them" mentality, its linkage to economics and politics, and the definition of "us" as those who find ourselves consistently marginalized by economically driven systemic oppressions. What is *most* important is the desire for a hope that unites against ideologies and material actions that would limit socially and financially disadvantaged individuals to spaces of exclusion.

Ultimately, connecting these propositions to literacy exposes the public value of literacy: This competition becomes problematic in considering the idea of public education, and how that education lends itself to participation in a democracy. Found in the quest for publicly accepted literacy is a loop back to re-investing in a neoliberal mindset, placing competition and self-

⁵ Barack Obama did, in fact, run on the platform of promoting school choice. In that vein, his administration primarily promoted charter schools. As Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley point out, resulting from the increased funding towards charter schools, "In addition to exacerbating racial segregation, the lack of publicly available data to assess the extent to which charter schools serve low-income students and non-native English speakers is a vital civil rights concern" (245). However, Obama incentivized this option within the framework of equity, while the Trump administration used it as a dog whistle for racial segregation. This dog whistle is clearly defined by his entire campaign.

interest as the forethought of all actions associated with literacy. As such, my focus on literacy in this argument explains how neoliberalism has invaded ideological understandings of the value of literacy, now most apparent in producing writing. True enough, literacy is always already ideological; however, this particular ideology is framed by a rather large, overshadowing entity that provides funding and shapes purpose in an unavoidable way. That “unavoidable way” is that for individuals to be recognized as members of the United States public by the United States Government they must be considered literate. Consequently, students become students in the sense that they must fight for their own self-interests. While self-interest has always had a place within public education, what this chapter gets at is the ways in which the United States government frames self-interest and national interest (in terms of economics and national safety) as the *only* benefit to formal education and literacy.

“Literacy” and the U.S. Government’s Influence on Educational Discourse

First, I want to consider how this chapter sees the expanding definitions of literacy by starting at Scorza, Mirra, and Morrel’s description of “critical literacy.” They explain it as going “beyond reading and writing—it is a set of cognitive, emotional and sociopolitical skills whereby individuals are able to understand and articulate relations of power, dominance and hegemony using media, text, artifacts, oral tradition and experience that both illuminate and disrupt internalized oppression” (23). National ideologies in the United States regarding literacy do not work towards an individual’s understanding of their own oppression. Rather, that purpose is supplanted by the need to compete for a basic literacy that contributes to global capitalist competition. Instead, the literacy encouraged by public education, through the U.S. federal government, is what Eric Darnell Pritchard calls “normative literacy.” He states that literacy normativity is “the use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto

people whom are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm” (28). Instead, he argues for restorative literacies. In comparing the two he says, “Literacy normativity steals emotional resources from people, wounding people through texts, and restorative literacies⁶ remake those emotional resources people need for living, especially love, and returns them to work in the best interest of the individual and others” (24).

However, the very act of walking into a classroom primes students for disconnecting themselves from the emotional resources they need for living in favor of making a living. Packer and Goicochea claim that there are ontological implications connected to literacy. They point out that the very label of “student” requires individuals to adjust to a new set of social rules and social skills. They state, “In most schools, children and adults now relate in an impersonal way, distinct from the concrete particularity, the personal ties of family relationships” (235). This “ontological transformation” frequently follows students for the rest of their educational pursuits. As such, whether in a public or private school, children are taught to behave a certain way toward authority figures in how they write and speak. In this way, students become socially literate in terms of benefits of not questioning the status quo. Thus, students are cognitively, emotionally, and socio-politically welcomed into the world of the impersonal through a social literacy that centers self-interest. Literacy is presented as objective, and not related to a student’s personhood. This idea of literacy does not take into account emotional or cognitive skills that help shape cognitive processes. (To clarify, considering these emotional and cognitive skills for an individual is personal and, to some extent, involves self-interest. However, recognizing these

⁶ “restorative literacies, which consist of literacy practices that Black queers employ as a means of self-definition, self-care, and self-determination” (Pritchard 24).

aspects in the self has the capability of positively contributing to a community or society, as opposed to the self-interest involved in competition.) Accordingly, the stimulus to question the type of literacy taught dissipates within the structure of the classroom. Thus, literacy becomes a means to a normativity that rejects other forms of literacy, relegating its practitioners to the Other.

The United States Government enters educational, and therefore literacy, discourse by way of its sponsorship. This government enables, supports, teaches, and models literacy through the classroom. Also, within the classroom, it works to regulate and suppress students' ideas of literacy into the limitation that normative literacies are the only ones worth pursuing. It stands to reason, if the literacy demanded of students to succeed in the classroom requires that their goals and context for literacy be restricted, under the guise of objectivity, then the learning of literacy as well as student identity becomes irrevocably tied to that ideology. Put another way, if a student is considered "illiterate" or put in a "remedial" class or "fails," it negatively marks them. The "official" literacy must underwrite the self-interest that perpetuates neoliberal ideologies. With this literacy, the personal negates the public by prioritizing global competition and the neoliberal subject's position within it as independent and self-governed. Within this structure, because it is competitive, others who compose the public are considered opposition and unification is hindered on the basis of normativity. This structure does not acknowledge alternative forms of epistemology nor, by extension, of literacy. Alternative forms could include "mother wit⁷," or, the more commonly referred to "street smarts⁸."

⁷ "Mother wit" stresses "that wit cannot be acquired or learned, but that it has to be inherited, presumably from the mother. And only what can be learned can also be cognized. Mother wit however belongs to the category of intuition, of a non-representational imagination that is linked to the body and to affect" (Rauch).

⁸ One definition of "street smarts" is "connected with being able to maneuver through structures in their [youth] lives such as poverty, the police, street culture, and abusive 'others'" (Hatt 154).

As a sponsor of literacy, in strictly financial terms, the United States federal government offers loans, provides grants for qualifying individuals, and aid for institutional development for postsecondary education and institutions⁹. Ideologically, the budgeting of those loans, grants, and aids are determined by the expressed purpose of education by the United States government. This value, as scholars I discuss in this chapter argue, is apparent in the history leading up to the government's direct involvement in education (with the United States Department of Education creation, as we know it today, in 1979¹⁰). This value primarily stems from heightened competition since World War II and Russia's launch of Sputnik. Support for this global competition can be found in *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (or *ANaR*). While this official U.S. Department of Education document was released in 1983, evidence of its influence can still be found in literature about education in the United States. For the remainder of this section, I will consider the implications of the United States federal government's involvement in education and how its sponsorship influences educational discourse in K-12 education. Of course, the organization of classroom literacy practices continues in colleges and universities, so the context remains the same and students welcome the familiar organization. Ultimately, the U.S. government, as a sponsor of literacy, envisions education as a competition in which individuals struggle for access to literacy and economic standing in order to participate in economic endeavors on a global scale. I focus on postsecondary education partly because it is the place in which much of the literacy training from K-12 comes to a head. Another reason I focus on postsecondary education, and the literacy acquired in colleges and universities, is

⁹ A more comprehensive list of what federal funding for postsecondary education as well as elementary, secondary, and others can be found at the U.S. Department of Education website:

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/history/edhistory.pdf>

¹⁰ The first US Department of Education in the US was established in 1867. Its goal was to “collect information on schools and teaching that would help the States establish effective school systems” (“The Federal Role in Education”).

simply that to be college educated in the U.S. implies intelligence and capability. Central to that intelligence and capability is *how* the intelligent and capable individual functions to perpetuate ideologies concerning literacy. This aspect is part of what makes up a public and a nation.

According to the “United States Federal Government Budget Overview and History,” in 2019 the United States federal government appropriated \$33,797, 909 for postsecondary education. Federal Pell Grants accounted for almost \$30 million and the Federal Direct Student Loan Program took up another \$7.6 million. These two aspects alone place expenditures over their proposed budget, with around \$600,000 going towards Aid for Institutional Development (n.p.). The remaining expenses total over \$3 million. These numbers are certainly not peanuts. However, when compared to the 2019 “Department of Defense Budget Overview” for the same year of \$686.1 billion (686,000,000,000), they appear to be lacking (n.p.). In considering these two budgets, it is clear that the federal government of the United States places a higher material value on defense than education. *ANaR*, with its “warlike language,” is the document that scholars turn to in order to understand the ideological impetus of reform, as will I. But first it is important to consider how engrained this ideology is into American culture (Hlavacik 62). In his article, “A Nation at Risk and Sputnik,” Erwin V. Johannigmeier argues that in the U.S. education has always been framed as a defensive project. He cites Truman’s Commission on Higher Education (1946), *Brown v. Board* (1954), Eisenhower’s White House Conference on Education (1955), and the report President Jimmy Carter ordered from the National Science Foundation and the Department of Education, among others, to argue that the U.S. federal government has always paired economy and defense with education. Of these moments in the history of the United States, Johannigmeier claims, “Like *A Nation at Risk*, these documents all emphasized the need for academic standards so citizens of the United States would be prepared

to contribute to the nation's defense requirements and to participate in and to contribute to the nation's economy" (349).

Thus, when *ANaR* appeared, "education criticism and the education discourse of the previous forty years created in the public mind a reservoir of tacit knowledge that easily came to the fore" (Johanningmeier 348). With decades of education associated with and synonymous with the economy and with the language of defense, it would have appeared to the American public that there was no alternative to viewing the significance of education. In other words, *ANaR* merely emphasized the connection to, and urgency of, education as a means of defense in terms of ideological structuring from the U.S. government. Holly G. McIntush points out that the report was widely available, stating that "large portions were reprinted in newspapers across the nation, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*" (420). Basically, this ideology circulated freely and became the language the public would use to discuss education. As a result, within the minds of America's inhabitants, the connection between national security and education in the form of economics became inseparable. The undeniable mark left by *ANaR* is evidenced by the fact that twelve years after its release, President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Education titled his Second Annual State of American Education Address "Turning the Corner: From a Nation at Risk to a Nation with a Future." Similarly, scholars have continued to respond to and analyze the implications of this report. David T. Gordon's 2003 edited collection asks *A Nation Reformed? American Education 20 Years After A Nation at Risk*. Dominic Belmonte's 2020 publication *The Age of Accountability: The Assault on Public Education Since the Time of A Nation at Risk* reasons through the weight of blame teachers still carry as a result of *ANaR*. The association of economic security to education stemming from this particular document continues to permeate national and scholarly discourse about education.

In addition, as Hlavacik illustrates, *ANaR* implicated the entire country as failing to involve themselves in education. This rhetorical move ensured at least a discursive commitment to the public response to both the document and the state of education it outlined. The accusation by Terrell H. Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Education, who researched and wrote *ANaR* in 1984, is not that the country is doing the *wrong thing*, but that the country is doing *nothing*. This, Hlavacik deems as "negligence" (58). I contend that by interpolating every citizen into this role *ANaR* subliminally defines the values of education for the nation's economy itself and interpolates the public into the discourse. Their ultimate goal wanting to find someone or something else to blame, or to hold accountable. In other words, Hlavacik claims that "accountability [...] is blame enthroned as policy," which becomes increasingly obvious in recent presidential administrations' educational policies and general discourse surrounding education in the U.S. (6) This rhetorical move negates previous educational reform as not good enough or simply nonexistent because it did not involve the participation, or blame, of the entire of the country. In particular, the study implicates those who *should* know better by stating,

the average citizen today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago—more literate, and exposed to more mathematics, literature, and science. The positive impact of this fact on the well-being of our country and the lives of our people cannot be overstated. 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. The negative impact of this fact like-wise cannot be overstated (13 [emphasis in original]).

Within this quote from *ANaR*, The National Commission on Excellence in Education clearly implicates the older generation in the failure of education by way of distinguishing between "*citizen*" and "*graduate*." By analogously aligning the success of previous generations and the failure of the most recent, as "*graduates*," the report charges the "*citizen*" with the responsibility of maintaining educational standards as previous generations afforded them. More succinctly, the

report blames the current generation for education's shortcomings as defined within the urgency of the United States' supposed failing global economic standing. In comparison to the previous generation, this generation is failing its youth. So, then, blame and accountability, which I will return to in the next section, becomes part of the language of educational reform.

This bears repeating: As a sponsor of literacy, the United States government provides funds to individuals, as well as institutions, to enable literacy; however, and more to the point of this project, it regulates that literacy as an ideological sponsor. Through framing education chiefly as an economic necessity and urgent defense need, the Government defines literacy within a competitive and monetary context. Within that agenda, the U.S. Government restricts the purposes of literacy to gaining economic advantage for the individual, which contributes to overall global competitiveness at the national level and constitutes the self-interested *homo economicus*. As a result, individuals in the U.S. vie for access to literacy as the U.S. defines it and its economic utility—normalizing literacy in service of competition. In short, this competition limits hope to that which the individual can contribute to capitalism. In the next section, I will discuss how this literacy ideology carries with it social implications in connection to literacy and education that effect public and social participation.

Accountability and Responsibility, or Blame and Individual Failures

The connections between education, literacy, and individual identity and how they shape broader notions of what it means to be “literate” or “educated” in a given cultural context cannot be overstated, particularly in relation to a sponsor of literacy. For this project, an understanding of the self as “raw material” to be worked into a normative literacy that contributes to economic competition is important. As a quick reminder, Brandt explains that writing is “connected to work, not citizenship” (*The Rise...2*). This association is troubling. James Paul Gee claims that

“literacy and literacy crises are a displacement of social fears” in attempts to evade larger social problems, such as inequity and inaccessibility (31). Stuckey puts it another way when she states, “literacy is a social restriction and an individual accomplishment [...] teaching literacy depends on circumstance not textbook [...] A theory of literacy is a theory of society, of social relationships; and the validity of a theory of literacy derives from the actual lives of the people who make the society” (64). Specifically, a uniform understanding of literacy, couched in discourses of national safety and global capitalistic competition that are riddled with blame, conceals the potential alternatives for literacy in relation to how an individual identifies themselves and forms a public with others. So, then, if the United States government defines literacy within the context of capitalistic competition using the language of conflict, it excludes others who do not or cannot, for material reasons, fall into that definition of literate—they are limited in their participation, viewed by others as outside of society—and therefore are not considered when others reflect on their positions as part of the public. In turn, the nation produces individuals who also exclude Others in terms of social identities and even economic stability and security in the name of neoliberal self-interest. In this section, I will outline specifically how the Government has repeatedly centered blame as a necessary part of education. Ultimately, the ambience of blame trickles down to individual students.

Jimmy Carter created the Department of Education, as we know it, in 1979, which served as the Government’s official entrance into educational discourse for recent memory. As Mark Hlavacik outlines, the first to take hold of this new government influenced discourse in a public way was Milton Friedman. His PBS show, entitled *Free to Choose* (1980), laid the groundwork for blame and placed it on the bureaucrats (21). He argued for the voucher system in schools, his primary contention based on economic reasoning (this aspect will be further discussed alongside

Betsy Devos’s attempt to push for school choice in her position as Secretary of Education). Following Friedman’s blame approach, Ronald Reagan commissioned *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, from Terrell H. Bell (the Secretary of Education). Although the former employed militaristic language and blames the nation as a whole, both return to an emphasis on endangered economy caused by ill-wrought educational approaches. I argue that this evidence, provided by both popular culture (PBS) and the Government (*ANaR*) has continued to influence educational discourse, shaping literacy as that which identifies the self in a neoliberal context. I also argue that *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* have equally upheld these educational outlooks. Both George W. Bush’s and Barack Obama’s education policies began and ended with monetary gain for K-12 institutions—an approach that carries over to the mindset of postsecondary institutions. What this sponsor requires for literacy is submitting to the ruling ideologies in terms of how to interpret the world and the self: competitively and economically, which the neoliberal mindset adapts as self-interest and self-governance. Both are perfectly respectable considerations to have; however, within the neoliberal context, they negate the idea of the public and public influence for individual success and failure.

As I previously mentioned, the language of the “dropout” implies a breaking off from intended paths. The United States government encases the primary, “positive” trajectory—graduating from high school and going on to college to become an economically contributing member of American society—within the understanding that to be a dropout is to individually fail because it is not the norm. School itself is structured around this idea in such a way. As Allison Carr points out, “avoiding failure—is the object around which school is structured” (n.p.). In other words, being “held back” is just as akin to “failing” or “failure” as it is to

“dropout.” She goes on to state that historically, since Quintilian, “Literacy, then and now, is inextricably linked to identity—the identity of the individual as well as the identity of the community to which that individual belongs.” She explains that, as a result, “Shame acknowledges the failure, and in so doing, names the failure *as failure*, causing us to feel isolation while making us painfully aware of our relationality” (n.p.). That relationality becomes a negative one, in comparison to others who have fallen in line with the appropriate, normative literacy. One way to promote normative literacy is through automation of the individual. Meyerhoff examines the language of “dropping out” as linked to automation. He states, “The automation narrative implies that part of the agency creating the crisis is in the progressive forces [...] of liberal-capitalist modernization” (92). “Dropping out” is synonymous with “failure.” It literally distances the former or “failing” student from their successful peers in that they are removed from the normative abilities of the individual to their success. Scott A. Sandage makes failure’s connection to the individual all the more apparent in American discourse by describing the understanding of failure in the U.S. as a shift from “ordeal to identity” (4).

So, then, “failure,” “dropping out,” and being “held back” are affiliated with individual identity. Problematically, this situating of the individual as responsible for nationally perceived shortcomings within a capitalism-based context serves to maintain neoliberal ideologies that become further internalized. This aspect becomes complicated when the individual is geared towards self-interest and disregards others in a public. Struggles constitute publics, and these labels appear to be the punishing factor in normalized literacy for those who choose to not adhere or cannot adhere. Co-existence is surely unavoidable, but the positionality of the literate further complicates the positionality of those who do not succeed by these same literacy standards. The

next section will dive more deeply into how this ideology has played out in recent educational policies and movements from the United States federal government.

A Race to Leave No Child Behind by Choice

United States Presidents share a long history of having policies concerning how the nation's education should be administered and for what purposes. In 1779 Thomas Jefferson wrote "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," which essentially outlined the beginnings of public schools, only for white children. Dwight D. Eisenhower directed that schools must be integrated. Richard Nixon signed The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, paving the way for Individualized Education Plans, or IEPs, also known as 504s¹¹. In more recent years, arguments for public education and signing of bills transformed into full-on strategic moves in education by the United States government. By discussing George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind, followed by Barack Obama's Race to the Top, and then Donald Trump's push for School Choice, I aim to lay further groundwork for considering the weight with which U.S. federal government ideology influences educational discourse. I also hope to establish how specific federal movements in education promote neoliberal ideologies that center economic advancement in global competition, thereby interpolating youth, and their parents, as neoliberal subjects—particularly in educational discourse.

George W. Bush described his No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as "the cornerstone of [his] administration" ("Executive Summary of NCLB"). The goal of this sweeping policy was to close the "achievement gap" between minority students and/or low-income students and their

¹¹ Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states: "No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 705 (20) of this title, shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance under any program or activity conducted by an Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service."

peers. Michael Heise points out that “NCLB reset the education federalism boundary in a manner substantially more favorable to federal authority” (1867). With the signing of this Act, parents could choose to remove their students from a poorly performing school under the condition that its performance has been consistently subpar for two years. Among other things, this Act provided funds to states with demonstrated improvements in children’s education. These funds were determined by the grade assigned to each district and school¹². While the legislation did not mandate particular benchmarks or the use of its own assessment tools, it did require states to obtain federal approval in their assessment practices (Heise 1867). Basically, funding itself depended on schools’ abilities to improve *prior* to any funding provided by the federal government. Put another way, the government required a school to improve in order to receive federal funding, which would appear antithetical to what would signal a need for more funding, by way of resources and hiring more skillfully trained teachers.

In the end, NCLB was doomed to fail. The financial crisis of 2008 alongside healthcare reform shifted the attention of the United States federal government away from education. Also, growing criticism of NCLB compounded with “a growing number of states’ failure to achieve adequate yearly progress,” and gave Barack Obama’s Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, room to step in with waivers that relieved states from adhering to NCLB’s obligations (Heise 1870). The waivers also implemented an even more blatant competition with Race to the Top. As defined by “Race to the Top Program Executive Summary,” this program is “a *competitive* grant program designed to encourage and reward states” for “adopting standards and assessments” (2 [emphasis added]). For their share of the \$4.35 billion (\$680 billion for the U.S. Defense budget

¹² For example, in 2019 East Baton Rouge Schools, as a whole, received a grade of “C”—increasing by 3.7 points from the previous year (“EBR...”).

at the time¹³), schools must compete for a piece of the funding. The more quickly a school adopts standards and assessments, the more ensured they are for winning the money. The federal government continues to turn to individual schools to make these finances happen, resulting in heavy discussions around teacher evaluation. As indicated by Aguilar and Richerme's 2014 study, "The Race to the Top scoring rubric [...] demonstrates that teacher evaluation served as a key reform measure for states wishing to win Race to the Top funds" (110).

In fact, Race to the Top (RTT) changed the requirements for assessing teachers by utilizing value-added measurements for teachers including assessment of student growth. The "Race to the Top Program Executive Summary" defines "student growth" as "the change in student achievement [...] for an individual student between two or more points at a time. A state may also include other measures that are rigorous and comparable across classrooms" (14). Essentially, it becomes a question of whether teachers add to student growth from one year to the next based on test scores from students from previous years and compared to other students in the same grade. As Croft and Buddin argue, however, a primary factor complicates this approach. They explain that certain teachers remain unevaluated because RTT only measures student growth in school subjects that are included in standardized tests (Math, English, etc...). This, they clarify, could lead to a shuffling of those perceived as less successful of teachers to untested subjects (2). So, with value-added modeling, the American public gains an even more codified scapegoat in teachers. Coincidentally, the "value added" is only in those subjects the Government considers closely connected enough to competition and economy to standardize and test. The point I am driving at is that federally mandated tests are limited to what teachers in specific subjects can push on students well enough to make the grade on a test. And, of course,

¹³ For a comprehensive outline of the 2009 U.S. Defense Budget: <https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/Budget2009/>

that is what can contribute to American economy, and, by extension, global competitiveness. Literacy, then, is highly regulated in order for schools to obtain governmental funding. That regulation, as we have seen with the language of the “dropout” and “failure,” negatively marks individuals in the view of the Government, and by extension, the public.

This last-minute Common Core waiver for NCLB paved the way for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that President Obama signed in 2015. It officially replaced NCLB, giving more power to the states, but it maintained “federally mandated standardized testing” (Baskin n.p.). Fundamentally, the ESSA allowed states to develop and implement their own accountability goals but with the stipulation that states must present their goals to the federal government for approval. The fundamental principle in all of these movements is where to place accountability, or blame, and it is directly linked to students’ performances as normalized and standardized by the United State federal government. The United States government, through these policy changes, decides which teachers, and which educational components, they hold accountable by way of their standardized tests, or government approved goals. Subsequently, federal policies reward or withhold funds for individual schools and states based on the national goals they reflect. The public now holds the position of customer, while the federal government manages those whom they deem accountable. In this way, the Government interpolates the American public into their definitions of literacy associated with economic gain and neoliberalism, while absolving the public¹⁴ of responsibility.

This competitive ideology laid the groundwork for the Trump administration to promote school choice via a voucher system, which transforms “public education” into a customer-service model. The idea of school choice in conjunction with a federally funded voucher program further

¹⁴ While I would argue that they are still members of the public, the rhetorical positioning of the “dropout” distances those who have not succeeded academically from the rest of the public.

begets competition, encouraging development of the neoliberal subject. While actual policy documents on education from the Trump administration are difficult to find, a number of speeches from both Donald J. Trump¹⁵ and Betsy DeVos¹⁶ signal their preference for school choice, under the guise of “reducing the outsized Federal role in education and returning control over education decisions to whom it belongs—State and local leaders, teachers, parents, and students” (U.S. Department of Education).

At best, school choice allows for parents to remove their children from underperforming public schools and place them in a charter, private, or public school that performs at a higher level (by pre-determined, regulated standards based on tests). However, this “at best” becomes complicated when considering that public funds account for these individual students’ financial access to the charter schools. Or, that these programs often depend on scarcity of resources to operate, and further mystify the public benefits of school vouchers. Carolyn Sattin-Bajaj and Allison Roda’s 2018 study found competition to economically advance through school becomes between individual parents and children. The competition is specifically between those with limited financial means and time constraints and those with economic privilege. The researchers discuss “opportunity hoarding” in order “to understand the actions (and inaction) that maintain racial/ethnic and class-based inequality within and outside the education system” (996). Essentially, Sattin-Bajaj and Roda discovered that middle-class and upper-middle class white parents possess the resources and cultural capital to ensure their children gain access to charter

¹⁵ Donald J. Trump: State of the Union Address, February 5, 2019: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/02/05/state-union-read-president-donald-trumps-full-address/2781766002/> and <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/05/politics/donald-trump-state-of-the-union-2019-transcript>

¹⁶ Betsy DeVos: Hillsdale College, October 19, 2020: <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/prepared-remarks-secretary-devos-hillsdale-college> ; JFK Jr. Forum at Harvard Kennedy School, September 28, 2017: <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/prepared-remarks-secretary-devos-jfk-jr-forum-harvard-kennedy-school> ; Brookings Institution, March 9, 2017: <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/us-secretary-education-betsy-devos-prepared-remarks-brookings-institution>

and private schools, while lower-income parents do not. They found that financially well-off, white parents could spend time and money navigating school choice policies, hiring tutors, and placing their children in preparatory classes (1016). All of these approaches to gain advantage for their children require time and money that is not available nor accessible to all parents in the U.S., thereby creating competition is not among schools, but among individual parents and children.

Herein lies the thrust of my argument: Historically, in the United States, education has always been framed as a competition. The winners of which can advance in or, for those higher on the socio-economic ladder, maintain their economic standing; however, because the individual competition is based on global economic competition, as outlined by the federal government, more often than not economic class is *maintained* as opposed to advanced. This maintenance of the status quo, or normalization, is the problem with the neoliberal subject's adherence to self-interest. As a result, education itself is limited by competition and privileges of those already in possession of positive socioeconomic standing. Accordingly, literacy itself, as the United States government defines it, is sustained by guaranteeing those already falling within the accepted definition the preservation of their standing. Within this context, Stuckey's claims that "literacy is considered an 'inside' phenomenon" and that there exists within U.S. society an understanding of illiteracy as an "incivility," becomes increasingly clear (36). To be labeled "illiterate," then, is to lose value, protection, and understanding from that society (as I stated in the Introduction). Put another way, individuals straying from the path of nationally sponsored literacy (and education) are marginalized and placed at a disadvantage in local, national, and global competition by a public that has been conditioned to that sponsorship.

Conclusion: From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope...But Hope for What?

In this chapter, I have made a case for how ingrained competitive neoliberal ideologies are fixed United States educational discourse. I considered expanded understandings of literacy to highlight the extent of literacy regulation by the U.S. Government. I have also considered historical efforts by the United States Government to enter then persist in educational discourse that has helped neoliberalism consume individuals, which alters their self-identification, influencing their interaction with public education discourse. However, in 2019 the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development, or NCSEAD, discovered "A growing movement dedicated to the social, emotional, and academic well-being of children is reshaping and changing lives across America"; they state, "On the strength of its remarkable consensus, a nation at risk is finally a nation at hope" (5). Within their Introduction, the NCSEAD immediately tries to pull away from the ideology that the United States is "at risk," and enthusiastically commends the changes they find evident in discussions with "young people, parents, teachers, school and district leaders, community leaders, and other experts" (5). The report states, "these social, emotional, and academic capacities are increasingly *demanding in the American workplace*, which puts a premium on the ability to work in diverse teams, to grapple with difficult problems, and to adjust to rapid change" (5 – 6 [emphasis added]). In this conclusion, I discuss the implications of continuing to center the workplace and competition, even in terms of "hope," for supposed ideological shifts concerning education in the United States and possible alternatives. I then consider those alternatives.

The commission for the NCSEAD study emerged from a non-profit organization (not the U.S. Government), The Aspen Institute, but it is important to note that this group is still trying to get out from under the weight of *ANaR*. By titling their findings "A Nation at Hope," they

distinguish their outlook, based on the results of their research, as one of a bright future as opposed to accountability, or blame. For the most part, this aspect is rather optimistic in that their study highlights the positive aspects of current movements in teaching. However, continued centering of the workplace is problematic. Lisa Duggan explains in *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, that under neoliberalism's assumed neutrality, it subdues the relationships that social movements labor to emphasize (xiv). In *We Demand: The University and Student Protests*, Roderick A. Ferguson builds on her assertion. He states, "A refusal to see the depths of social struggles works in the service of neoliberal processes that attempt to suppress our understanding of the complex and interlocking systems that make up the social world" (69). Because the work aspect obscures both literacy and hope, it is limited to what I would call a neoliberal outlook in which the whole person remains incomplete without adhering to economically mandated behaviors and skills that contribute to local, national, and global competition. Put another way, the person is "incomplete" without improving themselves, the end goal being a self-interest that contributes to capitalism and the neoliberal subject's adherence to its requirements.

Furthermore, as Michael Engel points out in *The Struggle for Control of Public Education*, in the corporate world everything is geared towards teamwork, *except* who will profit and what will be produced (133). So, the "ability to work in diverse teams" becomes increasingly tied to support for the corporatization of education, lending itself to market-ideology. Additionally, "To grapple with difficult problems, and adjust to rapid change," then, appears to focus on "self-determination" (Engel 212). In this context, "self-determination" means to work in teams and adhere to productivity. This methodology further reinforces neoliberal leanings in

terms of individuality, recalling the American Dream¹⁷. Hope now becomes a question of fitting into predetermined goals that restrict the value of education and, therefore, of what a sponsor of literacy willingly invests in. Under the aegis of neoliberal ideology, teamwork, the tackling of difficult problems, and rapid change all promote competition. The goal of one team is to beat another team. The objective of solving problems is to turn a profit—preferably higher than the competitor’s profit. And, striving to adapt to rapid changes assures individuals that they belong within this system (as exploitive as it may be), promising them a self-identification that permits a comfortable acceptance. All of these aspects buttress a neoliberal ideology that continues to perpetuate itself through competition. How then can we share a *hope* for education, or direction, that can only guarantee further struggles and opposition requiring that someone must lose? How can we share this hope when it is clear that many individuals are disadvantaged from the moment they are born, whether it be economically or socially?

The alternatives I seek imply a hope that reaches beyond economy and into the everyday lives of the public that can be practiced and felt through education. As such, the hope I seek for education and literacy insists on the value of learning and the individual beyond economically driven ideologies that currently sponsor literacy at the governmental level. This hope grasps at learning for the individual to recognize others as comrades and co-conspirators as opposed to competitors. Since my intentions lie at the intersection of politics and hope, in seeking to escape hegemonic ideologies of literacy, I employ Harvey Milk’s framework of hope. In Charles E. Morris III and Jason Edward Black’s introduction to their edited collection of his speeches, they explain that “Milk’s purple passages and stump clichés teach us that hope’s discourse, at close

¹⁷The American Dream is “a set of ideals stating that in the United States freedom includes opportunities to obtain prosperity, success, and upward social mobility through hard work no matter what an individual’s racial, religious, or economic background is” (Eliassen).

hearing by real people, is by turns and toil both sublime and hackneyed in situ” (7). Key to my conclusion in this description is the need for “real people” in a definition that operates only within “turns and toil,” requiring the ambivalence of “sublime and hackneyed.” In short, the contradictions of real life. I will not pretend to know what reality is, but I can confidently attest to its inherent tendency to consistently lapse from our intended trajectories for it. Thus, when discussing “in situ,” the hope I strive for accounts for the contingency of what individuals hope for, or can hope for, outside of rigid economic demands.

As evidenced by Milk’s “You’ve Got to Have Hope” speech, this hope accounts for the diversity of individuals intrinsic to the quotidian. He connects capitalism’s inherent competitiveness to an alternative viewpoint in passionately arguing that:

It’s no longer the Seniors, the unemployed, the Asian community, the Gays, the Blacks, the Latins and so forth. They’re all US. It’s US against THEM. If you add up all the USEs, you’ll find we outnumber the THEMS. And yet the THEMS control. It’s the THEMS who benefit when the Gays and the Blacks and the Latins fight [or compete] amongst themselves. It’s the THEMS who want to tear down the homes and community centers of the USEs for their special pet projects. It’s the THEMS who divide—and conquer. It’s the THEMS who are the real outside agitators in our communities. And they’ve been here for years. Who are the THEMS? They’re the ones who pay the taxes and run the corporations and have large investments in the city (150)

While I recognize I toe a line in employing language of “US” and “THEM,” ideological factors regulating literacy that exploit disadvantaged people in order to provoke competition necessary for neoliberal capitalistic expansion already requires an “us and them” mentality in terms of competition. This aspect is most apparent in the federal government’s support of “school choice” in which, as I have outlined, “opportunity hoarding” becomes an intrinsic characteristic. The takeaway here is inclusivity. Neoliberal self-interest has made competitors of us all, but what Milk outlines is a recognition of that exclusion and the fact that most of us are outliers in some way, which bares reflection in considering public education.

I use this understanding of hope as inclusive, not competitive, to begin to imagine an alternative. In my imagining, I can freely admit that perhaps I have chosen the wrong word here. In a 2019 interview, Patricia Hill Collins explains that “community” may be a better alternative to “public” because, “In contrast to the term public, the idea of community provides a more malleable way to talk about social groups [...] [communities] provide a language for understanding our location in power relations as well as a site that better explains our place in the abstract notion of a public” (161-2). These communities are not unlike the ones Milk outlines. And we can start thinking about improving those communities by considering how we can be better people. In *A Richer, Brighter Vision for American High Schools*, Nel Noddings proposes a unified educational purpose of creating “better adults” through formal education. By “better adults” she means “one who offers help where it is needed, who avoid the deliberate or careless infliction of harm or suffering” (70). We can gear ourselves more towards cooperation and understanding than competition and fear of losing that competition if we focus more on finding out who needs that help. My imagination, while wild at moments (and perhaps a bit esoteric?), cannot concede the absolute possibility of this hope changing everything. Doubtless, a public constituted by struggle will continue to exist; however, that competition need not infiltrate an individual’s identity in terms of their literacy practices and how they identify themselves or others as a subject within a public. To lose sight of what constitutes a public, through all of our differences, by way of neoliberal subject formation, is to lose sight of possibilities of what public education can be.

Interchapter 2

In our yard, off the dirt road, we had some sort of Cherry Blossom tree at the front edge of the shoddy fence. Or maybe it just *wanted* to be a Cherry Blossom tree? It didn’t have a single

trunk. It lived as a number of tortuous stalks stretching further out than up. I loved climbing it. I could make it to the top of its thicker limbs because it wasn't very big or tall. I could hide in it when we played Man Hunt at night. I could sit up there and watch the neighborhood happen. Hidden. Even when my folks were on a tear, there seemed to be some sort of tacit understanding not to bother me while I sat in that tree. It was a nice place to go. Just let be. But then the spring would come, and those caterpillars that make webs would spin all over it. Hundreds. The white clumps covered all the reaching trunks, suffocating the pink blossoms. I always ended up at a loss for what to do when I couldn't climb that wannabe Cherry Blossom tree. As I got older, I realized that I'd never seen another like it. Still haven't. Was it deformed? Did it mix with something else? Was there something wrong with the soil?

I managed to earn my A.A. degree. The trailer I'd escaped from burned down, my stepfather was murdered, and my cat, Socks, died in a fire, but I did it anyway. They'd changed the name from Florida Community College at Jacksonville to Florida State College at Jacksonville in my last summer semester. So, I'd graduated from Florida State College at Jacksonville with plenty of classes in History, English, and Philosophy, but I wanted to keep reading and writing for as long as I could. My next step was to continue with a Major in English and a Minor in History at the University of North Florida. It was local and affordable. Filling out my FAFSA, however, proved to be a challenge. My stepfather had illegally claimed me on his taxes before he died, and there was no way to get the documentation. Even before his death, he refused to supply me with the required papers.

So, in order to continue my education, I had to write a letter to the school's Financial Aid Office. This letter emphasized that I did not have any contact with my mother (because she was an alcoholic) nor my stepfather (because he was dead); therefore, I could not obtain the required

documents for a FAFSA. This damn letter did something or other to me. I simply could not fathom the fact that my ability to move forward in my educational endeavors required someone to die. It wasn't a burning building, nor the strength it took to leave a bad situation. Someone had to die. Money, death, and addiction as the thresholds for continuing my education. Honestly, in retrospect, at the time I was too stoned to parse it out, but I knew I'd made it, or at least was trying to *make* something — I was *doing* something. Something other than getting screamed at in Starbucks for charging a customer 40 cents for the vanilla syrup. At the time, I also worked as a dog sitter for six to nine months out of the year and would take on the occasional art modeling position. I felt as though this *something* I was making and doing could give me a better life and distance me from the dirt road and all its entrapments. The trailer was gone. Stepdad was gone. And now there was official documentation stating that I wasn't a part of that scene anymore. Two truths and a lie: I didn't belong because I was better, but I did belong because I wasn't any better.

So, there I sat in my first English class at a *real* university. It was called “Dramatic Women in Literature.” I failed my first reading quiz. I'd failed so horribly, in fact, that the big, crimson-inked feedback bled “UNACCEPTABLE” across the entirety of the first page. “Well,” I thought, “then what the fuck am I doing here?” But more bone-chillingly, I'd thought that the professor knew something I didn't—besides the answers to the quiz questions. Did he somehow know I didn't belong at the university? Was it the bow-legged way I walked? The nearly imperceptible twang in the way I talked? “UNACCEPTABLE” is what the loopy writing screeched across the paper, but I'd been accepted. I'd written the letter. It wasn't up to him if I was acceptable, or UNACCEPTABLE. Flashbacks to my sixth grade History teacher commenting that I was “Rude, crude, and socially UNACCEPTABLE” dotted moments in the class for the rest of the term. But, again, I was ACCEPTED. So, then, what was *his* problem? What was my sixth grade History

teacher's problem? So what if I got lost walking from the parking lot to campus? So what if I couldn't recall who said what lines in *Madea*?

That damn UNACCEPTABLE also made me question what I was doing majoring in English. I'd been warned by colleagues and older customers at Starbucks that folks with English degrees didn't make a whole lot of money. All I'd be able to do with the degree was teach. And teachers didn't make much money. What was the point of college if I wasn't going to make money? But teachers always told me I was an exceptional writer, at least before the *real* university. And I enjoyed what I studied. But still, I couldn't help wondering if English was going to put me back on the dirt road. But wasn't writing a letter what put me here? Fucking writing.

This UNACCEPTABLE professor's art installations frequently dominated the main library and surrounding lakes. Oddly enough, his degree was in Art History, but he was in the English Department. I'm not sure what the story is there, but I do know I felt not only his presence but also his importance on campus—he was not only *acceptable* but also trusted to make the university in the image he felt appropriate. Once I got over that first hurdle of UNACCEPTABLE I did alright. I was allowed to major in English. Aside from my decent grades and actual presence on campus, my belonging at the *real* university and ability to major in English was also evidenced by my younger brother's constant expulsions from high school on the grounds of "insubordination." Comparatively, I was a good kid. I did my work and behaved (or at least I didn't get caught doing anything "bad"). I could, and was, taking care of myself. I had a place to live, food, a car, a few jobs, and even lots of friends. Still, I found myself lost in moments, trying to convince myself that I'd worked to get here, damnit. I'd earned it. I'd sacrificed. Didn't I belong? Just like my classmates, but more so? Someone didn't have to die (no matter how terrible they were) so they could sit in this room. They couldn't appreciate a place where everyone was free to experiment,

no holds barred, with each other and their own selves. I loved, more than anything else, that I could be a good college student for a few hours, a coffee slinger long enough for a paycheck, and a party animal for the times in between. And it was okay, and it was good because I was in *college*. *Real* college.

As the semesters came and went, my two years as an undergraduate at UNF formed into one giant globule of reading, writing, unbelievably late nights resulting in painfully hungover days under the fluorescent lights of chilly classrooms, and the smell of coffee grounds. I finished my BA. It wasn't honors or anything — I didn't even make the Dean's List. I stood out as exceptional to my professors at Community College, and even State College at Jacksonville. I was fortunate enough to stay close to a few (even to this day). But I certainly wasn't labeled as a genius during my BA. I wasn't sure where to go from there. Honestly, I didn't think I'd get that far. So, because I didn't know what else to do, I applied to the Master's Program in English at UNF. Once again, I found myself getting accepted, but I still wasn't quite sure what that meant. I was confused, directionless, and unsure of myself. I didn't have the Cherry Blossom tree that grew out rather than up to just be in. So, despite it all, I wrote. Fucking *writing*.

Chapter 2. Postsecondary Institutions as Sponsors of Literacy

Anyone can see that there is no disgrace in the mere fact of writing...The disgrace begins when a man writes not well, but badly.

- Socrates, in *Phaedrus*, by Plato

But if you tell folks you're a college student, folks are so impressed. You can be a student in anything and not have to know anything. Just say toxicology or marine biokinesis, and the person you're talking to will change the subject to himself. If this doesn't work, mention the neural synapses of embryonic pigeons.

- Chuck Palahniuk
Invisible Monsters

Immaculately polished with the spirit of a hustler and the swagger of a college kid.

- T. I.
"Live Your Life"

Introduction

As I've outlined in the previous chapter, the United States federal government, as a sponsor of literacy, promotes neoliberal ideologies through its competitive educational policies, placing the purpose and value of literacy within a capitalistic framework. However, postsecondary educational institutions, or colleges and universities, also play a large role in continuing competition for literacy and how the American public understands it on a mass scale. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 19.7 million students were projected to attend college in 2020. The Pew Research Center points out that at least half their sample of postsecondary institutions accepted two-thirds of their applicants. They also note a stratified differentiation between the more "prestigious" schools and the lesser-known ones. So, carrying over from the language of the "dropout," as outlined by Eli Meyerhoff, the terms "accepted" and "rejected" find new footholds in the minds of the United States' young inhabitants¹⁸. The time spent awaiting acceptance or rejection to college, then, is when literacy and education as

¹⁸ This is not to discount older individuals going to college. Rather, my project is considering the trajectory from public secondary school to public postsecondary educational institutions.

competition comes to a head. This is the time when all of the students' failures and successes add up. On one hand, the winners are the "accepted." They now have access to further intellectual development, at least in formal institutions. The ones who won at the more prestigious schools find themselves with an even higher sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. They can now more fully solidify their understanding of literacy, placing themselves more firmly, and willingly, within the competition for economic stability or advancement. This validation encourages further struggle between themselves and others in terms of social and economic standing. On the other hand, the losers, those who have been rejected, are left in the dust in terms of formal education. There are alternative routes to acceptance in the United States; however, the base line for undeniable success is a college education.

So then, acceptance into college is the genesis of "the swagger of a college kid," as T.I. puts it. The impressive title of "college student" reassures the individual that they are, in fact, intellectually and morally better than those who are rejected. A postsecondary institution accepted them. They won. But what have they won? I argue that acceptance into college or university is more accurately an acceptance into a larger apparatus that further perpetuates dominant ideological understandings of literacy, which support competition, exclusionary practices, and self-interests. In short, postsecondary institutions are one of the many creators of neoliberal subjects—placing market-centered values first. As such, predominantly white postsecondary institutions in the United States guarantee quite a bit, but primarily they promise the ability to find and secure a career upon completion of a degree, resulting in financial stability and possible upward mobility. To be clear, the issue I take is not the advancement of individuals, so much as that advancement depends upon competing with others: In order for someone to win, someone has to lose.

These institutions also promise the status of college graduate, therefore college educated, which signifies inherent value in the individual. I define that value, through the lens of neoliberalism, as commodification of the individual and their abilities to produce (and consume). Put another way, that value rests in the individual's ability to contribute to political economic stability and advancement for themselves and, by extension, the United States as a global economic power. In turn, by their college-educated standing, the individual feels ensured of their own financial stability and possible advancement. The promise of making a living in a capitalist society, as well as valuing yourself, are fairly high stakes. Essentially, it's the promise of power through acceptance, followed by the hard work of an individual. Supposedly, through neoliberal ideologies, that access is attainable by all who try and is empowering for the individual who was accepted. Put another way, bootstraps mentality imbues ideologies with heavy personal responsibility and an understanding of success that ignores external obstacles to that success. Within this ideological matrix, colleges and universities are powerful in that they are gatekeepers of what qualifies as relevant knowledge that makes up a college degree, which is now commodified by the neoliberal political economy as human capital¹⁹. By way of Foucault's explanation in *Discipline & Punish*, power relates unswervingly to knowledge. Foucault argues that

power and knowledge directly imply one another [...] there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations [...] it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power/knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge (27-28).

¹⁹ "Human capital" contributes to the "quality of labor." Universities and colleges are the training grounds for "production work." Therefore, they "contribute to economic growth" (Slaughter and Leslie 10).

To put it another way, these institutions, as keepers of knowledge and sponsors of literacy, promise power by way of knowledge, in turn they reinforce their own power and epistemological underpinnings. In this way, postsecondary institutions create and enact power/knowledge. Knowledge is deemed knowledge by sponsors of literacy, who are, “agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well a recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way,” whether by actual money or dominant ideology (Brandt 166). As a sponsor of literacy, colleges and universities choose to exclude other forms of literacy and individuals who do not adhere to the definition that propagates their own power. It’s also no coincidence that Foucault specifically highlights that “struggles” make power/knowledge up. The more exclusionary and competitive getting into college is, the more literacy and its power/knowledge are prized and considered a scarce commodity to strive or struggle for.

Foucault goes on to elaborate that a disciplinary institution, “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes” (183). The educational institution employs these basic mechanisms constantly by way of grades, advancement, and eventually degree attainment, as well as the prestige of the university or college itself. By utilizing these indicators to define what knowledge is and what it’s useful for, colleges and universities (re)produce the apparatus’s own power, consistently creating willing subjects, in students, that continue to disseminate their understanding of knowledge and power as outlined by the apparatus. Thus, in its literacy sponsorship, postsecondary education normalizes what it means to possess knowledge as well as how “knowledge” is defined, all the while excluding those who are at social and economic disadvantages. Of course, the university structure is merely a part of a larger apparatus. Foucault specifically states that, “the apparatus itself is the system of relations

that can be established between” the elements of “discourses, institutions [...] moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (*Power/Knowledge* 194). In analyzing Foucault’s definition of “apparatus,” Giorgio Agamben deduces that an apparatus “appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge” (3). The “unsaid,” then, are individuals continuing the discourses, attending the institutions, making decisions and laws, crafting administrative measures and so forth. Bourdieu and Passeron call the mechanism that enforces this cycle “Pedagogic Work,” or the “process of inculcation which must last long enough to produce durable training [...] capable of perpetuating itself after Pedagogical Action²⁰ has ceased” (31).

In that vein, scholars Lisa Duggan as well as Joyce E. Canaan and Wesley Shumar argue that the neoliberalization of the university began in the 1980s with the emergence of globalized markets. Canaan and Shumar clarify the link between marketization and postsecondary education, stating, “the marketization and commodification of higher education [is] indicative of the wider transition of the previously public sector institutions as we move from the welfare state to the market state” (4). Duggan further argues that neoliberalism’s thriving in the United States has consistently relied on identity and cultural politics. She explains that “economic goals have been (must be) formulated *in terms of* the range of political and cultural meanings that shape the social body in a particular time and place” (xii [emphasis in original]). Her reasoning highlights my choice to discuss race in conversation with postsecondary institutions, neoliberalism, and literacy. Through the lens of socially and economically marginalized groups, the neoliberalization of postsecondary institutions becomes more apparent. But further still, if, as Slaughter and Leslie posit, “academic capitalism” is “the reality of the nascent environment of

²⁰ Pedagogic Action, as defined by Bourdieu and Passeron, is “symbolic violence insofar as it is imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (5).

public research universities, an environment full of contradictions, in which faculty and professional staff expend their human capital stocks increasingly in competitive situations,” then wouldn’t the same ring true for students (11)? The caveat, of course, is that students are not yet trained. Consequently, they would be marked by their physical appearances and attributes in terms of interaction and communication. Enter complications for literacy and its social and economic ramifications.

Within this context, in *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt outlines that “literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century” and plays a role maintaining “racism, sexism, and other undemocratic interests” (18, 8). American workers once altered raw materials for production and consumption, but now we have become the raw material—to be shaped into marketable commodities through literacy. Postsecondary institutions develop that literacy, at least in a way that it is easily marketable. Not only is literacy developed by postsecondary institutions in terms of how they encourage faculty and staff to directly teach forms²¹ of literacy, but also in the way colleges and universities contribute to social literacies concerning race and disability (among many other socially coded attributes). In terms of “social literacy” or “literacies,” as stated in the Introduction of this dissertation, I imply an understanding of the “ideological model²²” of literacy. Bryan Street explains, “literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures” (161). My analyses in the following sections outline how accepted literacy practices in postsecondary institutions are

²¹ Brandt states that, “Multiple literacy practices are also a sign of stratification and struggle,” which supports Foucault’s point that power/knowledge is made up of struggles (*Literacy in American...8*).

²² Street proposes the ideological model of literacy in opposition to the “autonomous model of literacy.” James Paul Gee explains that the autonomous model of literacy, “has cognitive effects apart from the context in which it exists and the uses to which it is put in a given culture” (80). The autonomous model, then, conceals the power structures influencing literacy practices that posit Western approaches to literacy as “neutral” or “objective.”

bound up with neoliberalism—maintaining exclusionary practices and instilling economically competitive ideologies of literacy and access to it.

As such, I claim that literacy is a means by which economic competition becomes a form of knowledge that reflects on both economic and social standing of individuals through the institutions in which they are enmeshed. And the maintenance of exclusionary practices depends largely on self-interest. To clarify, I take institutions to mean,

the prescriptions that humans use to broadly organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions, including those with families, neighborhoods, markets, firms, sports leagues, churches, private associations, and governments at all scales. Individuals interacting within rule-structured situations face choices regarding the actions and strategies they take, leading to consequences for themselves and for others (Ostrom 3).

A postsecondary institution, then, would be composed of any structured, organized interactions that commence after secondary schooling. For this project, postsecondary institutions pertain to formal education outside of vocational and technical schools. I specifically use the term “postsecondary institution,” then, to mean colleges and universities. These associations include community colleges, liberal arts colleges, regional colleges and universities, and state colleges and universities. To be “literate,” by way of postsecondary institutions, is to say one has been “prescribed” to a life governed by the structure of the postsecondary apparatus. It’s worth noting here that “prescribe” comes from the classical Latin, *praescribere*, meaning “to write beforehand, to describe in writing beforehand” (*OED*). In the case of postsecondary institutions, this act of prescribing is both the result of prior writing—literacy learned in K-12 institutions—and the forebearer of a life that has been directed by the students’ own adherence to a certain type of writing, or literacy. Of course, Ostram’s definition of institutions binds “prescription” to any institution, but postsecondary institutions in particular are distinct within the context of this

project because it is within their function to propagate literacy standards which deem individuals fit for the workplace and ascribes them economic value.

This institutionalized aspect of literacy shores up a literately normalized individual's identification as better than, and more deserving of, winning the omnipresent economic competition. And because such individuals have power and knowledge, through their participation in a central institution of power/knowledge, that ideology appears unshakable. To begin, I will briefly recount the neoliberalization of postsecondary institutions. Then, I will discuss the power relations within postsecondary institutions that influence competitive exclusionary practices in considering their pushes towards diversity in relation to race and disabilities. Fundamentally, the concept of diversity is subsumed by colleges and universities and exploited as a point of marketability.

In further detail, the goal of this chapter is to outline ways in which predominantly white postsecondary institutions and their exclusion of Black Language invites further exclusionary practices associated with literacy as defined and proliferated by the institution. Historically Black Colleges and Universities, such as Howard University and Spelman College, may offer alternatives in terms of Black Language, or they may not. In either case, this aspect is out of the purview of this project because the majority of postsecondary institutions are predominantly white. I've chosen race in terms of Blackness as an aspect for several reasons. In terms of race, postsecondary institutions often like to advertise their diversity numbers; frequently those numbers are associated with race. I choose Black Language in connection to Blackness specifically because contemporary academic discourse surrounding the teaching of writing focuses on the problem of White Language supremacy—in other words “normalizing whiteness” (Inoue 373). White, as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic point out, is always posited as a

binary: “White and other” (81). Nakayama charges that the concept of Whiteness is “constituted through a rhetoric of whiteness” (293). And it is through Whiteness that Blackness, its opposite, is imagined as “an indicator of absence of achievement” (Mbembe 12). The cost of failing to adhere to these literacy ideologies marks individuals as less worthy of civic or personal recognition because of absence of achieving proficient use of White Language. If Blackness is the opposite of Whiteness and is constituted through its rhetoric, then Whiteness imagines Black Language as its opposite because it is a part of Blackness. This formulation becomes increasingly problematic as part of that rhetoric belongs to the idea that the “integrity of the white race is delineated as a public good” and public schools are supposedly intended as a public good (Hartman 199).

Furthermore, the rejecting institution’s labeling in application processes complicates the decisions of Black Language speakers to gain access to further normalized intellectual growth. Meanwhile, the ideologies that support this exclusion benefit and reward those who continue to profit from the normalization through financial means. Propagating these norms results in the expansion of neoliberal ideologies that have already taken hold of colleges and universities. As forms of literacy not recognized by institutions are left by the wayside, those who observe postsecondary institutional mandates in literacy and social discourse continue to preserve and spread their dominant forms through student acceptance, providing validation and the “continued universality and invisibility of Whiteness” (Nakayama 296). Students, particularly those whose home language is rejected by said institutions, observe institutional mandates as well. The accepted would also continue to proliferate literacy ideologies. The underlying truth of these mandates is that literacy exists for postsecondary institutions primarily as an economic function, bolstering individual self-interest over communal harmony, cooperation, and innovation. The

larger insight in my exploration is that postsecondary institutional ideology concentrates literacy as a motive for, and result of, neoliberal competition, transforming students into perpetrators of competitive deployments of literacy, which continues to proliferate through educational apparatuses for its capitalistic purposes. I will conclude by outlining that the college writing classroom has the potential to be an exceptional space to challenge these ideologies.

Diversity and Race in Postsecondary Institutions

To begin, understandings of “diversity” vary quite a bit. For example, The American Society of Associative Executives emphasizes practicing inclusion and “diverse backgrounds” to “support equitable work environments and behavior” in their hiring practices. The Association for the Study of Higher Education defines “diversity” specifically for postsecondary institutions: “Within higher education, discussions of diversity typically focus on challenges related to race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and sexual orientation, among others” (2). The Conference on College Composition and Communication claims in their Committee on Diversity Charge that it has, “a particular but not exclusive charge to address the concerns and problems of racial diversity in the rhetoric and composition community” [emphasis added]. The National Communication Association defines diversity “as fair and just commitment to equity, access, and inclusion for all persons.” The National Association of Colleges and Employers even specifies who brings diversity by including “immigration status” and “military veteran status” among its concerns. Considering these few examples, working towards diversity on the most basic level begins with consciously trying, as Sara Ahmed points out, through documentation. This documentation takes the form of statistics for both students and faculty but is primarily used in terms of student population. We can see evidence of these efforts in public relations photographs that are sure to include people of color, readily available percentages of the student population’s

race and ethnicity, and existence of offices that go by names of “Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (or similar), and diversity trainings. But she warns, “it can be assumed that equality is achieved *in the act*” (11 [emphasis in original]). Ahmed’s emphasis is on not so much what the documents *say* as how they circulate around. She states that, “To read the document for what it is saying would be to miss this point by making it the point” (5). Her phenomenological study, *On Being Included: On Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, evaluates the performance of documentation and policy in diversity at postsecondary institutions. Through the metaphor of a “wall,” her research results in explaining what diversity workers come up against while trying to bring inclusivity to an institution. She finds that this wall is “the sedimentation of history into a barrier that is solid and tangible in the present, a barrier to change as well as to the mobility of some, a barrier that remains invisible to those who can *flow* into the spaces created by institutions” (175 [emphasis added]).

Postsecondary institutional spaces are necessarily among the apparatuses Foucault discusses and Agamben elaborates on. Institutions set limitations on what’s accepted as “academic” within the physical space—particularly in terms of literacy. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit’s edited collection, *The Real Ebonics Debate*, offers texts surrounding the issues in the Oakland case. The 1996 case of the Oakland Unified School District’s attempted to recognize a student’s home language, specifically Black Language, challenged the use of *only* standard English in K-12 classrooms²³. Despite the growing support for an understanding of English as a complex set of language systems, scholars like April Baker-Bell and Keith Gilyard (among

²³ The Ann Arbor decision of 1977 resulted in Judge Joiner (who heard the case) ruling “use that knowledge [how Black Language speakers communicate] in teaching such students how to read standard English” (Flood). This order, however, differs from the Oakland Case/Black Language/Ebonics Resolution in that Oakland’s decision supported Black Language not only to assist in the learning of standard English, but that it is a Language in its own right.

others) continue to argue for a deeper understanding of the power struggles inherent in English language standardization via educational institutions. The danger in continuing to deny Black Language in postsecondary institutions, in terms of the institution itself (not always the classroom) lies in “the *act*”—the ongoing presence of these individuals, and not their acceptance.

Access to literacy also becomes embroiled in other seemingly endless factors. I’m limiting my discussion in this chapter to race as it’s socially constructed, Black Language in particular, in conversation with neoliberalism in postsecondary institutions, but further consideration should be made in terms other possible social markers and how they affect access to literacy. For example, Susan Woolley’s ethnographic study, “Contesting Silence, Claiming Space,” investigates how schools have become active sites for the production of identity in “this neo-liberal moment” (6). She explores how schools discipline sexuality and sexual identity as teachers and students negotiate their own sexuality in educational social spaces. Or, Wilson, Reay, Morrin, and Abrahams’ “‘The Still Moving Position’ of the ‘Working-Class’ Feminist Academic,” which discusses concepts like belonging, caring, exploitation, and oppression in relationships with the still working-class through the lens of their experiences in academics coming from working-class backgrounds. Or, Nelly Oleke and Lauren Airth’s “How Neoliberalism, Ageism and Stigma Drive the Lack of Policy for Older Adults’ Mental Health,” which focuses on how neoliberalism’s preference for competition and profits disregards an individual’s well-being based on age through lack of policy on mental health issues.

Black Languages in Post-Secondary Institutional Context

Another reason that I focus specifically on Blackness in language is because what can generally be called “Black Language” has frequently been the center of debate in terms of implementing standardization in schools. The experiences of Black Language speakers in the

United States are not monolithic, and not all Black people speak Black Language. For example, as Ayanna Cooper's research points out, many Black Language speakers in the United States are not necessarily from the United States. She explains that "They come from diverse ethnic backgrounds, have varied home languages and socioeconomic statuses, and may be U.S. born or foreign born" (1). Sometimes referred to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Ebonics, or Black English, I choose the term "Black Language."

To outline my intentions with this term: I agree with April Baker-Bell's reasoning for her use of the term "Black Language." In *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, she explains that she deliberately uses the terms "Black Language" and "White Mainstream English" to "foreground the relationship between language, race, anti-Black racism, and white linguistic supremacy"; these terms, she says, "more explicitly captured the intersections between language and race [...] By linking the racial classifications Black and white to language, I am challenging you, the reader, to see how linguistic hierarchies and racial hierarchies are interconnected [...] people's language experiences are not separate from their racial experiences [...] I also use Black Language politically in my scholarship to align with the mission of Black liberation movements like Black Lives Matter" (2-3). However, in 2007, Vershawn Ashanti Young uses "Black English Vernacular" (BEV) to bring "attention to the construction of black (people) and BEV in contrast with White English Vernacular"; he explains that it's "purely rhetorical" and switches to "African American English" in his book *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity* (149n1). In his more recent 2018 book, he states that he does not use "vernacular" because, he details, African American English is a variety of English and should be "integrated *with* Standard English to enlarge Standard English as an accommodating multidialect system" (11 [emphasis in original]). However, it's

important to acknowledge “Ebonics includes both the verbal and paralinguistic communications of African-American people, this means that Ebonics represents an underlying psychological thought process [...] the term *Ebonics* was a repudiation of the lie that Niger-Congo Africans had no fully developed languages originally and that the genesis of human speech for English-speaking African slaves is an Old English ‘baby talk’ or European-invented pidgin/creole vernacular” (Smith 52). Ultimately, while we should leave room for whatever developments in this linguistic scholarship call for our reconsiderations in naming Black Language, I choose Black Language in this text primarily for its political associations, and the simple fact that I am also focusing on the rhetoric of Whiteness.

While discussion about White Mainstream English continues in colleges and universities, the conversation surrounding the use of a “Standard English” has primarily raged on in K-12 schools in the forms of state and federal mandated testing. The Black Language/Ebonics resolution of in 1996, in Oakland, maintained that “Black Language/Ebonics was a legitimate rule-based, systematic language...should not be stigmatized...[it] should be affirmed, maintained, and used to help African-American children acquire fluency in the standard code” (Perry 3). The deployment of Black Language towards the learning of a standard code raises some issues. First, while the preservation of Black Language can be seen as a rather positive note, doing it in the service of affirming a Standard English, or what April Baker-Bell calls “White Mainstream English,” implies a substandard version of the dominant code that might, at best, become a bridge to the dominant code. Second, this stipulation also “ignore[s] the racial and cultural tensions that underlie such pedagogies” (Baker-Bell 103, 2018). I add here that the ignorance of those tensions also exploits Black Language in service of concealing White Mainstream English as a standard English by educational institutions (recall the invisibility and universality inherent

in the rhetoric of Whiteness). The fact that colleges and universities reinforce this standardization only serves to strengthen White Mainstream English as the “educated” and “professional” form of communication, a prescription for language, within the institution.

While not out of postsecondary institutions, what has broadly resulted from similar frameworks is code-switching, which is the ideology that universities cultivate in their expectations and presentations. People in the United States (and elsewhere) tend to code-switch between groups they are a part of and interact with. To explain this concept, like Keith Gilyard in *Voices of the Self*, I find Suzette Elgin’s definition of code-switching useful yet problematic. She describes the occurrence as the “ability to move back and forth among languages, dialects and registers, with ease, as demanded by the social situation” (109). Gilyard finds her use of the word “ease” here “*objectionable*,” and he states that “I have often chosen to switch, rather than fight, but the routine hasn’t always implied any emotional ease” (31[emphasis in original]). He refers to Peñalosa’s definition. Peñalosa defines “code-switching” as “a strategy by which the skillful speaker uses his knowledge of how language choices are interpreted in his community to structure the interaction so as to maximize outcomes favorable to himself” (77). Gilyard prefers it because it “allows the appropriate room for pain.” Likewise, in reference to pedagogy, Christopher Emdin claims, “To validate the codes of young people in the classroom and then fail to arm them with the tools they need to be successful across social fields is irresponsible” (176-77). Emdin goes on to elaborate, that for what he calls Reality pedagogues²⁴, “teaching code-switching is concerned first and foremost with how we teach youth to be deliberate in a literal movement from one world with certain rules of engagement and language to another.” That

²⁴ Emdin’s concept of “Reality pedagogy” is “an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf...positions student as the expert in his or her own teaching and learning, and the teacher as the learner...the teacher is the person charged with delivering the content, the student is the person who shapes how best to teach that content” (27).

“deliberate movement” requires reflection and discussion concerning the hegemonic underpinnings of why one code, or language, is more valued and implemented in social situations.

Of course, simple code-switches exist between disciplinary subjects, like Science and English²⁵, and the frequently cited scholars on code-switching, Rachel Swords and Rebecca S. Wheeler explain that appropriate implementation of code-switching rejects “correction” in favor of contextualizing languages and dialects (471). Indeed, Theresa Perry points out that “for African Americans, language use is fundamentally and exquisitely contextual” (10). Acknowledging these approaches to code-switching is important in that many advocates for this pedagogical method emphasize the affirmation of Black Language; however, code-switching continues to assert, “that Black students code-switch to avoid discrimination,” and inflicts the pain Gilyard needs room for (Baker-Bell 9, “I Can Switch My Language...”). So, when educators teach students to code-switch and do not explore what supposedly necessitates that code-switching, we employ anti-black linguistic racism²⁶. In doing so, educators hope to close the “achievement gap” between White students and Black students. Unfortunately, however, the institutional conception of code-switching continues to label White Mainstream English as standard, neutral, and/or objective. Consequently, this approach also contributes to hegemonic ideologies surrounding presuppositions that the correct, standardized way to read and write is, by default, White. Any alternatives that are inherently raced are considered incorrect or ignorant.

²⁵ Emdin shares a table which compares English, Science, and Slang with words like “Light,” “Photon,” and “Lyte,” respectively (179).

²⁶ Anti-Black linguistic racism is “the linguistic violence, persecution, dehumanization, and marginalization that Black Language (BL) speakers endure when using their language in schools and in everyday life... requiring that Black students reject their language and culture to acquire White Mainstream English (WME)...” (Baker-Bell 103, “I Can Switch...”).

Furthermore, if, as Emdin points out, responsible code-switching requires to reflect on the hegemonic practices that contextualize its need, then would we not end up asking the question of why White Mainstream English is valued over Black Language in the context of school in preparation for “the real world”? In reviewing the Demands of the from *The Black Language Syllabus*, the demand to “STOP telling Black students that they have to ‘learn standard English to be successful because that’s just the way it is in the real world” highlights how far Black Language is removed from expectations of entering into the world of adulthood (n.p.). The work here is towards what Baker-Bell calls Linguistic Justice. She explains that both the book and concept, “is about Black Language and Black Liberation. It is an anti-racist approach to literacy and education. It is about dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism and white linguistic hegemony and supremacy in classrooms and the world” (7). Altogether then, code-switching may come across as an easy fix in terms of standardizing language used in the classroom; however, its insidious work is to relegate Black Language to lesser than White Mainstream English by way of ideologizing the latter as better and supposedly more accessible to everyone.

This ideological approach, then, results in postsecondary institutions’ expectations of student behavior and their literacy practices. Students must apply to colleges and universities for acceptance. Written Personal Statements and high school grades weigh heavily in terms of a student’s admittance to a college or university. These aspects greatly depend on White Mainstream English. So, the pain Gilyard refers to plants itself at the juncture of a large apparatus in which students must compete to gain access to normative literacy²⁷. The hope, in the neoliberal vein, is that students can become marketable. To drive the point home, Freire states

²⁷ Recall that Pritchard calls defines “normative literacy” as “the use of literacy to create and impose normative standards and beliefs onto people whom are labeled alien or other through textscapes that are experienced as painful because they do damage or inflict harm” (28).

that, “language variations (female language, ethnic language, dialects) are intimately interconnected with, coincide with, and express identity, they help defend one’s sense of identity and are absolutely necessary in the process of struggling for liberation” (186). Within these moments of applying, then, Black Language speakers must choose between running the risk of expressing their identity and possibly facing rejection or code-switching for the hope of an acceptance into the apparatus, ensuring their marketability. The fact that Black Language speakers must consider this implies that a student’s identity, if it is not expressed in White Mainstream English, may not be fit for access to what the postsecondary institution defines as accepted forms of literacy.

To recognize the complications of code-switching in a different way, its emergence signals a shift from a paternal racism to a competitive racism by way of claiming diversity itself. Paternal racism, as defined by Philomena Essed, “is wrapped in ‘good intentions’ to ‘help’ ethnic minorities” (1). Essentially, it’s the white man’s burden (recall Kipling’s 1899 pro-imperialism poem) to assist Black Language speakers in socially adapting to White Mainstream English, through literacy practices that assimilate them into neoliberal society. However, more frequently today the conversations about race focus on ethnicity and national identity, concealing the competitive underpinnings of competitive racism (8). An extreme example perhaps, but Charlottesville protestors yelling “Blood and soil” directly claims the purity and supremacy of the White race in terms of ethnicity, framing their arguments as a competition, rather than attempting to “save” anyone who is not white by virtue of Whiteness’s supposed goodness. Competitive racism expresses a rivalry for resources and population. For another more insidious example, standard English is actually White, but claiming it as “standard” obscures the racial bias inherent in its supposed standardization in that “standard” carries the connotations of

objectivity and neutrality. This hidden aspect sparks further exertion for Black Language speakers (and other Indigenous People and People of Color) in the competition to fit into literacy requirements without acknowledging the emotional and mental effort. A paternalistic racism lens for literacy, then, would be the code-switching that fails to honor Black Language and “corrects” Black Language speakers. Competitive racism, it follows, malevolently posits competition without recognizing that the dominant ideology, and the very system in which the language operates, pits students against each other for acceptance into postsecondary institutions (or social acceptance). Put more simply, while competitive racism has its loud moments (such as “blood and soil”) it has its more invisible moments in which its capable of directing the competition away from race and towards a standardization based on race in which race, most often the White race, is superior.

This line of reasoning leads to the notion of institutional racism. Raymond Padilla explains that “institutional racism” is

an extension of individual racism but also includes the manipulation of institutions so that one group benefits and maintains an advantage over others; institutional racism supports practices that operate to restrict on a racial basis the choices, rights, mobility, and access of groups or individuals. Although not necessarily sanctioned by law, these practices are nevertheless real. Cultural racism includes the individual²⁸ and institutional expression of the superiority of one race’s cultural heritage over that of another race (4).

So, while postsecondary institutions are interested in stories of students overcoming obstacles for Personal Statements, the way in which students tell those stories is also up for consideration in college applications. While there are no specific studies²⁹ concerned with the aspect of

²⁸ Padilla defines “individual racism” as “closest to racial prejudice and suggests a belief in the superiority of one’s own race over another, while behaviorally it enacts an invidious distinction between races” (4).

²⁹ There are a few recent studies looking at college student biases in terms of White Mainstream English preferences compared to Black Languages that are based in White standardization (Holliday and Squires, 2020; Álvarez-Mosquera and Marin-Gutiérrez, 2021). While Álvarez-Mosquera and Marin-Gutiérrez’s study was conducted in South Africa, there was a still a preference among student participants for the White Mainstream English with “no Black accent” (392).

postsecondary institutions' view on linguistic choices considering Black Language in college applications, it would be difficult to imagine Black Language speakers not experiencing some form of sociolinguistic labor³⁰ when faced with a college application. Put another way, even applying to postsecondary institutions rejects students' own literacy by tacking onto it the requirement to choose between the potential student's home language and the public institution's generally accepted form. While the argument could be made that there is some call for standardization in service of professionalization, the question arises: Why should it be White? Another consideration: If K-12 instructional pedagogy approaches code-switching only as a matter of contextualization and disregards considerations for dominating hegemonic ideologies, then Black Language speaking students are unaware of the implications of their requirement to make the choice.

I have primarily discussed K-12 and student acceptance into postsecondary institutions, but as Adalberto Aguirre Jr. illustrates, this expectation to submit to overarching institutional ideologies goes as far as faculty in postsecondary institutions—even in their faculty positions as role models, reinforcing “the concept of ‘very few’ rather than ‘why not more’” (24). He explains that minorities in academe are “constrained to those institutional contexts and activities that reflect his or her status characteristics to show other institutional members that he or she is not a ‘lost stranger’ in the academe” (24). While he discusses faculty positions here, particularly for Chicano/as and Indigenous people, I would argue that all Black Language speakers in dominantly white postsecondary institutions are subject to constant White institutional contextualization of their minority status. I turn here specifically to social literacy, which requires agreements on meanings of actions and words for them to be communicative.

³⁰ Nicole Holliday and Lauren Squires define “sociolinguistic labor” as “the physical, emotional, and psychological effort put into deploying sociolinguistic resources in a way that is meant to satisfy others” (421).

To illustrate, James Paul Gee explains that “the meaning of words is also tied to negotiations and social interactions [...] Power plays an important role in these negotiations. The negotiations can be settled for the time, in which case meaning becomes conventional and routine” (10, 12). So, by this logic, the more powerful, or dominating, ideology set forth by the postsecondary institution requires those socially labeled as the “very few,” to continuously contextualize their own literacy within academe. This ideological move also keeps the “very few” as “the very few.” In doing so, postsecondary institutions can tout diversity numbers as an argument for their supposed inclusivity and prestige; however, this means they require others to conform to their literacy practices and bolster the predominantly White status quo. Admittedly, Aguirre’s illustration comes from his 1995 experiences, and things are changing. More faculty are, in fact, accepting and discussing Black Languages in their classrooms. More Black people and People of Color are in faculty positions. There is a possibility of real positive change, of course; however, the University of North Carolina withheld tenure from Nikole Hannah-Jones, despite her creating the Pulitzer Prize winning 1619 Project³¹. Even though the previous two Chairs in her position were “given tenure when appointed,” Hannah-Jones was initially denied (“1619 Project...”). Can individual work have an impact on a shared dream of inclusivity and institutional change? Yes. Are we continuing to see evidence that more work needs to be done? Always.

As previously mentioned, the work and presence of Black people and People of Color in postsecondary institutions acts as documentation, or proof, that these institutions are diverse. But consideration must be given to the fact that these acts disregard the inability of non-white individuals to “flow” through these spaces. In this negotiation, then, “routine and convention”

³¹ The 1619 Project “aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (Hannah-Jones).

silences others. Basically, colleges and universities ignore the extra effort of navigating between language variation, through code-switching (choosing between Black Language and White Mainstream English) and actual work put in that results from their diversity bragging rights. Ignoring, or even completely eliding, this required effort on the part of Black Language speakers (and other People of Color) in academe only serves to further solidify the erasure of their identities as such.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained some ways in which accepted literacy practices in postsecondary institutions perpetuate neoliberal ideology through the continued generation of power/knowledge. Both competition and exclusion exert power/knowledge that postsecondary institutions solidify through their student populations. In short, literacy is a means by which economic competition becomes a form of power/knowledge and identity in that it reflects on both economic and social standing of individuals through postsecondary institutions. The maintenance of such depends largely on self-interest within that competition. To illustrate, I focused on diversity and Black Language within this neoliberal context. The exclusionary practices I have outlined in terms of race support an ideology of literacy, and its standardization, as White.

This chapter did not include further complications that arise due to intersections with socioeconomic class, disability, and gender. But given that, in their conclusion for *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, researchers Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Laura T. Hamilton assure us that, “Broadening access to the professional pathway means the meticulous unraveling of the often-invisible advantages that accrue to wealthy and highly educated families,” we can discern those intersections within the matrices of power create further

complications for individuals and access to normative literacy (238). What I have tried to do here is to unravel the “often-invisible advantages” in terms of literacy as propagated by postsecondary institutions, that come to individuals who just happen to be white.

In Donna LeCourt’s 2004 study, *Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse*, she analyzes basic writing students’ literacy autobiographies to understand their values, identities, and ways of expressing themselves. One conclusion she draws from exploring these documents is that “the basic writers’ ability to succeed in school writing tasks is linked directly to themselves as agents who control meaning making” (60). For example, when students write about their successes in writing (such as an ‘A’ on a submission) there is “no mention of difficulty or frustration with school language [...] they are depicted as natural expressions of the writer’s voice” (60). In relation to their successful participation in academic discourse (the ‘A’), academic writing becomes natural and a part of their identity. In this way, students are clearly making their own meaning through stories. And this meaning is that they belong. This moment is perhaps where “the swagger of a college kid” begins to develop. Personal stories from students in postsecondary institutions most frequently get told and heard in writing classes. Because they are making that meaning for themselves in terms of who they are and how they fit into the competition, the writing class is an excellent place to begin disrupting associations between identity and value in conversation with social context and normative literacies. Composition teachers can remind students that writing is not something we are born knowing how to do; that writing for school is different from writing a text message to a friend; that congratulations on getting an A on that paper, but you did revise it a number of times.

By calling attention to how postsecondary institutions prescribe a type of literacy, both in the classroom and as an institution, students can themselves bring to light alternative ways of expression that are equally valued beyond self-interest, competition, and all the neoliberal markings of exclusion. Admittedly, the writing class is only a beat through the seemingly infinite veins of the postsecondary institutional apparatus: It is just one course in (what feels like) countless required classes. In an institution that is, in fact, an *institution* in the most *prescriptive* sense of the word, writing can be, then, either remedy or poison³². It falls on administrators to consider potential side effects.

Interchapter 3

So, I was in the M.A. Program for English at the University of North Florida. I barely lasted a year. At the time, I would've said I hated it. In retrospect, however, I feel more like I didn't deal with my stepfather's death. My personal issue compounded with the behavior of a few colleagues who fully invested in the elitism they saw (or at least thought they saw) professors display as a mark of superiority. Looking back, so what if a colleague (who had the same class schedule I did) spent every breath she had putting others down? Or, if a professor scoffed in front of the whole class during my presentation on William Carlos Williams (even though I'd sent him the presentation weeks in advance)? I began my M.A. finding the work much different from undergrad. It was overwhelming in that I'd rarely taken classes related to what was required for a Master's in English at UNF: I'd never studied much British Literature beyond *The Canterbury Tales* and *Hamlet*; I'd taken maybe one or two classes that might have discussed literary theory; I'd never heard of active or passive voice; I had no idea what made a

³² In *Phaedrus*, Plato describes writing as a *pharmakon*, with the potential to act as both remedy and poison. Much later, through a critical deconstructive reading of this text, Derrida would argue that writing doesn't have an identity in itself and therefore cannot fall into the binaries of medicine/poison, good/evil, true/false, inside/outside, vital/mortal, etc... (447).

journal “academic.” During my second semester in the program, I worked as one of the first Graduate Teaching Assistants for the UNF Writing Program. The Writing Program Director was teaching a Writing for Business class, and we were required to have office hours. Luckily for me, no one ever came. As one of her GTAs, I had my own office in the English Department, a decent paycheck (compared to what I made hourly at Starbucks), and an extra line on my CV. But between the classes and the job, I had no idea what I was doing. I was also still working at Starbucks and dog sitting.

Maybe because we were bored, or maybe because *Portlandia* started airing on IFC, a group of friends and I decided to make plans to move to Portland. Considering how out of place I felt in this M.A. program, I was ready to move as far away as I could. I shaved my head, got my septum pierced and, after finishing my second semester, I left the program. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, but we never made it out west. Instead, I spent two years wrecking my life. I didn't feel like I had anything going for me. At this point, I'd dropped out of school and was stuck working at Starbucks and doing various odd jobs. I tell people I “couch surfed,” but I was basically homeless for a few months. There are a lot of chunks missing from memory of that time. I was in a bad way. Things only got worse when a customer at Starbucks threatened to rape me, and my managers told me it was my fault because I wasn't “nice enough.” They'd said I'd “plateaued” in terms of customer service. Fortunately, I was still dog sitting for the Director of Graduate Studies at UNF. I sputtered out something about my inability to figure out what to do with myself. She told me to come back to UNF and finish my degree. I was so incredibly embarrassed and felt completely humiliated by life. But she assured me folks would just be happy to have me back.

I vividly remember talking to my mentor about coming back. I'd been his student in an undergraduate literature course. Maybe it was the cadence in the way he spoke, or how he carried himself from class to class, but I'd be lying if I didn't say his views on my coming back to academics didn't shake me a bit. In our first meetings before I officially came back, he tried to convince me to do anything else besides return to academics. I defended my choice in the simplest terms I could construct (without coming off as completely pathetic): "There's nothing else I want to do or care about."

Feeling like I was out of options in terms of the direction of my life, I made plans to get back into school by Fall 2014. I can't piece together how I did it, and I don't know how long it took. I found a stable living situation, cut down on the drinking and use of certain substances, (painstakingly) removed some folks from of my life, and I even paid off my car. I thought I'd just be tutoring when I got to UNF, but it turned out I was reinstated as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the new Writing Center, which was connected to the Writing Program. After seven years of slinging coffee, I finally put in my two weeks at Starbucks and prepared to dedicate myself to finishing this degree in a way I'd never committed to school before. But I'd never taught before (outside of substituting at Title I elementary schools), so my first few days, or weeks, in the Writing Center were overwhelming and confusing, perhaps like it is for most new teachers. This time, luckily, I had amazingly supportive colleagues. One of the other GTAs even patiently explained to me what active voice is (clearly, it's something I'm still working on). And no one brought up my two-year absence. Everyone just seemed happy to have me back.

There were four of us Assistants. We were like family. I loved coming to campus and talking with them and students. In fact, I became so confident that I decided to minor in Composition and Rhetoric when I barely knew what it was. I'd reasoned with myself that I knew

it was about writing, and writing was this cool thing I could just keep going on about: What happened between the thoughts in our heads and what ended up on paper? What is a “good” writer? Is there such a thing as a “good writer”? Who gets to decide? How much of writing is product and how much of it develops who we are? Do we become a product through writing? In my first term back, my mentor organized an independent study with me. The goal was to get me comfortable in front of the class. So, one day a week I’d come with him to his class and teach it. On the walk over from his office he’d always have me repeat “red leather yellow leather.” I almost always tripped on the words, but I eventually got comfortable in front of the class. Hell, I came to look forward to it.

As I continued working in the Writing Center, I realized that I loved talking about writing. Even the space did something for me. Legend has it that the office suite we were in was somewhat stolen. Apparently, some folks just walked in and started painting the walls of the empty office. The building was falling apart (holes in walls, exposed electrical wires, ratty carpet, etc....), but we were cozy. We also made it a point to have fun. For the holiday party we all got each other Nerf guns and spent the whole day blasting each other with the suction cup bullets. Once, the Teaching Assistants even tricked someone into eating an entire bag of sugar-free gummy bears. The following email explaining why that person couldn’t come in the next day was interesting, to say the least.

So, basically, I loved working in the Writing Center and was enjoying teaching. I wanted to find a way to stay. After graduation, I lingered as the Writing Center Office Assistant. I also stayed at UNF as an adjunct. I was also adjuncting at Florida State College (formerly Community College) at Jacksonville, and I was working as a frame selector and insurance filer at an optometrist’s office for around 20 hours a week. Basically, I was working at least 60 hours a

week between four jobs just to stay in the Writing Center and be a part of the Writing Program. Somehow, with an M.A. and all these jobs, I was still making less than \$23,000 a year. But wait! I'd come to college (yet again!) to be able to live comfortably and confidently. I came back to know that I was worth more than what the dirt road and its sordid history had to offer.

On top of all these complications, I was having to throw out food per the demands of a senior colleague. The Writing Program offered a writing boot camp of sorts for incoming college students. We called the program "Writing Intensive Orientation Sessions." For five days during summer, around 8-10 hours a day, students would be given writing activities, attend lectures about writing in different disciplines, and play games to help familiarize them with campus resources. We fed them the whole time. The first day we had a ton of food left over—entire catered meals from Jason's Deli and such. I explained to the instructor running the activities that I could use the food. Something like: "It's summer and I can only get one class to teach here, and the other school doesn't have enough classes to offer me anything. The optometrist won't give me more than 20 hours a week." I can't remember what her reason was for not allowing me to take any of the food, but she insisted that I be the one to throw it out. And so, it was for the entire week that I threw out good food. She made sure I threw it out. I still feel gross thinking about it.

Not making much money was one thing, but having to throw out food I could've eaten, that I wanted to eat and that would've helped me to eat, kept me on the dirt road. My M.A. didn't automatically count for me being financially stable, nor deserving of food (or so I felt). By that same token, their Ph.D. didn't count towards them being a decent person. The fact that we both worked at a university as teachers didn't matter. I was still an inhabitant of the dirt road in some way, and she wasn't much of a better person for being well read and having a terminal degree. So, after a year, and this terrible week, I decided I couldn't stay in the UNF Writing Program, not

with someone like that working over me. By “like that,” I mean cruel, but I also mean disappointing. I didn’t want to think about it. I was hungry. I didn’t want to feel like I was on the dirt road anymore, or even that I was trying to get away from it. I started applying to local high schools as an Advanced Placement English teacher. There wasn’t a Writing Program or Writing Center at any of the places I applied to, but there was a better paycheck and there would still be writing.

Chapter 3. Writing Programs as Sponsors of Literacy

Emotional labor of becoming arises when we must make decisions based on values that might conflict with our sense of identity.

- Kate Navickas
“The Emotional Labor of Becoming,”

Introduction

In my position as the Writing Program Assistant Director at Louisiana State University, I watch the Writing Program Director and the Associate Writing Program Director work through emails and meet with folks just dropping into the office. The scheduler, the Department Chair, and the Undergraduate Adviser run around the office suite talking about calls they made or emails they sent trying to find instructors for all the sections of first-year composition. An instructor we’ve somewhat loaned out to the writing tutoring studio, that’s not directly connected to the Writing Program, drops by. We discover there’s a whole new office at LSU that we need to get in touch with about student placement scores for our new student Directed Self-Placement model we’re using. A Teaching Assistant comes over to tell us she’s canceled class because there was no air conditioning, and it was too hot to learn or teach in masks. There are also moments when we’re sitting around talking about nothing in particular while eating candy. In my position I’m just updating listservs and responding to softball emails sent to the Writing Program account. I’m not too surprised at any of this—I came to Louisiana State University with the purpose of getting my Ph.D. intending to direct a Writing Program. I had worked quite a bit at my previous institution with the Writing Program and thought this type of career would be the one for me, and I was willing to ante up the time and money for another degree.

However, as I sit in my little cubicle staring at my dual screens, I find myself wondering how different it will be with the diverse personalities we often encounter in academics when I (hopefully) eventually ascend from *Assistant* at a completely different institution. I anticipate a

lot of emails and questions, discussions on assessment, guiding new teachers, and getting classes covered, but when I think about having to change things or adjust myself to what I cannot change, the vision of these expectations grows blurry. In large part, that fuzziness is due to the differences among postsecondary educational institutions, student populations, whether the Writing Program is attached to the English Department, what legacies the previous Writing Program Administrators leave behind, and so on. All the possible permutations make me wonder what will faculty, staff, and administration expect me to do? As a sponsor of literacy, directing an institutional body that is also a sponsor of literacy, what role will I play in shaping literacy? What are the facts here? What will I become if I become a Writing Program Administrator³³?

In their introduction to *The Things We Carry*, Kristi Murray Costello and Jacob Babb broadly define “Writing Program Administrator” as an “inclusive term that encompasses the work of many kinds of faculty and staff at many kinds of institutions” (5). Kelly Ritter claims that a Writing Program Administrator is “an actor who understands and responds to the system” and possesses “the power to create and override rules” (19). Eileen Schell argues that it’s the Writing Program Administrator’s responsibility to ensure that all groups charged with it “are prepared for the task of teaching writing” (220). She goes on to see Writing Program Administrators as “both change agents and a managerial class [...] reformist, conversationalist, collectivist, and abolitionist” (228 – 9). The authors of *GenAdmin*, however, look specifically to find the empowering aspects in the position of a Writing Program Administrator. They state that they view being Writing Program Administrators as

a pervasive feeling that we are always in the process of becoming—not in the sense of arriving at a particular WPA identity or becoming *the* WPA, but becoming in the sense that we aren’t asking to arrive or survive. We are seeking to rhetorically thrive and continually

³³ In most quotes on the subject, “WPA” will be shorthand for “Writing Program Administrator.” For the sake of brevity, “WPA” or “Writing Program Administrator” also includes titles like Writing Program Director and Writing Program Associate Director.

change...deliberately we must choose this philosophy of change as our goal (106 [emphasis in original]).

I'd venture to say that a lot of these descriptions (no matter how lofty they may appear) are really about working with postsecondary writing teachers while still adhering and adapting to expectations set forth by the administrators of the institution. This understanding creates space to discuss possibly working with a mostly adjunct faculty, acknowledge the dependence of the Writing Program trajectory and operation on the institution in which it lives, and invite discussions on the occasionally fraught complications of working with and for people.

All of this to say, writing about both Writing Program Administration and Writing Programs is difficult because experiences and expectations in different institutions vary. What works for one set of faculty members may not work for another, what benefits one student population may disadvantage another. Or, as Bryna Siegel Farmer and Jamie White-Farnham put it in *Writing Program Architecture*, "The complexity, cultures, and 'baggage' of writing programs in various institutions often obscure and even preclude accurate descriptions of what a WPA does" (6). Furthermore, in my experience, a Writing Program is a lot of different things to a lot of different people: To students, I imagine it as an invisible machine outlining their college writing curriculum trajectory; for faculty outside of the Writing Program, occasionally it exists a blame receptacle as to why their students fail at writing perfectly detailed and accessible prose, and sometimes it is just the thing that runs the mysterious Writing Center; to staff it lives a pile of paperwork; to administrators (who are not administrating for the Writing Program) it is important for a student's first-year experience, a guarantee of accreditation, and also probably somewhat mysterious. I would even go so far as to venture to say that most students are not aware that there *is* a Writing Program at their postsecondary institution—Composition is just another English class.

To elaborate, most books on Writing Program Administration are edited collections of different stories individuals have experienced while administrating Writing Programs. While this narrative characteristic is important to the field, this chapter seeks more to consider the features of Writing Programs that most, if not all, Writing Program Administrators will have to take into account when making decisions. In other words, the point of this chapter is to explore the work that Writing Programs accomplish, and the role(s) Writing Program Administrators play in accomplishing that work. Much of what goes into a Writing Program, and how, depends on the Writing Program Administrator's interactions with their institution's populations (both student and faculty). In addition to the backdrop of working with people, this chapter also focuses on the neoliberalization of education, and literacy itself, by way of assessment practices in Writing Programs. This neoliberalization of literacy requires erasure of labor for product. In this chapter I take assessment as the product of institutional expectations. Postsecondary institutions need Writing Programs, as sponsors of literacy connected to postsecondary institutions, to carry out assessments annually. These assessments go towards the institution's accreditation so that the university or college can compete on the market with others.

To accomplish the task of sifting through the relations that encapsulate literacy into market-oriented ideology, this chapter will first further acknowledge that we frequently learn what Writing Program Administrators and Writing Programs do through stories. Oftentimes these stories are steeped in emotion—not always the most enjoyable of emotions (it doesn't escape my attention that the first book I mention on the subject is called *The Things We Carry*). In the following section, I outline working conditions common most Writing Programs in terms of first-year writing course labor. In doing so, I emphasize faculty positioning in relation to Writing Program Administrators as well as the dependence of Writing Programs on

postsecondary institutions and vice-versa. I then present the idea of Writing Program Administration as being involved with a number of ecologies. For a specific example, I consider assessment and connect its purpose to a commodification of knowledge, and by extension literacy, and students. Building on the contexts of these relations, I will finally argue that much of the challenge of the work as a Writing Program Administrator would be to make the effort and labor of all involved more visible to students and administrators, possibly even the public. In doing so, I hope to highlight that literacy does not just appear at postsecondary institutions—it comes from work and effort of individuals and their abilities to work together.

As I near my conclusion, I consider Rebecca Lorimer Leonard's claim that, "in a context of commodification, the value assigned to literate resources fluctuates according to economic, organizational, or political conditions and the powerful agents that determine them" (170). The context of commodification here is neoliberalism—as in the neoliberal, or even the necroliberal, university. The fluctuation is apparent in difficulties surrounding assessment practices in Writing Programs that inevitably tie them to competition. However, commodification compounded with this newer idea of the necroliberal university further complicates parsing out how literacy can be liberated from both neoliberal and necroliberal politics.

Moreover, if, as Eli Goldblatt contends, "the most important job of WPAs is to build and extend the sustaining relationships that make their programs possible [...] caring for crucial relationships may be the necessary condition for everything else one is expected to accomplish," then visibility of the effort put into Writing Program relationships is vital to the ease, or even ability, with which this labor is carried out (146 – 7). And if, as John Trimbur argues, "WPAs are bureaucrats who manage larger or smaller chunks of curricular real estate in the political

economy of higher education,” then we must strive to illustrate that there is no invisible hand³⁴ directing writing at an institution (ix). The idea in my exploration is to emphasize that Writing Programs in postsecondary institutions are sponsors of literacy who work to define literacy in some way. And to stress that the way in which that literacy is defined, in my example by assessment through the Writing Program as a sponsor of literacy, may carry with it the ability to undermine literacy’s neoliberalization.

Writing Programs, Writing Program Administration, and Writing Program Faculty

Before we can start talking about administration, we need to talk about what being a “teacher” means in Writing Programs because administrators work primarily with people who identify as such. I’m focusing on first-year writing teachers because those tend to be the courses with the most sections in a Writing Program³⁵; therefore, they have the most teachers working with them. James Zebroski provides a quick sketch of the first-year writing teacher population. He points out, “Most people who teach first-year composition are literature or creative writing students” (80). The individuals he describes are graduate students fulfilling their Teaching Assistantships. This positioning signals a disconnect between this type of writing teacher’s intended intellectual and career trajectory and their current position as *writing* teacher. Of course, my observations do not mean to imply that these individuals do not teach well or take pride in teaching, nor that they do not work to improve their writing-centered pedagogical approaches

³⁴ Foucault addresses Adam Smith’s “invisible hand of the market” as a theological, “optimistic” aspect of liberalism that makes self-interest somehow benefit the larger population (278). Foucault focuses on the problem of invisibility and how the theory of the “invisible hand” disqualifies the “political sovereign” (obedience to the law or authority figure) (283). I use the “invisible hand” here to highlight that 1. An economy exists in higher education in terms of literacy, and 2. Invisibility is a tool utilized by neoliberalism to erase labor in service of tidying up machinations in terms of sponsors of literacy (in this case, postsecondary institutions).

³⁵ The first-year composition course tends to have the most sections because it is a requirement for accreditation. Ryan Skinnell discusses the first-year writing class as a concession—not like a fun concession stand at a Little League baseball game—but as the aspect that can easily make changes for accreditation committees because it’s so malleable. I’ll discuss concession more in the following section on Writing Programs and postsecondary institutions.

through workshops, discussions with other teachers, and updates to syllabi; however, it is important to acknowledge that teaching writing is not their personal goal, and they probably do not anticipate doing it beyond their graduate education. Zebroski goes on to call attention to the fact that “Adjunct and part-time labor trades mostly in first-year composition classes,” which means, in a way, that teaching first-year writing is where English graduates go with their advanced degrees when other job opportunities in their intended fields do not work out. In other words, a lot of the individuals who spent their graduate years teaching first-year writing courses, not planning to continue teaching first-year writing courses, remain teaching them.

Oftentimes, within these positions, first-year writing teachers are called adjunct, or contingent, faculty. Teacher’s Insurance and Annuity Association of America defines “adjuncts,” (as I use the term here) as “part-time non-tenure track faculty” who are not employed outside of academics (though some do, this chapter takes the definition that teaching is their main source of income) (n.p.). Recent data from the American Association of University Professors reveals a growing number of part-time faculty and adjuncts. Their research indicates that between 1975 and 2015, part-time faculty positions expanded from 24% to 40% of faculty positions, and non-tenured faculty positions have grown by 7%. Meanwhile, both full-time tenured faculty and tenure-line faculty have decreased by 8%. By 2015, the number of all non-tenured and non-tenured track faculty comprised a staggering 70% of the academic labor force, including adjuncts. In other words, “contingent instructors are those who teach without the job protections and material and economic privileges of tenure: part-time faculty, lecturers, non-tenure-track” (Schell 220). The Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America 2018 Adjunct Faculty Survey reports that the average salary for adjunct faculty is \$3,000 per course, but almost 60% of those adjuncts are paid less than that average. Adjuncts do not receive benefits or any

guarantees that they will teach a certain number of classes nor any classes at all in the following year or semester. So then, it is fairly understandable that “No one seems to want first-year composition—except if there are no other courses to teach or no other jobs to be had. It’s not personal; it’s business” (Zebroski 80)³⁶.

As a Writing Program Administrator, it is also important to recognize the labor put into the roles of first-year adjunct or writing instructor—especially considering how little pay and stability the position holds. My observations do not mean to imply that there are no other writing classes available to teach in Writing Programs. Often there are Special Topics courses (that could focus on writing about sports, food, films, or even horror genres), Professional Writing courses (such as Writing for Business or Academic and Applied Writing for Pre-Nursing Students), or Creative Writing (courses in subjects like Poetry or Fiction). However, glossing over the fact that Writing Programs are often supported by first-year writing instructors that are contingent faculty is to fail to see the importance of their position while also neglecting to confront the unstable economic position they reside in. To elucidate, writing classes cannot be taught through multiple choice tests. Rather, the classes need to engage with students through their writing and providing feedback on their individual styles. So then, even if the class is capped at twenty-two students, that amounts to twenty-two papers every submission, which often includes line-by-line feedback, rubric scores, and overall comments. If the instructor can somehow limit their feedback time to ten minutes for each submission from a student (which is difficult), that is around three and a half hours of grading for one assignment in one class. Also consider the preparation for lesson

³⁶ Alternatively, there are individuals who teach mostly, if not solely, writing classes and are not paid class-by-class with the hope of receiving a contract for the next semester. This position is one of full-time “instructor” or “lecturer.” Unfortunately, there aren’t many, if any, comparisons between adjunct, or contingent, faculty and full-timers in either journal articles or online. These individuals do typically receive benefits and some stability (unless they have to renew their contracts every few years). In the following paragraph I’ll discuss more about the time and labor required to teach writing, which holds true for both adjuncts and full-time writing faculty.

planning, responding to emails, setting up web-based resources (through Canvas, Moodle, etc...), and creating assignments. Keep in mind that many adjuncts could possibly teach multiple classes at different institutions. This description also does not include small writing assignments that writing teachers often respond to such as journals or writing exercises, nor does it include office hours required by their positions. Keep in mind as well that many instructors, whether adjunct or not, are expected to fulfill some level of service on committees, attending meetings, and/or offering workshops. In short, being a writing teacher, especially first-year writing, is a lot of work.

But there are good points. Fully functioning Writing Programs, capable writing teachers, and successful writing students result from these positionalities, alongside the occasionally tragic and fraught circumstances. However, these aspects are accomplished within the context of what Nathaniel Street calls “frustration narratives.” Within *Writing Program Administration* scholarship, this genre “addresses problems related to WPA work through quasi-personal and critically-oriented narratives that are often sardonic, parodic, and/or self-deprecating” (53). Within this context, Micciche reminds us, at least since 2002, that a pattern of overall disappointment has existed in English studies. She states that this “culture of disappointment” in academia presents itself as “an exacting bitterness, or disappointing hope, in what the academy has become or failed to become³⁷” (433). All of this seems rather bleak, but we must keep trying. Writing Program Administrators can use sensibility. Matthew Heard defines “sensibility” generally as, “a constant, focused attention to the decisions that we make and the consequences that these decisions generate;” however, he specifies this definition for Writing Program

³⁷ This, Micciche states, comes from “widely perceived job market collapse in the humanities, national abuse of adjunct teachers whose primary duty is the instruction of required first-year writing courses, and the general devaluation of the humanities as the academy develops into more and more of a corporate entity” (432).

Administration as, “a disposition of ready awareness to how writers negotiate the daily conflicts and tensions that shift and shape the influence of writing on our lives” (38). So then, as one who desires to administrate a Writing Program, to keep going is to ponder the conflicts sensibility requires us to anticipate in relation to writing. In doing so, it would be negligent to not consider the ways in which Writing Programs interact with the rest of the institution in which they exist. The following section works to contextualize what Writing Programs do within a postsecondary institutional setting.

Writing Programs, Writing Program Administration, and the Institution

To lay a foundation for this section, “no writing program or department is ever truly independent, or liberated from, the working conditions of a university. That is, every writing program or department is dependent on others for funding: student enrollments, university finances, state financial support, federal student financial aid, and so on” (Matzen and Abraham 15). In relation to the previous section, Christopher Carter goes so far as to argue that “university managers depend on the existence of a large group of part-timers with few institutional rights and limited intellectual liberty in order to consolidate control over curricula and policy [...] academic bureaucracy protects academic capital” (189, 191). Writing Programs will always be part of the whole—we are unlikely³⁸ to find one out in the wild. Postsecondary intuitions, more specifically the writing that happens within them, are dependent on Writing Programs. This dependence places Writing Program Administrators between their teachers and their upper-level administrators (Deans, Chairs, Provosts, President, etc...). This section seeks to work through the opacity of institutional expectations alongside writing itself through the work of Writing

³⁸ My claim does not mean to discount writing groups or writing classes available to the community. Rather, the complexities of a Writing Program, as I’m outlining the concept here, can only be as bureaucratic as it is within university and college structures.

Program Administration in conversation with both writing and Writing Programs acting as ecologies.

Carter's reasoning is reminiscent of Donna Strickland's idea of the "managerial unconscious." She explains that a "persistent tendency to align composition primarily with teaching, resulting in an obscuring of the administrative function, suggests that the official *story* of composition is built on what I call a *managerial unconscious*" (47 [emphasis added]). This concept falls in line with Frederic Jameson's political unconscious (which, in the simplest terms, is that the general population does not realize that class conflict lies at the base of how culture is produced); however, Strickland is talking more about the ill-defined line between teaching and the managerial position of being a Writing Program Administrator. But, within this construct, Strickland fails to distinguish between managing a university and writing's specific trajectory in the institution. Because they are under the title of "Administrator," oftentimes Writing Program "Director"—however the institution defines it in terms of the Writing Program—they are held accountable for the Writing Program's performance in terms of success and failure.

"Success," I realize, can be a rather vague word, especially when framed as "however the institution defines it." So, for the sake of our discussion, I will refer to Ryan Skinnell's *Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes* to think about "success" more broadly. He argues that composition has been a concession and claims that "first-year composition was intended less as a gate-keeping mechanism, as most rhetoric and composition historians have claimed, than as evidence of postsecondary institutions' suitability for educating large numbers of high school graduates" (27). He further argues that conceding composition resulted from a requirement for accreditation, and that conceding composition occurred in order to reshape education and attract federal money (77, 108). If the composition

class is open to “wildly varying interpretation” as Skinnell outlines, then it must be malleable (15). As such, there are several ways an institution could define “success” in terms of what a writing course could, or should, do. Skinnell’s assertions exclude the idea that writing classes could prepare students for “the real world³⁹,” and their professional lives. So then, it’s also difficult to generally anticipate what a postsecondary institution would want from their Writing Program and Writing Program Administrator prior to that individual working for that institution; however, reflecting on the idea that the composition class can be bent and molded to fit needs keeps Writing Programs, and their administrators, on their toes. These expectations also influence how, what, and why writing is taught in a specific institution’s context.

But here I am getting away from literacy. What about writing itself? How does writing shape writing programs? What is it that writing wants? If we were to answer this question directly, Victor Vitanza would say, “WRITING WANTS. Just WANTS” (3). More specifically, “**writing or composition wants a writer!**” (4 [emphasis in original]). Marilyn Cooper has an answer that intersects with both writing and the writer. She argues that writing itself is a type of ecology. It is an ecology in that connects to other ecologies, and these connections can be beneficial to the writer. She points out, “An ecologist,” or a writer, “explores how writers interact to form systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all other writers and writings in the system” (368). Within this construct, as a Writing Program Administrator, the student writing in relation to instructors, and vice-versa, must work within the context of the written, explicit expectations of the institution they inhabit. But, simultaneously, the writing of students in relation to their instructors shape the university’s relationship with writing. In turn, this

³⁹ A point I don’t agree with, but it is often brought up in academic circles.

constellation influences faculty relationships with their Writing Program Administrator, thus bringing us full circle back to sensibility and anticipating consequences of decisions and the ways in which writing impacts our lives.

To expand this idea further, in their Introduction to *Ecologies of Writing Programs*, Reiff, Bawarshi, Ballif, and Weisser explain that four relevant ecological characteristics of Writing Programs themselves are “*interconnectedness, fluctuation, complexity, and emergence*” (5 [emphasis in original]). While these characteristics, they state, are equally important, I want to focus on “emergence.” Whatever the expectations are of a Writing Program and its Administrator, something new emerges from the “shared perspectives and interactions among faculty, administrators, and students” (9). When thought about in this way, I can’t help but recall the editors of *GenAdmin*’s outlook. To repeat the highlight: “we are always in the process of becoming—not in the sense of arriving at a particular WPA identity or becoming *the* WPA...seeking to rhetorically thrive and continually change [...] deliberately we must choose this philosophy of change as our goal” (106). So, pairing this idea of change with the idea of emergence—a continual emergence—requires that the definition of Writing Program Administrators to remain elusive. Because writing wants and because people need (and want, of course), the continual emergence can develop as response, instead of a reaction, to institutional expectations and requirements.

Admittedly, this idea of emergence seems rather optimistic compared to my discussion in the previous chapter in which I argued that postsecondary institutions are “neoliberal” (in all the worst ways). And now scholars are discussing an evolution towards the “necroliberal” university. Benjamin Balthaser and Bill Mullin explain that the “necroliberal” university is the “polite administration of death” (n.p.). While the authors discuss racism in the context of what they call

the “necropolitical university,” the article was jumpstarted as a response to various postsecondary institutions’ handling of returns to campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. They claim that university and college administrators are prepared to allow some faculty, staff, and students to die for their schools to open again and have in-person classes. These descriptors fall in line with Achille Mbembe’s definition of “necropolitics.” As he, the originator of the term, explains, “necropolitics” are “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power over death” (39). While some university and college administrators require vaccines, others have avoided mandating vaccination in order to open university doors once again. In doing so, these other administrators place students, faculty, and staff in harm’s way of the virus. In other words, “they openly accept death as something to be managed, controlled, and even invited”; since this relationship with death occurs “in the context of immense wealth and privilege,” it becomes *necoliberal* (Balthaser and Mullin n.p.). Within this atmosphere, Writing Program Administrators are left powerless in the decision-making, but must respond to and negotiate what’s decided from the higher ups. All the labor put forth by their teachers, whether in person or not, must be accounted for and supported.

In making these choices, upper administrators and their institutions subjugate life to the power over death for the institution’s financial maintenance and gain. So then, how could institutions that would openly take this approach to maintain wealth somehow house a Writing Program that I am claiming could be represented by change and adaptation? My general answer is people. The more specific answer is working *with* people to create and enact responses to institutional expectations that are dependent on valuing control of death over life. But also, to determine the best ways to help others learn to communicate more effectively. This is where the promise of emergence comes from in a Writing Program. The Writing Program Administrator

exists in a position to facilitate the conversations that bring about constructive ideas and initiatives while maintaining beneficial practices already in place. They can take the opportunities to respond instead of reacting. They also build and sustain relationships between faculty and administrators that make changes possible. In short, Writing Programs can be a source of positive emergence by acknowledging people's positions and supporting them. The next section considers at least one conversation the Writing Program Administrator will inevitably organize and facilitate: Assessment. As I examine this example in the following section, I hope to demonstrate the complexities of working with others for a positive emergence in the postsecondary institutional setting that carries with it inherent neoliberalization.

The Economy of Assessment

In their Introduction to *Assessing Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*, Peggy O'Neil and Brian Huot explain that assessment goes towards "accrediting agencies, policymakers, and government organizations demanding evidence of learning from educational institutions" (1). However, Tony Scott boils down discussions around assessment to "labor issues" (27). He states,

The push to make writing labor (teaching and composing) a commodity, an exchangeable unit divorced from material situations and laboring bodies, extends from a *neoliberal* political economic ideology that seeks economization of all human relations according to a singular model of efficiency, competition, and concentrated accumulation...large-scale writing assessment mandates function as a means of making the terms of labor invisible through shifting the focus from the qualitative to the quantitative, from multiplicity to singularity, and from the agentive exercise of professional expertise to the ordered achievement of symbolic outcomes (15).

Within this web, to be an "effective Writing Program Director [...] one must be able to respond to the varied writing assessment needs of students, faculty and institutions" (O'Neill and Huot 1). So, with all these expectations, working with people can become a challenge that is difficult to navigate. And even though some Writing Programs are fortunate enough to develop their own

assessment practices, they often find they hit a snag when they scratch below the surface of consensus. But then, how does that work with what I call the economy of assessment in Writing Programs? In this section I will outline general problems with assessment in order to emphasize its function in adding to the neoliberalization of both the university and the labor that goes into an accepted form of literacy. As the Writing Program Administrator is responsible for assessment in Writing Programs, this aspect provides a space in which to analyze how neoliberalization creeps its way into literacy sponsorship from Writing Programs.

In terms of consensus in assessment, Bruce Herzberg explains his approach at Bentley University. He states, “We relied on the assumption that open discussion and a good deal of flexibility within the guidelines would be regarded as consensus, and that the process itself would promote a collegial willingness to enact the standards” (491). But he quickly discovered that “standards meant nothing if the instructors ignored them” (492). Further complications arise in what assessment itself accomplishes, even if the standards are not ignored. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein outline the trouble with the standardization oftentimes, if not always, required for assessment. In “Everything-but-the-Kitchen-Sink Assessment,” they examine their own approach to Student Learning Outcomes Assessment at the University of Illinois, Chicago. In their method, the Writing Program creates its own expectations for assessment based on experiences with their students’ abilities and needs. This in-house assessment approach allows those who interact with the students the most to determine what is important and useful for the learners, as opposed to individuals who are more removed (such as policymakers and politicians who have not worked with the students). This technique would seem beneficial because it considers the abilities and needs of the institution’s specific student population. However, Graff and Birkenstein concluded that, “accepting outcomes assessment requires you to accept

standardization. But unfortunately, the outcomes movement has run away from the standardization it implicitly accepts by producing statements that are so long, diffuse, and unfocused that they end up fueling the curricular inconsistency they were supposed to resolve” (485). So then, even if something of a consensus exists, it can be difficult to enact normalizing standards among faculty. Of course, there are also the ideological problems with attempting to create standards that categorize students as not writing on the appropriate academic level⁴⁰.

The idea of consensus in assessment could theoretically bring about more democratic ways of thinking about writing and literacy; however, the administrative process will translate “the labor of teachers and students [...] into flattened signifiers, a set of singular numbers that related simply to stated outcomes” (Scott 17). In tandem with the neoliberal university applying pressure to “turn ‘knowledge’ into ‘product’,” a connection arises between that erasure of labor and neatly packaged assessment (Jakobi 107). This pressure and labor deletion in academics is evident in roles from faculty publishing to gain tenure (publish or perish) to students developing marketable job skills. Product, or assessment (literacy supposedly manufactures knowledge), is how postsecondary institutions compete with each other for more, and better, college applicants. The more students that graduate and attain jobs in their field, the better the school looks compared to others. So, then, the postsecondary institution takes assessment as the product of knowledge gained, which acts as simplified criteria for accreditation. And accreditation, from groups like Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), provides meaning to the ultimate product of the postsecondary institution: a college degree.

⁴⁰ For one example, in Chapter 2 I explain problems with White Language supremacy in educational institutions.

The work turned to assessment turned to accreditation, regardless of whether educators do reach some kind of consensus in terms of working with people, is where neoliberalism finds itself engrained in institutional assessment practices concerning literacy. The market transaction takes place as the erasure of the work both faculty and students accomplish when assessment boils the labor down to numbers for commodification, used by the institution. That product, the assessment, helps to ensure accreditation⁴¹ and can act as marketable numbers. That accreditation gives meaning and prestige to the college degree. These aspects are what attract potential students to invest time and money into the college to gain the degree. In some sense, this is what “sells” the college. But would that not pigeonhole students as consumers?

In market terms, some scholars argue that students are, in fact, consumers in their ontological roles as “students.” There are a number of ways scholars have attempted to quantify and qualify postsecondary students as consumers. In 2014 Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick conducted a study around the concept of how students understand the “value” of education. Their findings showed that most students associated “value” with price, or cost of attending the institution, and how it financially benefitted them after degree attainment (60). Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, and Reinhardt consider the concept of “academic entitlement,” which they say, “indicates that on some level students believe they are entitled to or deserving of certain goods and services to be provided by their institutions and professors, something that is outside of the students’ actual performance or responsibilities inside the classroom” (344). In their study, they directly asked students if they saw themselves as “customers.” Student responses were

⁴¹ The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) states that “Accreditation requires institutional commitment to the concept of quality enhancement through continuous assessment and improvement” (5). While there are other requirements, assessment, alongside “balanced governing structure” and “support structures and resources,” appear to be the most concrete requirements (5).

overwhelmingly “yes,” and students cited their treatment by the institution as “customers” and their “payment” and “cost” as evidence (354). So, gaining a college degree, to some extent, is about students getting what they believe they paid for with a degree, at least in the eyes of the students. This realization directly connects to accreditation and marketable graduation and job attainment numbers that partly result from assessment and its subsequent worthwhile degree.

However, there exists a further complexity in the role of student as something beyond consumers. After all, students are still students. In market terms, Dusi and Huisman have argued that students are, in fact, *prosumers*—a combination of “producer” and “consumer.” They base their definition on Alan Toeffler’s (the originator of the term) explanation of a “prosumer” as “an individual engaged in the production of what s/he will consume” (940). For example, a student writing a dissertation while using the university’s resources (such as the library) would qualify as a prosumer. Another example is students serving as representatives on committees to improve life on campus. Important to this chapter is these authors’ emphasis on the different ways in which students both consume and produce in a postsecondary institution. This aspect provides another reason for an analysis of assessment practices in terms of economy. Students, as both consumers (paying for the degree) and producers (developing product from their knowledge in the form of assessment), foster the ability to produce, consume, and commodify the most important product: an accredited college degree. In terms of literacy, their abilities to produce and consume at the appropriate level for and from the university ensures the university’s continual accreditation and prestige and the student’s ability to exchange that degree for a job. In this way, assessment safeguards the university or college’s place as a competitor in the market and (as discussed in Chapter 2) makes competitors of students beyond their postsecondary

education. In a similar way, the degree and students' ability to compete on the job market legitimize the literacy these institutions claim to provide.

Additionally, on the note of "ability," in his discussion on disability and the possibilities of universal design in postsecondary institutions, Jay Dolmage points out that "there is also a push for new forms of literacy and ability [...] a hallmark of neoliberalism: the redefinition of intellectual values that highlight the need of the individual student (or worker) to become a more flexible (and thus fungible or disposable) producer and consumer" (101). At this juncture, I simply want to point out that there is a direct connection between assessment—or standardizing literacy—and neoliberalism, beyond my argument. Dolmage considers this aspect in terms of disability; however, it is important to acknowledge that literacy is inescapably considered a form of ability.

For now, the takeaway is that standardization requires and then erases labor as students work towards that ability and faculty work towards outlining what that ability is or looks like in terms of assessment. This movement replaces those who provide the labor with a product, and that is where the commodification takes place. In other words, assessment replaces people's labor (both students and teachers) with a product: Accreditation (in order to maintain the value of a degree). As such, assessment is one way in which people can become commodified through literacy. People are erased, and the ideology of the invisible hand of the market that neoliberalism leans on to find its footing as a primarily socially beneficial economic endeavor gains continual grounding. As sponsors of literacy, Writing Programs in postsecondary institutions must maintain assessment practices. As individuals responsible for Writing Programs, Writing Program Directors must contend with this aspect while also continuing to acknowledge the people they work with, over, and under.

Conclusion

By way of investigating what a Writing Program Administrator does, this chapter outlines general considerations for Writing Programs as sponsors of literacy. Writing Programs, and their administrators, play a part in shaping how literacy is defined through assessment. Institutions (the larger sponsor of literacy) validate those terms of literacy for market-value, then consequently transmit that understanding to students. This progression maps out how literacy works within the neoliberal, or even necroliberal, university. I have chosen to analyze assessment (as it works with accreditation in postsecondary institutions) to highlight how neoliberalism, in its demand for product, erases the labor of instructors and adjuncts who are in labor-intensive positions. This market-oriented economic outlook, in terms of assessment, affects literacy through Writing Programs because the context of postsecondary institutions require assessment as a product of knowledge in order to legitimize a type of literacy. Literacy, as the institution defines its standards for assessment, is reduced to numbers. These numbers ensure the commodity of learning and education through literacy, particularly in Writing Programs.

The overarching implication here is that education becomes defined as such through assessment practices that take literacy as something that can be fully evidenced by numbers. While a nice, neat package for accreditation may be warranted, it conceals the efforts required to reach literacy and how they influence how we come to understand literacy. As a result, the Writing Program as a sponsor of literacy in a postsecondary institutional setting disappears, and with it, potential discussions on how to negate the neoliberalization of literacy and its students.

Ultimately, no matter what aspect of Writing Programs and Writing Program Directors look at, as sponsors of literacy, see people: students, faculty, upper administration, etc. Considering the work that this chapter does, I determine that when discussing Writing Programs,

what Writing Programs and Writing Program Administrators should always try to do is be seen. To put it more academically, “Visibility is billed as a proxy for appreciation [...] Ironically, many of the efforts undertaken in the past half-century to make rhetoric and composition more intellectually sound—including expanding into basic writing, writing centers, writing across the curriculum, writing program administration, writing assessment, and so on and so forth—have also resulted in more visible indicators of composition’s institutional value” (Skinnell 141-2). That visibility should extend to the labor performed by individuals in these positions to establish that literacy does not appear out of thin air. By materializing literacy’s sponsors beyond institutional factors and into their effects, literacy’s shaping becomes a tangible artifact that clarifies literacy’s ideological nature.

Interchapter 4

I didn’t have an office. I had a table with a computer in the hallway at the Writing Center, so that’s where I sat when I updated my application materials for teaching positions at local high schools. As sad I was about leaving, I felt confident that I would find a position somewhere because Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment classes were in high demand, and I had experience teaching “college-level writing.” It was one of the mornings that I’d buried myself in revising my CV when the Writing Program Director, Linda, stopped to chat with me on her way to her office. I can’t remember her exact wording, but she said I was under consideration for a Visiting Instructor position and asked if I could forward her my CV. Shortly after sending it to her, she asked if she could see me in her office. I didn’t realize it was going to be an interview.

Up until this point, I’d always second guessed myself and my abilities. I loved writing, and I could talk it up, but, in retrospect, I lacked confidence. Oddly enough, when she asked, “What would you bring to this position?,” the words “I’m the best candidate for this position”

fell out of my mouth. The best I can make of it that is a couple days before the surprise interview, I'd talked to the Assistant Writing Program Director, David, about what we could do to improve tutoring practices. In our conversation I kept saying "I know I just graduated" and "I know I'm not full-time or anything," and he stopped me. He said that I was qualified to share these opinions. He'd said he valued my views and that I had good things to contribute. In any case, whatever I said—honestly it was like I blacked out—Linda responded that she'd decide by the end of the week. I didn't expect to get the position. There were plenty of adjuncts who'd been there for years, and I was still a little wet behind the ears in comparison. I recall texting my friends about my excitement but explaining that it was nice just to be considered. Surprisingly enough to me, within the hour, she came out and asked if I would like a position as a Visiting Instructor at the University of North Florida. Of course, I said "YES!"

So, I could stay at UNF and work with the Writing Program. Not only had a weight been lifted, but I had something to run *to* instead of run *from*. My pay was going to be AMAZING (okay, so \$45,000 with benefits and more money for summer classes, but definitely more than I was making working four jobs), and I'd be able to quit Starbucks—a job I'd had for my entire adult life. I'd even be able to get some extra money if I picked up summer classes. I'll never forget the first time I paid all my bills with one paycheck. I cried. Of course, I was also living cheaply because I lived with my friend Beth (and her four wiener dogs), but it didn't matter. In that moment, I remember thinking "Is this how the other half lives?!" I remember feeling like I'd made it. And I'd done it on my own. I'd earned it. But that was short-lived. Throughout my first year teaching full-time, I was constantly told by a senior colleague that I only got the position because she'd told Linda to hire me for it. Her claim felt like some sort of leverage because this colleague would call and text me about work at all hours. She'd text me at 5am asking what my

lesson plans were for the day, or at 2am saying she wasn't going to make it to campus and that I needed to cover her classes. Then, of course, there was the instructor who made me throw out food. She'd send me emails with the harshest tones and most ridiculous demands. Even though I was no longer the Writing Center Office Assistant she still acted like I worked for her in some way.

But I also worked on a curriculum and textbook committees, even creating the cover art for our textbooks. I was also the first faculty adviser and sponsor for UNF's Musical Theatre Club. In their first year they'd put on several showcases and gained close to 100 members. Additionally, I'd garnered the respect of most of my colleagues. By my second semester in the Visiting position, they started emailing me for guidance on teaching topics and asking for direction with the curriculum. Every time there was a new position open, someone working on that search committee would stop by my office. They'd say that if I ever wanted to come back and they were on the committee for that position, I'd have an in. I could carry myself professionally at holiday parties in the office, but I could also have a wild night out at the beach bars with my colleagues.

I was on top of the world, but I wasn't sure if we'd get the budget line for a second year. Luckily it pulled through. I was grateful because I'd been rejected by every one of the six PhD programs I'd applied to that year. So, for another year, I did everything I could to try to prove my worth. Like Cheap Trick, I wanted them to want me. Of course, it was discouraging that I was constantly told another year in this position wouldn't be guaranteed. For the first time since I'd gotten the position, I could feel my mental health slipping. It didn't make any sense to me. I contributed so much to the UNF community and did an awesome job teaching. By its second year, the Musical Theatre Club was the biggest club on campus, and they'd even put on a full-

length production of 9 – 5. My evaluations glowed with praise from students. I attended all Writing Center events. Even when the Writing Center moved to a nicer building, I made it a point to drop in and be supportive where I could. Except for the two aforementioned colleagues, folks generally enjoyed having me around and working with me. Why couldn't they find a way for me to stay? Wasn't my work and what I had to contribute worth anything?

Because it was so confusing and frustrating, I couldn't sleep. I'd wake up sweating and end up wandering out to the back steps in the middle of the night, smoking half a pack of cigarettes trying to not be anxious. I was falling back into bad habits I thought I'd eradicated before I went back to finish my M.A. So, I started going to a cognitive behavioral therapist. He said I was in a "holding pattern" at UNF. So, I applied to Ph.D. programs again. He also gave me the homework of not looking at my work email for all of Spring Break. So, for a whole week I didn't look at my email or do anything related to work. Within that time, I found myself at peace knowing my future may not be in academics nor in writing. I'd decided that in the off chance I got accepted into a Ph.D. program I wouldn't go unless they had everything I wanted. I didn't need it anymore, so I wouldn't go unless their offer was attractive enough.

Well, as some sort of cosmic joke I'm sure, when I got back from Spring Break my acceptance letter from Louisiana State University was at the top of my inbox. The notification had been sitting there while I worked through my academic dependency issues. I couldn't believe it. I even made a friend stop and read it on her way to teach to make sure I'd understood correctly. She confirmed the email as an acceptance into LSU's Ph.D. program. When she left, I just shut the door and sat alone in my office. I felt excited and validated, but I also felt nauseous and wrong. In that moment I didn't know anything about words, let alone writing them. I didn't even want to tell anyone. It was too overwhelming. I could just say no, and it would be like it

never happened. I'd reasoned with myself that I'd gotten over the shame of being rejected, so I could just tell everyone that all my applications had been rejected again. But then, I felt the need to tell the people who'd supported me by looking over my materials, writing my letters of recommendation, and saying kind words. I wanted them to know that their encouragement wasn't for nothing, that I did it, and that we did it. So, yes. I would tell everyone I got accepted, but I would wait to talk to their Director of Graduate Studies to see if I *wanted* what LSU had to offer.

The congratulatory text messages, social media posts, and phone calls poured in for a day or two. Honestly, that part felt wonderful. I was beginning to sway towards accepting the offer before knowing all the details. Everyone's responses made it seem so obvious that I, *of course*, would go to LSU. But I kept reminding myself that I could get stuck again. That there would be egos and insecurities. There would be expectations and pressures. There would be no guarantees of anything. I would have to start over. But a friend lived in New Orleans, so I could move in with her—I could live in New Orleans! I already had my M.A., so I could finish my coursework quickly and be out in four years. What's another four years? It's not like I had other plans, so the idea of becoming "Dr. Fuller" seemed like a good one. On the last day to decide, I confirmed that I would accept LSU's offer. I signed the documents for acceptance alone in my office and sent them off. While this action was going to change my life, it just felt like another thing to do. I checked it off and went about my day, teaching writing.

Chapter 4. Cyborg Influences on the Self and a Way Out

The learning of literacy is submission to it...As profound as the technology of literacy is, it is a technology. It is an invention. Literacy, simply, is not natural, and much results from this.

- J. Elspeth Stuckey
The Violence of Literacy

I just showed up one day without a map or a compass.

- Rue Bennett
Euphoria

Introduction

The HBO series *Euphoria* is currently the most popular show on the network. *Variety* reports that the second season is “up nearly 100% from season 1” in viewership (n.p.). The show follows Rue Bennett, a drug addicted Junior in high school. Since her childhood she has been diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, General Anxiety Disorder, and “possibly Bi-Polar” Disorder. She narrates as the show follows her and her friends navigating their personal relationships through high school. While the show is certainly hyperbolic at times, being that HBO labels a “teen drama,” for the purposes of this project I would like to focus on the first episode of the show. Just within the first five minutes, Rue reports that 9/11 happened three days before she was born. The first two days she was alive, she explains, her parents remained in the hospital watching the planes repeatedly hit the twin towers on television. Perhaps it is a bit of a reach to suggest, as the show or Rue does, that because she spent her first days outside of her mother’s womb experiencing nothing but anxiety and sadness she has been forever changed. However, this observation, in its peripheral, brings up the point that the world continues to change in unanticipated ways. Included in the first five minutes of the show, Rue, as a pre-teen, receives a text message stating “im gonna rape you cunt” [sic] and we see her criticizing her body in the mirror (sucking her stomach in and popping it back out). Ambiguity, confusion, and angst are fairly consistent in the often-fraught process of

growing up, but the way in which these feelings and actions are induced has changed rapidly in the last few years, due in large part to the rapid advancement of computer technology.

Technology with text messages, as we see in the show, but also greater understandings of medical diagnoses (Rue's multiple diagnoses), communication through images (like the planes repeatedly hitting the towers on our televisions), and, though the show doesn't mention it, even accessibility to instruments that can help people learn to read and write are just a few examples of the ways in which the world continues to change.

We, as educators, must learn to interpret those changes and adapt to their implications for literacy for our students who are burgeoning into their adulthoods. Younger students grow up in the midst of anxiety that proliferates as a result of literacies they must develop to navigate the world. Clearly, a number of the inhabitants of the United States enjoy watching these (albeit extreme) dramas unfold but do not often discuss the truth in which they are rooted and how this constant communication can have detrimental effects. So, I recognize the exaggeration of Rue Bennett's character in a show that American viewers flock to; however, if educators want to better understand what our students go through in terms of attaining and practicing literacy, then we must contend with the world in which they live and have always lived. Their world has consistently been plentiful with computer technology (from chat platforms to text generation and word processors) that affects the ways in which students learn and implement literacy. As it stands with postsecondary institutions, literacy affects how students perpetuate understandings of literacy as a tool for competition (as outlined in previous chapters) instead of collaboration or cooperation. As sponsors of literacy that operate within postsecondary institutions, instructors hold a position that offers an opportunity to provide access to understandings of literacy that act as alternatives to promoting competition.

In the vein of literacy, one aspect that seems to stand the test of time is the literacy myth. Harvey Graff, having studied the history of how literacy has maintained a prominent position in American culture, provides his most encompassing yet succinct definition in his work with John Duffy. They explain that the literacy myth is a “belief” in which acquiring literacy imbues one with “almost ineffable qualities,” such as making you a good person; making you smarter; making you more deserving of a lucrative career; making you more inclined to work productively with others to attain that ever-enlightened dream of democracy and contribute to a fairer, more socially just and equitable world while also tending to self-interests (32). The catch is that literacy is the *only* way to achieve these realizations. They go on to elaborate, “the literacy myth is not so much about falsehood but an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes” (32). Further, “those who sanction” this literacy myth are the sponsors of literacy. So, then, as this project would have it, Duffy and Graff’s definition of the literacy myth is propagated in many ways by sponsors of literacy, which means that the myth’s “outcomes” necessarily benefit its sponsors of literacy and their interests. To a great extent, my project has circled around the idea of the literacy myth, particularly in the vein of sponsors of literacy; however, I want to go further and connect the literacy myth more solidly to how it works with students’ experiences with literacy in the postsecondary writing classroom and through technology to imagine a way outside of a literacy sponsors’ own desires and benefits.

This chapter aims directly at conceptualizing the literacy myth in conversation with how students perceive literacy through discussion around understanding our students in the postsecondary writing classroom and literacy’s engagement with computer technology. I could continue to theorize, like Bourdieu and Passeron, in *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* about how we are imitating literacy’s past trajectories; however, Clive Thompson’s

argument in “The New Literacy” (for *Wired* in 2009) suggests that a new route outside of institutionalized understandings of literacy is blossoming specifically because of computer technology. In “The New Literacy,” Thompson argues that a “new literacy” in which writers compose for specific audiences developed as a result of social media and texting—computer technologies. While composing for specific audiences is nothing new, Thompson’s argument points to a shift in accepting that computer technologies hold promise for different understandings of literacy. So, maybe things *can* change? But then, a follow up question: *When* and *how* are students programmed with the literacy myth by sponsors of literacy (recalling the discussion on Writing Programs from the previous chapter)? And what are the implications for students’ working with us, educators, as sponsors of literacy? With the postsecondary institution as the overarching sponsor of literacy, we are somewhat limited. So, I argue that we, as writing teachers who are sponsors of literacy, can consider the space of the classroom to offer a slightly different instruction.

This chapter will first discuss how literacy has been understood as a technology for quite some time. It then moves to actual computer technology that is currently used in the writing classroom. The point in the first section is to outline the differences between technologies I discuss. I then provide a background of the potential for the writing classroom, in particular, first-year writing. In the next section, I profile what writing could look like by way of alternatives that already exist through discussion of cyborg politics. Finally, I suggest a way in which we can begin to work towards a cyborg writing in such a way that it provides a loose framework for writing outside of the dominant ideology of competition, as expressed by overarching sponsors of literacy.

Technology/Writing

Nothing New

The idea of writing as akin to identity is nothing new. If Kenneth Levine is correct in stating that “On the individual level, most people quickly forget the details of the learning process and cannot remember the time before they could read or write,” then there is no memory of a self that exists outside a literate self (1). I would add to his assertion that there would also be no memory of a time when a person did not know in some way that they were “illiterate” by hegemonic standards. But then, his claim becomes more entangled in identity when students claim, as they so often do, that they are “not good at writing” or “can’t write”—as though writing (and even reading) is not a life-long learning endeavor. The technology of writing, and by extension its notions of literacy, has in many ways developed how individuals view themselves. In “From Pencils to Pixels” Dennis Baron explains the connection individuals have to writing that influences conceptions of literacy:

writing itself is always first and foremost a technology, a way of engineering materials in order to accomplish an end. Tied up as it is with value-laden notions of literacy, art, and science, of history and psychology, of education, of theory, and of practicality, we often lose sight of writing as technology, until, that is, a new technology like the computer comes along and we are thrown into excitement and confusion as we try it on, try it out, reject it, and then adapt it to our lives—and of course, adapt our lives to it (1)

Because our lives also adapt to it and we do not typically remember the time before we could read and write, it is easy to lose sight of writing as a technology. Individuals tend to see their relationships with literacy as defining who they are, if not at least one representation of who they are. As sponsors of literacy shape the definitions and promotions of literacy that benefit them and their interests, the literacy myth proliferates disguised as a fact of life.

If our relationship to literacy could be procedural and machinic, as James Brown Jr. would have it, then our programming appears to be solid right down to our identities. But that

programming has to start somewhere. The programming begins with some sponsor of literacy, and as already stated, those sponsors bank on the literacy myth, as defined by Graff and Duffy, in order to continue the exigent need for literacy. The sponsors of literacy I refer to here are the ones I have outlined as benefitting from the competition that has resulted from neoliberalism. I would add that the “literacy crisis,” which Jacob Babb points out is “nothing new” and “perennial,” plays a role in shoring up a literacy exigency. However, that exigency is what mainly reinstates and rearticulates the myth that literacy—the hegemonically dominant understanding of literacy—is integral for the well-being of all of us. If “Johnny Can’t Write,⁴²” it means he cannot write like everyone supposedly expects him to: “ordinary expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity” (1). This description, as dated as Sheils article is, encapsulates a view of literacy that everyone should adhere to in terms of a “perfect communication” in that it assumes all lifestyles recognize, or should recognize, concepts like “ordinary,” “structure,” and “lucidity” in the same way regardless of context. This viewpoint permeates the literacy myth because it posits an ideal for literacy. In turn, the struggle for that ideal contributes to competition.

Haraway states, “Cyborg politics are the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against one code that translates all meaning perfectly” (57). The literacy myth appears at this juncture — “the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication.” Because the literacy myth, via sponsors of literacy, has been “invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities,” the desire for literacy in this context creates struggle for literacy, or “perfect communication” (Graff and Duffy 32). And because “the

⁴² “Why Johnny Can’t Write” is a 1975 *Newsweek* article by Merrill Sheils in which she bemoans the inability of people graduating high school and even college to write. This article comes some time before *A Nation at Risk*, which I’ve discussed at length in the first chapter. While this article indicates a level of panic, in contrast to *A Nation at Risk*, it does not point the finger at the American public so much as the advance of technology.

benefits ascribed to literacy cannot be attained in other ways nor can they be attributed to other factors, whether economic, political, cultural, or individual. Rather, literacy stands alone as the independent and critical variable,” it needs to be limited in terms of availability, which creates outer struggle among individuals and or groups. Specific to institutions, Gonzales and Shotton claim, “the neoliberal academy insists that there are only enough resources for one group— isolating us from others and tempting us into scarcity mindset” (11). Otherwise, literacy would no longer be a variable, but a given. So, to extend this argument, the desire to be literate along with a sense of scarcity ensures that the literacy myth continues to thrive. Considering the aforementioned detrimental effects of literacy, brought on by computer technology and its constant presence, the imperfection of literacy becomes more apparent and stifles literacy’s promise of perfection upon attainment. In this way, because writing is what Haraway calls a “polluted category” (which I will discuss later) all writing is cyborg writing.

Within this matrix it is easy to think of the literacy myth as manufactured precisely for its own existence in terms of the benefits for sponsors of literacy. To explain further, “Yes, it’s ‘machines all the way down,’ but these machines are simultaneously authoring and authored, writing and written. Excavating the machinic dimensions [...] reimagines the machinic as something dynamic and fluid” (Brown 509). And so, in the way that we have consistently seen writing as a technology, there is a melding of identity with technology in terms of how we see ourselves and others based on literacy. Many of the sponsors discussed in this project have taken the approach of promoting access to literacy as scarcity, and (once attained) positioned as competition. But not all sponsors of literacy share this perspective, and literacy does not need to be boxed in. As this chapter works towards considering alternative literacy sponsorship outside

of competition, the following subsection will describe more clearly how computer technology, beyond writing itself as a technology, enters into the writing classroom.

More Technology in the Writing Classroom

In her 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair's Address, Kathleen Blake Yancy draws parallels between the newly developed reading public of the 19th century and the writing public of the new millennium. She explains that we are witnessing “a writing public made plural, and as is the case of the development of a reading public, it is taking place largely outside of school [...] unlike what happens in our class, no one is forcing this public to write” (300). She attributes this change to the rapid advancement of technology. In this address she urges writing instructors to implement more computer technology, particularly in the writing classroom. Almost twenty years later, incorporating technology into the writing classroom has become standard practice⁴³. Of course, social media websites like Twitter have been a space where a number of assignments seem to have succeeded (McWilliams, Hines, Conner, and Bishop; Espinoza-Celi and Pintado; Davis and Yin) among many disciplines where writing is concerned. However, a much more direct path between the technology of writing and the technology of computers seen in the classroom is evident in scholarship discussing the use of Turnitin and Grammarly, particularly in the writing classroom.

Turnitin is frequently discussed as a “plagiarism checker” in academic circles; however, its Mission Statement claims, “To ensure the integrity of global education and meaningfully improve learning outcomes.” A possibility exists that students do not perceive the platform as offering either “integrity” or a focus on “learning outcomes.” A 2020 study performed in South

⁴³ With the shift to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, computer technology has, in many ways, *become* the classroom. Every classroom.

Africa⁴⁴ found that over half (54.9%) of students surveyed, “felt offended by the Turnitin report when they submitted their work online as their work was declared to have been plagiarized” (117). Additionally, a 2015 study from the United Kingdom reports that, despite the students surveyed being in their sixth semester of undergraduate study, “a surprisingly high number expressed anxiety regarding the risk of unintentional plagiarism” (38). When put into practice here in the United States., Mimi Li and Jinrong Li implemented Turnitin beyond just submitting papers and used it for peer-review feedback. The researchers utilized Turnitin’s peer-review tool, PeerMark. PeerMark provides “Commenting tools⁴⁵, Composition marks⁴⁶, and PeerMark questions⁴⁷” (22). Their study included both ESL and English speakers as participants, who reviewed one another’s submissions anonymously after a short training period that included practice trials and explanations through PowerPoint presentations. They found that, “Both mainstream students and ESL students held positive attitude [sic]” (30). They quote participants as saying that the Turnitin peer-review activities “diminish the pressure,” “provide more constructive feedback,” and “allowed them to organize the feedback over and over again” (30). Grammarly, a similar tool in which students can electronically submit a paper and receive automated feedback, has been investigated for comparable purposes. Svetlana Koltovskaia’s study at Oklahoma State University with ESL students deduced that students did not “effectively utilize” automated feedback because students “corrected 57% of their total errors” (10). However, errors in this study are limited to grammatical. Other instructors utilizing Grammarly beyond automated feedback found it generally useful. For example, student writing performance

⁴⁴ Surprisingly, not many studies on either Grammarly or Turnitin have been conducted in the United States. As far as publications go, the majority of the research has been performed outside of the United States and many of the studies done in the United States have had limited scopes in terms of student population.

⁴⁵ The comment function allows students to highlight sections and leave comments directly on the submission.

⁴⁶ Composition marks can be clicked on and dragged directly to the submission.

⁴⁷ PeerMark allows students to communicate about the assignment directly through assignment-specific questions.

can “improve” as a result of integrating teacher feedback with Grammarly’s “surface” automated feedback (Dong and Shi 1).

The technology of both writing and computers are unavoidable in the writing classroom. Notably, the best results in using Turnitin and Grammarly in learning to write resulted from including both teacher feedback and the automated feedback—a mix of the two—cyborg feedback. Cyborg feedback here means the feedback itself is composed of both human and machine responses, but also refers to using computer technology to present the feedback even when humans supply the responses. So, in one sense, computer technology works towards some kind of perfection in communication. More to the point of the cyborg writing I discuss, a tension exists between human involvement that responds to the technological presence and may come to rely on computer technology’s involvement. In the next subsection, I want to combine the theory of Haraway’s cyborg writing with literacy in service of mapping out what the cyborg writing I wish to consider can offer educators in terms of a framework to become more cognizant of influences on literacy, whether they be through outright literacy sponsorship or social or societal. In other words, I want to offer a cyborg writing that views literacy as a way to enact a literacy sponsorship which can go beyond literacy for competition in terms of that perfection.

Cyborgs

To begin thinking about how Haraway’s cyborg myth enters conversations about literacy, I recognize that there is a line of theory associated with cyborgs that have resulted in discourse about the posthuman in general. But I want to be clear that my interest in the cyborg within this project concerns literacy (as defined in the Introduction to this dissertation). The component of literacy the cyborg is most concerned with, as Haraway posits it, is writing. While reading must certainly play a role, Haraway’s discussion focuses on the act of writing. In a 1996 interview for

the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, Gary Olson asks Haraway “What might distinguish cyborg writing from traditional phallogocentric writing, authoritative practices of mastery and domination?” and she answers, “the important issue for me is that the cyborg is from the start a polluted category [...] It's an offspring of World War II nuclear culture, and there's no possibility of working out of that position” (4-5). To focus particularly on the position of writing with regards to the cyborg is to indicate that writing is never pure and that there is no liberation from that position of contamination. In any writing classroom, our students carry within them what this dissertation would see as “polluted” institutionalized notions of literacy. Sponsors of literacy have invested their financial efforts towards concepts of literacy that will benefit them and have imparted those conceptions to our students well before they enter the classroom. Again, this is not to claim that students are cyborgs, so much as that their notions of literacy and writing are polluted in terms of the ways in which they perform literacy. From Haraway’s position, which looks specifically at writing, literacy in general is potentially informed by similar contexts. So, while writing is the focus in Haraway’s structure, I transpose her argument to literacy more broadly.

Within this structure, where I’ve heavily leaned on the downfalls of neoliberalism in relation to literacy, the impression of literacy in the United States is steeped in competition. We do not typically think the struggle or competition for literacy as being related to the end of the world. However, the limits to competition in literacy, as outlined by Haraway’s reference to World War II, would appear to be devastation. Recalling Chapter 1’s analyses of national discussions around education and literacy acts as a reminder that the safety of the United States itself could be at stake. Additionally, Chapter 2’s investigation into identity and group erasure in terms of Black Language also highlights what is at stake in the competition for literacy.

Attaining literacy in terms of institutions reinforces this unchecked competition. While Haraway references nuclear culture in her response to Olson, Rue illustrates this anxiety by way of illustrating her first days of life in that disquieted hospital with all the violent television images. This anxiety, while not pushing students to cower under their wooden desks (as if kindling is going to save anyone), remains in the forms of extremism (9/11) and confusion and misinformation (COVID-19). It is simultaneously caught in the middle of endless communication about such things at students' fingertips. In fact, while they have not made it to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and possibly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the terms "doomscrolling" and "doomsurfing" were recently added to *Merriam-Webster's English Dictionary*. The dictionary says the terms refer to, "the tendency to continue to surf or scroll through bad news, even though that news is saddening, disheartening, or depressing. Many people are finding themselves reading continuously bad news about COVID-19 without the ability to stop or step back" (n.p.). Doomscrolling or -surfing can easily be categorized into a cyborg reading in that computer technology makes it possible while also negatively influencing audience interactions with reading in an undesirable light. The ideology of Haraway's cyborg, as in the *Manifesto*, must necessarily cope with the fact that it is a product of something else, of other goings-on that individuals have little to no control over. Just one of those influences with the cyborg's existence is anxiety induced by constant technological communication that causes daily habits like "doomscrolling." In a number of ways technology muddies the limits of this competition in that even false information is dispersed and continues to be consumed in unhealthy ways in efforts to attract an audience's attention. And the idea that literacy exists to sharpen our tools for competition with no constraint taints our students' notions of literacy as they enter our classrooms.

A more recent discussion of the cyborg, or posthuman, lies within the Introduction to Sidney Dobrin's edited collection, *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing*, where he points out, in relation to writing, "posthumanism enters composition and rhetoric with a substantial gaze directed toward subjects and identities, not with much attention to writing" (9). So then, in terms of writing, Erin Holliday-Karre claims, "Cyborg writing is not about aiming at the truth behind the fairy tale [or myth] but rather invokes another fairy tale that limits the potential for instantiating truth-claims. Haraway's cyborg is less a metaphor than a practice [...] The cyborg becomes less a noun than a verb: to 'cyborg' is to radically undercut productive writing and reading practices" (309-310). Identity is not off the table in my discussion. I place the focus more on the activity of cyborg writing, which challenges the notion of a fixed identity or fixed purpose in relation to writing or literacy in general. In other words, "truth-claims," in cyborg writing, become non-existent, if not at least malleable and more welcoming of constant revision.

Within this structure, my imaginings focus on students as entering formal postsecondary education with "polluted" notions of literacy. The sponsors of literacy that benefit from competition utilize the literacy myth alongside technologies' potentials to establish struggle and further competition as a necessary characteristic of literacy. To be clear, in this particular take on what it means to cyborg write is to "undercut productive writing and reading practices"—to avoid productivity that could be used for competition. To clarify, the productivity that Holliday-Karre discusses is the "need to assert power over the material 'object' and 'natural' world through production" (299). So, in other words, the point is to undercut reading and writing practices that attempt to assert dominance. I am distinguishing a particular aspect of cyborg writing, beyond writing with technology, which can still be wrapped up in neoliberal ideas. The point is to emphasize writers jacked into an entire system that influences their understandings of

literacy. The idea is for these students to possess the ability to enact a literacy that performs the unconventional as divergent to an assumed opposition, or vie for dominance, brought on by the literacy myth. To further illustrate, in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway seeks with the cyborg, “a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia” (68). A communication that invites multiple voices to go beyond questioning assumptions about literacy and proclaim the alternative in its existence. Of course, as Holliday-Karre asserts the cyborg as a verb, this would be an active, ongoing project, one which we cannot point to and say “*this* is cyborg writing” outside of a given moment. It is a *doing*. And it must continue to do, otherwise, it becomes perfect communication. But in a controlled space, like the postsecondary writing classroom, we can create the conditions for such an elusive possibility. In the next section I will explore the openness of a space that allows for exploration of alternatives to competition for literacy.

In the First-Year Writing Classroom

The first year of postsecondary education tends to be challenging for many students. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average dropout rate for first-year college students in the United States. has consistently been around 30%. Because there is a decent possibility that students in their first year may not continue, this time in their lives can act as a liminal space. In this first year, students experience a whole new world that is composed of a variety of literacies pulling them in different directions. While the postsecondary institution is the overarching sponsor of literacy, each class a student takes asks them to develop a different kind of literacy, and this will continue for the next four to six years it takes them to complete their degrees (if they remain at the institution). The writing classroom, in a temporal sense, already acts a cyborg space in that it exists as a fuzzy boundary in which students enact literacy

but also learn to perform some other type(s) of literacy. In this way, the cyborg—a blur of boundaries—is the destination, a collection of indefinite spaces that allow for redefinition and re-assembly. In other words, the liminal space of transitioning between sponsors of literacy, whether from high school to college or from ENGL1001: Composition to ENGL2001: Academic and Applied Writing for Pre-Nursing, leads only to more conceptions of literacy, which are contextualized by sponsors of literacy. There is always *more* writing. In particular we see that the “first-year” writing class, by the name itself, indicates there will inevitably be *more* writing—this is *just* the first year. It is worth noting that students are also changing between sponsors of literacy—going from K-12 institutions or life experiences and coming to our classroom means they are seeking to discover this sponsor’s new expectations.

Perhaps because the space is so actively liminal or malleable (as discussed here and in Chapter 3), faculty themselves have wildly erratic perceptions of what the first-year writing class, or any composition class, does. Historically, the purpose of first-year writing has had a number of shifts. First-year composition’s initial conception, as Robert Connors argues, was a response to “college freshmen’s” inability to write as evidenced by Harvard’s 1885 entrance exam. Its first iteration was “English A,” and meant to only exist for a few years. But the class remained and continued with the expressed purpose of teaching incoming college students how to write. And because Harvard initiated the class, other universities and colleges followed suit (Connors 11-12). In the 1950s Robert O. Bowen point blank claimed, “The purpose of Freshman English Composition is to assist the general student towards an appreciation and command of prose which concern the college-level American reader and writer” (110). As time wore on, a number of movements developed in composition and rhetoric attempting to quantify what first-year writing should be doing. In *Concepts in Composition*, Irene Clark outlines the expressivist

movement, which focused on students sharing their thoughts and feelings, throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. This approach gave way to social constructivist methodologies by the mid-1970s and through the 1980s (13). Citing Patricia Bizzell's "Cognition, Convention, and Certainty: What We Need to Know about Writing," Clark explains that "this perspective implies that all writers [...] are mentally influenced by inner-speech [...] that develops in response to a particular culture's concept of language and thought" (15). While Janet Emig's *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* was published in 1968, process theory in composition was highlighted with much conversation around portfolios in the mid-1980s through the 1990s.

Then, as is common practice in academics, Process Theory lost footing due to criticism. Postprocess theorists generally hold, as Thomas Kent explains in *Post-process Theory: Beyond the Writing-process Paradigm*, "that writing is a practice that cannot be captured by a generalized process of Big Theory" (1). In *Beyond Postprocess*, he more specifically states that postprocess is more of a mindset that understands "nothing exists out there to ensure successful communication" (xvii). Composition's history is varied and contains much overlapping. The writing classroom is a flexible space whose purposes and approaches have been tirelessly discussed and debated. Given Kent's assertions, it would appear that the field is working towards what I'm outlining with cyborg writing in that it asserts the impossibility of "perfect communication." More recently, however, Vershawn Ashanti Young's 2021 Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair's Address asks that we, as writing teachers, move away from "writing to literacies." He states, "Literacy teachers have the responsibility and opportunity to keep the vision of social justice in the forefront" (635). In this claim, his concern is not with literacy as reading and writing, so much as responding to social issues that have continued to proliferate. All of this to say that the first-year writing classroom and its purposes

have a long history of discontent, which makes it the perfect space in which to discuss the cyborg writing I advocate.

Regardless of what faculty believe to be the purpose of the first-year writing classroom, the National Council of Teachers of English state that first-year Writing accomplishes a number of undertakings. In their 2013 Policy Research Brief, “First-Year Writing: What Good Does It Do?,” they state that small class size “fosters engagement and retention^{48 49}” (1). They add that focusing on the “processes of writing” helps enhance “rhetorical knowledge and “develops metacognition,” which “increases responsibility and ownership towards their [students] work and learning” (2, 3). While the varied writing classes suggest the existence of a number of sponsors of literacy represented in postsecondary institutions, the first-year writing class carries with it so much potential, an entirely different framework for seemingly endless possibilities, at least within the framework of programmatic requirements and institutional expectations.

Cyborg Writing

Technology is an unavoidable feature of literacy now, and writing was, is, and always will be a technology. All writing is cyborg writing. In this chapter I advocate for a particular kind of cyborg writing. Donna Haraway has already outlined the concept in her *Cyborg Manifesto*. To clarify, I hope to utilize ideas from the *Cyborg Manifesto* as a heuristic framework for considering sponsors of literacy, the literacy myth, and the technology of writing together in service of forwarding her notion of the blurred, or even non-existent, boundaries between human

⁴⁸ A survey collected through Writing Program Administrators Listserv between 1998-2015 found that of the 310 schools responding, only two capped their “basic” writing classes at 30, while the rest mostly capped their classes between 15-20.

⁴⁹ In their 2019 article, “RE-Imagining the First Year as Catalyst for First-Year Writing Curricular Change,” Crank, Heaser, and Thoun press upon the “unique” position of the First-Year Writing class when they state, “Two other key factors in college retention that are also provided by FYW [First-Year Writing] courses are personal attention and low student/teacher ratios” (53).

and machine. I say “non-existent” here, because what Haraway really discusses is posthumanism as her argument is an ironic reading of what can be counted as “human.” As such, I wish to expose the uncertainty of boundaries between what we do or do not consider writing, or what we do or do not consider technology. I do so in the service of reaching beyond sponsors of literacy who embed neoliberal notions of competition into literacy acquisition to discover a cyborg writing, or a cyborg literacy. To elucidate, Haraway states, “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the *boundary* between human and animal is transgressed” (11 [emphasis added]). This description is reminiscent of Stuckey’s claim that “because language systems shape subjectivity [...] the difference between literate and illiterate sensibilities is seen as marked,” or differentiated (82). This chapter attempts to imagine a space in which cyborg writing can take place and literacies unacknowledged by some sponsors can take shape. In direct relation to writing, in the *Cyborg Manifesto* Haraway states, “Writing is preeminently the technology of cyborgs [...] Cyborg politics are the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against one code that translates all meaning perfectly” (57). As such, in terms of communication, the cyborg, and therefore its writing, is an ongoing project.

Haraway goes on to explain that “The cyborg is a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self [...] Indeed myth and tool mutually constitute each other” (33). As such, the literacy myth constitutes a tool that constitutes the literacy myth. Both the literacy myth and literacy itself act as amorphous tools that do not necessarily provide a finished product—they are in the constant process of becoming. The myth is a tool, but further it is also a tool that gets sharpened by “taking inputs and generating outputs” (Brown 496). In other words, people practicing literacy are inputting and outputting, disassembling, and reassembling for a given context. Thinking of sponsors of literacy as gauging the value of these inputs and

outputs as based on what they deem beneficial to themselves complicates our role as educators, as sponsors of literacy. As individuals beholden to the university and its expectations yet working with students, what space do we have to offer students alternative outlooks to literacy that do not necessarily result in neoliberal competition? As sponsors of literacy bound to institutional expectations that we need to recognize and acknowledge, how can we think about practicing literacy in ways that concede this position while also offering alternative?

Now is the time to imagine, and I invite you to imagine with me. I do so in the spirit of bell hooks' quote: "The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility [...] we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress" (207). To accomplish this imagining we envision a cyborg writing that resists in any way it can and *be* or *act* as writing. In other words, a literacy that might not fall into the category of literacy or writing but can still be literacy or writing. A literacy that takes the pollution inherent in cyborgs and reinstates it as resistance to the very aspects that attempt to conceal the cyborgian in working against "perfect communication," that highlights the imperfections of literacy.

In the *Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway provides an outline for what cyborg writing has been, laying groundwork for what it could be. I quote her at length here because she also contextualizes writing itself as a powerful tool/technology that possesses the capacity to define the value of an individual in or from a particular culture. Focusing primarily on the work of black women and women of color, she states,

literacy is a special mark of women of color, acquired by U.S. black women as well as men through a history of risking death to learn and to teach reading and writing. Writing has a special significance to colonized groups. Writing has been crucial to the Western myth of the distinction between oral and written cultures, primitive and civilized

mentalities, and more recently to the erosion of the distinction in ‘postmodernist’ theories attacking the phallogocentrism of the West [...] Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious. Cyborg writing must not be about the Fall⁵⁰ [...] Cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other (54-55)

In the last line Haraway advocates cyborg writing as specifically a tool of survival, which (admittedly) would imply some level of competition. However, if we, as writing teachers, help to create the space in which survival is not the primary immediate exigency, our students could begin to imagine worlds that could be possible. In other words, they might learn different ways of knowing. Literacy, like rhetoric, is a way of knowing, a way of being in the world. These are the ways we situate, or do not situate, ourselves in the world or in specific contexts. These are the ways in which other people situate us, or do not situate us, in the world. We see this discussion happening in a number of academic conversations challenging the ways in which we view reading, writing, and epistemology. A couple of examples that I will discuss in the following subsection are indigenous and erotic ways of knowing.

Alternatives Already Here

The notion of alternative rhetorics provides a framework for continuing to investigate unorthodox paths for our students in the first-year writing classroom. Comparing their positioning to David L. Wallace’s *Compelled to Write* and Laura Gray-Rosendale and Sibylle Gruber’s *Alternative Rhetorics*, Hsu states that “alternative does not signal any inherent quality of a text. Rather, it describes discursive practices that decenter normative worldviews [...] [alternative rhetorics are] a tireless process—vigilant in recognizing and responding to the appropriative tendencies of dominant narratives,” they are also “inherently personal” because

⁵⁰ “The Fall” that Haraway references here is the Fall of Adam and Eve (very Western). She describes it as “the imagination of a once-upon-a-time wholeness before language, before writing, before, Man” (54).

they utilize “personal experiences” (144). In terms of identity, we are also thinking about it here as the world our students live in and how technologies (both writing and computer) influence that. While, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues against “narrative sickness,” he does so in the service of diminishing dominating narratives to promoting dialogue. That dialogue, as a discursive practice, is something that carries with it the possibility to lead us out of “tendencies of dominant narratives.” If we were to frame the classroom in such a way, a way that questions knowledge claims about the world, a way that decidedly accepts and revels in the anxiety and competition “polluting” literacy then we can begin to envision cyborg writing.

One way of thinking about how we know and interact with the world and its literacy is discussed by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Her chapter from *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*, entitled “*Mishkos Kenomagwen*, the Lessons of Grass: Restoring Reciprocity with the Good Green Earth,” accomplishes a number of boundary pushing ambitions. In terms of a resistant writing, it takes grass itself as a text. Focusing on sensory elements, a conversation occurs with one of Kimmerer’s students, by the name of Laurie, about sweetgrass. After advising the student that they “have to get to know it,” Kimmerer goes on to illustrate that, “it was love at first sniff. It did not take her [Laurie] long to recognize Sweetgrass after that. It was as if the plant wanted her to find it” (158). In this simple interaction a knowing occurs that requires a literacy already innate in Laurie, a way of “listening and translating the knowledge of other beings” (158). But more to the point of cyborg writing, there is only one reference cited for the eleven-page chapter: “*Wiingaashk*, Buffalo, Lena, the Ancestors” (166). What Kimmerer cites is not peer-reviewed, nor physically documented in any way that Westerners would typically consider academic, yet because her article is peer-reviewed the citation mark can mark the world that had previously marked her, and her way of being, as *other*. Again, we encounter a marginalized way of reading

the world and interacting with it that has been pushed to the backburner in favor of the phallogocentrism the cyborg hopes to struggle against and, I want to believe, can resist. Further, while Kimmerer organizes the article as a typical science paper with sections such as “Literature Review,” “Methods,” and “Results,” what really happens, since this is a published piece for the academy, is “seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.” “Them” here refers to indigenous rhetorics, literacy, and ways of knowing. The returned marking is that of the citation, the sensory experiences, the acknowledgement of knowledge already possessed yet ignored and belittled.

Another inroad to discovering different ways of knowing and being in the world, can be found in Lore/tta LeMaster’s⁵¹ Introduction to the special topics issue of *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*. In “Felt Sex: Erotic Affects and a Case for Critical Erotic/A,” she follows Audre Lorde’s claim that “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (59). LeMaster asserts that “the erotic” can provide a structure for “actualizing sustained transformation” if we focus on both “what is” and “what can be” in terms of sexual experience or desire (108). A “sustained transformation” in the context of cyborg writing is essential for continual change. The issue contains articles describing queer and trans experiences from which heteronormativity departs in the sexual acts and desires of the contributors. The point is to “(un)learn and (re)signify the discursive materialization of identity and embodiment” (109). In doing so, new theories are invoked, and the pathways by which we ascertain them transform. Binaries (male/female, good/bad, right/wrong, etc...) distort and disappear for a new world in which acts like fisting (Gamboa) or even soccer teams like

⁵¹ Lore/tta LeMaster has previously published under the name “Benny LeMaster.”

Man(chester) U (Huff) become texts that allow for “releasing the play of writing” and rejection of the purity that the Fall longs for. In this case, heteronormative sex acts that have marked these authors as other are seized in the form of an academic journal that wishes to push the boundaries of how we can come to know and learn differently.

These two examples, in their own ways, outright challenge meanings of writing, particularly in the Western academic sense. In many ways, both could be considered disidentafactory practices. Jose Muñoz explains that disidentifications “is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning,” and employ “strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse of power” (31, 19). Are these things students may be explicitly looking for? Perhaps not. However, remember that the idea here is to create a space, to open a space, an opportunity, in which students can write without a literacy sponsorship that encases literacy as a means to competition. In terms of disadvantages, students may feel as though they are not getting prepared for future courses, and educators (as sponsors of literacy) may feel they are shortchanging their students in terms of that preparedness for future courses or careers. Some students may also feel frustrated as it can be unclear as to “what the professor wants.” Some instructors, such as Deborah Cohan, may even claim a lack of “rigor,” as she argues for maintaining such in “Upholding Rigor in Pandemic U.” But, as William Duffy points out, in a direct response to her, there is no clear definition for “rigor” outside of possibly meaning “firm” (n.p.). These fears hold water, as I have argued that larger sponsors of literacy entrench literacy in neoliberal competition, and thus assist in creating a world in which success through competition promises financial stability with possibilities of financial advancement. But remember, the idea here is to present an alternative, offer something else. The first-year writing class will not be students’ last writing class. Or, at the very least their last time writing or thinking through writing. It is also

worth noting that students can take this experience and information and move forward with it however they want, as with any other class they take.

Conclusion

There are a number of ways one could conceive of “cyborg writing”; however, the cyborg writing I advocate for can bypass or challenge overarching ideologies associating literacy with competition. I have taken my parameters from Donna Haraway’s iteration of the Cyborg. In the *Cyborg Manifesto* she argues that it must be acknowledged as a “polluted category” (4-5); it “appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed” (11); and “is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other” (54-55). Further, in analyzing Haraway’s writings, Holliday-Carre adds specifically that cyborg writing would be an active, ongoing project that “radically undercuts productive writing and reading practices” (309-310). As such, whatever I could describe or suggest could not depict a clear path to, nor description of, the cyborg writing I argue for, but is that not the point? Given my own limitations, I can suggest some steps to take in terms of edging towards a cyborg writing that embodies aspects that previous approaches have worked towards in the hopes of removing writing itself from a neoliberal, competitive context.

1. Discuss who is the Other from and for whom:

Other what?

2. Misdiagnose *good* writing, *bad* writing, *good* writers, and *bad* writers:

How sick can we be before we call out of work or decide to no-show at all? Sick of what?

3. “Produce”:

Carrots, broccoli, oranges, cucumbers, bananas, apples, etc...

4. Reflect on how a/n _____ would write:

In “Some Reflections on the Ego,” Lacan says this about the mirror stage: “In the first place, it has historical value as it marks a decisive turning-point in the mental development of the child. In the second place, it typifies an essential libidinal relationship with the body-image. For these two reasons the phenomenon demonstrates clearly the passing of the individual to a stage where the earliest formation of the ego can be observed” (14)

5. Take account of the wholestory:

If we’re lucky, the big difference between today and tomorrow is who gets to tell the story of yesterday.

We frequently use technology, and we are aware of that. But how much do we discuss how frequently technology uses us? Given Rue Bennett’s experience, I would go as far to say rarely, if not never. Like ideology, it appears natural, extensions of our hands and even our thoughts. Maybe that could be considered good technology...maybe. But the more we separate ourselves from technology, the more it can use us. And when we discuss sponsors of literacy and miss out on recognizing the literacies we use every day, we invite that using. In recognizing this point, the question is not “What has technology made of us?,” but rather it becomes “What can we become with technology?”

Final Interchapter

November 2021

I wanted the final interchapter to be about my time in this Ph.D. program and the memories from the last three or four years. It’s been rough, to say the least. There’s a laundry list of things that finally sent me back to therapy: finding out how my biological father died during

my comprehensive exams (he overdosed a month before my 18th birthday); violent threats from a colleague; assault by a colleague; being thrown into a leadership role without my permission while also publicly being called a “career politician” by some guy I’d never even met before; the COVID-19 Pandemic; three of my best friends losing their fathers—I couldn’t be there. I’ve also moved six times in the last four years. All of this, of course, while being in a Ph.D. program. Therapy didn’t last long because when I was doing everything I possibly could to stop being depressed and anxious (eating healthy, working out, writing in my journal, coloring, taking time for myself, setting boundaries, meditating, etc...) the therapist said that I’m “just going through a phase.” All I could think was that I was/am really fucked up. Why can’t I get over it? Why can’t I sleep without 8 milligrams of melatonin or an Advil PM? Why do I stumble through writing when it used to be the antidote to all the instability? Even now as I look at this blinking cursor its rhythm seems to give me motion sickness, but it’s also this nagging demand to spill my guts, rearrange some other scholar’s spilled guts to fit my argument or my narrative or my so-called reasoning, and mix those guts with some other scholars’ guts to fit this genre and find out what we’ve been eating and if it’s good for us or not. Word vomit, but with reasoning, so it’s okay, right? Fucking writing.

Only now it occurs to me that what I’m doing in these interchapters is remembering, or re-remembering. I’d originally wanted this dissertation to be some kind of autoethnography, but with time constraints the project felt too big. So, I happily settled with these snippets, trying to piece together how I got here, what or who I am, what of me is left after all these experiences and how it’s even some idea of me writing this. I’m in this dissertation—my time, energy, effort, thoughts—even without these interchapters. So why is writing them so important to me? Someone recently sent me Karen Barad’s chapter from *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*,

called “**No Small Matter** Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetime-mattering.” I’m still not completely sure what “spacetime-mattering” is, but this line sticks to my ribs: “Re-mem-bering, then, is not merely subjective, a fleeting flash of a past event in the inner workings of an individual human brain; rather, it is a constitutive part of the field of spacetime-mattering” (G113). I tell a friend about it who’s also writing a dissertation. She says that “Literary patricide is a valid form of Black rage. It’s nonviolent but vital to world making beyond patriarchy and racism” (Scott). And I say something about Foucault’s biopolitics, and she sends me a link to Sun Ra’s “Nuclear War.” I send her the Barad chapter. Right now, neither of us know what “spacetime-mattering” is, but it’s fun to sit with. It’s comforting to know our fingers are on each other’s pulses. There are heartbeats. We can follow the veiny trail of the pulses to the guts. And then I come back to this blinking cursor, and I spill my guts.

I stopped working on the last chapter so I could wring out this interchapter. It just felt necessary. Word vomit. I had so many guts that if I didn’t spill them, they’d spill themselves and it’s not always appropriate to spill your guts, nor to take someone else’s guts and spill them. Please place your guts in an orderly fashion, so I’ll need to revise it. I’ll do my best to re-member what happened and what I was thinking. The click and clack on this antique Mac is a re-mem-bering. All these researchers and academics I quote, I’m just re-mem-bering their words—rearranging our guts together.

April 2015

My friend who looks like a sexy gay Jesus with facial piercings is a travel agent at American Express (“They have to pay \$10,000 a year just to hold the card”). Free trip to the Breakers in West Palm Beach. We just had to get there. \$2,000/night—basic room; \$200/person (even for kids)—breakfast buffet. Beach, gym, pools, boutique, spa. Free cookies in the

penthouse. The elevator doors close on us frequently, rolling backpacks careen over our feet.

Reading *Great Expectations* for some (grad) class.

Elementary/Middle/ High School

Porch sitting and reading. It's cold, but somehow, it's hot. Smells of burning beer bottles.

Everyone in this neighborhood knows all the bad things going on, but "It's in God's hands." So,

I hold a book. Probably *The Bell Jar*, which I really won't understand for another ten years.

Where would I be without a book? Regardless, entangled.

Conclusion

We believe that the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy... Literacy itself can be understood only in its social and political context, and that context, once the mythology has been stripped away, can be seen as one of entrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it.

- Elspeth Stuckey
The Violence of Literacy

It was seven years ago now that I read Donna LeCourt's *Identity Matters* and began asking myself what it means to "teach" writing, to "teach" literacy. As Stuckey puts it, "the heart of education is literacy," and with so much weight on it, pumping blood to the furthest reaches of our national, and even global, body we cannot ignore the impetus for that pulse (vi). Although Stuckey wrote these words in 1991, over thirty years ago now, literacy remains a key factor in the quality of life for people in the United States and continues to determine how we value others and view ourselves. Historically, it has been common practice to ban and/or burn books. The Nazis are probably the most famous for burning books, but as recently as 2019 a number of Georgia Southern University students burned copies of Jennine Capó Crucet's *Make Your Home Among Strangers* for suggesting that white privilege is inherent in being white (*CNN*). Just this year, in 2022, a Tennessee school board banned the graphic novel *Maus* "due to concerns about profanity and an image of female nudity⁵² in its depiction of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust" (*CNBC*). The American South forbid the people they enslaved to learn to read and write for fear that they would "threaten the social order" (Cornelius 171). The control over literacy, *what* we write and read, *if* we can write and read and *how* we learn to write and read, stands as a testament to its power. Scholars like Stuckey, Brandt, and LeCourt have worked to make clear the implications of accepting literacy at face value, and yet we continue to consider

⁵² To be clear, all of the characters in *Maus* are anthropomorphic mice.

literacy, particularly in terms of the literacy myth, as a catchall for all of society's issues. Literacy as a solution to a multitude of problems is possible and undoubtedly encouraged; however, taking literacy at face value without considering sponsors of literacy may limit conceptions of literacy to connotative definitions that perpetuate exclusionary and competitive literacy practices. Depending on how a sponsor of literacy presents the literacy they intend to preserve or propagate, their concept may also degrade alternative forms of literacy which may offer opportunities for others to succeed.

In Chapter 1, I discussed how the United States federal government frames literacy as a weapon for us to compete with our global neighbors in the name of global economic control. Chapter 2 explained that for one person to better their life, others have to fail by facing rejection, via postsecondary institutions. It further elucidates on how that attitude has affected literacy in terms of competition. Chapter 3 illustrated how efforts and labor towards defining and disseminating literacy, no matter the intentions, can be subsumed by sponsors that have already staked their claim in support of that competition. Chapter 4 worked to consider a way to think about literacy that sidesteps neoliberal notions that promote competition. Overall, these chapters form together to complicate literacy by way of who sponsors it and to what ends. Not all sponsors of literacy are "bad" and not all are "good," rather the point of this dissertation is to illustrate how something as connotatively beneficial as literacy can be can also be detrimental. Literacy always takes the salty with the sweet.

Implications

This project has taken Brandt's concept of sponsors of literacy as a way to understand how literacy is promoted and enacted within the limited scope of the United States. While scholars

have explored many genres, such as cookbooks (Mastrangelo), literacy narratives (Lawrence and Brandt), and family (Stacey), as sponsoring literacy in some way, this dissertation wanted to confront what is often overlooked in terms of the literacy sponsorship encountered on a daily basis. Or even an ideology that presents itself as having no ideology and as not backed by any sponsors. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire claims, “I, as a teacher, ought to be aware of the power of ideological discourse” (117). Public conversations around literacy imply that all literacy is “good” and therefore does not have ideological underpinnings that guide trajectories for nations, educational programs, and individuals that can generate potentially damaging results. Thus, my project’s constellations result in a number of implications.

The larger implications for my dissertation call attention to how the United States defines “learning” and “education.” If education acts as a straight line to follow, then achieving one’s education is to say that a line has been followed. If the more powerful sponsors of literacy limit that line with economic values, then understandings and purposes of “literacy” will generally be taken as economic. This viewpoint becomes reflected in smaller sponsors of literacy, such as postsecondary institutions, which individuals attend to gain knowledge. This connection means that individuals pay, with time, money, and effort, for direction towards an outlook on literacy that continues to shore up market-centered, neoliberal ideologies around literacy. This ideology promotes competition as opposed to cooperation or community when considering the values and uses of literacy. And, in a number of ways, between economics and education, this outlook creates a society defined by that competition. School, what Louis Althusser would call an ideological state apparatus working as part of the superstructure, takes its place in the product-oriented process in which the product is a literacy that is one of “the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the 20th century: a lubricant for consumer desire; a means for

integrating corporate markets; a foundation of the deployment of weapons and other technology; a raw material in the mass production of information” (Brandt 166). To be clear, my assertion primarily considers the sponsors of literacy that wield sizeable power and have the most to gain from competition, both globally and nationally. And because these sponsors exercise that power, the average individual is affected day in and day out.

The sponsors of literacy who do not carry with them as much power as the United States federal government or postsecondary institutions hold possibilities for alternative ways of envisioning and enacting literacy—we just need to recognize them. In this project I chose to focus on writing programs and writing spaces in postsecondary institutions. Can making moves at this level change an entire ideology? No. Or, at least, probably not. But “day in and day out” can maybe look and feel different if exists outside of a productivity that predominantly serves to put people at odds with each other, even if only for a time. Literacy can be a way to read the world and a way to read ourselves in it as agents of change. To look through the lens of sponsors of literacy in expanded ways illustrates the power different levels hold and exercise; however, it also underscores that there are different levels of literacy sponsorship. There is power there. There is knowing there. There is hope there. If nothing else, I hope that my dissertation has provided food for that thought.

Future Research

Literacy’s Levels: An Analysis of Neoliberal Literacy Sponsorship in the U.S is clearly limited in that I only reviewed a few sponsors of literacy in connection to neoliberal economics in the United States. Of course, there are global implications in terms of economic competition through literacy (if this project would have gone the opposite direction from Chapter 1’s discussion, which would be towards national sponsors of literacy); however, a broader look at

how literacy operates in international communications and interactions in relation to the development, non-development, or exploitation of other countries may provide insight into the ways in which literacy is sponsored, including enabling and withholding as Brandt outlines. This insight could possibly provide alternative ways of moving forward cooperatively instead of competitively. A more limited scope on sponsors of literacy in other countries may also provide some awareness for how literacy from particular sponsors has influenced different societies or regions as well.

Overall, while “sponsors of literacy” inherently implies a capitalistic economic function in supporting or suppressing certain types of literacies, the heuristic will most certainly supply choices for how we can move forward and begin to think of sponsorship in relation to literacy in a more mutually beneficial light—one that, in my wildest dreams, may incite thoughts and actions towards an economy in which we work together instead of against each other. A future where everyone is invited to the table.

Dessert

Lives are defined by language if language is a tool of oppression, the society that fixes the worth of speakers fixes the work of their worlds also.

- Elspeth Stuckey
The Violence of Literacy

In the 1960s my mother’s mother immigrated to the United States without knowing a lick of English. I am currently working on a Ph.D. in English. My mother, the generation between, forgot how to speak Maltese and no longer understands it when she hears it. Neither my biological father nor stepfather made it through high school, and I am fairly certain my younger brother also dropped out. Of course, there are always complications like money, circumstance,

mental health issues, etc..., but there is also a guilt that becomes shame, or vice-versa, when reading or writing is difficult. That same shame or guilt finds its way into social situations. It is the shame of feeling shut out and the guilt of not bettering yourself or knowing how to better yourself. These feelings, in turn, make wanting to learn to read or write or be in a new space difficult. Things fall apart. We forget some languages and learn new ones. We leave one institution of learning and find something else to do where we learn something anyway. Things change.

In terms of making changes within the context of postsecondary institutions, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney outline what it means to them to “study.” In their interview with Stephen Shukaitis, Moten explains:

we are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people [...] a sociality. It is talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice [...] The point of calling it ‘study’ is to mark the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities as already present [...] To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice (110).

So, in some ways we are already there, always studying, we are always practicing study and, by extension, literacy. The key is to acknowledge these moves, to get to moving with each other, and it is more than our bodies that move. Ideas move.

To put it another way, in the Introduction to *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam says, “if there is *study rather than knowledge production* [...] then we must all find our way to it.” (12 [emphasis added]). And if we find our way together, to “plan something together,” to study instead of produce knowledge, then we have already found a way out of the competition (Moten and Harney 68). This shift towards recognizing that we are doing together so that we can think together means that we can sponsor literacy *for* each other and, most importantly, *with* each

other. So, if and when things fall apart, we refuse race to pick up the pieces and run away from each other or up against each other. Then things can change. I am here and you are here, and something is moving and maybe it could be us and our ideas. And maybe we could save room or create room for dessert and coffee and music and talk. And maybe we will get so full and sleep so well that it is only in our waking hours that we dream. What is a waking dream but our imagination at work, planning? What is imagination but the good parts of things above and beyond as they are?

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Vita

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