LEARNING TO BE "GOOD ENOUGH": HOLLYWOOD'S ROLE IN STANDARDIZING KNOWLEDGE AND THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY

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Abstract Written for teacher educators and pre-service teachers, we analyze education-themed Hollywood blockbusters *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) and *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Simpson, 1995) that were released alongside neo-liberal, classist, racist U.S. education policies of the 1980s and 1990s. We posit that these films boosted mainstream acceptance of the standardized testing industry and thus, the myth of meritocracy. In addition to featuring harmful narratives about racially, culturally, and economically marginalized students, the pictures promote high-stakes testing rather than interrogating the industry's reliance on marginalized students to "fail" tests so that centered or privileged students have a standard for measuring "success." We argue that the films continue to influence dominant national attitudes because the film narratives are often passed down intergenerationally from teacher to pre-

service teacher. Countering these messages, we analyze a third feature length film, *Whale Rider* (Barnett, Hübner, & Sanders, 2002), for its dedication to positive (not utopian) depictions of Māori epistemologies. Created outside of Hollywood's financial grip, this picture illustrates how film has the power to expand thinking on the value of Other ways of knowing. Simultaneously, we problematize the picture for its absence of address of colonial oppression.

Introduction

Public schooling in the United States responds to and often codifies dominant narratives that pervade contemporary culture. These narratives influence curriculum, policy, as well as teacher and student attitudes towards education. One primary narrative stream influencing, reinforcing, and challenging hegemonic ideologies about public education is popular film. With teacher educators and pre-service teachers in mind, our goals for this paper are to reveal intersections between the film industry, standardized testing industry and neo-liberal U.S. education policies that work for capitalist gains at the expense of students. We advocate for popular films about schooling serving as sites of analysis to inform critical conversations in pre-service teaching programs. We specifically engage pre-service and teacher educators because they will/have the greatest capacity to impact educational practices and systems on a day-to-day basis. As such, we hope to inspire teacher educators and pre-service teachers to think—even more critically than ever—about the collusion of these industries in (historically and contemporarily) producing deficient national narratives

about students, particularly marginalized students whose knowledges and worldviews have too often been limited or excluded from national discourse. We encourage readers to consider:

- For whom are films about teaching and learning, particularly within urban settings, typically made?
- Why is it important to investigate popular film narratives about teaching and learning?
- How have filmic messages impacted the way the dominant view the marginalized?
- What "permissions," justifications and predatory measures do disparaging films about teaching marginalized groups influence how Others are then educated by dominant groups?

As we address, racism and systemic oppression operate at a nexus of multiple institutions. Film has the capacity to act as a document of racist culture or to perpetuate racism. We explore the relationship between U.S. education policies spanning the 1980s – 2000s; this period of education reforms led to the massive privatization and consequent contemporary re-segregation of America's public schools (Lipman, 2011; Kumashiro, 2012; Ravitch, 2013; Warner, 2018). During this time, the Hollywood film industry produced education-themed blockbuster films featuring harmful narratives about marginalized students. These films still have a prevalent grip on the psyche of the U.S. Americans, even if not seen by current generations of pre-service teachers, because the narratives are often passed down intergenerationally from teacher educator to pre-service teacher. Our analyses of *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) and *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Simpson, 1995)

reveal how many canonical mainstream Hollywood films on education serve as a troublesome platform of "public pedagogy" (Giroux, 2004; 2011). Public pedagogy operates beyond the four walls of traditional schooling allowing public in/formal sites—such as film screening sites—to become educative spaces. Regarding Hollywood films as a public pedagogy, we argue that the medium has often endeavored *not* to challenge upper class, White, male epistemologies, but validated those epistemologies through inspirational messages designed to corral students into a myth of meritocracy. The myth of meritocracy (also referred to as the *bootstrap myth*) is born out of the ideals of the American Dream. The American Dream espouses that social mobility is equally available to all hard working citizens. However, the American Dream and its mutually-constitutive myth of meritocracy masquerades society's structural imbalances that rely on capital and social gains gleaned from the systemic oppressions (Harris, 2015). These myths support neo-liberal education policies and capitalist notions of achievement as numerical attainment. They further reward students not for working collaboratively or civically to prevent and solve social issues, but for competing in an artificial system that may or may not deem them "good enough" to progress academically and socially as we later describe. To counter these illusions, we offer an alternative analysis via our third film, *Whale Rider* (Barnett, Hübner, & Sanders, 2002), created outside of the Hollywood machine, for its dedication to positive depictions of Māori Indigenous epistemologies.

Our analysis is especially pertinent as the United States continues to face political upset while the Trump administration whittles notions of citizenship and human

value down to a monolithic identity, often reductively defined as White, American-born, Christian, heterosexual and male. We see this through administrative speech patterns that degrade Others and executive orders that target the legitimacy, validity and safety of marginalized communities through a multitude of national policies and practices (e.g. the "Muslim travel ban"; attempts to rescind the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program; the ongoing terrorization of immigrant communities by the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agency; the deplorable conditions found in immigrant detention centers at the U.S. border, with focused attention on the derogation of female detainees). Such reduced notions of citizenship can be similarly employed by the leadership of Betsy DeVos, who heads the U.S. Department of Education and advises the president on K-20 educational matters including funding, as well as policy and programs that inherently affect all students. Devos and her family are known for their bankrolling of right-wing organizations that peddle their own worldviews including Focus on Family, which supports anti-gay legislation as well as the pseudoscientific practice of conversion therapy[1] ("Public (school) enemy," 2016). Devos's worldviews are similarly promoted through "school choice" initiatives that have been criticized for increasing racial and economic segregation (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010) while turning focus away from investment in and strengthening of public school systems that serve a majority of students and families in the U.S. In 2019, Devos wrought

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[1] Conversion therapy (also known as reparative therapy) seeks to change an individual's sexual orientation from homo/bisexual to heterosexual, and/or a person's queer gender identity to cisgender through spiritual or psychological interventions. The practice has been denounced by the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatry Association, the American Counseling Association, and many others (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

results from standardized testing to cite a "student achievement crisis" (Lobosco, 2019). While student test scores were indeed disappointing, Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers contended:

> Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos ignores the real issues [of state funding] that plague our classrooms and student achievement, presumably because they disrupt her political agenda to siphon public money into private hands and expand private school vouchers and for-profit school ventures (Lobosco, 2019).

Devos's construction of the "student achievement crisis" (Lobosco, 2019) turns the lens towards students, administrators, teachers and governmental overreach while obfuscating her own role in benefitting from a system that privatizes education at the expense of public school learners, and especially low-income students. Also of concern is Devos's ability to use testing outcomes to justify obstructions of funding into "failing" public schools, and thus, increasing public school closures that would yield to greater overcrowding and school segregation.

We begin this paper by mapping a brief historical foundation rooted in coloniality that sought to standardize knowledge and subsequently generated fertile ground for the standardized testing industry to materialize. Then, we address how capitalistic gains made through neoliberal U.S. education reforms relied on narrow constructions of knowledge and the advancement of competitive, individualistic notions of achievement. Next, we analyze the aforementioned films to reveal their complicity with the

standardization of knowledge and the development of a national psyche about what education looks like, and how its messages have aligned with specific educational policies. We complete the film analysis by illuminating "Other" ways of knowing via an alternative filmic model (*Whale Rider, 2002*) which works to unpack and promote the necessity for varied knowledges in the academy and beyond. Lastly, we conclude the paper with reflections.

We write as two educators who have taught in both the k-12 US school system and in US higher education. We position ourselves as recipients of White privilege committed to anti-oppression teaching and learning. The significance of our review is to reveal a set of coordinated factors that normalize oppressively competitive structures that continue to evolve at the nexus of film and education. In doing so, we hope that we teachers, teacher educators, parents, students and communities will be better able to recognize and resist these structures in favor of just educational practices in schools and in our communities. In conjunction with building social and cognitive justice, we propose acknowledging how different communities construct knowledge and how the honoring and integration of varied knowledges can create a stronger educational and societal fabric.

Engaging understandings: Coloniality and colonization
Coloniality pivots from a position that western European logic, including the notion of gender and its bifurcations, is universal and accurate (Lugones, 2007; Lugones, 2016; Mignolo, 2011). Relevant to the points made in this manuscript, coloniality seeks to "dismantle 'Other' knowledges and ways of life" (Manning, 2016). Coloniality

can further be described as "a system that defines the organization and dissemination of epistemic, moral and aesthetic resources in ways that mirror and reproduce modernity's imperial project" (Andreotti, 2015, pp. 195). Alternatively, decoloniality offers a "delink[ing]" from colonial projects and "dispel[s] the myth of universality" (Mignolo, 2011, p. xxvii, and p. xvi, respectively).

Though related, coloniality differs from colonization in that land is central to colonization and to decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). While Indigenous cultures vary, Indigenous peoples have expressed the centrality of land in Indigenous epistemologies (Simpson, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). The centering of land is seen not as a "*concept* … but about centering the land as a *metabolism*" (Ahenakew, 2019, p. 14; italics original). As such, decolonization is not "a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3).

With these articulations in mind, we are intentional about the distinctions we make between coloniality and colonization throughout this article.

Mapping the historical foundations for the standardization of knowledge: Colonization, eugenics and standardized testing

Coloniality, colonization tactics, eugenics and standardized testing have built upon each other to normalize the subjugation of "Other" ways of knowing in order to privilege "dominant notions of what constitutes knowledge and knowledge construction in the academy and beyond" (Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan & Patton, 2010, p. 329). We address how

the practice of standardizing knowledge seeks to funnel learners into co-opted reductive ways of thinking that advance monoepistemological notions of education for the convenience and profit of a few. We engage decolonial and feminist pedagogical frameworks rooted in critical theory to help convey the intricacy of a social system wherein the power of the center depends on the creation and subordination of the margins. The role of capitalism is significant to this discussion because of its reliance on the margins to maintain the power and prestige of the center. We further engage these frameworks for their abilities to articulate and demonstrate the values of "Other" ways of knowing, learning, organizing, re-defining and practicing education. We recognize that decoloniality is not a tidy project with predictable solutions and outcomes. Instead, decoloniality requires flexibility, messiness, discontinuity and a commitment to "look within and undo/rework the colonizing oppressive structures from the inside-out and then look again from the outside-in" (Segalo, Manoff and Fine, 2015, p. 343).

The Eugenics movement

Though it had multiple iterations spanning generations, eugenics policies proliferated with fervor in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century and, soon after, throughout parts of Europe and Canada. The movement, which paved the way for a more insidious sorting via standardized testing, sought to develop a superior White race through selective breeding and forced sterilization efforts that intended erasure of multiple racial, ethnic and social cultures. Eugenics often relied on the IQ test as a method for determining human inferiority (Martschenko, 2017; Winfield 2007). As the tests were developed via the

reflection of western, White, male, middle and upper class epistemologies, People of Color were likely to score lower. In addition, newly arriving immigrants and anyone else who fared poorly on the tests were targets of the movement which led to mass sterilization campaigns aimed at halting the reproduction of:

> the urban poor, rural "white trash," the sexually deviant, Blacks, Jews, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos/as, the deaf, blind, epileptic, alcoholic, petty criminals, the mentally ill, and anyone who did not fit in with the pseudoscientifically established blonde, blue-eyed "norm" presented by the eugenically glorified "superior" Nordic race (Winfield, 2007, p. xvii).

Additionally, as part of "anti-Mexican sentiment manifested in school segregation and racial housing covenants" (Novak et al., 2018, p. 613), a study revealed that in California, Latina/os (especially Mexicans) were disproportionately targeted by sterilization practices between 1920 and 1945, with Latina women and girls being at an even higher risk than their male counterparts. Stereotypes of Mexican American women and girls as "hyperfertile" were used as justification for forced sterilization. An illustration of how such a stereotype became written into dominant national beliefs through film can be seen in the film *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) addressed below.

Standardizing knowledge
We employ the term *standardization of knowledge* to convey the streamlining of dominant cultural knowledge via mass education, including testing practices. The standardization

of knowledge has been "tightly related to the industrial revolution and the development of a nation-state" with goals of recruiting individuals to "serve the needs of the nation-state and its economic structure" (Bekerman, 2008 p. ix; see also Bekerman & Keller, 2003). Bekerman (2008) asserts that, because of such ties, "schools are in no way disinterested arenas within which neutral knowledge or skills are transmitted from the minds of specialists to those of passive individuals" (foreword). With a history of education in the west serving wealthy, White, able-bodied, Christian men, it is apparent that the standardization of knowledge is linked to a greater narrative about *who* is valued in education and *what* types of education are deemed valuable (Archibald, 2008; Teitelbaum, 1989; Yosso, 2005).

Standardized knowledge operates within interpretations of Cartesian logic that insist on divisions and compartmentalizations of our personal and communal existences as opposed to an integration of multiple parts of ourselves, our greater communities and spiritualities. Said monoepistemological understandings of education dangerously assume "cultural neutrality" (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005, p. 140), rather than acknowledging the multiple cultural ways in which knowledge is circulated and gleaned (Teitelbaum, 1989). Additionally, the standardization of knowledge often affixes a deficit lens that pathologizes marginalized groups for difference (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). As one example, Yosso (2005) describes how Students of Color and their families are "fault[ed] for poor academic performance" and that these deficit assumptions lead to the "banking method of education ... with forms of cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society" (p. 75). Yosso's statement

illuminates how the standardization of knowledge operates in tandem with what Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to as assimilationist teaching. Assimilationist teaching disregards students' cultural characteristics in favor of "ensur[ing] that students fit into [dominant] society" (pp. 24 – 25). As we describe later, filmic representations of Other students are often portrayed through a deficit lens, pathologizing them as unlearned, undisciplined, and troubled individuals ("bell hooks," 1997), and fail to acknowledge said students' abilities to think more critically through their lived experiences beyond the limitations of the dominant cultural spectrum (Yosso, 2005).

The standardized testing industry and the narrowing of epistemologies

In this section, we reveal how standardized testing—a multi-billion-dollar industry—disproportionately affects Students of Color and low-income students. Such testing intensifies social and educational segregation, leaving marginalized groups to fend for themselves in an already precarious educational system.

The standardized testing industry claims to measure both likelihood for students' future success and student achievement. Two primary forms of standardized testing in the American educational system include aptitude tests and achievement tests. Aptitude tests, such as the SAT, claim to predict student performance in subsequent educational settings such as colleges and universities. Achievement tests intend to measure students' knowledge gleaned from classroom instruction and training. While utilized to determine students' grade levels, results are reportedly used to indicate a school's effectiveness to board members and

communities and thus contribute to school closures, as seen through No Child Left Behind legislation.[2]

The standardized testing industry operates under the insistence that thinking can be streamlined, tests can be developed and measured objectively and that predictions of success can be accurately quantified. It camouflages the fact that test-makers are "subjective, value-laden human beings" (Teitelbaum, 1989, p. 329) by promoting notions of *objectivity* and *transparency* (Robertson & Dale, 2013). Critics like Teitelbaum, a test developer and trainer with the Educational Testing Service, contend that standardized testing only reflects "the androcentric model of knowledge by excluding everything that does not fit its definition of 'knowledge' and everything that cannot be tested in a positivistic format" (p. 329).

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[2] No Child Left Behind legislation outlined that by the end of a school's second year of not meeting adequate yearly progress, the following corrective actions could be taken: "(1) continue to provide all students enrolled in the school with the option to transfer to another public school served by the [Local Education Agency]; (2) continue to provide specified types of technical assistance while instituting any corrective action; (3) continue to make supplemental educational services available to children who remain in the school; and (4) identify the school for corrective action. Requires the [Local Education Agency], in the case of a school identified for corrective action, to do at least one of the following: (1) replace the school staff who are relevant to the failure to make [Annual Yearly Progress]; (2) institute and fully implement a new curriculum, including providing appropriate professional development for all relevant staff, that is based on scientifically based research and offers substantial promise of improving educational achievement for low-achieving students and enabling the school to make [Annual Yearly Progress]; (3) significantly decrease management authority at the school level; (4) appoint an outside expert to advise the school on its progress toward making [Annual Yearly Progress], based on its school plan; (5) extend the school's school year or school day; or (6) restructure the school's internal organizational structure." (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

The testing industry relies on the commodification of students and an illusion that successful test results secure educational advancement and thus future socio-economic security. Connell astutely describes this reliance on commodification and divisions for its proliferation:

> [F]or commodification to work in the area of a basic social process such as education, exclusion is vital. There need to be visible losers, if parents are to be persuaded to pay for their children to become winners. ... the losing has to be legitimated, it has to be made credible and not appear a matter of unfair discrimination or bad luck (in Robertson and Dale, 2013, p. 4) .

Furthering Connell's statement, Robertson and Dale (2013) summarize the consequences of standardized testing as "a particularly fierce form of identification of winners and losers" (p. 437). As such, the industry creates and maintains a convincing competition narrative that keeps students, parents, educators, administrators, policy-makers and politicians believing that learners need to participate in order to progress in society.

These tests can further exacerbate divisions between students because those with economic resources can afford preparation materials, tutors and courses marketed toward improving test scores. As such, the structure of the testing industry inherently positions low-income learners and their intersecting identities at a disadvantage. The descriptions offered by the authors above reveal how the testing industry co-opts marginalized and even centered students into a capitalist, competition-laden system that was never created

for their benefit, keeping both marginalized and centered students vying for dominance. Meanwhile, this well-maintained division between polar notions of *success* and *failure* secures the industry's profits.

Capitalist control and the cooptation of neoliberal education reforms

The ongoing standardization of knowledge through standardized testing relies on the roles neoliberalism and economics play in decisions about public education. The compulsory nature of public education produces rapt audiences for the persistence of capitalistic drives and desires to manifest. Kliebard (1995) points to the rise in industrialization as producing an "urgent mission" of public education to prepare youth for social efficiency, stating, "the advocates of social efficiency were educational reformers" (pp. 77-78). While compulsory schooling stands as some semblance of a human right to education in the American imaginary, it often serves the nation's capitalistic interest in providing the social training necessary for corporate economic prosperity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), as seen particularly in the federal education reforms of the 1980s and again in the early 21st Century.

A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (1983), published by President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education, determined that U.S. schools were failing and U.S. "preeminence" was "being overtaken by competitors" (n.p.). The following excerpt illustrates the report's reliance on a fear-induced rhetoric of *exclusion* to rally patriotic hopes for *inclusion*:

The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era *will be effectively disenfranchised*, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the *fostering of a common culture*, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom (n.p.; emphasis added).

The *Nation at Risk* report catapulted a new era of education policies with goals to produce a workforce that could compete with a rapidly globalizing economy (Kumashiro, 2012; Ravitch, 2013). The urgency imbued in this policy produced a subsequent emphasis on standardizing curriculum, enforcing a de-skilling of critical pedagogical practices through the mass adoption of pre-packaged curricula (Ravitch, 2013). This strategic de-skilling of teachers removed the need for critical competencies and forced teachers to focus on "ideological visions of management" (Apple, 1982, p. 114) rather than the promotion of critical thinking and citizen education in the classroom (Kumashiro 2012; Giroux 1988). Thus, the classroom became a reproduction of the factory job site; the teacher served as the manager of a room of workers taught to comply to the standards of behavior, and the teacher prepared students for the social classes of their parents (Anyon, 1981). The social control of curriculum in the 1980s solidified and furthered a foundation for the continued

narrowing of knowledge through the reforms of the next few decades.

A *Nation at Risk* reveals a pivotal moment in the focus on U.S. education: it threatens the psychic, economic, emotional, existential and ultimately the physical security of anyone who does not assimilate. Additionally, despite the report's boastful mention of the country's "pluralism," it whittles notions of American *culture* down to a conflated identity of *productive workers*, promoting America as a capitalist melting pot at the erasure of the cultural, ethnic, religious and other heterogeneous distinctions that comprise the country's identity.

The narrowing of knowledge further gained traction in the education reforms of the 1990s and through the trajectory of the re-authorizations of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The 1994 re-authorization, titled "The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994" (IASA), brought the first codified implementation of federal standards to public education. IASA, along with "Goals 2000," established accountability reporting measures on student performance on standardized tests. The 1994 ESEA re-authorization enhanced a competition-based view of schooling wherein standards became normalized measurements of schools' and students' worth. Often manifesting as standardized tests which focused on specific points of knowledge, the scope of learning narrowed as student-to-student competition grew.

The 1994 ESEA re-authorization's focus on standardization set the stage for the proliferation of standards-based reforms that heightened academic

competition during the Bush and Obama administrations. The 2004 re-authorization of ESEA, commonly called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), attached federal funding directly to performance outcomes based on achievement tests. Many achievement tests were outsourced to large profit-bearing corporations like Pearson and McGraw-Hill (Picciano & Spring, 2013; Miner, 2004; Bracey, 2005), creating a conflict of interest: if corporate contracts relied on the misfortune of low-performing schools, what incentive would exist to thoroughly "improve" schools? Simultaneously, the reliance on capitalism in the public education sector reveals the corporate advantage in minimizing culturally relevant curricula in favor of assimilationist curricula.

A key attribute of the NCLB legislation included penalties for poor performing schools. Title I schools, schools concentrated in many low-income, urban areas, serving predominantly Students of Color, that failed to meet federal achievement standards received sanctions for poor performance. Sanctions included: providing students the option to choose another school, such as a charter school; connecting with external, often for-profit, agencies that would provide supplemental educational services to students such as tutoring; adopting a new curriculum, often one that was prepared by a corporate education company; and finally, closing a traditional school and re-structuring it as a charter school, forging further relations with corporate philanthropic arms (Bracey, 2005). The sanctions established in NCLB created a mushroom cloud of profits for educational testing and curriculum corporations where some companies stood to make over $2 billion in the course of the first few years of the law's enactment (Olson, 2004). As public schools failed to compete in the knowledge

marketplace, they were turned over to turn-around businesses that provided profitable interventions and boundaries of what could be considered useful knowledge.

The Race to the Top (2009) initiative implemented by the Obama Administration called for continued competition, pitting states and districts against each other for grant money to improve educational opportunities that aligned with particular standards. These grant dollars often go to contracts with educational services companies to help schools improve certain processes or to introduce new technologies to schools, further blurring the lines between public schools and private companies.

The significance of the initiatives and laws we have described that redirect public school funding and attention away from public schools toward private and profitable institutions speaks to the U.S. government's prioritization of corporate power and profit over the interests of schools and communities, a phenomenon that has flourished since the Reagan era.

Hollywood's perpetuation of the achievement gap through visual narrative

The media, as well as the culture they produce, distribute, sanction, have become the most important educational force in creating citizens and social agents capable of putting existing institutions into question and making democracy work—or doing just the opposite.

Henry Giroux, 2005, p. 45

Film is significant to the critique of standardizing knowledge because it has the power to create, influence and/or solidify national attitudes about *who* and *what ideas* are to be valued in a particular society. It can inaccurately inform identity production through various gazes including male, White, patriarchal and the colonial gaze which perpetuates "caricatur[izations] of non-European civilizations" (Gonick, 2010, p. 306). Conversely, film can work through a lens of decoloniality via the production of "more expansive understandings of diverse peoples, their struggles, and world views" (Gonick, 2010, p. 306).

In film, deficit and achievement gap discourses about marginalized communities are advanced through script writing that camouflages state violence through portrayals of specific communities as problematic. It also does so through casting. Films such *as Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Simpson, 1995) cast White actors as knowledgeable, disciplined students or teachers, but cast Brown and Black actors as unruly, disobedient students from bad communities in need of a White savior. Viewers' constant repetitive exposure to these contrasting racial stereotypes normalizes racism sub/consciously. Simultaneously, the narrative creates a thriving platform for competitive ideals about meritocratic education: those who work hard enough will master the test and secure their futures; *all others will have failed by choice.*

We review *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) directed by Ramón Menéndez and *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Simpson,1995) directed by John N. Smith, two formative films that paralleled aforementioned macro-level education reforms in the 1980s and 1990s which sought to standardize

knowledge through segregative policies. These films served as commercial drivers for the social acceptance of such reforms. We posit that these films are especially relevant to investigation by pre-service teachers because they have been central in regenerating an international and intergenerational sub/consciousness about the aesthetics of education including what comprises education, who is educated and who is teachable. In these films, what is overtly expressed are meritocratic values. Operating insidiously just beneath the consciousness of mainstream (White, middle/upper class) movie-going audiences is that Students of Color should assimilate entirely into western, White, androcentric knowledge—despite its erasure of Other cultural ways of knowing.

Stand and Deliver
The film *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) offers a complexity of issues presented in concert with the Reagan Administration's education policies. We analyze this film for its role in providing an epistemological foundation for subsequent films that perpetuate notions of racism, sexism, and classism in education.

Loosely based on a true story, *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) tells the story of educator Jaime Escalante, played by Edward James Olmos, who teaches calculus in a low performing high school in East Los Angeles. The film portrays Escalante teaching students—who were otherwise mathematically illiterate and rebellious—how to accelerate in calculus in one school year. Nearly all of Escalante's students appear to be People of Color with the implication that all the students are from working class families. Escalante drives his students to success through high

expectations, a no-excuses policy and rigorous training that includes test preparation before and after school, as well as during the sweaty, non-air conditioned summer months, and during holiday breaks. Escalante and his students come under the suspicion of the Educational Testing Service when the entire class passes the Advanced Placement Calculus exam. Students are in a bind: if they do not re-take the exam, they will be falsely incriminated by the allegations of the Educational Testing Service; if they re-take the exam which will likely be more difficult, they not only risk failure, but also concede to a racist (and classist) system. While racism is assumed to be at the root of the allegations, the students agree to re-take the exam to prove their innocence. The film fails to highlight how testing industry profits are tied to the competitive delineation between insiders—those who pass the exam—and outsiders who fail the exam. This hype that surrounds passing and failing exams secures the industry's futurity.

Stand and Deliver (Musca, 1988) is an interesting film to problematize because its portrayals are not entirely negative as it arguably presents some positive narratives of Students of Color in an urban school. In one regard, it projects a different picture of the academic, social and familial abilities of Students of Color rarely portrayed in Hollywood films during its time period. For example, Pancho works hard at honing his skills as a mechanic after school and Lupe studies extensively despite her responsibility to take care of her siblings while her parents work the night shift. However, the film promotes sexism and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) in multiple ways: the portrayal of men in positions of power and women as inhibitors to their advancement (see for example, Escalante's wife; also, a

female school administrator) as well as the hyper-sexualization of Latina characters.

One key scene where the male gaze subjugates Latina characters takes place in the classroom. Escalante teaches the students algebra using a word problem involving the number of girlfriends Juan, Pedro and Carlos have. When Claudia, one of Escalante's active students, proposes a way to solve for this heterosexist word problem, Escalante replies, "You're good now, but you're gonna end up barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen" (Musca, 1988, 00:34:39). This non-sequitur suggests that Claudia's current "good" looks will lead her to a predetermined destiny full of limitations and serves no other purpose than to undermine the student's contributions to the class. While it may be seen as a joke to the class, the statement publicly reinforces a societally limiting view of Claudia's future, belittling her to a set of stereotypes about Latinas. Escalante further peddles the male gaze through heterosexism. When a male student who does not entirely conform to gender binaries tries to solve for X, the student asks, "Is Pedro bisexual or what?" to which Escalante retorts, "I have a terrible feeling about you," suggesting that the student himself might be gay or bisexual and it is terrible (Musca, 1988, 00:34:37). These two judgments made by Escalante advances heterosexuality and masculinity as the gold standard. In doing so, the character reinforces a heteropatriarchal male gaze too often ascribed to representations of Latinos in mainstream films.

In addition to the perpetuation of stereotypes, our critique of the film is that it uncritically promotes an inspiring view of standardized testing and fails to dismantle the racism, ableism and classism upon which the industry

is reliant. By romanticizing competition through meritocratic narratives, the film seduces viewers' expectations that Others ought to proudly bootstrap into the dominant culture's educational system instead of challenging it. Rather than unpacking these crucial issues, *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988) reinforces limited options: students can either assimilate into the educational system by mastering and acing the test, or "choose" failure. We liken this to Audre Lorde's (2007) contention that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (pp. 110-113). That is, mastering and acing the insider's test will not dismantle survival-of-the-fittest thinking that deters diverse voices and worldviews from entering and contributing to the academy; rather, it validates and promotes hierarchies and marginalization that maintain distinctions between the academy's insiders and outsiders.

Dangerous Minds

Dangerous Minds (Bruckheimer & Simpson, 1995), though met with criticism (Ebert, 1995; McCarthy, 1995) at its release, fared well at the box office and persisted as a White cultural artifact, buttressing the moral panic around violence of the mid-1990s. Starring Michelle Pfeiffer, the narrative advances a particular cultural imaginary of the White female teacher who changed careers to help save the lives of Youth of Color from the perils of their low-income neighborhoods. While based on LouAnne Johnson's (2007) *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, the film deviates significantly from the book, providing a "feel-good oversimplif[ication] of two of its themes, pedagogy and race" (Harris, 2015). Johnson (played by Pfeiffer in the film), disclosed to a student who was inquiring about negative student

depictions in the movie, that it is "at times so far removed from fact as to be ridiculous."

The depiction of urban Students of Color as "dangerous" pervades from the opening credits, as film viewers are introduced to seedy images of drug dealers and back-lit characters walking graffiti-riddled streets. Movie-goers witness students boarding a school bus which drives them from their neighborhood (shot in grainy black-and-white film) to a brightly colored school campus. The school, like we see in Johnson's character later in the film, is portrayed as "the light" for the "darkness" of urban students' lives.

Viewers first meet Johnson entering the school as a student teacher who is quickly offered full-time status after a string of substitutes are driven out by students. After a defeated initial day in which Johnson is addressed by some of her students as "white bread," she confides in her White male friend and colleague, Hal, that she can't teach her pupils. Despite her declaration, Louanne (spelled differently than the book author) returns with a sharpened approach, donning a leather jacket, heeled-boots and a no-mess attitude to attempt to effectively win over her students.

Most notable about Johnson's character is how it is positioned to normalize assimilationist teaching in the movie-goer's psyche. Assimilationist teaching "operates without regard to the students' particular cultural characteristics" and seeks only to "ensure that students fit into [dominant] society" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 24). Louanne is the picture of the 1990s IASA teacher champion, pulling students away from the diverse knowledges of their home communities (Yosso, 2005) in order to assimilate them

into White epistemological futurity. In one instance, Louanne centers a grammar lesson around the threat of death that looms in the lives of her low-income Students of Color. Challenged by her students on her disconnect from their communities, Johnson delivers a heated monologue steeped in the myth of meritocracy, that centers individual student *choice* as the gateway for self-saving while simultaneously burying multi-institutional societal oppressions from viewer consciousness. Simultaneously, Johnson re-centers whiteness and furthers her attempts to "homogenize students into one conflated 'American' identity" (Ladson-Billiings, 2009, p. 38) through the pedagogical engagement of White folk lyricist Bob Dylan, who sings of *dignified* death. Johnson enrages:

> There are a lot of people in your neighborhood who *choose* not to get on that bus. What do they do? They *choose* to go out and sell drugs, they *choose* to kill people, they *choose* to do a lot of other things. …. The people who choose to get on that bus— which are you—are the people who are saying 'I will not carry myself down to die when I go to my grave, my head will be high.' That is a *choice*. There are no victims in this classroom! (1995, 00:48:40)

As in *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988), we see the illusion of "choice" pedaled throughout the film. Through a discourse of "choice" the film works to secure a bias in viewers that never questions systemic dysfunction but assumes individual and cultural guilt through a rhetoric of *bad choices*. This theme colludes with the implementation of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, one of the primary actors in the development of a school-to-prison pipeline (Hanson,

2005). These zero tolerance policies expanded beyond a safety measure to a profiling measure, creating criminals of students based on assumptions of danger (Meiners, 2007).

A final imperative to our connection between Hollywood and the testing industry is the neo-liberal plexus from which they operate. Neo-liberalism works beyond overtly political aims and emerges covertly through rhetoric, technologies, "discourses, institutions and practices that construct 'truth'" (Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 138), thereby endeavoring to "persuade populations to discipline themselves economically and/or enterprisingly" (Webb, Gulson, & Pitton, 2012, p. 3). As we have seen in the preceding analyses, neo-liberal depictions of educators in films work in a twofold manner. First, they develop a White savior mentality often depicting middle class, White teachers working with "troubled" teens "in the hood" as if they are a public service project. Said teachers administer educational discipline through bootstrap ideologies that negate Other cultural ways of knowing. In this sense, savior teachers are portrayed as ever-giving: they pay for students' school supplies, events and personal items out of their own pockets; they work overtime and weekends without compensation; they sacrifice time with their families and give up relationships with their partners. These teachers often appear as radicals working inside the system. But if we shift the Hollywood narrative from the screen to political and social reality, we see the other element of neo-liberalism at work in these films: teachers are agents who contribute to the "privatization of aspirations" through their deep belief that mastering the test will create economic advancement (Robertson and Dale, 2013, p. 435). The teacher as neo-liberal agent allows the government to fulfill an illusion of

reduced overreach while asserting more governance over its people through their own self-policing. In short, as the Hollywood imaginary furthers divisions between insider and outsider student groups, it also promotes teachers as saviors, martyrs and "manag[ers] of social risk … tasked with social control and with delivering public services" (Raddon and Harrison, 2015, p. 139). Teachers are at once individuals and entrepreneurs as well as businesses charged with the responsibility of "innovat[ion]" so as to solve social problems" (Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p.139).

"Other" ways of knowing and an alternative filmic representation on education

> *When Aboriginal people say 'no' to aspects of Western education that clash with our cultural knowledge and ways of knowing, we often feel assaulted by the continued pressure to conform through new forms of colonization such as government policies and procedures. But … we stand upon the ground—the land—of our cultural knowledge, which has sustained us since time immemorial: we prevail* (Jo-ann Archibald |Q'um Q'um Xiiem, 2008, p. 92).

Much of what is stripped away in conventional western education is cultural knowledge. "Other" or alternative ways of knowing can refer to various cultural groups which are diverse in both their knowledge and in their practices. Other ways of knowing may include the lived experiences of Indigenous groups, women, queer folks, immigrants, differently-abled folks, People of Color, people experiencing poverty and/or homelessness, artists, and so forth. Though

varied and different, we situate Other ways of knowing as the nexus of multiple intersecting knowledges that exceed the limitations of strictly linear logics. Alternative ways of knowing rely not on capitalist notions of achievement such as standardized testing's numerical attainment wherein students become the numbers that they score, but rather recognize that "[t]he story of one cannot be understood outside of the story of the whole" (Lavallée, 2009, p. 24); students may be seen as part of a greater life and ancestral network, for example.

As illustrated in Lavallée's (2009) quote above, Indigenous ways of knowing—though varied—may value connection with self, community and Elders, spirituality, creativity, sensory experience, intergenerational and ancestral knowledge, spirit, memory and the unknown (Archibald 2008; Lavallée 2009; Linklater, 2014). Knowledge may further resonate through dreams, intuition and symbols, in dialogue with others and through storytelling. Indigenous epistemologies may recognize that deeply meaningful and profound learning is likely to occur in spaces outside of the "academy," such as in nature (Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2014). Lavallée (2009) (as gleaned from Kovach, 2005) further summarizes Indigenous epistemology as "fluid, non-linear and relational" (p. 23). She states that "many Indigenous ways of knowing accept both the physical and the nonphysical realms as reality. In accepting the nonphysical, one must accept that reality cannot always be quantified" (23). This description differs from institutional practices born out of western epistemologies that rely on "narratives that deal with the sequences of events in a linear progression ..." (Archibald, 2008, p. 83). Indigenous and Other knowledges have been

historically and contemporarily dismissed and villainized by western institutions for providing alterity to White, western, androcentric pedagogies. We see this in Hollywood films particularly when Indigenous knowledge and Other ways of knowing are frequently objectified, essentialized and exoticized.

Whale Rider

One film that potentially counters Hollywood's narratives around Other ways of knowing is *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002), directed by Niki Caro. The screenplay is based on the book similarly entitled *The Whale Rider* (1987) by Māori novelist Witi Ihimaera. In response to his daughters' observation of the overrepresentation of male protagonists and helpless female counterparts in Hollywood action films, Ihimaera wrote the book with the intention of making the protagonist a girl child (Grimm, 2016).

Set in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the film features an eleven-year-old Māori girl named Paikea ("Pai"), who believes she is destined to be the next chief of her community. This honor had been strictly reserved for Pai's twin brother who died alongside their mother during childbirth. For Pai, living in what is portrayed as a patrilineal society means that she will have to convince her grandfather, Koro, the current chief (a duty which includes political as well as spiritual leadership), that she is worthy of the responsibility. Koro disregards Pai's intentions to become the next chief, often blaming her for the afflictions of the community[3] which he notes began when she was born. Koro summons the eldest

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[3] The afflictions of the community—though unexplained—are mostly portrayed through visual representation of a generation of young Māori men lacking direction or cultural engagement.

boy children in the village to attend a sacred school where they will learn ceremony, song and warrior techniques of the *taiaha,* or fighting stick, used in *mai rakau* (stick fighting)*.* At this school, the boys' spirits will be tested to determine the next leader. Despite being prohibited from participation in the sacred school, Pai watches the instructions in secret and recruits her uncle to teach her how to use the *taiaha,* at which she becomes strikingly adept.

The aforementioned is just one of many storylines in which Pai outwits the boys in the sacred school and exhibits innate leadership abilities. It is apparent to viewers that Pai's abilities are grounded in her connection with land, rather than patriarchal protocol. For Pai, "the land is more than a backdrop, space, or a location; it is a sustainer, speaker, and archive" for the stories of her people (Sium & Ritskes, 2013, p. VII). Pai connects, listens, and communicates with land, respects her elders, challenges patriarchy and finds ways to glean cultural and ancestral knowledge despite the sexism that impedes her from partaking in the sacred school.

In many ways, Whale Rider (Barnett et al., 2002) operates as a pedagogical tool through its negation of the colonial gaze that might otherwise depict the community as helpless or misguided by their cultural beliefs. Despite the portrayal of unspecified social and economic challenges, much of the Māori community is portrayed as agentic and living in congruence with each other (Gonick, 2010). The film further portrays a young female leader who "ensur[es] cultural survival" not through advancement of her own individuality, but through the community collective (Gonick, 2010, p. 317). Through several instances in the film, viewers come to understand that Pai's intelligence is deeply

connected with her ability to read signs from land—particularly the whales. When at the end of the film, multiple whales are beached on the local shore, the community comes together to physically pull the whales back into the ocean. Unfortunately, their efforts are in vain and the community members attempt to comfort the whales as death ensues. Yet it is Pai who understands that mighty physical power will not move the whales: connection and communication will. Like her grandfather, Pai is able to independently identify the leader whale. She knows that in assisting this whale back into the ocean the others will follow. Pai's successful leadership—which has always been evident to the film viewer—becomes clearer to her community, and eventually her grandfather too. Pai sits atop the leader/chief whale, massaging and encouraging its return to sea. The whale begins to move. At this point, the film viewer witnesses the success of a different kind of leadership. Whereas Koro led with forceful, rigid, patriarchal values, Pai's leadership proves to be relational. In *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002), viewers see that moving beached whales back into the ocean is beyond any linear western logic that can be taught in the formal academy. The message is not only about beached whales: if the beached whales represent old (stuck) ways of thinking, what becomes evident is that moving heavy, arduous thoughts from overtaking space requires more than force; it requires communion, nuance, remembrance, intuition and collaboration. Said differently, knowledge that is intended to solve local or global societal issues ought not be inflexible, standardized, packaged and force-fed for mass consumption because one size will not fit all (Apple, 1982). In Pai's story, knowledge culminates intuitively and relationally—and likely along lines of ancestry—through the encouragement of her

community who accepts connection with self, nature and land as truth. This provision of safety and encouragement in learning is shared intergenerationally, through time and within relationships.

Unlike the other films we review, *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002) was produced in Aotearoa/New Zealand, outside of Hollywood's financial influence. Caro, a non-Māori New Zealander not only directed the film but adapted the story to a screenplay. Caro attempted ethical storytelling in multiple ways: she shot the film in the village of Whāngārā, where the story is situated; she collaborated with the Māori people of Whāngārā; and other than principle actors, Māori people from Whāngārā were employed as a majority of the actors throughout the film. It could be argued that Caro's accountability to the community was embedded in her filmmaking methods as she told the story *of* the people *in front of* the people stating in the film's special features, "I was very attracted by the potential to work within a Māori community, to work collaboratively, and to collectively create something that we could all be proud of in Aotearoa" (Caro, 2003, "Behind the scenes," 00:02:38). Endorsing Caro's work, Ihimaera, the book's author, reflects on the success of the book's adaptation to screenplay:

Niki [Caro] created a [marvelous] transformation and she updated the story so that it is very relevant beyond the year 2003. It's not just about a community that is faced with a particular problem of ancestry and succession, it's also about women and how they need to find and make their way in society. Pai has become this iconic young girl who is desperately trying to seek her own sovereignty

and her own destiny in a male-oriented world (Film Education, 2003).

Ihimaera's account, albeit cloaked in the individualism associated with White liberal feminism, is particularly pertinent as the film's endorsement comes not only from the book author, but from a member of the community portrayed in the film. Yet perhaps the most striking and significant affirmation of the film comes from Hone Taumaunu, Chief of the Ngati Konohi people of Whāngārā. In the film's special features, Chief Taumaunu reflects on the collaboration between the cast, crew and the people of Whāngārā, stating "we have built up a beautiful relationship, and the relationship is built on mutual trust, mutual respect, and a lot of give and take" (Caro, 2003, "Te Waka: Building the canoe," 00:10:22). Chief Taumaunu further shares that what has been "enshrined on the heart will remain" (Caro, 2003, "Te Waka: Building the canoe," 00:10:39).

Our inclusion of *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002) as a pedagogical tool is not uncomplicated. In one sense, the film offers a break from pathologization of non-dominant communities that the Hollywood films reviewed here perpetuate. Alternatively, astute criticism of the film brings into relief some potential risks associated with the portrayal of a non-dominant group by a member of a dominant group. For example, while it might be assumed that the hardships of the community—of which Koro blames Pai—stem from colonial oppression, there is an almost eerie absence of dialogue about such a likelihood. Similarly, as Hokowhitu (2008), a Māori scholar from the Ngäti Pukenga tribe (Sorensen & Diaz, 2015) notes, with the exception of a non-

speaking German woman near the film's end, Pākehā (non-Māori White people) are missing from the storyline. While this absence could be interpreted as centering the Māori community, Hokowhitu (2008) suggests that this tactic "offers the illusion of spatial isolation" allowing presumably White viewers "to escape into a world where images of themselves are not present" (p. 128). Consequently, "Pākehā and other Westerners [can purge themselves] of any responsibility for the oppression of indigenous peoples" (Hokowhitu, 2008, p. 129). Statements such as these require us to consider—as stated in the introduction—for what social locations were this film made? It seems unlikely that the filmmakers were targeting a Māori audience, but instead intended to enthrall middle class White westerners to theatres. The contrast between Ihimaera (Film Education, 2003) and Chief Taumaunu's (Caro, 2003, "Te Waka: Building the canoe,") perspective versus that of Hokowhitu's (2008) perspective (admittedly, all men) offers a tension that is relevant for exploration in the classroom.

The opportunity to screen and discuss *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002) with pre-service teachers provides a formative dialogic space to consider how "the production and transmission of knowledge is always a contested process" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010, p. 144) without tidy boundaries. Not only can *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002) be used to circulate discussion about the risks of standardized thought, the film offers other ways of imagining education and critical thinking. For example, education that values critical thinking, creativity, ancestry, community and connection with land challenges neoliberal education values that rank business prowess and economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability that could otherwise

support all communities. *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002) is not about the standardization of knowledge and its mass consumption, but the opposite. It shows how communing with the land and "trust[ing] a more-than-human intelligence" (Jimmy, Andreotti, Stein, 2019, forward) benefits the earth's inhabitants. Furthermore, the imbrication of endorsements and criticisms of *Whale Rider* (Barnett et al., 2002)—such as the ones shared here—offer an opportunity for pre-service teachers to unpack and live with the untidy tension that no single perspective can fully represent one issue (in the case of Whale Rider, whether it was produced with integrity). This loosening of rigid ways of knowing can help usher in more collaborative ways of thinking, being together, and approaching world issues that desperately need our attention. In this sense, teaching necessarily acts as a political commitment to the social world (Glick, 2020).

Reflection and conclusion
The popularity of Hollywood films on education produced from the 1980s to the 2000s aided in the acceptance and development of corporate futurity in the public curriculum. Corporate futurity was aided by Hollywood's repetitive and thus normalizing narrative about Students of Color and students from low-income earning families being in need of "saving" from their "deficit-riddled" lives through education reforms that actually worked to disenfranchise them. Teaching how these films align with the discriminatory historic and governmental policies is key not only to future teachers, but also to future filmmakers who wish to focus on schools as sites of inquiry. Utilizing canonical Hollywood films about education serves as a critical site for developing socially-conscious and self-reflexive pre-service teachers

committed to dismantling systems of oppression that play out in traditional classroom narratives.

Monoepistemological standardizations of knowledge erase the personal, communal, spiritual and the imagination in learning. Instead, standardizations of knowledge promote assessments of students by how well they follow institutionalized definitions of knowledge acquisition (Freire, 2000). The myth of meritocracy in Hollywood, coupled with mainstream notions of standardized education and individual success, denies the importance of working in community with self and others. Knowledge centered in standardized testing disregards the necessity of Other ways of knowing. Other ways of knowing are necessary for developing community, skills of diplomacy, negotiation, emotional intelligence and generosity—skills necessary in global and local peace-building initiatives. Such denials make it difficult to imagine creating a new era of thinkers that will promote the well-being of students and families regardless of their cultural and social backgrounds. The greatest risk of teaching to the test is that it can limit learners' knowledges, robbing them of their abilities to co-develop holistic communities in the future.

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