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Miya G. Abbot
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Miya G. Abbot entitled "Dismantling the Master's Schoolhouse: The Rhetoric of Education in African American Autobiography and Fiction." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of , with a major in English.

Miriam Thaggert, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary Jo Reiff, Janet Atwill

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Mary Jo Reiff

Janet Atwill

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew

Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Dismantling the Master's Schoolhouse:
The Rhetoric of Education in African American Autobiography and Fiction

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Miya G. Abbott
August 2006

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Edward K. Washington, Sandra Jackson, Darryl Brown, Brittany Marshall and Tyrell Henderson of Baton Rouge, LA, who are, at the time of its writing, finishing third grade in East Baton Rouge Parish.

Acknowledgments

I owe much gratitude to Dr. Miriam Thaggert who is patient and careful as a reader, and reliable and insightful as an advisor. Thank you for the time you've given this work and for being an ideal professional and scholarly role model. To Dr. Janet Atwill, thanks for guiding me (and everyone I know you to have taught) to the recognition that interests, skills, and values are all interconnected and that to be fulfilled, both personally and professionally, we should be inclined to find ways to package them all together. And Dr. Mary Jo Reiff: a million thanks for your professionalism and willingness to join me in this project on what many would consider short notice. Finally, to Dr. Kirsten Benson, I'd like to say that my life apart from this project owes much of its cohesion to you for your mentor- and friendship these past two years.

Abstract

This thesis examines rhetorical understandings of education for African Americans in literature of three important time periods of American history. From the post-Reconstruction South, to Northern cities in the 1950s, and finally to 1990s Los Angeles, this is an examination of how African American authors of fiction and autobiography have presented the relationship between literacy acquisition and identity. Underlying the historical and rhetorical examination is the argument that, for African American students, the virtue of the educational space is dubious. It is at once the gateway to the “American dream” of prosperity, and the venue for the reinforcement of systemic racial prejudice and oppression. This thesis interrogates the cultural belief that literacy is the key to freedom by illustrating ways in which authors complicate the definitions of both literacy and freedom.

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Introduction

Even before literacy was institutionalized in America, it was an agent of divisiveness and a means of perpetuating a racist power structure. Nineteenth century ideals of literacy associated it with social practices that upheld white supremacy and the disenfranchisement of African Americans. Literacy was in a category with ownership of property, the markings of citizenship that were withheld from black Americans. The historical development of educational policy has done little to make American education racially equitable. Institutionalized American classrooms are a contentious space in American history and American present, where issues of race, gender and class are both cultivated and ignored. For African American students, the virtue of the educational space is dubious. It is at once the gateway to the “American dream” of prosperity and the venue for the reinforcement of systemic racial prejudice and oppression. For African American students in the 21st century, the experience of public education is accompanied by more than a century of conflicting rhetoric that manifests in literature from the earliest slave narratives to modernist and contemporary texts.

Robert Stepto, in *From Behind the Veil*, premises his exploration of African American narrative on the fact that “The primary pregeneric myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy” (viii). This thesis examines how that pregeneric myth has been framed within the work of African American orators and authors in three important time periods. The first period, surrounding emancipation and reconstruction, is represented by texts from Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. The second period, surrounding the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, is represented by texts from Richard Wright, Ann Petry, Nella Larsen, Ralph

Ellison, Edward P. Jones, Leona Nicholas Welch, and Malcolm X. The final period, surrounding the turn of the 21st century, is represented by texts from Paul Beatty and Sapphire.

As foundational texts of the African American canon, slave narratives have been analyzed from nearly every literary angle imaginable. Taken for granted within these critical approaches has been the concept that education leads to freedom and the promise of a better life. This idea is so prevalent in the interpretation of early African American literature that it is not only a trope within the literary realm, but also within American popular culture. Before emancipation, the acquisition of literacy was a life-threatening risk taken by some. During Reconstruction and at the turn of the 20th century, education became a promise to all African Americans that remains unfulfilled, even 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* reinforced that post-bellum promise and constitutional right.

This thesis asserts that Frederick Douglass's argument about the importance of education to the African American, based on an examination of the text that he credits as paradigmatic in his education, was obscured by both the rhetoric of white liberals and African American orators who followed him, particularly Booker T. Washington. One primary importance of Douglass's autobiographies is that they (like Harriet Wilson's) serve to "believe perceptions that African Americans were incapable of or disinterested in education, and they also delineate the centrality of literacy in the lives of some as well as the increasing prominence of a variety of views about literacy" (Harris 280). Washington reappropriated Douglass's philosophy in his endeavors to establish and maintain Tuskegee Institute, initiating the misguided development of rhetoric surrounding African

American education that proved useful to white racists and liberals alike, but enormously detrimental to African Americans.

I argue that W.E.B. DuBois, though his ideologies are problematic, recognized how education problems became regionalized during his time period. In a 1922 issue of *The Crisis*, his article "Education" states that,

In the North with mixed schools unless colored parents take intelligent, continuous and organized interest in the schools which their children attend, the children will be neglected, treated unjustly, discouraged and balked of their natural self-expression and ambition. Do not allow this. Supervise your children's schools. In the South unless the parents know and visit the schools and keep up continuous, intelligent agitation, the teachers will be sycophants, the studies designed to make servant girls, and the funds stolen by the white trustees. (Zuckerman 199)

Because the social manifestations of the development of education for African Americans can be thusly regionalized, this thesis is also regionalized to an extent. The first chapter is concerned primarily with texts set in the South. Chapter two moves from the South to schools in northern cities. And chapter three travels across the country from Harlem to Los Angeles.

In this survey of literature from the mid-to-late 19th century into the 21st, I will identify a pattern of oppression and elusive rhetoric that has turned Douglass's educational promise into Paul Beatty's suicide note from the roof of Boston College. In "Reading Education and Poverty: Questioning the Reading Success Equation," J. Edmondson and P. Shannon illustrate how current debates in education resemble

Aristotelian debates of virtue, regardless of political leaning, and just as inadequately address issues of race, class and gender as did the orators and philosophers of the 4th century BCE. Their view of education also gestures toward an explanation of why education for African Americans around the turn of the 21st century is once again becoming deinstitutionalized:

the rationales for schooling and reading education are tied directly to the availability of good jobs. Reading education and schooling lose all functional value for the society and poor if a surplus of well-paying jobs are not available in the American economy. Without those jobs, why should people learn to read? Some studies of school dropouts suggests that some adolescents—particularly poor minority students—have already answered this question. (116)

Thus, the representations of education in narrative and fiction by African American authors are tied to social codes, American policy, and economics more than any fixed ideology.

While American education from the 1890s to the 1930s was largely focused on the assertion of self-hood, and in the 1940s and 50s, on training for entering the (stratified) American labor market, in the 1990s, education policy shifts to focus on the preservation of a culture in which the individual has a place (based on socioeconomic status, gender and race) to recognize and fulfill. These time periods roughly correspond to the three cultural moments defined earlier. Of course, the culture that is being preserved is dependant upon patriarchal, racialized policy. As Edmondson and Shannon argue, “Policies begin with their makers’ images of an ideal society, and they are

intended to be operational prescriptive statements to realize that ideal. Ideals are based on values, and values do not float independently from social contexts. Therefore, policies have historical and social attachments” (106).

This thesis draws from work in the realm of Critical Race Theory, a field that exists in a space between the disciplines of Rhetoric and Literature. The relationship between Critical Race Theory (CRT), education and literature is triangular. Critical Race Theory rose out of a legal trend, attributed to "leftist" legal minds, called "Critical Legal Studies" (CLS) (Ladson-Billings 11). In the legal vein, this movement sought to interpret the law based on specific cultural contexts, and called into question the liberal contention that changes in the law based on civil rights developments were influencing steady, positive social and legal progress (Ladson-Billings 11). In "Just What is Critical Race Theory?" Gloria Ladson-Billings summarizes that "CLS scholars critiqued mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of U.S. society as a meritocracy but failed to include racism in its critique. Thus, CRT became a logical outgrowth of the discontent of legal scholars of color" (12).

As Ladson-Billings articulates, the connection between law and education in the United States is easy to establish. The relationship between CRT and education is more contentious. Critical Race Theory is largely concerned with examining the rhetoric of liberal discourse, therefore when applied to education, CRT addresses concerns about the discourse of equal opportunity. A critique of the argument for equal opportunity education could be seen as counterproductive for proponents of improvement in minority education in America, if the term "equal" is seen only in the context of availability. As

Ladson-Billings points out, "equal" also implies "sameness," which is where CRT finds a place within equal opportunity discourse.

Ladson-Billings cites Ellen Swartz¹, whose explanation of the "master script" is widely applicable to educational procedures, as well as being a parallel to many critical approaches to early African American autobiography:

Master scripting silences multiple voices and perspectives, primarily legitimizing dominant, white, upper-class, male voicings as the 'standard' knowledge students need to know. All other accounts and perspectives are omitted from the master script unless they can be disempowered through misrepresentation. Thus, content that does not reflect the dominant voice must be brought under control, *mastered*, and then reshaped before it can become a part of the master script. (21)

Swartz's concise definition of master scripting does not differentiate the intentions and values of the liberal faction of the defining majority from the rest of its population. This is significant because white liberal proponents of equal opportunity education most certainly self-identify as politically different from opponents to equal opportunity education. In the interest of equality, however, they do little to distinguish differences between themselves and the minority populations with whom they are concerned, and this is problematic because, regardless of intention, in practice it creates educational spaces that are effectively imperialist. This practice still serves the interests of the majority population, but is safe from criticism under the blanket of liberalism.

¹ Swartz's research in the field of education focuses on teacher training, inter-cultural education, and the intersection of Critical Race Theory and educational bureaucracy. The text cited by Ladson-Billings is foundational in her body of work, and influential as a commentary on the educational structure, as well as serving as an interdisciplinary theoretical link.

Based on these connections, Critical Race Theory is appropriate for an examination of the development of the rhetoric surrounding education for African Americans because the role of creating and evolving that rhetoric has largely been attributed to two groups: African Americans themselves and white liberals. The fundamental role of slave narratives in the development of both African American literature and the movement for equal opportunity education (problematic as it is), creates a space where literature, education, and the theory surrounding both cultural institutions meet.

For this research, Critical Race Theory is being applied retrospectively to foundational texts of the African American canon. Texts from the modernist and civil rights movement periods are considered as originating from the historical period concurrent with the development of Critical Race Theory. Contemporary texts can largely be argued as work produced within the field of Critical Race Theory. The structure of the thesis reflects both these historical and literary periods, and two essential characteristics of African American education: the myth that education directly results in the idealized American notion of "freedom," and the power structure of the inter-racial classroom.

Chapter One: The Conflicting Rhetorics of Frederick Douglass,
Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois

“I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one.” -*Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*

Houston Baker calls Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* “one of the finest black American slave narratives, [that] serves to illustrate the black autobiographer’s quest for being” (*The Journey Back* 32). The critical response to the *Narrative* proves that it reveals understandings of identity essential for Americans both white and black, and that it is Douglass’s quest for literacy that is the crucial paradigmatic event in this revered man’s life.

In “‘While I am Writing’: Webster’s 1825 *Spelling Book*, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass’s Positioning of Language,” Daneen Wardrop argues that it is Webster’s 1825 *Spelling Book* that primarily influences Douglass’s literacy. She claims that his book is “the standard with which and against which Douglass educates himself” (650), but Douglass himself prioritized another rhetoric text in his autobiographies. She annotates the rules of comportment in the text which would have been troubling to Douglass, pointing out that what the text dictates—“mind your book; love your school, and strive to learn”—is exactly what the young Douglass has been forbidden from doing. She demonstrates the irony between the book’s instructions to “Tell no tales; call no ill names; you must not lie, nor swear, nor cheat, nor steal” and the behavior that Douglass observed in his white masters (650).

Next Wardrop examines Douglass’s experience in attempting to determine the meaning of the word “abolition” which was spoken around him frequently in this period

of his life. He was, as Wardrop emphasizes, around 12 years old, and presumed to be completely illiterate, so the use of the potentially inciting word in his presence was not considered dangerous. Wardrop spends a considerable amount of time examining the significance of his quest to decode the term “abolition,” blending that quandary with his acquisition of individual letter sounds. She argues that in this particular situation, “Douglass stands in a position to deconstruct doubly the oppressive language system” (652), both linguistically by learning and culturally by writing his autobiography.

While her Lacanian approach to Douglass’s acquisition of language, and its role in showing the stakes for him and other literate slaves “enter[ing] a preexisting system of signifiers” is useful theoretically, it avoids dealing with some of the most historically important aspects of Douglass’s arrival at literacy. Wardrop, in an effort to prioritize Webster’s *Spelling Book* for its usefulness in the Lacanian context, completely avoids the text which Douglass himself identifies as paradigmatic in his self-education.

Not only does Wardrop not mention *The Columbian Orator* in her article, the chronology that she follows is misleading. In *Narrative*, Douglass first discusses *The Columbian Orator*, then discusses the definition of “abolition”, and *then* mentions Webster’s *Spelling Book* as the text which he used to learn to write letters, presumably in pursuance of his goal to eventually write his own free papers. In *Narrative*, he writes: “I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster’s Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book...I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write” (35). While Wardrop’s argument that the process of learning to write propelled Douglass into the world of signifiers which

largely belonged to the dominant culture is accurate, her presentation of it is incomplete because for Douglass, the act of writing was imbued with value only after his exposure to the readings within *The Columbian Orator*.

Though some argue that the revision of *Narrative* into *My Bondage and My Freedom* marks a decline in the relationship between Douglass's style and his rhetorical effectiveness, it is unarguable that the more adjective-rich prose of *My Bondage* provides more context for Douglass's emotional awareness of the events of his life. Though James Matlack asserts that *My Bondage and My Freedom* is "padded with anecdotes and verbiage which clog the narrative flow," without the padding, Wardrop's equivocation of Webster's speller and Caleb Bingham's *Columbian Orator* might pass unnoticed (Matlack 24).

In *Narrative*, both Webster's *Spelling Book* and *The Columbian Orator* are treated plainly, but *The Columbian Orator* is mentioned as an ideological influence rather than merely a learning tool. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass refers to *The Columbian Orator* as "a rich treasure" which he spent his spare moments "diligently perusing" (116). Also in *My Bondage*, the discussion of *The Columbian Orator* extends from a paragraph and a half to more than two pages. The discussion of Webster's text is actually slightly diminished, mentioned as merely the most successful of "various methods of improving [Douglass's] hand" (126). A reading of *My Bondage* is important to supplement the nature of Douglass's relationships to both texts, but even dealing only with the *Narrative* shows the inadequacies of Wardrop's argument.

It is significant that the primary educational success and identification on Douglass's part was oratorical because his *Narrative*, as Matlack points out, was

“essentially the same material which he had presented countless times as a roving Abolitionist spokesman” (15). Therefore, the expansion and revision of his autobiography, to the dissatisfaction of his white patrons, was a reflection of his ownership of that oratorical skill. He determined that his writing should reflect him as a speaker, and whether critics found the revised autobiographies a “distinctly poorer literary performance” or not (Matlack 23), they were more an embodiment of Douglass’s impression of himself than the impression of the white men who depended on their paternalistic and exploitative relationship with him.

Prioritizing Douglass’s acquisition of writing ability over his recognition of and ability in oratory is problematic because it effectively reinforces the myth that it is merely the act of becoming literate that leads to freedom. In “African-American Conceptions of Literacy: A Historical Perspective,” Violet Harris approaches literacy in a unique way: both as a component of education and as a double-edged sword that is more historically complicated than most examinations care to reveal. She defines African American literacy, which for many of the individuals she discusses was “synonymous with education and schooling,” as “more than the ability to read and write at some specified grade level, but rather as an indication of the efforts of a marginalized group that attempted to participate in all cultural institutions through the attainment of literacy” (278). It is this idea of literacy that should be applied to Douglass’s autobiographies, rather than more simplistic, limiting ideas that resemble late 18th century perceptions. Harris argues that, “The focus on literacy then [in the 18th century] was its basic acquisition and the use of literacy in the struggle for emancipation and equality” (278). A close examination of *The Columbian Orator* reveals that the text which most

fundamentally influenced Douglass's ideology of literacy was progressive in its vision of education, and not, like most colonial textbooks, merely a tool for provoking and sustaining nationalism within the entire population.

The progressive nature of *The Columbian Orator* is due to that fact that its author, Caleb Bingham, was an educational reformer well ahead of his time. In the late 18th century, he was already an advocate for the equal education of women, American Indians, and African Americans. He was a pioneer in the public school movement, and a proponent of literacy for all Americans. In 1797 he compiled and published *The Columbian Orator: Containing a Variety of Original and Selected Pieces Together with Rules, Which are Calculated to Improve Youth and Others, in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence*, a reader/elocution manual that reflected his liberal and multicultural values. Between its initial printing and the 1830s, the manual was widely circulated as the follow-up to his earlier work, *The American Preceptor*. Its most recent reprinting is the 1998 NYU Press bicentennial edition, edited by David Blight.

The title page of the 4th edition (1802) bears a chreia by Charles Rollin:

“Cato cultivated ELOQUENCE, as a necessary mean for defending the RIGHTS OF THE PEOPLE, and for enforcing good counsels.” This is a characterization of the entire text; it is an elocution manual designed to prepare students to defend the rights of man. Bingham explicitly reinforces this theme in his choice of texts, many of which were written by his associate David Everett, for inclusion in *The Columbian Orator*. One such essay, “Slaves in Barbary,” echoes the sentiment from the title page in its final line: “Let it be remembered, there is no luxury so exquisite as the exercise of humanity, and no post so honorable as his, who defends THE RIGHTS OF MAN” (Bingham 118).

In his article, “The Active Virtue of *The Columbian Orator*,” Granville Ganter points out some of the other characteristics of the text that distinguish it from early American textbooks, which are now characterized as imperialistic, racist, and limiting. He writes that, though “it has been treated as a typical educational anthology for its era, ...by encouraging generations of American students...to speak and write in a tradition of nonconformist activism, it had a power uniquely its own” (463-464). After detailing Bingham’s credentials as an experienced educator and researcher, Ganter emphasizes that the speeches that Bingham chose are different in tone and intent than those typically chosen for readers (those of Noah Webster, specifically). For example, two of the three George Washington speeches are marked as unique; one, a president accepting the French flag in opposition to popular opinion, another given by a man leaving the presidency for a new career (Ganter 469-470). Even the speeches taken from antiquity are more activist than those typically used. Ganter states that the speeches of Cato included in this anthology emphasize Cato’s “active virtue” as “simultaneously an ethical, literary, and political intervention[ist]” (468).

David Blight, the editor of the 1998 edition of *The Columbian Orator*, is a Douglass scholar and has edited new editions of several Douglass texts. His editorial additions to Bingham’s reader place the text squarely within a multicultural context, primarily as a paradigmatic part of the African American canon. As evaluated by Blight, Douglass is a forefather of the African American tradition of authorship, and *The Columbian Orator* was pivotal in Douglass’s understanding of himself as an orator and author confined as a slave.

Blight's edition of the book includes quotes from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Ossie Davis, who attest to its relationship to Douglass and the terminus of American slavery. Blight's introduction is titled, "The Peculiar Dialogue Between Caleb Bingham and Frederick Douglass," and tells the story of how Douglass acquired the book at age 12 and internalized the significance of the texts within it. He interweaves Douglass's story with the story of how Bingham came to write the book after years as a pedagogue and education reformer. The epigraphs that Blight chose for his opening essay link Douglass and Bingham also in their shared passion for literacy:

I well remember, when I was a boy, how ardently I longed for the opportunity of reading, but had no access to a library. –Caleb Bingham, 1803

Every opportunity I got I used to read this book. –Frederick Douglass, 1845 (xiii)

In accordance with Blight's assessment of how this text influenced Douglass, nearly any source that provides a biography of Douglass includes his encounter with this reader as epiphanic. As earlier noted, Douglass expresses his revelations at having read the selections from Bingham's book in both *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*².

Douglass discusses the impact of specific selections from *The Columbian Orator* in the *Narrative*. First he writes of "Dialogue Between a Master and Slave," saying, "The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master" (32). This piece documents the oration of a slave who *talks* his way out of

² In order to avoid the apparent controversy over stylistic changes between different versions of Douglass's autobiography, all subsequent excerpts here will rely on *Narrative*.

slavery. Significant in this selection is the fact that a slave was endowed with a mastery of oratory, and also the fact that the master was honest enough to honor his slave's talent by granting him freedom. The slave in this dialogue also vocalizes sentiments that echo Douglass's feelings about his most violent interaction between Douglass and Master Covey: "the sooner it [life] ends, the sooner I shall obtain that relief for which my soul pants" (Bingham, *Columbian* 211). The final sentiment of the slave, after he has orated himself into freedom, resembles the rhetoric of Douglass in popular speeches to white audiences, such as "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" in which Douglass uses the second person to create accountability on the part of the listener, and normalizes the criticism that slavery is wrong because it turns men in to brutes. In the "Dialogue Between Master and Slave" the slave says to his master, "You have reduced them [the slaves] to the state of brute beasts; and if they have not the stupidity of beasts of burden, they must have the ferocity of beasts of prey" (Bingham, *Columbian* 212).

The second *Orator* selection that Douglass cites is "Part of Mr. O'Connor's Speech in the First Irish House of Commons, in Favour of the Bill for Emancipating the Roman Catholics," (although he misidentifies the author as Sheridan). Douglass writes, "The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery" (*Narrative* 33). His recognition of that fact supports Heather Williams's claim in *Self-Taught* that, "In childhood Douglass may have believed that the mere ability to read would be a magical elixir that would lead to freedom, but in actuality it was the content of the reading material that transformed his life" (25). This assertion is important, because it is a concrete example of how Violet

Harris's characterization of literacy as full participation in American cultural institutions is useful, as well as moving beyond the simplicity of Wardrop and Matlack's arguments.

Other selections in the 1998 anthology help put it in the multicultural category as well, as Blight emphasizes. The "Dialogue Between a White Inhabitant of the United States and an Indian" resembles a Socratic dialectic in which it is the American Indian, not the white settler, who comes across with more moral and rhetorical force. He says to the white man:

When your fathers came over the big water, we treated them as brothers: they had nothing: peace and plenty were among us. All the land was ours, from the east to the west water; from the mountains of snow in the north, to the burning path of the sun in the south. They were made welcome to our land and to all we possessed. To talk like white men, they were beggars, and we their benefactors: they were tenants at will, and we their landlords. But we nourished a viper in our bosoms. You have poisoned us by your luxury; spread contention among us by your subtlety, and death by your treachery. (238)

This dialogue portrays the Indian in a manner uncommon to this time period; in his debate with the white man, he is shown as clearly more just and generous of spirit. His customs are not presented as savage, but reasonable and based upon tradition.

The "Extract from a Discourse Delivered Before the New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, April 12, 1797" provided for Douglass a foundational use of religious rhetoric that did *not* abuse the doctrines of Christianity,

which contrasted with the distortion of religion that he later found in the rhetoric of his masters and anti-abolition opponents. The speaker, Reverend Samuel Miller, emphasizes that American slaveholders are men “who wear the garb of justice and humanity; who boast the principles of sublime morality; and who hypocritically adopt the accents of the benevolent religion of Jesus...” (Bingham 1998 257). Many of Douglass’s orations as an abolitionist reflect this sentiment, and attack those who use religious rhetoric to defend slavery. In his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Douglass states, “...the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters...and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off on the world for Christianity” (Blight *Narrative* 164). Thus, as these excerpts illustrate, within the pages of *The Columbian Orator* Douglass could have found every defense of abolition, and every weapon against slavery that he ever used as an orator.

Douglass also recognized the limits set for him by the white abolitionists with whom he worked closely during the beginning of his oratorical career. The act of writing *Narrative* was indeed an act of literacy that was also “a symbolic gesture of near-defiance, an assertion of independence from a certain kind of psychological and role-playing bondage perpetuated by those whites who were most insistently proclaiming the freedom of Negro Americans” (Matlack 17). The starting of a newspaper, another act of defiance through assertion of literacy, effectively caused his split with his patron William Lloyd Garrison. His reasons for preferring *Narrative* over Douglass’s other autobiographies aside, Matlack rightly asserts that,

Autobiography, especially in America, usually describes the making of a man. Douglass's *Narrative* tells such a story in an unusually profound and literal way. The central movement of the book is a process of liberation. There are two essential components in this process—literacy, to gain awareness of his self-hood; and resistance, to assert his manhood.

(21)

Clearly, Douglass's autobiographies are complicated enough to lend themselves to various interpretations of the function of literacy in his life, as well as what literacy meant. Douglass, however, serves even today as a primary example of the fact that, for marginalized groups like African Americans in the United States, literacy must mean reading, writing, and elocution, as well as cultural literacy, and that all these things combined make up an education.

Just as Douglass's complex understanding of literacy is largely misunderstood by critics of his writing, descendants of his oratorical tradition seem to have misinterpreted his understanding of education and literacy. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois are perhaps the most readily recognized African American orators to engage with issues of education for Black Americans around the turn of the 20th century. In their seminal texts—Washington's *Up From Slavery* and DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk*—both take controversial positions on education that are not so clearly linked to Douglass as they may seem. Though the two orators and intellectuals are identified as oppositional to each other in their rhetorics, their dissonance with Douglass is relevant as well.

Said to be the last major slave narrative, *Up From Slavery* resembles Douglass's *Narrative* in structure and chronology. Like Douglass, Washington goes through the

historical fact and moment of his birth, then spends a significant amount of time postulating on the process and value of his own acquisition of literacy. He writes, “From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read” (16), an articulation which parallels Douglass's sentiments following his coming to understand what literacy meant. Washington also seems to have a similar social introduction to literacy—being exposed to it as both exclusive and elusive. He writes about his encounters with formal schooling:

I had no schooling whatever while I was a slave, though I remember on several occasions I went as far as the schoolhouse door with one of my young mistresses to carry her books. The picture of several dozen boys and girls in a schoolroom engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise. (4)

Washington did not have to acquire literacy as surreptitiously as Douglass did. Though Washington's attendance in school was by no means facile, he was allowed to attend formal schooling after being introduced to the dream of literacy.

Washington's educational values, however, set him apart from Douglass. Washington subscribed to the use of religious rhetoric in a way that Douglass was opposed to. While Douglass could see through the use of religion to its destructive capabilities as both a pacifier of slaves and a justification of slavery, Washington embraced it as a use for literacy. Washington provides few examples of individual exigence for acquiring literacy—literacy seems to be an end, whereas Douglass clearly

believes in it as a means. Of the time when black public schools were first being opened, Washington writes:

This experience of a whole race beginning to go to school for the first time, presents one of the most interesting studies that has ever occurred in connection with the development of any race. Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education. As I have stated, it was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn...The great ambition of the older people was to try to learn to read the Bible before they died. (*Up From Slavery* 18)

And later in his career, as an explanation of his intentions, he states that,

[his] theory of education for the Negro would not, for example, confine him for a time to farm life—to the production of the best and the most sweet potatoes—but that, if he succeeded in this line of industry, he could lay the foundations upon which his children and grandchildren could grow to higher and more important things in life. (119)

It is Washington's willingness to delay self-hood and to prolong the condition of suffering that differentiates his rhetoric from Douglass's most concretely. One of the most controversial aspects of his career was his functioning as an agent of white benefaction, supporting his endeavors with white endowment. He spent his entire career at Tuskegee emulating the Hampton Institute, while Douglass managed to spend only three-fifths of his career under Garrison's thumb (separating over *The North Star*).

Houston Baker writes that,

[Booker T.] Washington was an imperialist educator without peer...The significance of education for the culture of dominance, of course, is that it enforces and surveils mind and manners in the service of the ‘public good.’ Education becomes *mission civilatrice* for colonialism everywhere. Consider Indian boarding schools in the United States. Such schools were designed precisely to eradicate the ‘Indian’ in a Native American self, and self-consciousness. Indian schools changed the names, dress, hair, and minds of Native Americans forced into them by ruthless Christian zeal. (*Turning South Again* 63)

Baker's criticism of Washington here articulates a popular sentiment among those who opposed his work. The debate over Washington's intentions remains unsettled, but his position as a leader in African American history is a matter of course. He was an established success as an orator, and arguably the most recognizable African American speaker for thirty years around the turn of the 20th century. His life was committed to the cause of education for African Americans, but the controversy surrounding the reality of his effectiveness for the cause of “racial uplift” helps to undermine much of what he claims in *Up From Slavery*.

In *Schooling for the New Slavery*, Donald Spivey sets up the notion that Tuskegee was an extension of the Hampton Institute. As noted by Houston Baker, the civilizing mission of Hampton's white founders is clearly reflected in *Up From Slavery* when Washington writes about teaching the Native Americans who came to Hampton and consistently refers to them as savage-like. It was a mission that Washington took up

unironically, and continued within his own race—teaching that for post-reconstruction African Americans, “civilized” meant able to earn enough money to live on and working on the land, but nothing more.

Booker T. Washington's “conception of the proper course for blacks rested upon the blacks' own exploitability,” which informed his drive for getting African Americans to publicly denounce the need for social equality (Spivey 45). According to Spivey, “Blacks received an education at Hampton Institute that in every way conformed to the status quo. There was no danger, as some whites feared, that industrial schooling would make the black competitive with the skilled labor force of the South” (26). This is the same criticism that is and was leveled against Washington at Tuskegee by students, teachers, and historians, and a criticism that makes Washington complicit in the paternalistic, imperialist techniques of his main benefactor and mentor, Samuel Armstrong.

Spivey also writes that Washington's philosophy of uplift through submission drew heated criticism from many black leaders. What is not a familiar story is that in his championing of these ideas, Washington “alienated many of his Tuskegee students and faculty members and never gained the full support of the white South” (45). Spivey refers to Washington's tenure as principal of Tuskegee (1881-1915) as the period of “the second coming of pseudoscientific racism,” and does not include Washington in his group of African American intellectuals of the period who fought against the renewed fervor for using science to support the notion that whiteness was inherently superior. In fact, Spivey plainly states that “Washington frowned upon black intellectualism, or what he considered to be a tendency among blacks to seek education for its own sake” (50).

It was not merely in his administrative life that Booker T. Washington's ideals clashed with those of the man that he claimed as an important and revered predecessor. In his book *Frederick Douglass*, originally published in 1907, Washington essentially retells Douglass's *Narrative*, adding editorial commentary that repackages the *Narrative* into less provocative terms. Washington is retrospectively underwriting Douglass's autobiography, perhaps as an attempt to reappropriate Douglass into his own philosophy of separate but equal, as represented in the "Atlanta Compromise". But his approach to the *Narrative* is problematic in many of the same ways as his own autobiography is. Washington completely nullifies the desire for social equality that Douglass expresses throughout his text.

A place of particular interest is Washington's retelling of the story when Douglass is to be sent back to live with Mr. and Ms. Hugh Auld in Baltimore after being arrested for suspicion of a plot to run away. Washington refers to Thomas Auld's "good-heartedness" as "the only thing that preserved our young hero for that larger life which he was to make for himself, and help to make for so many others of his race" (50). There is, in fact, a much stronger tone of indebtedness to white benefactors (even when they are by definition slaveholders) in Washington's recapitulation than in Douglass's original work. Washington is arguably trying to use this particular scene as support for his educational philosophy when he highlights the fact that Thomas Auld sent Douglass back to Baltimore to "learn a trade, and that if he would behave himself and give him no more trouble, he would emancipate him when he became twenty-five years old" (49).

In this instance, technical education is quite blatantly being used as an alternative to freedom and as a means to pacify the slave within the condition of slavery. Stated in

the *Narrative* is the fact that Douglass was to be sold to another slave owner after the incident because of his role as instigator, but instead, “from some cause or other”, Thomas Auld sent him back to Hugh Auld's home instead (83). Washington, in *Frederick Douglass*, conveys the notion that Thomas Auld always intended to send Douglass into an industrial education (49). Washington's interpretation is not consistent with Douglass's account of his own life, but the rewriting of it makes Douglass a less willful figure, more in line with the image of African Americans that Washington strove to portray and cultivate.

In *The Journey Back*, Houston Baker provides an analysis of *Narrative* that is useful in comparing it to *Up From Slavery*. Baker points out that Douglass, in writing *Narrative*, complicates the semantics of the definition of literacy in his own life and text but becomes a third party, differentiated from the white slavemaster who assumes ownership of literacy, as well as the black slave who is perceived as “subhuman agency of labor” by that white slave master (Baker 33). The literate Douglass inserts himself into the text and therefore negates the paradigm that the white slave master attempted to sustain. Washington's methodology, however, does this neither in theory nor in practice.

In *Long Black Song*, Baker again touches on the importance of Douglass's role in defining the importance of literacy for African Americans. He writes, “Douglass devotes an entire chapter to his struggle for literacy, and, confirming Walker's theory³, that with increased knowledge came an increased desire for freedom. Education as a road to

³ Baker begins his chapter “Men and Institutions: Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery*” with a discussion of David Walker’s 1969 book *Appeal*. Baker calls the text “one of the most revolutionary books ever produced by a black American” and associates Walker’s educational ideals with Frederick Douglass (84). Walker affirms Douglass’s implicit belief that only a thoughtless slave can be contented by asserting that “for colored people to acquire learning in this country makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation” (qtd. in Baker *Long Black Song* 85).

freedom, therefore, was an established tradition among black Americans when Booker T. Washington emerged as leader in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (85-86). But Booker T. Washington's educational ideal leaves the ownership of literacy to white benefactors, essentially repeating what, in Douglass's life, was publicly a primary obstacle to education. Washington does not seek ownership of any means or ends of education, therefore his redefinition of the value of literacy (as it might be called in the most favorable interpretations of Washington's techniques) fails. Washington's definition of education and literacy does nothing to complicate the semantics of what “educated African American” means in his time period, while Douglass's does, which is a large part of what must differentiate the two orators.

DuBois, who spoke at Douglass's funeral service in 1895⁴, did not support Washington's lack of drive for social equality, and in this he was more aligned with Douglass's ideals of education. In fact, upon the occasion of Washington's death, DuBois published an editorial in *The Crisis* that stated, “...we must lay on the soul of this man, a heavy responsibility for the consummation of Negro disenfranchisement, the decline of the Negro college and public school and the firmer establishment of color caste in this land” (“Booker T. Washington” 113). In his critique of Washington, DuBois relies on many of Douglass's ideals in his rhetoric, especially those of self-assertion and self-determination contained within Douglass's abolition work. DuBois calls Douglass's philosophy “ultimate assimilation *through* self-assertion, and on no other terms” (*Souls*

⁴As Herbert Aptheker points out in “DuBois on Douglass: 1895” this was also the year of Washington's speech at the Atlanta Exposition. Aptheker's article from *The Journal of Negro History* is the first publication of DuBois' elegy for Douglass.

35). More simply, DuBois agreed with Douglass that “black boys need education as well as white boys” (*Souls* 39).

Further, were Douglass writing in the beginning of the 20th century, he would most likely agree with DuBois that “The function of the Negro college, then, is clear: it must maintain the standards of popular education, it must seek the social regeneration of the Negro, and it must help in the solution of problems of race contact and cooperation. And finally, beyond all this, it must develop men” (*Souls* 75). Douglass would concur that education should create a “sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it” because that is what it meant to him during his lifetime, and that is the primary reason he was inclined to become the orator that he did (*Souls* 76).

Despite similar recognition of the importance of education, Douglass and DuBois did differ in their approaches to providing literacy. Theoretically, DuBois and Douglass share a metaphysical belief in the importance of education to the soul of man but DuBois’s social values are marked with an elitism that does not surface in Douglass’s work. DuBois also produced some decidedly disturbing rhetoric regarding accessibility of education. Though he spent two summers teaching in a country school in Tennessee, which included elementary education, his public preoccupation is with higher education. Theoretically, some members of the Talented Tenth, DuBois's elite race men, would become elementary teachers, influencing the uplift by going from the North to the South to “[pull] all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground” (DuBois, “The Talented Tenth” 188). DuBois also seems to revere African American orators not only for what they said, but also for what they stood for in the minds of their audience, both white and black. He states, “They stood as living examples of the possibilities of the

Negro race, their own hard experiences and well-wrought culture said silently more than all the drawn periods of orators—they were the men who made American slavery impossible” (“Talented Tenth” 187)⁵. Here, DuBois emphasizes the silence of these orators, their ability to *look* worthy enough to defy the inhumanity of slavery as well as supporting metonymic representation.

DuBois’s eugenic leanings were embedded into his rhetoric of racial uplift and education. In *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Daylanne English designates eugenics as the underpinning of the racial uplift discourse of “race men” of the 20s and 30s-- “including, and perhaps especially...DuBois” (293). English also cites several decades of editorials published during DuBois’s tenure as editor of *The Crisis* which reveal his inclination toward the metaphorical position of editor of the African American genetic community. From his 1903 statement that “exceptional men” of the Talented Tenth had to “guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst” to his 1922 call for African Americans to “train and breed for brains, for efficiency, for beauty” and beyond, DuBois was publicly adamant about the need to educate the best *men* possible for the prosperity of the race (English 41, 38). DuBois, then, is so elitist in his educational priorities that his clear view of the proper goals of education is obfuscated by his classicism and sexism.

Both Washington and DuBois were essentially espousing civilizing rhetoric, neither of which required the sort of cultural literacy that Douglass believed in.

⁵Ironically, in the list of figures that precedes this bold statement, DuBois includes Sojourner Truth, not acknowledging in his rhetoric that she was not a man, but rather a woman “who made American slavery impossible.”

Washington, among other places, exhibits this tendency in his use of language in *Up From Slavery*, referring to other African Americans in the third person within the text, essentially “othering” them. It is only in speeches (made largely to white audiences) that he uses the second person. DuBois writes, “Comparing them as a class with my fellow students in New England and in Europe, I cannot hesitate in saying that nowhere have I met men and women with a broader spirit of helpfulness, with deeper devotion to their life-work, or with more consecrated determination to succeed in the face of bitter difficulties than among Negro college-bred men” (*Souls* 72). Here, DuBois has inserted himself into a class located in New England and Europe that is separate from “college-bred” African Americans. The fact that both men had visions of education that excluded and subjugated women further distorts their connection to Douglass's vision of literacy as freedom. Douglass actively included women in his ideology, uniting men and women in the quest for equality, whereas Washington and DuBois ignored women’s contributions, creating a legacy of gender conflict that further distanced them from Douglass's original assertions.

Chapter Two: The (In)Effectiveness of *Brown v. Board*
Evidenced in Literature

“Gentlemen, I finished the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan. My high school was the black ghetto in Roxbury, Massachusetts. My college was in the streets of Harlem, and my master's was taken in prison.” -*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

By the 1930s, W.E.B. DuBois's frustration about education for African Americans became evident within fiction and autobiography set in both the South and the North. In a 1931 *Crisis* “Postscript” DuBois articulated that, “Grave as our other disabilities, there is a sense in which discrimination against Negro children in education is the most dangerous and is doubly dangerous because so little is said about it” (Aptheker 641). The discrimination that DuBois cites certainly refers to the segregated condition of Southern schools, but also applies to the inadequacy and falseness of schools in Northern cities.

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) is known as a landmark case that initiated the termination of America's apartheid system of Jim Crow laws. Literature from the period surrounding the decision, contrary to historical perspective, reveals that regardless of federal legislation like *Brown v. Board*, literacy as the key to freedom remained largely a component of folklore, rather than a part of any actual social fulfillment, even during the height of the Civil Rights movement. The industrial, segregated education of new slavery in the South translated into a no more liberating, equally disenfranchised condition of living in Northern cities. Texts written in the three decades before the Supreme Court decision embody the social unrest that prompted the court proceedings. Correspondingly, the representation of literacy and schooling in texts set and published after *Brown v. Board* expose both the inauthenticity of *Brown's* purported intentions, and

the failure of the American educational system to fulfill anything beyond legal and rhetorical acknowledgment of *Brown*.

African American authors had not only to contend with the damaging rhetoric of Washington's industrial education, contributing to the criticism generated by DuBois and *The Crisis*, but also with the elitist, eugenicist rhetoric of the "New Negro" and DuBois himself. In Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, he recounts "how literacy enables one to emerge from harrowing experiences with integrity and balance intact⁶," but still socially disenfranchised and dissatisfied. In Ann Petry's *The Street* an educated, ambitious mother cannot counteract the institutionalized racism that her son encounters daily in his New York school. In both Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the protagonists migrate from the South to the urban North. Both depart from Tuskegee-like institutions into a sense of placelessness among black urban intellectuals.

Richard Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, was published in 1945, but the narrative begins in 1912, when Wright is four years old. His account of his acquisition of literacy in Natchez, Mississippi, reflects the lack of primary schooling for African Americans that pervaded the South. According to *Black Boy*, literacy came naturally to Wright, but institutionalized schooling was rare in his life, and the lack did not go unnoticed. He marks time periods in his life by relating them to school. After recounting his early childhood experience in saloons, Wright comments: "I was a drunkard in my sixth year, before I had begun school" (21). Later, he remarks, "At the age of twelve, before I had one full year of formal schooling..." (100), and "I was in my fifteenth year; in terms of schooling I was far behind the average youth of the nation..." (169). His

⁶ Cites Jerry Ward Jr.'s introduction to the 1998 edition of *Black Boy*, which is politically detached, but manages to highlight the importance of Wright's relationship with American social institutions.

experience was not uncommon in a region where, in the area with the most significant African American population there were just 65 high schools for a black population of 10 million (Rury 124). For several decades after the turn of the 20th century, expenditures for white students were ten times more than for black students (Rury 123-124).

Wright was well aware that he “was building up in [him] a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle” (169). From reading on his own, Wright developed a “consuming curiosity about what was happening” in his environment (22), but in school, upon every occasion of formal schooling that he had, he learned more about rebelling and gang behavior than he did about school curriculum. Wright never associated his growing interest in writing and creative expression, with something he was supposed to learn or do in school. In school he had grown used to learning “four-letter words describing physiological and sex functions” (24), and that “the first trial [of school] came not in books, but in how one’s fellow took one, what value they placed upon one’s willingness to fight” (91).

The first time Wright was enrolled in any sort of formal schooling for a sustained period was at a private religious school in Jackson, Mississippi, where his aunt was the teacher. In this environment, Wright was conflicted between his aunt’s hateful demand that he be submissive to her unreasonable authority, and his formerly learned social behaviors, primarily his “street gang code” (106). Eventually, his aunt’s disdain for him—even her enjoyment of neglecting him—led him to being unresponsive to the classroom in which he was ignored. He ceased studying the curriculum before him until he reentered public school, where he remained studious up to his graduation from ninth grade.

Wright was named valedictorian of his ninth grade class, but refused to give the speech prepared by his principal, therefore losing the chance for a positive reference to get him into a job as an educator. He moved on to adulthood at 16, looking for a job without an underwriter. As a laborer in Memphis, Wright again turns to literacy outside of the institutional environment to fulfill his insatiable social curiosity. His white coworker, Mr. Falk, is amused that Wright wants to read, but hesitant to be the one to facilitate it. He warns Wright to, “read the right things,” and plainly states that he’ll not support Wright in the case that he is discovered by the librarians (246). Here again, literacy, and the access to texts, is white property, and Wright remains conscious of the fact that he is breaking a social code. He is careful with everyone who inquires about his reading habit, minimizing it, though the questions raised by his voracious reading have become his new hunger.

Wright’s experience with education in the South serves as an example of a primary source of frustration with education “reform” for African Americans. Wright left school for good in 1924, after only five consecutive years of schooling in a system “designed to enforce [his] servile status and to insure [his] political and economic impotence” (Rury 124). With Booker T. Washington’s educational theory being relied upon in the South, Northern schools were supposed to be spaces where opportunity was more equalized, but they were, in fact, no more promising. Though enrollment in schools for African Americans was equivalent to that of whites and greater than that of immigrants in Northern cities (where in the early part of the 20th century only ten percent of the American black population lived), “Blacks benefited the least from

education...Racism permeated the job market, and served to dramatically counteract the benefits of schooling for African Americans” (Rury 124).

In Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) the educational experience of Lutie, the protagonist’s son, Bub exemplifies the experience of the “progressive” Northern educational system. His teacher is a white woman who has internalized the same negative stereotypes of black students as male schoolmasters of the previous century⁷. The power structure of the classroom here shows the urban educational environment not as liberating, but as a virtual failsafe for the fear of impending integration. Bub’s classroom functions under a power structure that reinforces white authority and will perpetuate “double-consciousness” and internalized racism, as well as prejudice.

Petry’s transition into the perspective of the schoolteacher is significant because it occurs at a crucial moment in the development of Bub’s fate. He adores his mother, a woman who grew up revering and coveting the educational privilege of the white people she knew and worked for. When she catches him on the street shining shoes, she reacts violently and unequivocally against it, contrasting him in her mind with the child of her former employers: “[Little Henry]’s doing his home work in that big warm library in front of the fireplace. And your kid is out in the street with a shoeshine box” (67).

She does not, however, articulate the educational implications of this to him. Instead she impresses upon him that he must not shine shoes because “white people seem to think that’s the only kind of work [African Americans are] fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least” (70). Bub finally finds a way to contribute money to the household without shining shoes: working for the super, who is plotting to

⁷ Like those portrayed in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, who are abusive and belittling in order to maintain a power balance.

separate Bub from his mother by getting him caught by the government for stealing checks from the mail.

In between Bub's acceptance of the super's "job" offer and his first transaction made with the money he earns for his illegal activities, Miss Rinner, his teacher, is introduced. The half-chapter dedicated to her perspective on the African American children that she teaches resembles a short story. Its tone and structure seems slightly detached from the plot driven scenes that surround it, and the departure from characters more integral to the chronology of the story is conspicuous.

Up to this point, the narrative structure favors the perspectives only of Lutie and those who are directly oppositional to the fulfillment of her intentions of a better life and home for herself and Bub.. The shift into Miss Rinner's perspective implicates her as an oppositional force even before her prejudices are revealed, though that comes swiftly. It takes Petry only three sentences to set up the racialized power structure of this classroom:

It was only two-thirty in the afternoon. Miss Rinner looked at the wriggling, twisting children seated in front of her and frowned. There was a whole half-hour, thirty long unpleasant minutes to be got through before she would be free from the unpleasant sight of these ever-moving, brown young faces. (327)

She exhibits a view of these children that fixates on their physicality and ignores their condition on any other terms, reifying the mentality that justified slavery based on the fabrication that slaves were valuable only for their bodies because they had no mental or spiritual capacity. She is also clearly in power in this room, but by no means motivated to educate the children in her charge. She seeks merely to control their bodies.

This teacher, responsible for one-third of the adult influence in Bub's life, embodies the most dehumanizing stereotypes that exist about her students. After years of teaching experience, "she came to think of the accumulation of scents in her classroom with hate as 'the colored people's smell,' and then finally as the smell of Harlem itself—bold, strong, lusty, frightening" (328). Her main methods for controlling her black students are physical intimidation and the assigning of meaningless errands and tasks. She seeks to intimidate them before they can become violent, as she is convinced they will, which defines her as an early representation of the violence phobia that permeates white stereotypes of all black schools, and communities in general. Miss Rinner is an agent of white authority in the school system whose racist, wholly pernicious methods are legitimated by her contention that, "Because the school was in Harlem she knew she wasn't expected to do any more than this" (330).

In her disdain for the idea of him urinating on the floor, and her general anxiousness to be rid of her students on a Friday afternoon, it is Miss Rinner who facilitates Bub's capitalizing on his criminality. She releases him early, which permits him to be the first customer in the candy store where he can buy his mother a gift with his money.

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) provides the perspective of the black teacher, dissatisfied for a reason that has more to do with administrative power than the power structure of the classroom. The novel opens at the fictional Naxos, "the finest school for negroes anywhere in the country," with Helga Crane malcontent about her position as a teacher at the school (2-3). She spends the opening scene of the novel isolated in her room, feeling sentiments from resentment to anger about the mission of the school. She

realizes, “The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all. Strange, too, for this was the thing which she had ardently desired to share in, to be a part of this monument to one man’s genius and vision” (3). This reference to “one man” certainly signifies on Booker T. Washington, with Helga Crane representing the disillusioned constituents of Tuskegee who had lost faith in the mission of the school.

Helga articulates a position on the fictional Naxos that Donald Spivey⁸ attributes to those alienated from the Tuskegee mission:

This great community...was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency...It was...now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern. (4)

This position, articulated in 1928, took nearly 50 years to become common, and though Helga represents someone who shared the DuBoisian, negative view of Washington’s industrial education, she no more readily accepts the educational ideal of racial uplift by way of the “Talented Tenth.”

James Vayle, Helga’s ex-fiancé, is a DuBois figure, a member of this Talented Tenth; a proponent of racial uplift from the top down who believes that upper class African Americans must procreate “if the race is to get anywhere” (103). His name signifies on DuBois’s prolific use of the veil metaphor both in *The Souls of Black Folk* and his *Crisis* writings. But Vayle, unlike DuBois, is in the midst of the industrial education machine. He serves as assistant principal of Naxos in a post-NAACP South

⁸ In *Schooling for the New Slavery*, as cited in chapter one on page 21.

and represents a potential restructuring of education for African Americans. His family subscribes to stereotypically upper-class values, and does not approve of Helga's family history. Helga's rejection of both Naxos and James Vayle's ideals as an educator are indicative of the failure to provide education for African Americans even after Washington's supposed triumph.

Fourteen years after *Quicksand*, and twenty-four years before the historic *Brown vs Board* decision, Ralph Ellison's critique of Washington's Tuskegee can afford to be more explicit and thorough in *Invisible Man*. Ellison's narrator spends his life contending with his grandfather's deathbed advice to, "Live with your head in the lion's mouth...overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). This is the old man's legacy that he wishes to be passed down to future generations, and his last instruction is to "Learn it to the younguns" (16). Despite the anxiety it causes him, the narrator feels proud that he is living this way as he gains the praise and nominal support of "the most lily-white men of the town" (16). His grandfather's advice is in direct conflict with his vision of himself "as a potential Booker T. Washington" (16).

In chapter one of *Invisible Man*, anthologized as "Battle Royal," the narrator is chosen to give a graduation oration at a function for the wealthiest white men in his town, but before he's permitted to take the floor to speak, he must participate with nine other boys in a violent physical battle. The setting is cacophonous and throughout the narrator seeks the voice of the school superintendent for comfort. When he is finally introduced as the "smartest boy we've got out there in Greenwood" to give his speech, he finds that

his audience only heeds him when he falters in his reprise of Washington's "Atlanta Exposition," using the phrase "social equality" in place of "social responsibility" (31).

This surreal occasion is his first opportunity to share his grandfather's rage, and though he begins to doubt his faith in the rhetoric of "separate but equal" he is triumphant at receiving a scholarship to the state college for black students. It is the future narrator, a more mature and cynical student of life, whose intonation indicates that he will realize only after attending college the meaning of his grandfather's dream message, delivered in a letter the same way his scholarship was received: "To Whom it May Concern...Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (33).

On the beautiful campus of the state college, the narrator regards the statue of the founder: "the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place" (36). Ellison's choice to signify on the statue that stands on the grounds of Tuskegee is a clear indictment of that university for its false rhetoric of uplift. The course of events that lead to the narrator's expulsion and subsequent placelessness in Harlem are an example of how the industrial education system for African Americans was based on a standard set not by black leaders, but by both "white liberal" benefactors and anti-integrationists who didn't fear the goals of the institution.

The narrator is not dismissed from the state college for academic failure. His dismissal is based on his failure to protect a white benefactor from the local African American population not sanctioned by the college. After taking Mr. Norton—"a Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled

scientist, director, philanthropist” and a parody of white philanthropists (such as Samuel Armstrong) (37)—on a drive to see the grounds of the school and inadvertently introducing him to an uneducated, incestual farmer who still lives in a slave cabin, and a group of combative mental patients, the narrator realizes that his failure to protect the approved image of the college community will decide his “fate for the rest of [his] life” (105).

In the scenes between his transgression and his punishment, the narrator is kept in a state of anticipation that resembles the waiting period he endured to give his graduation speech. Before Dr. Bledsoe, the college president, will give his penalty, he requires the narrator to attend chapel, where he listens to an oration instead of giving one. The oration delivered by a Homer figure witnesses the story of how Bledsoe inherited the “burden” of racial uplift directly from the founder, who now appears more as a Moses figure than a Washington figure (118-129). The oration indicates a lineage that the narrator is excluded from, perhaps based on the “curse” of his grandfather. The most significant aspect of the narrator’s audience of this sermon is that it convinces him (even if briefly) that his unintentional mistake is justifiably considered treason. His self-condemnation is provoked by the grandiloquent rhetoric of Reverend Homer A. Barbee, whom he sees as “part of Dr. Bledsoe” (118).

After this very public display of martyrdom, the narrator has an encounter with Bledsoe that shatters the myth of righteous black educational leadership. Bledsoe ridicules the narrator, saying, “here you are a junior in college. Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!” (139). Again, the situation parallels the “Battle Royal” finish where the trusted

authority figure, whose identity is inextricable from his role as educator, becomes the upholder of the intentionally oppressive system that is masked by its dubious social justification. In this case, the narrator is exposed to the corrupted leadership of a black man, rather than a white racist's, but the effects on the narrator are the same: he is disillusioned, angry and helpless to achieve justice.

Bledsoe is a powerful black leader, publicly selfless, who privately pronounces that he would “have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where [he is]” (143). In addition to his hypocrisy, Bledsoe has become the overseer of African American education and sends the narrator North with “free papers” in the form of recommendation letters that will maintain his subservience in the system that has replaced slavery, and reinforce white authority.

Despite the narrator's contriteness—which Bledsoe acknowledges, saying, “I can see that you're beginning to learn...Two things our people must do is accept responsibility for their acts and avoid becoming bitter” (148)—he is sent to Harlem with false confidence. Bledsoe's lie to the narrator is twofold: he lets the narrator believe that his student status will be reinstated for the fall semester, and that the letters vouch for him in the interest of gaining him employment. The narrator discovers the true contents of the recommendation letters from Mr. Emerson, a white liberal figure like Norton who professes belief in the ideal of equality but remains indebted to the hierarchy of white supremacy. Each of seven letters to various board members denounces the narrator and requests that the recipient not enlighten him to his situation. As articulated by the narrator: “Please hope him to death and keep him running” (194). As articulated by his grandfather, “Keep this nigger-boy running” (33).

The narrator's education does not end after his expulsion. It merely becomes de-institutionalized; he no longer seeks mentors among the proponents of black education. Rather, he encounters mentors in the community and on the streets, among the Brotherhood that finds him. The narrator's return to non-institutional education, like that of the pre-emancipation period, is reflective of the social incarnation of governmental interest in American schools. The narrator becomes part of the growing number of "good, smart, disillusioned fighters" that "the race needs" as Bledsoe predicted he might (145).

In the decade between World War II and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, American schools "became instruments of federal social policy" and "were increasingly acknowledged as a primary factor in national economic growth" (Rury 182). The forties also begin a period of migration to Northern cities by African Americans, with nearly four million citizens leaving the South in the 40s, 50s and 60s (Rury 183). With these two major social changes colliding, Northern schools became even less capable of fulfilling any education promise to black students. Schools grew more and more inadequate, and even integrated schools were not a solution to the problem that needed solving.

After nearly a century of waiting for emancipation to turn into social equality, and a decade of learning that integration with "all deliberate speed" was no more liberating than "separate but unequal" as far as schools were concerned, more militant civil rights efforts became more widely understood as a viable means for social change. In the spirit of these movements, the literature begins to reflect a rejection of institutionalized education on the grounds of the American educational system's inherent and historical

white supremacy and paternalism.

As illustrated by *The Street*, integrated classrooms do not mean spaces of equal and productive learning for all. Integrated classrooms remain spaces where racism was expected and black students were not encouraged to be competitive with white students for jobs. As bell hooks articulates in *Teaching to Transgress*:

School changes utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized our teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. Bussed to white schools, we learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. (3)

Though her all-black school experience (in Ohio) is marked by a rare, utterly positive memory, hooks' explanation of the experience of integrating for African American students is common.

In *Literacy and Racial Justice*, Catherine Prendergast departs from social imagination to examine the effects of *Brown*. When analyzed based on examinations of race in society by critical race theorists, *Brown* becomes something entirely different from the great equality promise that it has been historically interpreted as. Some crucial differences and distinctions arise in Prendergast's work that based on pre-*Brown* literature should have been anticipated, and based on post-*Brown* literature have not been remedied.

Brown did nothing to make the definition of "segregated" more expansive. As Gloria Ladson-Billings points out in her forward to Prendergast's book, even districts

which contained all black schools met *Brown's* requirements as long as there were not legally defined districts for black and white within a locality. This way, segregation persisted by zoning—schools naturally consisted of homogenous populations because they were based on the populations of the neighborhoods that they served.

“The First Day,” a short story by Edward P. Jones, appeared in his 1992 collection *Lost in the City*. Though the story bears no blatant markers of time period or race, the implications are that the main character, a girl starting school for the first time, and her mother are African Americans not long after *Brown*. The girl’s mother takes her to her first choice of school, which is located right across the street from her Baptist church, but they are turned away and sent to the school designated by their address. At the second school, the mother is regarded disdainfully until she has to ask for help filling out the registration form. Immediately upon her admission that she can’t read the woman who she is interacting with appears “so much more satisfied with everything,” and her behavior changes from hostile to patronizing (289).

Jones’s story marks a moment in history when the burden of negotiating the institutionalized racism of schools was passed on to the children who started school after *Brown*. Like the child in this story, those children had no vocabulary for racism, no recognition of the tangible goals of education. They were taught only that they would go to a certain school where they would “learn about the whole world” (Jones 288). Like the little girl in this story, children saw their parents as powerless to define education even when it acted to reinforce segregation, prejudice, and social injustice.

The rhetorical effects of *Brown* were as far reaching as the social changes that resulted from it should have been. Based on the language of *Brown*, education was

acknowledged as,

perhaps the most important function of state and local governments...In these days it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available for all on equal terms. (*Brown* qtd. in Prendergast 17)

Prendergast examines the language of *Brown* to expose that not only did the decision created several legal precedents that, rather than contributing to the Civil Rights movement, actually detracted from it.

The most damaging rhetorical effect of *Brown*, according to Prendergast, is the way in which its language legally records racialized definitions for educational practice (20). Prendergast points out that, “The arguments, the decision, and the remedies proffered in *Brown* constructed equal education as the opportunity to be educated among Whites” (20). This as a means and an end does not improve or even remotely equalize education, as Derrick Bell articulates:

The racial-balance goal can be met only in schools where whites are in the majority and retain control. The quality of schooling black children receive is determined by what whites...are willing to provide—which, as we should not be surprised to learn, is not very much. (qtd. in Prendergast 27)

The actuality of *Brown* and the ways in which it further racialized educational space undermines the need for equality at all. In theory, if schools were integrated literacy

could no longer be monopolized by white Americans. *Brown* managed to nominally eliminate segregation in schools, but reinforced literacy as property by legally requiring that it be doled out to black Americans *by* white Americans.

In “My Dear Colored People,” Leona Nicholas Welch illustrates how damaging education can be when it is recognized as doled out by white proprietors. The story was published in *Linda Brown, You Are not Alone* (2003), a young adult anthology commemorating *Brown*’s fifty-year anniversary. On her graduation day, a student at a black Catholic school is forced to listen to the rhetoric of the white bishop who presides over the ceremony. His words are both paternalistic and reminiscent of the racial uplift philosophy of Booker T. Washington. They do not even purport to acknowledge social equality. He says, “For the rest of your lives you will thank your teachers and your parents for preparing you to live in *your* world, and to bring forth a living by the power of your own hands” (110-111). The character has a strong emotional response: “Right at the edge of the word *hands* I felt a powerful urge to get up and walk. I didn't know where I wanted to go or what I would do when I got there. I just needed to move” (110-111). Here is a successful student, faced with the reality that no matter what she achieves academically, it will perpetually be seen as a gift to her by white Americans.

After her moment of disgust, she envisions herself initiating a peaceful protest against his words. The bishop begins his speech with the words, “My Dear Colored People,” which provokes her initial rejection of his rhetoric. But in a fantasy, she emotionally and intellectual reappropriates the words “My Dear Colored People.” She looks around the chapel, charitably loaned out by the white faction of the parish for the black graduation ceremony, and realizes that she is surrounded by *her* dear, colored

friends and family. She is so entwined in her community that she cannot separate her education from their lives. Though she wants to walk out on the patriarchal ceremony, she is living through it at a historical moment where it is a type of victory to be there and she would be rejecting the values of her community if she abandoned it. At what should be the most resonant moment in the transition from acquisition of literacy into (economic) self-actualization, there is a white authority figure there to preside over the black student body and assure the ideal of social responsibility instead of social equality.

Another matter of hidden damage within *Brown* is the notion of defining the term “discrimination” and countering its practices and effects. Prendergast summarizes that,

According to many critical race theorists, the decision in *Brown* actually made fighting [certain] forms of discrimination a more difficult task...First, it problematically defined discrimination narrowly as segregation...Second, by establishing educational opportunity as an end in itself, rather than concerning itself with equality of result, it gave no provisions for improving the conditions of schools...and made efforts to remedy educational inequity difficult to pursue in any terms other than racial balancing. (28)

This long-term effect of *Brown* arguably creates a damaging, highly racialized power structure within the classroom. It also assures that in Northern schools, many of which were already “integrated,” little to no change would be realized in the educational experience for African Americans. Rather than being a solution to the literacy crisis for African Americans, “literacy following *Brown* became one of the most prominent

battlegrounds on which struggles over what constituted racial discrimination and remedy were fought in the Supreme Court and in communities” (Prendergast 1).

In his autobiography, Malcolm X articulates the rage of realizing that that which has been waited for is sure to never arrive, and he negotiates the legacies of Washington and DuBois by denouncing the American educational system entirely. He completed all of his formal schooling in the North before *Brown v. Board* in integrated schools, and his autobiography exemplifies the impasse for African Americans in schools that are merely integrated.

DuBois wrote in *The Crisis* in 1931 that, “Usually when a colored boy in the high school states that he wants to study for a profession or higher career, his white teachers promptly discourage him. They say that Negroes usually become cooks, servants and laborers and that few enter the professions. When the boy reaches college this advice is emphasized” (Aptheker 642). This very occasion became a defining factor in the life of Malcolm X. Even after his stay in juvenile detention and foster care, Malcolm X was one of the top performing students in his high school. He had a positive relationship with many authority figures, but his outlook on his imminent future changed dramatically after a conversation with his English teacher.

When asked what he had in mind as a career, Malcolm replied that he thought he would be a lawyer. The prospect was not actually a significant goal of his, but he liked the potential for being a successful black man in his community. His teacher responded to him uncharacteristically, “[He] looked surprised...and leaned and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head...you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger...Why don't you plan on carpentry?

People like you as a person—you'd get all kinds of work..." (36). This occasion remained significant in Malcolm's mind throughout his life because it exemplified the sort of racialized system that was pervasive in American social institutions. Black students could be valued for their cordiality, for their ability to come across as good and decent people, but could not be considered for any serious intellectual pursuit. The educational system, as a fundamental aspect of a child's upbringing, was never intended to imply success for black students, and teachers and administrators took for granted that black students knew this about their condition and if they didn't, they "instructed" black pupils with this belief.

Not only does Malcolm X's educational experience exhibit the institutional racism (perhaps more) prevalent in Northern, integrated schools, it shows how the practice of integration (that was later legally endorsed by *Brown*) served to perpetuate cultural prejudices through curriculum. In all white schools, African American history would likely be entirely ignored. It is arguable whether that is more offensive than the way it was presented in integrated districts, as accounted in Malcolm X's autobiography:

Later, I remember, we came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one paragraph long. Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. He added, I remember, an anthropological footnote on his own, telling us between laughs how Negroes' feet were 'so big that when they walk, they don't leave tracks, they leave a hole in the ground'. (29)

Prendergast asserts that “the assumption of literacy as White property in crucial contexts has meant that a burden has been placed upon people of color to create and sustain alternative literacy institutions and programs...or to show evidence of literacy again and again to mainstream organizations” (9). The ultimate alternative to institutionalized literacy is the rejection of it, which is what Malcolm X did after leaving Michigan for Boston. He then regained the drive to be literate while in prison, and refocused the subject matter of his education to the Nation of Islam and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

Malcolm X’s subsequent fiery career began in late 1953 and early 1954, and among the venues for his prolific speaking engagements were various college campuses. Not only did Malcolm X seek alternative means and definitions of literacy, he ended up providing them for students within higher education nation-wide. Regardless of the controversy surrounding his rhetoric, his shifts in ideological perspective, and his assassination, Malcolm X is a concrete example of the rejection that is given to institutions whose promises and realities are incongruent.

Chapter Three: Return to Deinstitutionalized Education
in Fiction of the 1990s

“After a long schoolday of moralistic bombardment with the aphorisms of Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy, Cesar Chavez, Pocahontas, and a herd of pacifistic pachyderms, my friends and I were ready to think about color on our own terms.”
-The White Boy Shuffle

In *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, Derrick Bell seeks to answer his own question about the dissonance between the social reverence for *Brown v. Board* and the actual effectiveness of the decision. Bell argues the ways in which *Brown* is an economically, politically, and culturally circuitous policy that “served the nation’s short-term but not its long-term interests” by creating a false sense of accomplishment that pacified progressive ideals, yet preserved racist interests (4-5). Bell asserts that for black students “institutional closed-mindedness [evidenced by homogeneity of curriculum] makes inclusion as stigmatizing as exclusion. To be immersed in and judged by a system that fails to recognize the history, culture and needs of black students may, indeed, be worse than being excluded” (166).

Over the course of his book, Bell examines the rhetoric of *Brown* and many of the corollaries in education policy during the fifty years since the decision. In a chapter called “Searching for Effective Schools,” Bell articulates the efforts of those invested in education for African Americans to seek alternatives to integrated public schools, which function under the precedents set by *Brown*. He examines the context and statistics of “inner-city” independent schools, charter schools, specialized public schools, tuition vouchers, catholic schools, and supplemental school programs, which seek to fill the gaps in educational equity largely associated with *Brown*’s legacy. These alternatives

represent social efforts to circumvent the damaging personal and social effects of American educational policy, and de-center institutionalized education in America.

Two 1996 novels published by African American authors whose careers began in poetry resonate with Bell's statement that, in concert with ineffective policy making, "High levels of violence, teenage pregnancy, and other social problems correlate with low academic performance" (169). Sapphire's *Push* examines how pregnancy, statistically and stereotypically a factor in the educational success of young African American women, forces the deinstitutionalization of education. Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* contends with real and perceived conflicts in the maturation of African American masculinity in the context of institutionalized education. Both novels grapple with the fact that, by the 1990s, a negative stereotype of the rejection of institutionalized education by African Americans had become pervasive in American culture, yet decontextualized from the long history of educational disenfranchisement from which it arose.

Both novels are reacting to the "new" or popular racism that took the place of segregation and was facilitated by integration's inadequate definition of discrimination. In a 1993 study of Australian schools, Fazal Rizvi sought to "investigate the issue of how, in schools, popular forms of racism are produced, maintained, and reproduced, on the one hand, and resisted, challenged, and rearticulated on the other" (126). Rizvi's findings, compiled in the book chapter "Children and the Grammar of Popular Racism," contribute to the understanding of the environment of American public schools between 1954 and 1996.

Rizni's ethnographic study illustrates ways that racism has transformed over time from overt manifestations based on biological racism to ideological racism, which is couched in "the discourses of social cohesion, nationalism, and patriotism" (130). Socially, ideological racism manifests in the creation of cultural norms or values that are widely understood as shared by a culture, but in fact are exclusive and serve to further marginalize minority citizens. This tendency is readily identifiable in schools because of the tendency of curriculum and testing to reflect those "universal" values that are functionally marginalizing. The name "standardized testing" alone is indicative of this practice. As Rizni asserts, "Practices of popular racism are thus predicated on an essentialist view of human nature and social relations, which, as Errol Lawrence points out, naturalizes 'the social order, by obscuring the historical struggles that produced the present configurations of social forces'" (131).

It is significant to recognize that the racism in the fiction of the 90s is not the racism of *Invisible Man* or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The racism of *The White Boy Shuffle* and *Sapphire* is more covert; it is a "naturalized" racism with a direct link to the policy shortcomings of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The changing face of racism from 1954 to the 1990s is silhouetted in educational practices like curriculum development, teacher training, student tracking, and discipline. Both *Sapphire* and Beatty's novels strive to do what Rizni defines as essential in tackling popular racism: "to challenge not only the attitudes and beliefs that signify its grammar but, more importantly, its practical ideological form, the epistemic authority that sustains its practices, enabling children to make sense of the everyday world in racist terms" (138).

Push, as a novel, is problematic in many ways, not the least significant being its essentializing manner of presenting black poverty and black femininity in an all black community, specifically Harlem in the novel⁹. But aside from its stereotypical portrayals, the novel provides a searing look at the effects of the American educational system's inability to meet the needs of marginalized students. *Push* is the story of Claireece Precious Jones, who, in the first three sentences, identifies herself as a victim of incest and an outcast of the educational system that should be uplifting her: "I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year" (3). In the novel's present, Precious is 16 years old, pregnant with her (and her father's) second baby and facing suspension from school for it.

Like Richard Wright, Precious associates the stages of her life with educational progression. For Precious however, these periods are conjointly marked by incestual rape by her father and constant physical abuse by her mother. Her twelfth year is marked by exclusion from school because of her pregnancy. Later her childhood is surveyed with similar markers: "first grade, pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it" (18); "second grade my cherry busted" (36). In fact, second through fourth grade "seem like one dark night" during which she is continually assaulted by her father and her ability to learn is severely impeded (18). She implores, "Who care whether purple shit a square or a circle, whether it purple or blue?" when she's enduring the effects of both long term physical and sexual abuse (18).

⁹ *Push*, in fact, may be one of a few novels composited and parodied by Percival Everett in *Erasure*. In this existentialist novel, he creates a television talk show host with a book club, a thinly veiled reference to Oprah Winfrey, who invites Jaunita Mae Jenkins onto her show to discuss Jenkins' novel, *We's Lives In Da Ghetto*, the product of two days spent in Harlem. Everett's main character, Thelonius Monk Ellison, spends the novel contending with his ideological conflict over essentialist novels like this one, calling it an "idiotic, exploitive piece of crap" (188).

When she is presented in a traditional classroom during the novel, Precious's relationship to the curriculum and her peers is immediately revealed. She sits in the back of the room and when she's asked to open her book to a specific page, she can't because she can't recognize the numbers. In this instance, she embarrasses her teacher and threatens her peers in order to maintain an environment that doesn't expose her illiteracy. Over the course of the year, the teacher, Mr. Wicher, comes to rely on her to keep the classroom in order by exerting her influence (based on her size), but she makes no progress academically. Wicher appreciates her presence in the classroom only as an object of threat toward the other students whom he cannot control. Precious understands that he is grateful for her classroom management help, but there is no educator-learner relationship. She enjoys being in class because he needs her presence and she likes the way he dresses, not because she learns (7).

Despite her recalcitrance and her functional illiteracy Precious somehow manages to get "pretty good grades" and expects to move on to high school. Her ability to work her way through the system is no doubt based on relationships with teachers similar to the one she has with Mr. Wicher, and the fact that she is nearing an age far beyond what policy will allow for a middle school student. The last time Precious is shown in a traditional educational space, it is in the office of the counselor, who has stopped Precious from going to math class in order to talk to her about her new pregnancy.

The counselor, Mrs. Lichenstein, is presented as directly oppositional to Precious and as a representative of school policy that does not include a viable option for a pregnant teenager. From Mrs. Lichenstein's perspective, Precious seems slated to become one of "The large numbers of young Black women in inner cities and

impoverished rural areas who continue to leave school before attaining full literacy [that] represent the continued efficacy of the political dimension of Black women's oppression” (Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 4). At this point, Mr. Wicher’s appreciation for Precious becomes beneficial because his assurance that she has “an aptitude for math”—a statement unlikely to be true considering she can’t recognize numbers—prompts Mrs. Lichenstein to seek an alternative for Precious’s education. After a near violent scene in Mrs. Lichenstein’s office, where Precious reaches out to assault her because of a suspension based on pregnancy, Mrs. Lichenstein visits Precious and her mother’s apartment to tell her about the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One program which is expecting Precious (15).

Precious’s experience in the public school system certainly taught her a lesson that Patricia Hill Collins identifies as commonplace for black women. Collins writes that while her education taught her that “good ideas and solid evidence certainly matter... power relations that elevate some groups over others can matter even more in determining whose view of truth will prevail...knowledge and power are deeply linked, and achieving social justice requires attending to both” (*Black Sexual Politics* 3). Precious articulates the way this lesson manifested in her life: “Don’t nobody want me Don’t nobody need me. I know who I am. I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system’s blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, find a job for” (31). Precious’s experience in the public school system is ineffectual, antagonistic and damaging to her self-perception. After Mrs. Lichenstein’s visit, which got her as far as the intercom system at the front door of Precious’s building, Precious is instilled with a new sense of potential. In her most articulate expression of personal

awareness in her preliterate state, she thinks, “I don’t know what an alternative is but I feel I want to know” (16).

The alternative educational program is, for Precious, a place to rediscover and affirm a personal identity not characterized by victimhood. On her first day, Precious declares, “I is ready. Ready for school. School something (this *nuthin*’). School gonna help me get out dis house” (35). Her enthusiasm for the alternative school program renews her lost fondness for school. She states, “I always did like school, jus’ seem school never did like me” (36). She immediately recognizes the difference between the staff at Each One Teach One and the school administrators and teachers of the public school system who ignored her to “[f]ocus on the ones *can* learn” (37). In this program she is part of a small group in which she is neither racially disempowered nor stigmatized because of gender.

The White Boy Shuffle illustrates, with wit and cynicism, how the unfulfilled educational promise and legal half-truths of American policy have created a formidable distance between African American identity and institutionalized American education. The novel interrogates white liberal ideals of multicultural education for their underlying paternalism and ineffectiveness in imbuing students with the cultural capital required to attain non-racialized economic success. Beatty examines black parents’ choices about education for their children. He presents a complicated and problematic system of peer interaction that reinforces the violence phobia associated with all-black schools and communities. The novel is largely subversive, sparing no character from accountability in the racialized, classed, and gendered discourse over American educational space.

Gunnar Kaufman, Beatty's main character attends four public schools around Los Angeles during the course of the novel, and then chooses Boston University for his college education. At each public school in California, he encounters problematic definitions of race and community that force him to relearn modes of communication and renegotiate his identity based on racialized expectations within the institutions. Beatty's narrative voice is ironic, turning many of the racialized situations into blatant satire.

Gunnar defines himself as "the only cool black guy at Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel Elementary, Santa Monica's all-white multicultural school" where "Everything was multicultural, but nothing was multicultural" (28, 29). Gunnar's teacher, Ms. Cegeny, is prone to wearing flamboyant t-shirts to attest to her multicultural beliefs, and her classroom is decorated with banners and posters that proclaim a multicultural agenda. Gunnar and the other students, however, are left with no practical understanding of what the goal of multicultural education is. In fact, he's more disillusioned with diversity than anything; it is at Mestizo Mulatto Mongrel where he and his friends begin "to think about color on [their] own terms" (34).

One instance that reveals the vague and inherently flawed nature of "multicultural" American classrooms is a scene in which Gunnar is discussing his teacher's policy of "colorblindness" with the doctor who is conducting routine physicals with the students at the school. Gunnar—either ironically or genuinely—articulates confusion over what precisely his teacher means by "colorblindness" and the doctor advises him to "just pretend you don't see color. Don't say things like 'Black people are lecherous, violent, natural-born criminals,'" to which Gunnar replies, "But I'm black" (32). In this scene, Gunnar is captive to yet another destructive stereotype based on race,

but Beatty has presented it in a manner that reveals the racism inherent in multiculturalist policy that serves as a means of erasure, rather than a means of affirming minority identity.

Gunnar characterizes another teacher, Ms. Murphy, as condescending in her multiculturalism. He comments that, “During Black history month, to put a class of rootless urchins in touch with our disparate niggerhoods, Ms. Murphy assigned us to make family trees” (11). Gunnar proceeds, unchecked, to create an elaborate family history of “sell-outs,” naming his ancestor Euripides Kaufman as a coward who was responsible for the shooting of Crispus Attucks. Gunnar’s tale is an attempt to make up for a classroom full of students completely out of touch with their individual family histories, a classroom full of students who couldn’t validate themselves based on lineage, let alone the “posterboard Negro heroes on the walls” (11).

The tale stops with Gunnar’s father, a figure of disdain in Gunnar and his siblings’ lives:

The racist campestral doctrine of Yeehaw, Mississippi, raised Mr. Rölf Kaufman, a.k.a. Daddy. Instead of pumping property taxes into neighborhood schools, the town stuck its tongue out at *Brown v. Board of Education* and satisfied the Supreme Court’s integrationist stipulations by busing the dark-skinned niggers and the light-skinned niggers to Dred Scott High. Living in the only black household within walking distance of exclusively white and predominantly redneck Jefferson Davis High, my father didn’t even know about the colored bus...He was such a docile and meek nonthreat that the principal let him register for classes. (21)

The family legacy that Gunnar finds himself in is uncelebrated. He actively distances himself from a tradition of black masculinity that he sees as ignoble, yet recognizes the acceptance of it within his multicultural classroom because of a lack of any authentic efforts on the part of his teachers to create racial self-awareness.

Gunnar's mother discovers that the educational environment in which she has enrolled her children in has created a self-recognition that places them in between being distraught at a day camp call and response cheer that resembles "Yeah White Camp," and rejecting an all-black school because "They're different from us" (36-37). At this point, she decides to relocate to Hillside, a notorious all-black community, where Gunnar attends Manischewitz Junior High. In Hillside, Gunnar quickly recognizes the difference in vernacular and dress, commenting that, "The gods of blackness would let me know when I was black enough to be trusted" (53).

On his first day at Manischewitz, Gunnar encounters his file, which provides a commentary on the common but controversial practice of tracking in American schools. He arrives at school 45 minutes early, which prompts the receptionist to ask if he's having trouble at home, indicating that school serves as an escape for many students. The receptionist then skims Gunnar's file, assumes that based on what it contains, he must be new to the community so he offers Gunnar protective custody on school grounds. This occurs not long after the police visited the Kaufman home to conduct "preventative police enforcement," during which they insisted to know Gunnar's gang affiliation and warn him to keep his "big black nose clean" (47, 48). His file reads:

Despite his race, subject possesses remarkable intelligence and excellent reasoning and analytical skills. His superb yet raw athletic ability exceeds

even the heightened expectations normally accorded those of his ethnicity. Family background is exemplary, and with the proper patriotic encouragement Gunnar Kaufman will make an excellent undercover CIA agent. At a young age he already shows a proclivity for making friends with domestic subversives and betraying them at the drop of a hat. (61)

Clearly, the educational system is tracking him into a category of usefulness, essentializing as well as objectifying him by assuring that he can be manipulated into the appropriate mindset to infiltrate neighborhoods like his own.

The conflicting stereotypes and methods of tracking applied to Gunnar provoke him into subverting all of them equally. He becomes a scholar-athlete who considers a nefarious local criminal among his best friends. His poetry, graffitied all over the community, is revered. He quickly learns modes of code switching for school, home and neighborhood. Like Richard Wright, Gunnar learns his most important lesson for social success in Hillside in the classroom, and it has nothing to do with academics: “The class instantly interpreted [the teacher’s] behavior as a display of lack of trust and concern. That day I learned my second ghetto lesson: never let on that you don’t trust someone” (63). Alternatively, he employs his scholarly interests as his street defense: “In response [to local kids flashing guns] I’d lift my T-shirt and flash my weapons: a paperback copy of Audre Lorde or Sterling Brown and a checkerboard set of abdominal muscles” (96).

The stereotyping continues through junior high, and in high school the efforts of teachers and administrators to provide positive black role models for students are characterized as foolish. Gunnar is aware of the blatant contradictions in educational programming at his high school: “It was mandatory for every male student at Phillis

Wheatley High to attend the monthly “Young Black and Latino Men: Endangered Species” assembly. Principal Henrietta Newcombe opened the meetings by reminding us that despite the portrayal of inner-city youths in the media (she didn’t mention the name of the assembly), we weren’t animals” (112). Speakers at these assemblies are as ironic as its name. The mortician requests more gang violence to assure his good business; the restaurant owner is a gaudily dressed minstrel; the ex-football player is over-sexed and brags about his sexual relationships with white women (113). The students attending these assemblies soon tire of the repetitive, uninspired rhetoric of the benefits of staying in school and following rules. It is at Phillis Wheatley where Gunnar begins to feel the tension between his roles as “ace student, ace athlete, ace boon con” and tires of the “unwanted reverence” he collects from performing such roles (117).

At his fourth and final school before college, Gunnar must again locate his social roles and determine how to follow them. El Campesino Real High provokes Gunnar to advise, “If you want to raise the consciousness of an inner-city colored child, send him to an all-white high school” (153). Code switching at Campesino Real for black students requires “morph[ing] into waxen African-Americans. Perpetually smiling scholastic lawn jockeys, repeating verbatim the prosaic commandments of domesticity: *Thou shalt worship no god other than whiteness. Thou shalt not disagree with anything a white person says*” (154). According to Beatty, these are the lessons of being African American in an all white school. Rather than receiving an equitable education, black students learn how whiteness is privileged.

Throughout high school, Gunnar receives recruitment letters from various colleges. But after standardized testing at Campesino Real, “letters from colleges

addressed ‘Dear Scholar’ instead of ‘Waddup to the best guard in the nation’ began arriving” (157). He narrows his interest down to two Ivy league schools, Boston University and Harvard, to please his mother, and chooses Boston University whose recruiter, Ms. Jenkins, comes to his home and plays cards with him and his best friend, Nick Scoby. Ms. Jenkins is a stark contrast to the Harvard recruiter, “a marginally known bespectacled public intellectual” whose self-promoting, sell-out nature resembles the men in Gunnar’s family tree (157). Ms. Jenkins matches Gunnar’s own non-hypocritical rhetoric by blatantly stating that the BU is “looking for some black students who are going to turn shit out” (161). Gunnar chooses BU, as does Nick Scoby, but their gang leader best friend, Psycho Loco refuses Ms. Jenkins offer of admission based on the “Unique Quality Life Experience Program” stating, “I’d get in there and have to shoot the entire history department. ‘What you mean, remember the Alamo?’ Blam! Blam! Blam! That be some multiculturalism for yo’ ass” (162).

As a freshman at Boston University, Gunnar finds himself reimmersed in an environment that drips with “multiculturalism.” He’s turned off by academics, and only attends one writing class, where he is faced with his reputation as a “street poet” and the adoration of his teacher and classmates, among them a Jewish neo-Rimbaud, a Sylvia Plath redux, and a pseudo-Nubian named Negritude (178-179). In an effort to locate a social scene where he, his mail order bride/soul mate, Yoshiko, and Nick Scoby can feel comfortable, Gunnar ends up encountering social organizations that parody The Brotherhood of *Invisible Man*. The novel takes a turn toward absurd satire after the end of Gunnar’s only basketball season at BU when he is asked to speak at a rally opposing

the granting of an honorary degree to African statesman M'm'mofo Gottobelezi, an act that he characterizes as putting his "literary nigger stamp of approval" on the rally (196).

His candid speech attacks the dignity of Boston University's multicultural motives by focusing on a monument to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Gunnar realizes that the statue "did not dedicate a small piece of the earth and time to Revered King so much as it took partial credit for his success" (199). He accuses everyone listening to him of selfishness and apathy, and introduces mass suicide as a response to the fact that "today's black leadership isn't worth shit" (200). Black Americans start committing suicide the next day, leaving poems as suicide notes, a different kind of free paper, but the result of literacy all the same.

Beatty's intertwining of literacy and suicide climaxes with Nick Scoby. Nick's suicide note, left on the roof of the law school where he jumped from, includes a poem, and the metaphor that he feels his life at BU is nothing more than him "whistling 'Dixie'," for which he blames Gunnar (206). His suicide prompts Gunnar and Yoshiko to return to Hillside, where Gunnar is followed by the government, and considered a threat to law and order. After leaving Boston, Yoshiko and Gunnar earn Bachelor's degrees by correspondence over the course of two months. The remaining action of the novel disintegrates into unlikely oddity: suicides are committed by black Americans all over the country, their poem/notes mailed to Gunnar; Yoshiko gives birth to their daughter outside as a public spectacle, the entire community watching; Gunnar and Psycho Loco host middle-of-the night- Bacchanalian MiseryFests in the park by the light of surveillance helicopters; and Gunnar "cement[s] his status as savior of the blacks" by performing

poems like “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Crib Death” (221). The epilogue states, “It’s been a lovely five hundred years, but it’s time to go” (225).

Both *Push* and *The White Boy Shuffle* demand the revisiting of the education promise on the same terms as constructed in his autobiographies by Frederick Douglass, rather than the distorted, ineffectual means created by his descendents. Both Precious and Gunnar are ultimately liberated by their decision to use literacy as a means of self-actualization rather than to conform to the paternalistic and oppressive norms of institutionalized education. Though Precious exits the public education system and Gunnar continues through college, both characters subvert the rhetoric that is presented to them and adopted by the large part of their peers. Like Douglass, it is traditional literacy joined with cultural literacy that provides their liberation.

Precious relives the seminal moment of the education promise as it is depicted in Douglass’s autobiography by appropriating literacy from within the constraints of the white institution of education and into the school-alternative/welfare environment. Susan Laird insightfully examines the ways in which *Push* connects to Douglass’s *Narrative*:

The story that Precious tells does seem ironically to recapitulate the multiply varied form of a familiar African-American cultural text canonized in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and dating back to the first African-American novel, *Our Nig*. This cultural text's recapitulation-with-variation seems far more than just the black literary device that Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has named ‘formal revision.’ For oral language and literacy development within this cultural text is a *sine qua*

non of emancipation from enslavement. (*Philosophy of Education Yearbook Online*)

The school environment created by Ms. Rain in *Push* provides a locale of both emotional and intellectual emancipation. Precious's dialogical journal with her teacher validates her identity through writing, just as Douglass's process of learning to write ended up in his ownership of his own identity in his free papers.

Andrew Furman, in "Revisiting Literary Blacks and Jews," acknowledges the relationship between Douglass and Beatty's novel. He writes,

mastering language, a la Frederick Douglass, is what finally empowers Beatty's protagonist, who brushes up against and rejects various flawed versions of multiculturalism, Afrocentrism, and Bi-racialism. 'Language was everywhere,' Gunnar observes of his new neighborhood in West Los Angeles, and he must master the language of the streets, and the language of books, to forge his identity as a politically engaged African-American poet (48). The library, indeed, becomes Gunnar's refuge from white racism, Afrocentrism, and a host of demagogic 'isms' in between. (144)

Gunnar's call for race suicide in the end, however, indicates that literacy alone merely propelled him into a situation where, empowered or not, there is no place for black identity to exist unproblematically in American society.

As well as renewing the meaning of Douglass's education promise, Beatty interacts with Du Bois and Washington's educational philosophies. After leaving Boston University Gunnar and Yoshiko take on personas to debate what their next move will be: "I was Du Bois arguing vociferously for a continuation of our comprehensive over-priced

Ivy League educations...Yoshiko was Booker T. Washington fighting passionately for a more proletarian edification, one involving a practicum in the crafts and technical vocations...Yoshiko asked, ‘Don’t you want to earn your way? Aren’t you tired of having things handed to you on a silver platter, black man?’” (211). Ultimately, their debate resembles history and they follow a Washingtonian path, taking correspondence courses from a college in Chicago. But this education is not empowering, it is merely absurd. In two months, Gunnar receives a degree in “earth auguries with an emphasis in meteorology, star-gazing, and horse-race analysis” and Yoshiko “quadruple-majored in jet engine mechanics, urban forestry, auctioneering for fun and profit, and three-card monte” (212). Beatty cuts the Washington-Du Bois debate down to size, exposing that ultimately neither the leaders’ rhetoric nor the application of their ideas were of much use in the achieving of social equality.

Sapphire and Beatty reaffirm Douglass’s educational philosophy as well as reifying the zeitgeist of the historical period following his influence. Precious is not raped by a white man, but rather her own father. Like the Trueblood family in *Invisible Man*, the Joneses horrifically complicate their sex and gender roles and rules among themselves. Gunnar, rather than allowing society to lynch another generation, is calling for suicide as a means of alleviation from social injustice. The underlying theme is change something or die, but neither writer doubts the existence of the possibility for change. They doubt the capability of African Americans to achieve self-actualization within an educational system that teaches false multiculturalism as subterfuge for institutionalized racism and perpetuates the internalization of racism by minority students.

Conclusion

The texts within this thesis were chosen because they complicate the definitions of both literacy and freedom. The work of Frederick Douglass is primary because of his educational philosophy, which moves beyond the simplistic logic that literacy equals freedom. As argued in chapter one, Douglass's literacy was comprised of two parts: academic literacy (reading and writing) and cultural literacy. The texts chosen for the second and third chapters follow that logic. Implicit in these texts is the recognition that academic literacy is inutile if citizens do not have access or ability to participate in cultural institutions. At its simplest, cultural literacy means that a citizen has attained academic literacy to the point where they can critically engage with the democratic institutions of American society. In the context of the literature herein, cultural literacy remains a deficiency for African American students because institutionalized education still regards academic literacy as white property.

In Paul Beatty and Sapphire's novels, Frederick Douglass's notion of cultural literacy is revisited in a way that reveals that it has not been achieved. If cultural literacy is the acquisition of academic literacy that allows a citizen to participate in the construction and evaluation of cultural institutions, then Precious's academic illiteracy and Gunnar Kaufman's academic subversion illustrate that Douglass's educational promise remains unfulfilled. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois's attempts to reify Douglass's rhetoric on literacy failed to motivate African Americans, and ensured policies of social responsibility for African Americans rather than policies of social equality. Integration according to *Brown v. Board*, and the policies derived from the case have proven ineffectual over the past fifty-years, contributing to power inequities that

develop into economic disparities. The multicultural classroom, primarily a white liberal initiative to ensure minority student inclusion, has veered away from its first conceived intentions and devolved into a joke for the very students it purports to represent.

These facts, as represented in the texts examined in this thesis, reveal that at the beginning of the 21st century education for African Americans has made little progress since it first became a bureaucratically recognized social problem during Reconstruction. The texts herein also illustrate how curriculum and instruction remain agents of instilling the kind of internalized and institutional racism that were revealed by Kenneth and Mamie Clark's famous doll experiment during the *Brown* hearings. Standardized testing, now a strict national mandate upon which school funding is contingent, comes in many variations, but the common factor in most tests is that the questions that comprise them are culturally relevant only in a society where whiteness is privileged, and history fails to reflect the voice of an authentic minority¹⁰. As long as American education is "standardized" according to criteria that privilege whiteness, the long history of racial educational inconsistency will be perpetuated.

¹⁰ Consider Malcolm X's history class as referenced in chapter two, page 48.

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Vita

Miya Abbott is originally from Coos Bay, Oregon, and went to college at Pacific University, in Forest Grove, OR. After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and French Studies, with a minor in Creative Writing, Miya moved to Baton Rouge, LA to spend two years as a Teach For American teacher at Progress Elementary School in North Baton Rouge. After completing her two-year commitment there, and earning certification to teach grades 1-6 in Louisiana, Miya moved to Knoxville, TN to obtain her Master of Arts degree in English at the University of Tennessee.

Currently, Miya is pursuing a Master of Science in Social Work degree at She plans to become a school social worker.