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A Paradox of Fact and Fiction: Cultivating the 'Literary Imagination' Through Quiet Rebellion

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A PARADOX OF FACT AND FICTION: CULTIVATING THE 'LITERARY IMAGINATION'
THROUGH QUIET REBELLION

by

EDEN EVANS

(Under the Direction of John Weaver)

ABSTACT

The dissertation explores the problems that patterned and processed teaching and learning poses for implementing principles of critical pedagogy in English Literature courses. I apply multiple theoretical frameworks including literary theory, critical theory and post-humanism to place my own experiences amidst the on-going conversations about standardization and democracy. I draw upon the work of educational theorists such as Maxine Greene, Martha Nussbaum, Louise Rosenblatt, and Mary Aswell Doll to explore the ways that literature can enrich students' lives and society, and Geneva Gay and Lisa Delpit to explore how cultural bias regarding linguistics can function when teaching literature and language in a standardized setting. I also refer to John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Gert Biesta, and bell hooks to explore the ways that current practices can compromise democratic values in the classroom, and post-human theorists, such as Hayles, Braidotti, and Weaver to explore the consequences of sacrificing these qualities as science and technology continue to change our environment. Within these speculative essays I analyze the works of fiction from authors, Colson Whitehead, Lesley Nineka Arimah, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, and various authors of fantasy series to discuss how speculative fiction can help us understand these concepts. Through fictionalized vignettes based on real classroom experiences paired with speculative essays, I attempt to make connections between perceived binaries of fact and fiction and science and literature. I provide a discussion focused on the power of fiction to develop a sense of identity, both collective and individual, build empathy, and foster critical thinking skills, and address how these are lost when measurement takes precedence over learning opportunities that allow for exploration and creation. The study particularly addresses the ways science fiction and fantasy work to engage students while building important literacy skills necessary for success in the discipline. The inquiry explores the struggle teachers feel when attempting to meet district and state testing requirements while also providing students with meaningful learning opportunities.

INDEX WORDS: Curriculum studies, Speculative fiction, Critical pedagogy, Standardized testing, Teaching literature, Literary imagination

A PARADOX OF FACT AND FICTION: CULTIVATING THE 'LITERARY IMAGINATION'
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DEDICATION

To my loving family without whom this would have been completed years ago. In all seriousness though, I dedicate this to my girls Eliza and Evelyn who deserve more than our education system has to offer.

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I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, John Weaver, for all of his guidance throughout this process. I would also like to acknowledge my mother for her daily reminders to persevere and see the project through until the end.

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Prologue

I am a high school English teacher currently in my 10th year in the classroom. Throughout my experiences, I have always struggled with balancing the district and state requirements and providing meaningful learning experiences for my students, and it seems strange to me that these two goals should be so at odds with one another. This is in large part because I have always taught a course with a high-stakes state test attached to it. I want to begin this journey by providing readers with the necessary background information to understand the context of my current practice and inquiry. When I started teaching 9th Grade English at a high school in rural South Georgia in 2011, I was presented with four scripted units issued by the state and expected to follow these units. This was a year of transition since the state of Georgia had recently adopted new standards. These units included no suggestions for differentiating the content for a classroom of diverse learners and the amount of content was nearly impossible to deliver in the allotted amount of time.

It became clear to district leaders that these units needed to be revised to fit the needs of our students, and so the process began. Almost 10 years later, we still have these "common unit plans" for the district; however, they are unrecognizable from the initial versions. We are still expected to teach the extended texts as indicated by the common unit plans and are also provided with a list of supplementary texts to choose from. However, teachers who teach advanced content courses have significantly more freedom to bring in supplementary texts at their individual discretion, but only because they are the only teacher who teaches the specific course. A few years ago, our district, along with the other Georgia districts, implemented what is known as the "PLC" (Professional Learning Communities) process, which is essentially opportunities for teachers to plan collaboratively with their grade-level peers; however, according to DurFour

& DuFour's 2016 handbook, collaboration is not actually the goal. These meetings are instead focused on stripping down curriculum to what the team has determined "essential" skills and knowledge for the course and measuring student performance of those essential skills through common formative assessments.

When we began this process, the district brought in the services of a consultant for guidance who suggested that the formative and summative assessments should be "cold reads" with multiple choice questions for the sake of measurement. Therefore, the task for English teachers is to select 2-3 standards from the mandated 42 (many of which also include several specific indicators) to assess reading and writing. We, like other content areas, are then expected to make a goal and move a selected percentage of students from the "developing" or "beginning" categories to the "proficient" category. The baseline for this categorization of students is derived from 4-5 multiple choice questions focused on one reading passage. We then meet to determine whether the goal was met, and the process starts over with the next unit.

Often, we are met with flaws in the summative assessments that cannot be changed, and we are not permitted to throw out these flawed questions; but rather, students are academically penalized because someone at the district level incorrectly input the question or correct answer choice, and we are told to submit the changes with the next opportunity for revisions. Also, it is important to note that these assessments were teacher created by pulling from databases such as "GO FAR" which is comprised of Milestones questions that were not used on the assessment or online resources such as "Common Lit" and altered as necessary, so mistakes, inconsistencies, and validity/reliability issues are understandable.

With these Common Interim Assessments (CIA's) and the Georgia Milestones End of Course assessment, students in my 11th grade American Literature course will have 36 percent of

their grade made up of standardized testing, with no or limited opportunity to contest or review the assessment of their performance or remediate and retake the assessments. The greatest gains in a students' development happen when they are unafraid to take risks and are free from the psychological fear of failure; and unfortunately, this model does not allow for that freedom. Also pedagogically problematic, is the way this process imposes one specific interpretation of fiction on students. It does not allow for the reader to interact with and experience a work of fiction on their own terms, which reduces the power of literature in the learning process. Paradoxically, to impose some misinterpretation of a scientific process of data collection on the teaching and learning of fiction, we have reduced both science and fiction to shallow versions of their potential in teaching and learning. My dissertation is an attempt to explore these contemporary educational trends and the impact they have on students and their being in the world, as well as their impact on a society in desperate need of critical thinking and imaginative problem solving.

In Chapter One, I address the move away from an emphasis on fiction toward "informational" texts. I have a deep appreciation for nonfiction texts. Most of the works I will reference for this study are nonfiction texts. I teach AP Language, which focuses on insightful reading of nonfiction work and argument construction; however, the "informational" texts pushed are not those profound speeches by rhetorical geniuses or philosophical essays by history's great thinkers; they are informational pieces about topics such as the benefits of solar energy and meat-based diets. While I do not dispute students should be able to read these informational pieces, I do question whether they are instructionally appropriate for a high school American Literature course. In this chapter, I explore the flaws in binary thinking, the ways that fiction and fact can cross boundaries, how fiction can often be more real than what is widely

considered "fact" or true, and what is considered "fact" or true can be the very foundation for some of society's most harmful fictitious narratives. In this chapter, I draw upon Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and how it metaphorically captures this phenomenon.

In Chapter Two, I move into an exploration of the democratic possibilities the teaching and learning of fiction brings into a classroom: its Socratic nature, ability to create community through shared experience, potential for an individual's exploration of self within society, and its ability to inspire empathy for others. The chapter also includes discussion focused on the impossibility of standardizing students' experiences with literary texts through an exploration of the complexities of reading and responding to literature. It is largely a criticism of the contemporary educational model that attempts to measure and categorize students by means of standardization practices for the sake of acquiring better test scores. In this chapter, I include an analysis of Lesley Nneka Arimah's short work of speculative fiction "What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" which imagines a world in which emotions can somehow be measured and quantified.

In Chapter Three I expand on some of the ideas presented in the previous chapter regarding the promotion of democratic values in the classroom. It explores the ways literature can contribute to identity construction and allow students to figure out a space of belonging in a pluralistic society. Within this chapter, I focus specifically on the power of narrative writing and reading and how it enables students to share their experiences and develop a sense of empathic imagination. I think this is particularly important for my students in rural South Georgia. Many of them, lack much experience outside of the small community, and they also lack interaction with many people outside of the community; therefore, they are exposed to little variety of perspective and experience from which to make meaning of the world. In this chapter, I discuss

the importance of intentionally selecting works for the sake of these blind spots, and how teachers can approach the traditional canonized works we are often expected and even mandated to teach through a critical and culturally responsive lens. In this chapter, I include an explication of Toni Morrison's work to demonstrate the possibilities these works bring to the learning process.

The analysis of *What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* (2017) in Chapter Two introduces an exploration of the importance of science fiction and speculative fiction that I focus on in chapter four.

In Chapter Four I continue the discussion of the importance of science fiction and speculative fiction that I introduced in Chapter Two. In this chapter, I question our tendency to see science and literature as opposites, especially in the context of education, and call for a reconstitution of how educators view these disciplines, emphasizing that in a world in which science and technology are rapidly advancing, we need the humanities, fiction especially, to ethically navigate these new realities and imagine futures. To conclude this chapter, I will draw upon Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a demonstration of how speculative fiction can capture these ideas.

In Chapter Five I examine the powerful potential of the fantasy series for adolescents and the ways in which works such as *The Harry Potter Series*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* can not only create a love and passion for reading by providing engrossing imaginative realms that are not here and now, but also inspire contemplation of the ethical dimensions of the post-human issues they face in their realities.

My study consists of speculative essays that take a critical look at educational trends in a contemporary English classroom. These essays incorporate works of fiction to illustrate the

power of fiction to help students and teachers understand the realities of their world. I have also incorporated works of fiction that capture my experiences teaching in this milieu. While these vignettes are fictitious, they are derived from real interactions with my students and colleagues and capture the frustrations that manifest while teaching in this contentious space, a space where one is torn between obligation to fulfill job expectations and fulfilling her obligation to students and the community. It is in this space that I find a kind of quiet rebellion necessary in order to stay employed, but also keep my professional obligation to my students by completing required tasks, but preventing them from dominating my practice, by offering the controversial works of literature, but not always requiring them, and by presenting them with meaningful concepts and ideas and the space to freely respond to them. Teachers often feel powerless to change the culture of school, but by allowing freedom of thought in our classrooms, we can find a sense of agency and inspire the same in our students.

Because one of the primary purposes of my research is to convince my audience, other teachers and administrators, to rethink the current model of instruction for literature, the speculative essay is the appropriate form of inquiry. According to Schubert (1991), when one writes a philosophical essay, he or she "often makes a personal statement, asserts some knowledge with conviction, treats a variety of different topics, develops an argument shorter than a thesis, and frequently writes in an informal style" to "strive to convince the reader or at least to persuade" (p. 61). Throughout the dissertation, I intend to explore a variety of social justice issues relating to standardization of classroom assessments in the ELA classroom, issues that I have personally perceived as problematic in my own practice. My role as an AP English Language teacher contributes an additional layer of suitability since my daily goal for my students is an understanding of the art of rhetoric, both in their own writing and that of others.

Schubert (1991) also writes of the speculative essay form, "it can provide integrative, imaginative, and speculative leaps of interpretation that are still grounded in a variety of other research traditions. Metaphorically, it is a kind of meta-analysis or research synthesis that uses the informed and insightful scholar (rather than a set of statistical rules) as the instrument for synthesis and illumination" (p. 64). Since my study focuses on the need for a re-examination of using rigid statistical rules to inform classroom instruction, it is only fitting that I use a form of inquiry that defies those rules. The essays will utilize a variety of theoretical frameworks to create new ideas about a topic for which a wealth of research already exits: the effects of standardization on the teaching and learning of fiction. My goal is to synthesize the already existing literature, theories, and philosophies into a contemporary piece focused on classroom instruction. The essay form is also appropriate because the foundation of the study is rooted in my personal experiences and convictions, which will be an important strand of the tapestry woven with "extant knowledge" and future speculation.

Because the inquiry is focused on the transformative power of fiction, it is only appropriate the study incorporates some fiction. I intend to accompany each essay or chapter with a short fictitious vignette as a prologue. Like the work of many fiction writers, my vignettes will be based on my actual experiences in the classroom. In *The Art of Memoir* Mary Karr (2015) explores the power that memoir can have in grappling with sometimes painful experiences. She acknowledges that when writing memoir, it is impossible to tell a perfectly factual portrayal of an event, especially a traumatic one, which gives the memoirist the freedom to fictionalize, partly because of the impossibility of labeling experience fact and partly to protect the identities of personal relationships. While the vignettes are based in my personal experiences and interactions in both team data meetings and the classroom, they will be fictionalized with

imagined students and teachers who embody real insights and emotions. I thought about the actual day-to-day interactions and experiences that lead me to explore each of the topics for the chapters and attempted to recreate them in the vignettes. Originally, when I wrote the stories, I created characters and names to represent myself, but after completing my first draft, I revised the names back to variations of my own, to reflect different aspects of my identity and the various perspectives I bring to exploring this topic: a teacher, a mother, a student. In a few stories, I simply us the first person I, but in some I am Ms. Evans I use E in the vignette on the perspective of the powerless administrator because that is not a role I take on in real life and am therefore completely imagining what it would feel like to lead teachers in this difficult space. At the end, I am Eden, mama to Eliza and Evy, imagining their futures in a public education system such as the one in which I teach. In *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), Maxine Greene writes, "Literature deals with particularities, seduces persons to see and to feel, to imagine, to lend their lives to another's perspective" (p. 69). In this way, I will be able to not only examine and discuss works of fiction that have the ability to contribute to a person's consciousness and essence of being in society, but also show how I understand the phenomena through my own imagination and personal experiences with students, teachers, and works of fiction to create an experience for readers beyond the academic discourse which can seem disconnected from everyday practice.

Chapter One

Everything and Nothing: The Paradox of Fiction and Fact

For what seemed like the 75th time, I underlined the so familiar phrase "uses rhetorical strategies to get his message across" and accompanied this go-to thesis statement with the comment: "Be specific—what is the message? Avoid vague and general language" when my calendar alarm went off reminding me of tomorrow's PLC meeting for American Literature. A feeling of dread sank in when I realized this meant I needed to use my next planning period to enter the data from our last Common Interim Assessment on the chart intended to track proficiency percentages.

I pulled up the assessment. Only 15 percent of my students answered number 7 correctly. This was odd because the other items were sitting around 75-85 percent accuracy. Why did they miss this question? When I looked at number 7, I immediately recognized this question as one which needed revision as the choices included the correct answer, "metaphor" but also a possible distraction "alliteration" which was technically right since the quotation in the question does include several "s" words. However, they seemed to have taken the correct answer out of the possible choices!

When my coworker Lena brought this up at one of our Professional Learning Committee meetings several weeks ago, the school's instructional supervisor shook her head with a smirk of annoyance and said, "Well at least it will be an easy question for them!" But was it? Because the correct answer is not actually a choice… How confusing for students who are proficient in rhetorical analysis to not even see a plausible answer choice with any rhetorical meaning.

See, we are unable to make any changes or award any points back to students for poorly worded or blatantly incorrect questions without going through the county first, and these

changes require unanimous support and collaboration among representatives from all the schools, which is not a simple process. In short, students are penalized for poorly worded questions, or in this case, careless entry of a question into the testing platform.

The expectation is to come to the meeting with areas of improvement in mind. The data suggests my students need to work on identifying rhetorical devices which is a much less complex skill than identifying the central message of a piece or analyzing the rhetorical effect of a stylistic choice; however, since the correct answer is not actually present for students to select, how can we make sound instructional choices based on this flawed data?

I finished entering my numbers of exceeding, proficient, developing and beginning learners with a tinge of frustration thinking about tomorrow's useless discussion, and turned back to my final 5 essays. No wonder there are so many "vague and general statements".

"Objective" Data and Inevitable Subjectivities

The vignette included for this chapter, although fictionalized with some imagined details, captures an example of a true scenario I experienced last year with my PLC (Professional Learning Committee). It is included as a starting point for an exploration of the widely accepted farce that is objectivity in education and the fictions such notions of objectivity can work to create. It features a clearly flawed assessment from which educators are expected and required to make important instructional decisions that will impact their students' learning, and more importantly, their consciousness as these often invalid and unreliable assessments work to sort them into categories of proficiency.

Educational reform is dominated by the attempt to separate the subjective and the objective, unable to acknowledge that there are real subjectivities involved in what we view as "objective data". The notion of the objective works to simplify the decision-making process

within education systems, a simplicity that is indeed alluring to many stakeholders; however, to deny the complexities of learning and the factors that influence learning for the sake of simpler decision-making processes, works ultimately to reduce teaching and learning, especially of literature, to mere pattern and process, pattern and process that can be flawed.

According to Robert Lake (2013), "standardized testing is understood by the culture as the appropriate means by which to justify decisions whether they be about individuals or school systems" (p. 11). Teachers use standardized testing scores for student recommendations for courses, and administrators and district leaders rely on them to justify mandated reforms related to teaching and learning, reforms that may or may not work to improve the practice of individual teachers. These data collections are perceived as objective measures, and any subjectivities that pervade them are ignored. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad (2007) explores the relationship between measurement in the scientific process and objectivity: "The apparatus enacts a cut delineating the object from the agencies of observation. Clearly, then, as we have noted, observations do not refer to properties of observation-independent objects (since they don't preexist as such" (p. 114). In other words, it is an impossibility to completely isolate variables to determine their effect on the results. We can relate this to classroom teaching in that no classroom is ever truly reproducible, as it is made up of many individuals who are dynamic and will never carry the same emotions and experiences that they brought to the learning process in any moment in time. Furthermore, Barad (2007) points out that "the measurement interaction can be accounted for only if the measuring device is itself treated as an object, defying its purpose as a measuring instrument" (p. 114). The scientist inevitably brings subjectivities to the experiment when he or she selects the instrument, in that this is a conscious choice that will affect the measurements. In a classroom, teachers create assessments. They bring their biases and

subjectivities with them in these creations. Even at the state level, these tests are created by a group of individuals. Oftentimes, these instruments are not only filled with subjectivities, but they are also flawed. Mistakes are understandable, but they also need to be considered when analyzing data collected through these instruments. Subjectivities cannot be denied even if acknowledging them makes the decision-making processes ambiguous and complex.

Lisa Gitelman (2013) defines data as, "units or morsels or information that in aggregate form the bedrock of modern policy decisions by government and nongovernment authorities" (p. 1). Because data forms such an important foundation for decision-making, it is most important to understand what data is and what it is not. According to Rosenburg (2013),

> Facts are ontological, evidence is epistemological, data is rhetorical. A datum may also be a fact, just as a fact may be evidence. But, from its first vernacular formulation, the existence of a datum has been independent of any consideration of corresponding ontological truth. When a fact is proven false, it ceases to be a fact. False data is data nonetheless (p. 18)

When Rosenburg (2013) points out the rhetorical nature of data, he makes clear its persuasive power within our cultural context. Educators are trained to use data to inform decisions that guide teaching and learning; however, they are not encouraged or trained to question or analyze the validity of the data they are given, but instead are conditioned to accept the data set as a true reading of student performance, despite the undeniable truth that standardized testing is isolated from any real-world application. Another important aspect of a data-driven curriculum to consider is "that a data set is already interpreted by the fact that it is a set: some elements are privileged by inclusion, while others are denied relevance through exclusion" (Williams, p. 41). In other words, we make the subjective choice to use certain data sets to support a particular

narrative that we want to strengthen and discard any data sets that may work to compromise that narrative. Bowker (2005) explains that "a set of data structures and information retrieval models are set up so that a particular, skewed view of the world can be easily represented" (p. 149). In this way, data, what we tend to view as fact, despite that it can be false, can be used to create fictions, fictions that can have real consequences for individual students and school systems.

For this reason, Bowker (2005) advises that, "Raw data is both an oxymoron and a bad idea: to the contrary, data should be cooked with care" (p. 184). Educators, teachers, administrators, and state and local decision-makers, need to be encouraged to analyze data ethically and carefully and to question reliability and validity when it or the instruments used to collect it appear flawed or biased. Although, since educators are strictly prohibited from viewing standardized test questions even after tests are given, this is not expected or even a possibility. We live in a world in which "quantifiable uniformity is embraced, and divergent thinking is portrayed as a weakness" (Lake, 2013, p. xx). And perhaps our embrace of nonfiction over fiction fits into this context, as fiction encourages people "to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Greene, 1995, p. 19), and with that comes a more complicated and difficult decision-making process. Maxine Greene (1995) claims that "once we do away with habitual separation of the subjective from the objective, the inside from the outside, appearances from reality, we might be able to give imagination its proper importance and grasp what it means to place imagination at the core of understanding" (p. 140). This binary thinking applies not only to the subjective and objective, but also fiction and fact, the paradox that I will continue to explore in the next section.

Fictions from "Fact"

This attempt to "objectivize" educational decisions has and continues to have negative

consequences especially for traditionally marginalized groups. According to Butchart (1988), in

the 1960s,

> scholars began to probe the history of scientific racism and its insinuation into the school
>
> in the form of intelligence tests and other standardized tests. Their documentation of the
>
> ways in which racist ideology consistently overwhelmed empirical science is chilling: the
>
> implications for the ways in which that ideological science has killed children's spirits in
>
> America's schools are devastating. (p. 102)

As previously pointed out, the results of standardized tests, in our case The Georgia Milestone

End of Grade and End of Course Assessments, are used to determine placement for students in

subsequent school years. This is not a new practice and Mark Garrison explores the inception of

such practices and their political origins in *A Measure of Failure* (2009). Garrison explains that

as public schools emerged, "academic tests emerged to serve this purpose [marking abilities]

constituting an ideological tool for justifying social inequality (fair competition)" (p. 2), and he

asserts that the use of such tests is less about improvement than it is "about control over the

purpose and nature of schooling" (Garrison, 2009, p. 2), as standardized tests historically have

always reflected the values of the dominant culture and work to maintain that social structure.

According to Shujaa (2004), "it means conveying messages to the citizenry that disguise the

assertion of hegemony so that it is perceived as a process of natural social ordering whereby

unearned privileges derived from racialized power relations somehow become the rewards of

individual merit" (p. 179). People would not accept a reality in which children were categorized

according to social class and race; therefore, we have standardized tests to create a false narrative that children of privileged means earned their acceptance to colleges or job opportunities solely based on their own hard work.

In the previous section focused on the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity, I referenced Barad concerning the subjective choice in selecting a method of measurement. Garrison (2009) points out this subjectivity regarding standardized tests:

> This talk of ability and achievement thus aims at the impossible: the liberation of individuals from their social roots. But the fact is that achievement and ability rankings are themselves socially structured and patterned phenomena and no amount of attitude adjustment among teachers and students will change this structurally determined reality.
> (p. 27)

The tests we use to rank and categorize students are inevitably socially constructed, and whether we want to admit it or not, cannot be standardized since we cannot standardize our students and their personal experiences: their cultural background, languages, socioeconomic status are all unique, and some students will inherently have an advantage because we cannot control these variables. The decisions educators and government leaders make based on these scores has consequences for individuals and communities.

The practice of leveling courses and using test scores to place students within a hierarchical school structure is known as tracking, and this practice fosters school segregation. According to Clotfelter (2004) in racially diverse public schools, "Black students were generally less likely to be assigned to advanced or honors classes and more likely to be assigned to special education tracks for the mentally retarded than white students" (p. 137), and this disparity is due to "racially biased adherence to achievement criteria" (p.137). This information suggest that not

only are minority students already at a disadvantage considering the bias involved with test construction, but the results of those tests are used to place minority students in lower ability groups more often than their white peers. Clotfelter (2004) suggests a possible explanation in that "sociological studies reveal that middle-class parents are more likely than parents with lower incomes not only to make such requests [advanced placement] but to be successful in obtaining the desired placements" (p. 138). We have created a system that is not only inherently unfair, even if the rules apply to all, but also grant that the rules we have created only apply to some students. If certain white, middle-class parents believe their students are entitled to special treatment, and they complain loudly enough, their requests are granted.

At the school in which I work, we adhere to these ability tracking practices within both the English and Math departments and have categorized students into three different levels: AP/Honors, General (on level), and Support classes. Over the course of my ten years of experience, I have had the opportunity to teach all three of these ability-leveled courses, and my observations of the demographics of my classes hold consistent with Clotfelter's findings. Each year, I am lucky to have even a handful of Black students in my AP Language class. Although I teach in a majority white school (73 percent white), the numbers do not reflect the demographics of the school. Even though Black students only comprise 11 percent of the student population, a few years ago, my support Ninth Grade English class was made up of almost 30 percent Black or racially mixed students. Often students are consistently placed in the same groups year after year. We begin using standardized tests to place students as early as third grade and this will work to impact the rest of their school experience. When "struggling students" are placed in classes with only other "struggling students" they end up missing out on the enrichment opportunities and

discussions afforded the higher achieving students in favor of remediation that often consists of test practice.

It is also naïve to think that students are not aware of how we label and categorize them for the sake of achievement. Every year, come February, when it is time to sign off and have a conversation with each of my students about what class they will be in for the next year, there are always comments that reflect a deflated concept of self-worth and potential. I cringe at this process. The reality is, without fear of administrative questioning and accountability consequences, I would sign any student up for an Honors or AP class who was willing to do the work, but instead, I adhere to the requirements based on grades and test scores and tell them they will be able to submit a parental override at the beginning of the school year for the class. The reality is "standardized tests are forms of assessment, the object of which is to categorically rank the presumed difference in the value or worth of human persons" (Garrison, 2009, p. 39). Literally, when it comes to this model of education, students who score "distinguished" or "proficient" on their tests are worth more to the school than those who score "developing" or "beginner". This is the sad reality, and it has terrible consequences concerning the spirit and self-worth of our students.

The fictions created by testing performance data also have consequences for entire communities as well as individual students. In *Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow* (2004), Alfie Kohn makes the consistent connection with accountability and the effort to privatize schools and boost the profits of companies in the education "business": consultants, textbook companies, technology companies, etc. Kohn points out that when students succeed, the result is not to praise students or teachers, but "is instead to make the test harder, with the result that many more students subsequently fail" (p. 83). This creates a narrative that students are struggling, that they

are behind their international peers, and this fiction takes hold in the consciousness of parents, students, and district leaders prompting them to spend on intervention and resources. In the worst cases, it works to create the illusion that entire school systems are "failing" to justify the funneling of funding for public schools into charter schools through voucher systems leading to higher enrollment in private schools therefore exacerbating school segregation and social inequalities (Clotfelter 2004; Kohn 2004; Kozol 1991; Ravitch 2013). Jonathan Kozol (1991) remarks that "the consequence of unequal education have a terrible finality. Those who are denied cannot be made whole by a later act of government. Those who get the unfair edge cannot be later stripped of what they've won" (p. 217). The role of standardized testing and categorization of students plays a fundamental role in dolling out these educational inequalities.

Ironically, the consistent fictitious narrative used to justify these practices is for the sake of equality. Winfield (2012) explains that this was the narrative used to justify NCLB 20 years ago: "Reformers have co-opted the language of social justice to declare that they will 'leave no child behind' while at the same time schools are being closed, teachers fired, an students disregarded and displaced in relentless subterfuge" (p. 145). While some of the specifics have changed, the contradictory narrative remains the same. The underlying motivation for implementing the PLC process according to DuFour et al (2016) is to "guarantee" a viable curriculum to all students regardless of the teacher, which sounds much like "teacher proofing". Fundamentally, we cannot dismiss the basic fact that a standardized curriculum is inherently unequal. When teachers are unable to exercise discretion and professional judgment when it comes to formative assessment and resources students' individual learning needs go unmet. But educators tend to dismiss this for the sake of tracking achievement which reveals that perhaps a broader conversation about the goals of education is needed; ask the question: what are we

guaranteeing? Higher test scores or authentic learning experiences reflective of the real world? Because they are not one and the same.

This idea that test scores reflect higher learning is one of the most fundamental mistruths from which all the other falsehoods derive. Kohn (2004) points out in his article about the effort to privatize schools that "higher scores on standardized tests do not necessarily reflect meaningful improvement in teaching or learning—and may even indicate the opposite" (p. 85). This is because often, to prepare students and make them familiar with testing format and question types, meaningful discussions and explorations are sacrificed, and I will explore the concerning effects this can have for critical thinking skills and democratic values in a later chapter. I see evidence of this in my daily practice: the school district in which I teach is highly rated in the state of Georgia, ranked consistently within the 90th percentile; however, the district has repeatedly made the local news this year because of discriminatory practices, particularly toward its Black students concerning disciplinary actions. We have received multiple emails from district leaders directing us to restrict our students' conversations about controversial topics: Black Lives Matter protests, the 2020 Presidential election, the Jan 6th insurrection on the capital building, etc. The school will provide no space for their Black students to discuss and grapple with real world trauma and important issues. Thus, the test scores tell a very different story than the reality many students experience at the schools.

Reality of Fiction

The paradox of fact and fiction begins with the tendency toward binary thinking, the unnatural tendency to view these concepts as opposites rather than complex and intertwined. There is always reality involved in the fictions we create; and oftentimes, fictions are created through the objective facts we take for granted as truth. Furthermore, "nothing happens in the

'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 385). In this way, fiction can help us to imagine future realities, perhaps realities free from intersecting means of oppression and hegemony.

In *A Curriculum of Imagination in an Era of Standardization* Robert Lake (2013) makes the claim that, "One of the aspects of curriculum of imagination that needs increased cultivation has to do with the removal of well-guarded walls between genres and content area subject matter and between fiction and non-fiction" (p. 73). We create these walls for the sake of simplicity, denying the fact that reading and interpreting both fiction and non-fiction texts involves the same complex cognitive processes. To break down these walls, we need to establish what fiction is. According to Peggy Kamuf (2005), "A fiction refers to nothing that exists. It refers, but to nothing in existence" (p. 144), but at the same time, "it suspends the world: everything hangs from it. It is the possibility of world, of possible, virtual, fictional worlds, of other worlds" (p. 144). Paradoxically, fiction, by definition, does not exist in reality; however, it has the capacity to capture everything in our realities, and to open infinite possibilities and experiences.

Mary Aswell Doll (2000) explains the relationship between fact and fiction with the following insight: "fiction—more than fact—teaches wisdoms about the human condition precisely because fiction connects readers with what courses within themselves" (p.xi). Because fiction involves our emotions and passions, it can engage learners in a way that facts cannot and enables us to absorb a deeper knowledge beyond the facts. Maxine Greene (1995) makes this observation when she explains how the characters in works of fiction such as, "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening,* "emerg[ed] in [her] consciousness, and by doing so, transform[ed] it, as social scientific accounts or even psychological ones would never do" (p. 94). In this way, fiction can be more real, more resonant, than facts. Virginia Woolf (2011)

metaphorically captures the ways fiction is able to capture the complexities of our realities in a way that simple facts cannot: "It can lick up with its glutinous tongue the most minute fragments of fact and mass them into the most subtle labyrinths, and listen silently at doors behind which only a murmur, only a whisper is to be heard" (p. 10). Her comparisons work to illustrate the power metaphor, the literary, possesses to help us capture feeling, emotion, and phenomenon.

Throughout this inquiry I focus largely on the power of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction genres. I feel as through an exploration of all of these is appropriate because "when is comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance" (Atwood, 2009, p. 7). The works of fiction included in this study do not fit neatly into categories, which in part, is why they are included as I use them to argue against the practice of binary or categorical thinking. Atwood (2009) says of the term science fiction: "This label brings together two terms you'd think would be mutually exclusive, since *science*—from *scientia*, meaning knowledge—is supposed to concern itself with demonstrable facts, and *fiction*—which derives from the Latin root verb *fingere*, meaning to mould, devise, or feign—denotes a thing that is invented" (p. 56). The science fiction genre works to break down binary thought between fact and fiction, and Weaver (2019) argues "represented a more realistic understanding of science" than "textbook science" is capable (p. 2). And although science fiction is prescient in that it offers a powerful space for writers and readers to envision the futures of our current realities, Weaver (2019) points out that "no sooner do science fiction writers envision a futuristic possibility, the present catches up to it" (p. 7), and suggests we turn to speculative fiction to help us think about the future. Atwood (2009) addresses the terms science fiction and speculative fiction and their sometimes-interchangeable references, explaining that some use speculative fiction as an umbrella that includes science

fiction and fantasy, but ultimately makes the important observation that "SF novels of course can set themselves in parallel imagined realities, or long ago, and/or on planets far away. But all these locations have something in common: they don't exist" (Atwood, 2009, p. 59). It is this nonexistence that makes them powerful in understanding reality, what does exist. Schalk (2018) explains this phenomenon in her work *Bodyminds Reimagined*:

> Through nonrealist conventions such as time travel, futuristic settings, and nonhuman characters, these authors make evident the often occluded ways that racism and sexism can be enacted through discourses of (dis)ability and how ableism can take effect through concepts of race and gender in the real world. (p. 9)

Because it defies boundaries previously thought, it enables us to understand our past, present, and future in imaginative ways and perhaps work toward a future reality free of such intersecting ways of oppression.

Despite the power of fiction, it is not taken seriously in the real world. By real world, I refer to any professional circle beyond the literature department in our schools, and even in this space appreciation appears to be dwindling. It is not easily quantifiable and does not fit neatly into the process and procedures that educational consultants have outlined and deemed as "effective" approaches to learning. As educators, I assume we can all agree on the fundamental principles of learning in that children and adults learn through authentic experiences, not content coverage. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934) makes the assertion that we can engage in experience not through "ledger-entries nor [in a] treatise on economics or sociology or personnel- psychology, but to drama and fiction" (p. 44). The way that one is able to interact with and create an experience with art such as fiction has immense power in helping one to learn

about their realities, and imagine future possibilities. I will delve into this experience later in my inquiry.

The Intuitionist: An Allegory for Unity

Colsen Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist* (1999) serves as an allegorical portrayal of either/or's--subjectivities and objectivities, fact and fiction. In Whitehead's fictitious world where elevator inspection is a contested political space, there exists two ways of understanding elevator functions: Empiricists and Intuitionists. Hayles (2017) describes these opposite ways of knowing: "Whereas Empiricism investigates the soundness of elevators using measurable variables and arrives at results that can be verified empirically, Intuitionism relies on intuition, internal visualization, and feelings to arrive at judgments not through measurements, but through subjective feelings" (p. 179). One could read these binaries as a metaphor for the divide between science and literature, or even the right and left binary in American politics. It is clear to the reader that an elevator inspector should rely on both measurable variables and her intuition, much like data should be contextualized rather than isolated, not one or the other. However, the characters in the book ascribe to one philosophy or the other.

Lila Mae, the protagonist in the novel is an Intuitionist, and in so being, represents the post-human. Berlant (2008) explains the essence of intuitionism in her article *Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event*: "Intuitionism is foremost a school of thought that teaches people to take on the sensual perspective of the object they investigate in order to read the state of the object's health" (p. 850). In the scene capturing the process of elevator inspection, Whitehead (1999) describes the way in which Lila Mae's conscious mind is impacted by the technology of the elevator. She sees "orange octagon cartwheels in her mind's frame. It hops up and down, incongruous with the annular aggression of the red spike. Cubes and parallelograms emerge

around the eighth floor…" (p. 6). The shapes Lila Mae sees are dependent on the elevator as if the two, technology and human consciousness have momentarily melded, influencing one another, to ensure the safe vertical travels of the citizens. Whitehead (1999) reveals that the Intuitionists, with the perplexing methods described, have a higher success rate than the Empiricists: "No one can quite explain why the Intuitionists have a 10 percent higher accuracy rate than the Empiricists" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 58). Later, Lila Mae learns that Fulton's philosophy of Intuitionism was founded upon a joke he played on his white oppressors, causing her to question everything of which she was so sure. Mrs. Rogers, Fulton's confidante in the novel recollects a conversation with him in which he reveals his motivation for the joke: They all had their rules and regulations. They had all this long list of things to check in elevators and what made an elevator work and all, and he'd come to hate that. He told me—these are his words—'They we all slaves to what they could see.' But there was a truth behind that they couldn't see for the life of them" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 239). Similarly, in teaching, we obsess over the measurable, the "evidence-based", but in doing so the immeasurable is lost and largely disregarded. Diane Ravitch (2013) reminds her readers that, "the tests do not measure character, spirit, heart, soul, potential" (p. 241). I would add to her point, that they, in their current design, they cannot measure critical thinking either, and they certainly cannot measure empathy, which I would argue is one of the most important characteristics a child develops.

In the beginning of the novel, a "catastrophic accident" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 227) takes place in the Fanny Briggs building: an elevator, the one Lila Mae has just inspected, goes into an impossible free fall. For the rest of the novel, the reader along with Lila Mae is looking for explanation for who was responsible or how it occurred, and finally comes the conclusion that it is , "an event [that] neither the Empiricist nor Intuitionist discourse could account for" (Johnston,

p. 864). Hayles (2017) believes that "what Lila Mae learns from the catastrophic failure of No. 11 is that another realm beckons beyond the binary choice of Empiricism and Intuitionism: the undecidable" (p. 187). The free-fall was not Lila Mae's fault and none of the Empiricists set her up, but it was simply an unexplainable accident. Throughout the entire novel, the Empiricists attempt to pin accountability on Lila May claiming Intuitionism ineffective, "crazy" (Whitehead, 2009, p. 115), and the philosophy itself "voodoo" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 7). Lila Mae and the Intuitionists are convinced that she was set up by the Empiricists for the sake of political gain. Neither side can comprehend an accident for which neither side is responsible. Someone must take the fall. Whitehead (1999) communicates this idea when he compares it to "the things that emerge from the black nether reaches of space and collide here, comets that connect with this frail world after countless unavailing ellipses" (p. 127). It just happened. In this world of binaries and either/or's, no one can tolerate the ambiguous.

Whitehead (1999) is not only purposefully ambiguous with his resolution, but he is also so with his setting and genre. The setting is never directly stated, but readers can infer that it is probably New York, and Lila Mae is from somewhere in the South, based on the racial context provided. Lila Mae is the first black female elevator inspector; she attends a Jim Crow style vaudeville performance; and the characters interact with seemingly futuristic technologies. Berlant (2008) writes of the novel's genre: "Noir becomes romance becomes utopian novel, all the while insisting that it is history—which it is affectively" (p. 854). Just as one philosophy, one genre or setting would be inappropriate for a story with a main theme of crossing boundaries.

Although the novel does have historical elements, it is very much about the present. According to Berlant (2008) "what nations do, how power works—is derived from stories constituted by catching up to a crisis already happening in worlds that are being shaped by a

collectivity that is also caught up in making and apprehending the present moment" (p. 846). Her idea of the historical present is an important one for science fiction in that it requires an historical framework for the contemporary. In what ways could racism, sexism, classism, and ableism (our past and present) take shape in the future? Her idea of the historical present also prompts questions related to climate change. What will be our catastrophic moment that will prompt, "adjudication, adaptation, improvisation, and new visceral imaginaries for what the present could be" (Berlant, 2008, p. 847)? *The Intuitionist* invites readers to examine past, present, and future in ways previously unconsidered by crossing boundaries of the expected.

Conclusion

This leads into the motive behind reducing teaching and learning to pattern and process, and it is clear the accountability culture is a driving force. In *Reign of Error* (2014) Diane Ravitch addresses this culture conceding that of course teachers should be evaluated, but questioning these particular methods used to evaluate: "it encourages teaching to multiple choice tests; narrowing the curriculum only to tested subjects; gaming the system by states and districts to inflate scores; and cheating by desperate educators who do not want to lose their jobs or who hope to earn a bonus" (p. 111). It seems unfair that the educational experiences of our children should be compromised to provide supervisors and evaluators with evidence that teachers can do the job they have been extensively trained to do. I mentioned previously that data-driven instruction functions to simplify a complex process. We have decided to apply technical process to a practice that is not technical. Gert Biesta (2007) references John Dewey in his explanation of *Why 'What Works' Won't Work: Evidence Based Practice and Democratic Deficit in Educational Research* when he points out that "professional action is not about following tried and true recipes, but about addressing, concrete and, in a sense, always unique problems" (p. 16). He concludes that the real problems with this model of evidence-based education is that it "limits

the opportunities for educational professionals to exert their judgment about what is

educationally desirable in particular situations" (Biesta, 2007, p. 20). We are pushed to ignore

what we intuitively know to be good teaching in favor of what the data tells us without

consideration of flawed and complex factors that could potentially influence the story the data

tells.

Ironically, this push to apply scientific principle to the teaching and learning of fiction

not only works to reduce the educational possibilities of fiction, but also reduces the complexity

of science as well. Ravitch (2014) goes as far as to say that "value-added assessment is bad

science. It may even be junk science. It is inaccurate, unstable, and unreliable" (p. 113). Not only

are the educational opportunities reduced for students for the sake of evaluating teachers, but the

understanding and conclusions evaluators are able to come to through this pattern and process is

not even accurate so far as research is concerned. A true understanding of the complexities

involved with teaching and learning can only be gleaned through observation and conversations

with teachers and students. Last year, in one of our PLC meetings, our instructional supervisor at

the time, commented on the percentage of my AP Language students who had signed up to take

the AP exam. She expressed concern that "we'll never have a real idea about your ability to teach

the course because only half of the students take the exam." It seems important to note that this

supervisor had never once stepped foot in my class. This year, the district has decided that my

AP English Language students will take the American Literature EOC in addition to the AP

Language exam designed specifically for the course. This test that comprises 20 percent of their

average, is designed for a completely different course. This decision was made for two reasons:

the district scores for American Literature dropped significantly without participation from this

group of students and they need to have some accountability measure for the teachers who teach

this course; never mind that the test is over different standards rendering it a useless tool for such a purpose. Like the elevator inspectors in Colson's novel, if they want a true understanding of the classroom dynamics, they may just need to delve into the complexities of the classroom, become one with it, and trust their intuition while acknowledging rather than ignoring their potential subjectivities.

Teaching in this space is a difficult task because we are constantly attempting to fulfill the cyclical requirements of collecting, categorizing, and labeling students while also fulfilling our moral responsibility to provide meaningful learning experiences for our students. Parker Palmer (1998) calls this phenomenon living divided and notes that teachers who "teach each day in ways that honor their own deepest values rather than in ways that conform to the institutional norm" (p. 177) have chosen to live undivided, but to make this choice one must overcome a certain amount of fear. When teachers who question, rather than blindly follow the process are referred to as "offenders" (DuFour, R. & DuFour R., 2016, p. 213) and "saboteurs" (DuFour, R. & DuFour R., 2016, p. 221) in the manuals used to prepare administrators for their positions, a climate of distrust and fear permeates the school culture. Teachers are intellectuals dedicated to a life of learning, and the responsibility of the intellectual is to "[maintain] a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along" (Said, p. 22). While it is easy to fall in line and cyclically give the multiple-choice assessments and focus on preparing students for tests using reproducible material from workbooks filled with practice tests or online resources, no one ever said teaching was easy. We find a way to keep our jobs and fulfill the requirements mandated from the top, and do our best to emphasize experiences, empathy, collaboration, ambiguities, and critical thinking in our interactions with

our students until the day when filling the requirements and our responsibilities to our students

are not contradictory ends.

Chapter Two

The Standardization of Fiction: A Limitation of Infinite Possibility

Ms. Evans was getting ready to start teaching the American Dream unit for which The Great Gatsby was her required "extended text". This year, she was determined to work in a few more works to supplement and truly help my students understand what the "American Dream" has meant historically for more than just the wealthy white characters on East and West Egg of New York in the 1920s. Although she always liked The Great Gatsby, she did not feel like it was very relatable for many of her students. She had recently read Coates' memoir Between the World and Me and found a perfect James Baldwin debate to go along with the excerpts she planned to have her students read. She also had picked out a few vignettes from Sandra Cisneros' The House on Mango Street. She wanted their exploration of all these pieces to culminate in an argumentative essay about whether the American Dream truly exists based on the premise that all people have equal opportunity to attain it.

She was confident that this would be a great way to end the school year. Students would be engaged in discussion of a relevant social issue, and they would even get to eventually watch The Great Gatsby after they worked hard on their essays and took their End of Course Test. She was in the process of pacing these learning activities and important discussion opportunities out when she saw a new email come through. She switched over to her email window to see the testing coordinator had sent something marked important. The email "strongly encouraged" Georgia Milestones Teachers to utilize the attached assessment guide with their students to prepare for the upcoming test which was 2 months away. The guide was 20 pages for American Literature.

Her heart sank a little. She did not know where she was going to fit in this assessment practice. She would need to cut out almost a week of her unit instruction to make this happen.

The Milestones counted for 20 percent of her students' averages and was used to calculate the average student growth percentage that was attached to her teacher evaluation. It was important that her students be prepared for this test. Some of them were only passing by the skin of their teeth, mostly due to missing assignments and failed Common Interim Assessments. She was torn. She felt like the unit plan she had come up with was engaging and would help these students finish strong, complete their assignments, and result in meaningful learning both about the novel and the society in which they would eventually be trying to make it. However, could she neglect to incorporate this test review when the stakes were so high for so many of her students? She felt divided. She knew that instructionally, her original plan was best for her students' understanding of their world as well as their ability to synthesize source materials in support of an argument, but what if they aren't successful because she did not spend the time showing them what to expect and reviewing sample questions?

About the Vignette

The story in the vignette, like the one included for the first chapter, is a fictionalized telling of my actual experience in the classroom. Every year, administrators and school board employees expect that teachers prioritize assessment preparation or "review for the EOC", and while this may make some sense for other content areas, since the tests for those subjects focus heavily on content coverage, its application to literature is misguided. As explored in the previous chapter, most of the instruction throughout the school year focuses on continually reminding students of the expectations for constructed responses and inclusion of textual evidence on these standardized assessments. The standards we teach are cyclical rather than linear, meaning the same complex skills that we apply to reading and writing in the first part of the year are taught all year long including at the end of the year. Thus, what does it mean to

review for the Georgia Milestones for literature? It is an impossible feat and the administrative directive to do so, only causes teachers to think they need to replace their carefully planned activities with sample test questions. This chapter is intended to explore the meaningful learning that is sacrificed to accomplish this end.

Democracy and Education

In this chapter, I am focusing on how the teaching and learning of literature naturally lends itself to creating a learning environment rooted in social justice and critical pedagogy. To do this discussion justice, I think it is important to provide some exploration of the relationship between school and democratic values. Educational philosophers and curriculum theorists continually explore the complexities of what it means to educate for a democratic society, and John Dewey has had a major influence on how we think about these ideas. In *The School and Society* Dewey (1899) wrote,

> What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy. All that society has accomplished for itself put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its members. All its better thoughts of itself it hopes to realize through the new possibilities thus opened to its future self. Here individualism and socialism are at one. Only by being true to the full growth of all individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. (Dewey, 1899, p. 221)

Dewey attempts to bridge the binary thinking about individuals and society by arguing that it is individual growth that strengthens society; however, this cannot be a prioritizing of certain individuals over others: every individual is important to a democratic society and each individual

student is important to a classroom community. This struggle between the individual and society is a paradox, and hyper-individualism compromises democratic principles in society, and therefore in schools. Dewey cautions against job training and specialization and tracking methods, which seem to meet the needs of individuals, but in reality, meet the needs of a capitalist society, working to benefit certain individuals, big business owners and investors, rather than the needs of the individual who trains to fulfill the job.

He emphasizes in *Democracy and Education* (2012) that "the currency of these externally imposed aims is responsible for the emphasis put upon the notion of preparation for a remote future and for rendering the work of both teacher and pupil mechanical and slavish" (p. 199). Here he touches on the importance of conceptual and abstract learning that engages the students' imaginations and connects with their personal experiences. When the curriculum is made up of drilling certain skills, students are not intrinsically motivated, and learning becomes shallow. Dewey (2012) also argues that "too rarely is the individual teacher so free from the dictation of authoritative supervisor, textbook on methods, prescribed course of study, etc. that he can let his mind come to close quarters with the pupil's mind and the subject matter" (p. 117). A prescribed curriculum, created and held static before teacher and student ever meet, cannot meet the individual needs of students, and is "unlovely" for a democratic society. According to Dewey (2012), the "aim of progressive education is to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them" (p. 129), and a standardized curriculum is inherently unfair and undemocratic as it offers an advantage to some students over others; furthermore, the ways in which student performance and achievement are used to determine which classes students take works to perpetuate these inequalities.

In Love Justice, and Education: John Dewey and the Utopians (2009) William Schubert draws upon Dewey's philosophies and applies them to the contemporary educational setting, a product of what he terms an "acquisitive" society. He points out that "Hierarchy is a pillar of the acquisitive society, one which is not needed and has no value once the shackles of acquisition are broken" (p. 42). This hierarchical, competitive mindset works to hinder true and valuable learning because students are so focused on what they need to do to get an "A" they hesitate to delve deeply into content, explore creative possibilities in their writing, or risk a wrong answer. Instead of thinking for themselves, they will passively listen, so they can parrot the information delivered by the teacher to acquire the "A", or in some cases merely a passing score. At the beginning of the school year, I always have a class discussion with my students in which I challenge them to reflect on why they decided to register for AP English Language: This year, out of 55 students, only two told me that they enjoy reading and writing. Most of the answers were focused on making their college applications look more competitive, HOPE Scholar Endorsement, and of course, college credit. I'm not suggesting that these are not important or that there is not any value in these recognitions, but when they are the main motivating force, the learning will be shallow. Schubert (2009) explains that "one of the main things teachers have been forced to want, more today than in Dewey's day, is higher test scores on standardized tests" and that somehow the educational establishment and the public has been convinced that these tests are a valuable and reliable measure of our worth and that of our students' (Schubert, p. 95-97). Because we buy into the society of "acquisition" (Schubert 2009), it is no surprise that our students do as well. And it is so woven into the fabric of our school culture, tapping into intrinsic love of reading is nearly an impossibility for some students and teachers.

Gert Biesta also draws upon Dewey's philosophies in *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (2006), and early on establishes the basic idea that "knowledge and understanding are actively constructed by the learner, often in cooperation with other learners" (p. 17). A curriculum based in standardized testing fosters just the opposite. Its isolated, individualized, and allows very little space for students to construct their own understanding or create anything new. Biesta (2006) also explores this idea of learning as acquisitive, and suggests that rather than thinking of learning as acquiring something that already exists, we see "learning as responding" and "if we look at learning in this way, we can say that someone has learned something not when she is able to copy and reproduce what already existed, but when she responds to what is unfamiliar, what is different, what challenges, irritates, or even disturbs" (p. 68), and this is why teaching and learning fiction works to foster in depth learning and critical thinking, but a teacher's ability to tap into that potential is inhibited by this acquisitive mindset.

Paulo Freire (2000) builds on Dewey's ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when he terms the prescribed curriculum "banking education" and contrasts it with problem-posing education. He explains the major differences in these approaches:

Banking education (for obvious reasons) attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot destroy) the intentionality of consciousness by isolating

consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical

vocation of becoming more fully human (p. 83-84).

According to Freire the banking education method works to purposefully conceal truths and

miseducate students for the sake of social order and class reproduction. In Freire's vision of

democratic education, both the teacher and the student learn through a dialogue with one another

about the world around them. For him, learning must begin with the student and his or her

cultural identity and personal history. It encourages students to be critical thinkers rather than

accepting information and knowledge as truth without questioning where it comes from, the

motivations behind it, and how it affects them and others around them. When Freire wrote about

the banking education model and problem-posing education, I think he was referring to the way

teachers and professors tended to lecture and impart their knowledge of their discipline to their

students without allowing them space to explore. It is my position, that the testing model of

education is even more problematic for democracy. At least, with the "banking model" students

could have a response to a teacher's interpretation; with the testing model, the teacher nor the

student are entitled to any response, writing responses must be structured with such specific

parameters so that students are discouraged to even think about what they are reading.

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks also explores the importance of learning

beginning with students' complex identities. In a traditional (banking) model of education, the

teacher is "authoritarian, hierarchical in a coercive and often dominating way, and certainly one

where the voice of the professor is the 'privileged' transmitter of knowledge" (p. 85). She

emphasizes the need to value and welcome the experiential knowledge of students rather than

deny or negate it, because paired with analytical knowledge of the content, "it will enhance

[everyone's] learning" (p. 89). hooks takes Freire's philosophies and gives them applicable

meaning in the classroom, focusing on the importance of holding space for students' voices, and valuing all voices, not just those of the dominant class. She also echoes Freire's emphasis on the importance of dialogue to recognize and value student voices: "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences" (hooks, 1994, p. 130). hooks argues that in a classroom based on democratic values, teachers and students engage in dialogue to learn about and embrace the plurality of our society, rather than fear the unfamiliar.

It is clear that our contemporary approach to education contradicts the ideas of these curriculum theorists at just about every angle of inquiry which indicates the need to have difficult conversations about our ultimate goals as educators. When I look at our school's improvement plan, and the number one goal is to raise standardized test scores in our GA Milestones courses, I feel discouraged because we are now shameless about communicating to everyone that our goal is not to foster real world learning, to help students become individuals in a pluralistic society, or to create life-long learners, but to acquire test scores. In *Why What Works Won't Work: Evidence Based Practice and the Democratic Deficit in Educational Research* (2007) Biesta explores means, ends, and consequences of applying evidence-based practices to teaching and learning. In this article, Biesta makes the assertion that

> evidence-based education seems to favor a technocratic model in which it is assumed that the only relevant research questions are questions about the effectiveness of educational means and techniques, forgetting among other things, that what counts as 'effective' crucially depends on judgments about what is educationally desirable" (p. 5).

We cannot forget that it is important to not only research means, but "researchers and practitioners should also engage in inquiry about ends, and this in close relation to the inquiry into means" (Biesta, 2007, p.17). My inquiry is focused on this relationship between ends and means, and how the end goal of increasing testing scores, influences means, and results in ends that may not have been given their proper consideration prior to implementation: the compromise of democratic values in society and therefore, its schools.

Literary Possibilities: Empathy, Ambiguity, and Imagination

In *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities* (2010), Martha Nussbaum makes the following claim: "These abilities are associated with the humanities and the arts: the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a 'citizen of the world'; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person" (p. 7). The teaching and learning of fiction works to fulfill these educational goals because it is naturally open and full of possibility. Teachers, theoretically, should be able to choose literary texts with students' "particular blind spots" in mind (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 106), and they should also have the freedom to provide students with lists of titles to choose from, so students are encouraged to become active in their educations rather than passive receptors of knowledge. The beauty of the literary world is it literally contains multitudes of different perspectives and ideas of people from everywhere and has the potential to open students' minds to a world of infinite possibility, which is the very heart of democracy.

Maxine Greene (1995) refers to the inability to feel empathy for others as "a shadow side in American culture—an uncaring, separatist aspect too many associate with freedom" (p. 67). In order to illustrate such a tendency, Greene draws upon Fitzgerald's description of Tom and Daisy Buchannon at the end of *The Great Gatsby* as careless people who "smashed up things

and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (Fitzgerald, quoted in Greene, 1995, p. 67). We can look at the recent debate in our schools over COVID-19 procedures as evidence of the "shadow side" to which Greene refers. Empathy is a natural emotion for young children and as a society we are actively teaching them to reject empathy in favor of hyper-individualism under the guise of "rights". The challenge for teachers is to help students move away from this kind of carelessness, and toward an empathic imagination. Without empathy, humans have engaged in terrible acts of exploitation and oppression because they are unable to see the humanity of others. However, Biesta (2006) explores the complexities involved with empathy: "To my mind the main problem with empathy is that it assumes that we can simply (and comfortably) take the position of the other, thereby denying both the situatedness of one's own seeing and thinking and that of other's" (p. 91). Literature enables students to see the world through the perspective of another, without losing themselves or denying their own personal experiences and knowledge they bring to the text. Biesta (2006) explains that this is not seeing through the eyes of someone else, but instead seeing, "with your own eyes from the position that is not your own—or to be more precise, in a story very different from one's own" (p. 91). Fiction provides a space for students to see themselves and the other and come to know the two, however different or similar they may be, but this is not to say that the reading of fiction may not also work to change an individual's opinions or perspectives through the critical thinking that must take place in the process because it certainly will and should.

A few years ago, I taught a unit on moral courage using several nonfiction pieces from The Civil Rights Movement; however, these pieces for some reason, always fall short of

appealing to students' emotions. I, personally, feel tears begin to form every time I hear "I Have a Dream" despite how many times I've heard the speech before. They don't seem to have the same reaction as I do, and perhaps this can be attributed to the many narratives and works of fiction I have read about the struggle of Black people in America, but when watching film students are able to better understand the world from the position of a Black person during the time period. While watching *Selma (2014)*, a discussion erupted amongst the boys in my class all of whom wanted to tell each other and me what they would do if police accosted them in the streets, hitting them indiscriminately. Not surprisingly, they all thought they would refuse to accept such treatment without physically fighting back. It is important to note that these students are white and lack the reference points necessary or the tools to acknowledge that they could not possibly understand the experience of the characters in the film. I include this example because both Maxine Greene and Martha Nussbaum make the claim that film is particularly powerful in functioning much the same way as novels do, "because of the importance of the visual in our lives and people's growing familiarity with the language as visuals" (Greene, 1994, p. 101). Although a nonfiction work, *Selma* (2014) contains various elements of fiction in that the filmmaker had to imagine aspects of setting and characterization to bring the story to the screen. It works similarly to the novel genre in that it involves the emotions and can work as a stimulus for important conversations.

Although my students seemed to gain the ability to see another person's story with their own eyes by watching the film, their understandings now seemed dominated purely by the emotional, lacking understanding of institutional racism, and why nonviolent direct action was effective and necessary because they live in a world where if people committed a crime against them, the expectation is that the person would be held accountable. It was not until the second

day of viewing the film and some whole class discussion that they realized that the police officers would not be held accountable for killing an innocent young man. Some of my students reached the "emotional rationality" that Nussbaum refers to in *Poetic Justice* (1995), "the sympathetic emotion that is tethered to the evidence, institutionally constrained in appropriate ways, and free from reference to one's own situation" that is "essential to public judgement" (p. 78). Such public participation is crucial to a democratic society. While not many of us become actual judges, all will have the responsibility to vote on measures that will not only affect us individually, but will also affect others, and most will be called upon to serve as jurors of their peers. Nussbaum gives the following scenario to make this point: "if one cannot imagine what women suffer from sexual harassment on the job, one would not have a vivid sense of that offense as a serious social infringement that the law should remedy" (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 91). Nussbaum's example is one of the individual seeing with his or her own eyes, the position of another because men will never have the reference points necessary to understand sexual harassment from a female perspective. My students do not have the reference points necessary to understand institutional racism from the perspective of a Black person during the Civil Rights Movement, but works of fiction can help them see the world through their own eyes, the painful position of others.

Nussbaum (2010) points out that "democracies will not survive without alert and active citizens" (p. 65). She also claims that the humanities are naturally Socratic and promote the following characteristics: "active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure" (p. 72). Reading fiction fuels the natural curiosity of students in ways that other content cannot, and all one has to do to understand this phenomenon is to witness a young reader fly through a series that has awakened that curiosity; this "hunger" for learning about the

experiences of their favorite characters is unique to literary works. Granted I am not a math teacher, but I have never seen students pull out "for fun" math problems to work when they finish class activities. Not only does it pique curiosity, but it also encourages response. Reading a work of fiction is complex because not only is meaning created by the author of the piece, but the reader brings prior understandings and individual perspectives to the work which also create meaning. Every response to literature is unique, and no one will understand a novel in an identical way.

According to Mary Aswell Doll (2000), fiction works to "shock" and "disturb" (p. 29) us toward thinking "otherwise" (Greene, 1995). Maxine Greene (1995) explains the important effects these disturbances can have on people: "there are images and figures that speak directly to our indignation, to some dimension of ourselves where we connect with others. They open our eyes, they stir our flesh, they may even move us to try to repair our world" (p. 143). Active students become active citizens which is the participation that keeps a democracy alive. A common response students have to fiction, is the "What if this really happened? Or What if this happened to me?" Sometimes the connection needs to be made that despite how fantastical or imagined the setting of the book may be, the concepts explored in it are derived from real human experience. Peggy Kamuf (2005) writes of fiction and democracy:

> Literature that is, fiction, is always the possibility of events, events that can happen, that could happen, that could have happened. This possibility is infinite, but only so long as we recognize its absolute right to nonresponse. Democracy, if it is possible, has somewhere to resist the terror of its own law, its own demand for truth without shadow. No democracy without an absolute obscurity, which is not just the absence of light, the obscurity of what would otherwise be visible and that can be brought to light; rather, it is

the obscurity, the absolute non-visibility I began by invoking with the initial approach to

reading, and to reading "Reading" in our title. It is what happens obscurely, when anyone

reads. –which to say: everything, anything, and nothing at all. (p. 188)

Kamuf (2005) points out that fiction awakens the imagination to what could be, and this is an

important skill for participatory citizenship. I offer *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret

Atwood as a summer reading option for my 11th Grade students. In their beginning-of-the-year

essay, those who read this book often make connections to terrifying possibilities should

democracy be compromised in the United States, and thoughtful connections to female

oppression in American history. Unfortunately, these important conversations are becoming

increasingly difficult in a contentious political climate as we have received direct emails from the

superintendent to avoid discussing politics in any way that is not directly related to the content

(i.e. American Government). A statement such as this one works to highlight how little

leadership in schools understands the teaching and learning of fiction.

The "obscurity" that Kamuf refers to is also fundamental to democracy. Literature

enables students to learn to accept that there is not always one correct answer or approach to a

problem, and there is not only one interpretation of an event, but rather, there are always multiple

ways of understanding the world. *In Making Room on the Shelf: The Place of Postmodern Young

Adult Novels in the Curriculum* (2008), Knickerbocker and Brueggeman (2004) concluded that

postmodern literature in particular "invites students to engage in critical dialogue with other

readers and with texts and helps them experience a variety of thoughts and multiple meaning

[and] learn to tolerate ambiguity and a certain degree of uncertainty" (p. 75). Ambiguity is

something with which students seem to struggle. I recently taught Kate Chopin's (1895) "The

Story of an Hour" and many of the students craved a definitive cause for Mrs. Mallard's death at

the end of the story; the doctor's explanation of "heart disease— of joy that kills" was not sufficient, but through discussion we could arrive at a conclusion that the ambiguity and misunderstanding is what Chopin drew upon to explore the idea of appearances and reality in marriage. In the previous chapter, I explored what I perceive to be one of the biggest motivations for educational leaders to embrace this model of instruction: they believe it eliminates the possibilities of ambiguities and creates an illusion of objectivity regarding educational decision making. It is no wonder that our students crave the same concrete either/or thinking and struggle with reading and writing when they've been educated through these processes.

Fiction not only helps students to understand and accept ambiguities, but also enhances critical thinking skills by introducing students to figurative and abstract meanings. Mary Doll (2000) argues that "the problem in our culture is not illiteracy, but the literalisms that make us ill" (p. xii). She claims that "fiction is food" (p. xvi) that can help us move toward "a new literacy of imagination that will introduce strangeness, encourage slowness, express fluidity, and feed the other mind: the soul" (p. xvii). I particularly like Doll's use of the word "slowness" here. Too often when students read, the goal is to complete it quickly; the process seems to lack depth and thoughtfulness. This reading as a "task to be completed" mentality hinders their ability to comprehend the complex meanings fiction has to offer. When we read longer pieces, I provide students with reading guides to help them focus in on some of the important details in a work. Too often, I observe them scanning the text, hunting for answers unsuccessfully because these questions are often ones that ask "why do you think" or prompt them to "explain the irony". It is clear though that this is a process they've learned in other classes in which this might be successful. I have to constantly remind them that this assignment is not about answering the questions and acquiring "the right answer". The questions are only provided to help you

comprehend the book, to stimulate their thinking. Metaphor fosters the imagination and provides a freedom of possibility for making sense of the world and how we experience it. Robert Lake (2013) points out that "one of the reasons that metaphor contributes so much to personal sense making is that it can bring elements together that have no categorical relationship except in the experience of the creator of the metaphor" and "that it also carries the ability to create new concepts and worlds of meaning" (p. 35). The inception of new ideas, the bringing together of old ideas in new ways, freedom of thought: this is democracy, and fiction inspires the imagination necessary to fuel it.

Equally important as individual freedom of thought is creation of a sense of community. Literary studies are inherently conducive to creating a class discussion, a space where students' voices can be heard, and students can collaborate toward deeper understanding. Maxine Greene (1995) focuses on this idea of a shared cultural experience when she writes, "the arts have given me many imaginative experiences that I am sure are not mine alone" (p. 71). Although we all experience literary works in our own individual ways, there is a sense of the collective in the universal themes and concepts we encounter, and when we discuss a novel, a film, a play, a poem, we share the experience. Because discussion is so fundamental to literary studies, a classroom that incorporates fiction is a natural space for critical pedagogy if we take care to include and value all voices as important to the collective understanding. I will explore the need for conscious and purposeful selection of literary works in the next chapter. Greene (1995) summarizes the paradoxical capability for literature to meet the needs of individuals, freedom of interpretation and imagination, and society, a shared experience: "works of literature were deliberately created to communicate multiple but particular perceptions of dimensions of

the human reality is come in touch with what is being called the 'conversation' going on 'both in public and within each of ourselves' (p. 100).

Not only does reading and responding to fiction work to create a classroom environment rooted in democratic values but giving students the opportunity to write their own stories has a powerful potential to bring students' lives into our classrooms. However, when institutions impose standardized ideas of what makes for a "proficient" narrative, the value of incorporating such activities becomes compromised and can do more harm than good. Lisa Delpit (2009) explores this idea in "Language Diversity and Learning":

> When differences in narrative style produce differences in interpretation of competence, the pedagogical implications are evident. If children who produce stories based in differing discourse styles are expected to have trouble reading, and viewed as having language, family, or emotional problems, as was the case with the informants quoted by Cazden, they are unlikely to be viewed as ready for the same challenging instruction awarded students whose language patterns more closely parallel the teacher's [in this case the standard's]. (p. 328)

With standardized narrative writing expectations that reflect the dominant culture's expectations for story-telling, we've eliminated any possibility for the teacher to set aside cultural bias in their assessment of student writing and celebrate our students' stories.

Narrative writing provides a valuable opportunity for teachers to put critical pedagogy into practice. According to Freire (2000), "because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate' (p.124). When students write stories, their history, culture, lives,

and values are invited into the classroom; learning begins with them, and they become active participants in the process. However, the standards we use to assess students' narrative writing skills insist on students using a provided text as a stimulus and that they anchor their creativity in someone else's story, distancing themselves from the process and in effect, silencing the learner. Because this is what will be expected on the test, this is what their practice with narrative writing consists of in the classroom.

When students are given the opportunity to write their own works of fiction, they are making their own meaning of the world in which they live, becoming a being in society. The Georgia Milestones End-of-Course Assessments require students to write narratives rooted in a "stimulus" text. They may be asked to write the story from a different point of view, or they may be asked to write a conclusion to a story, and their stories are scored on a four-point scale. Basically, students are deprived of the opportunity to tell their own stories in ways that make sense to them because they are required to tell someone else's. I could argue that adopting another person's point-of-view could be a valuable exercise since it could potentially help students to see multiple perspectives; however, this is dependent on whose perspective they are asked to take on. I have yet to see a narrative practice that captures the perspective of the marginalized. Most of the passages are based on the literary canon, which we know excludes voices.

Complexities of Reading

When we meet to collaborate with our peers on how to deliver effective instruction, we should be discussing ways to engage and immerse students in literature rather than the percentage of students who missed a poorly phrased multiple-choice question, the depth of knowledge of those questions, and speculating why certain questions are missed more than

others. The discipline has been divided up into specific skills-based standards, but the reality is these standards work together, not in isolation, and the way to increase achievement is through engaging students in reading. Concerning these fragmented skills and content, Lake (2013) points out that "When these subjects are decontextualized and fragmented students lose motivation and interest in what could otherwise open up worlds of personal meaning for them" (p. 20). We could be discussing supplemental texts, authentic learning activities, and project-based assessments, building upon our materials to create a curriculum that offers choices and depth for students. These are discussions that could potentially lead to increased engagement in the classroom, but we forgo such opportunities in favor of categories, and SMART goals based on increasing achievement percentages. Furthermore, Robert Lake (2013) reminds readers that "test scores measure test-taking ability. Real assessment has to do with students demonstrating what they know through identification, discourse acquisition, and, finally, a presentation of that knowledge in another form" (p. 63). We discuss "depth of knowledge" of these multiple-choice questions, but true depth of knowledge is demonstrated through creation.

In his imaginative dialogue with Maxine Greene and Paulo Freire, Lake (2013) explains what it means to see things small: "[it] means to look from a 'detached' point of view and to be concerned with trends and tendencies rather than the intentionality and concreteness of everyday life" (p. 16). When we look at students' categorically, we are seeing the world small, detaching ourselves from the responsibility of educating a whole child, emotionally and spiritually, in favor of ranking and rating them. Admittedly, numerical data can work to tell important stories and inform educational practices and policies, but its value is in the big picture: demographics of students in advanced courses, attendance trends, even occasionally, student achievement, but when it dominates practice, teaching and learning become shallow.

Furthermore, these practices are inherently undemocratic because it is essentially, "the marking of some human beings having more worth or value than other human beings" (Garrison, 2009, p.30), since as far as accreditation and teacher evaluations are concerned, distinguished and proficient learners are worth more.

      Not only does this model compromise the depth of student learning, but it compromises the depth and complexity of teaching as well. Our administration makes comments about how the PLC model works so well for the teachers of other disciplines and has expressed frustrations regarding our department's struggle to implement the process they have outlined for us. Perhaps it is easier for other academic teachers to maintain an appearance of objectivity than it is for English teachers because of its democratic qualities: there is no fixed way to understand literature because the reader brings meaning to the text. Teachers inevitably bring biases and subjectivities to their scoring of student writing, and it is important for teachers to be cognizant of their biases. Lake (2013) quotes Greene in his discussion of objectivity: "Once we do away with habitual separations of the subjective from the objective, the inside from the outside, appearances from reality, we might be able to give imagination its proper importance and grasp what it means to place imagination at the core of understanding" (p. 13). Administrators and teachers want an easy, clear system to assess student learning, where meanings are fixed and simple, but in reality, reading is a complex cognitive process full of, and even dependent upon, our subjectivities. In *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt (1938) explains the nature of literary studies and why "literature lends little comfort to the teacher who seeks the security of a clearly defined body of information" (p 27).

      According to Rosenblatt (1938), the idea of "the reader" is "a fiction" because "there is no generic reader, each reader is unique, bringing to the transaction an individual ethic, social,

and psychological history" (p. xix). She goes on to explain the complexities involved with reading and understanding literature. Authors do have intentional meaning embedded in their works, and it is important to teach students the skills necessary for their interpretations "to remain faithful to the author's text"; however, the reader's "own assumptions will provide the tentative framework for such interpretation" (p 11). The author's intention and each individual reader's personal background work cyclically to create original meaning, a meaning that will even vary with the same individual. Maxine Greene (2001) explains that "Because we are different at different moments of our lives, the works that we encounter can never be precisely the same" (p. 36). For example, I have read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* at least six times over the course of 15 years, and different aspects of Elizabeth Bennett's character appealed to me as an 18-year-old young woman about to go to college than what I understand now as a 35-year-old woman entering marriage and motherhood.

The very nature of the literary experience does not lend itself to the idea of one correct response, and this renders any attempt to standardize the literary experience as invalid assessment and an ineffective approach to teaching literary studies. Rosenblatt (1938) points out that "without an understanding of the reader, one cannot predict what particular text may be significant to him or what may be the special quality of his experience" (p. 35). Teachers need the flexibility to adjust curriculum to encompass particular works that they feel will resonate with a particular group or individuals. For this reason, a standardized approach works to limit a teacher's ability to reach and engage their students. And with these practices in standardized curriculum, we are condemning our students to what Maxine Greene (2001) calls a "poor" life that is "confined to only one reality, only one kind of meaning" (p. 68), deprived of the freedom to explore their realities through literature.

Maxine Green (2001), William Schubert (2009) and Robert Lake (2013) all address the

ways in which curriculum for testing and categorizing compromises democratic values. Schubert

expresses concern over this trend with the following thoughts: "Too many schools ignore

students' values, diminish who they are, and focus on tests that assign students numerical ratings

that might as well be tattooed to their heads. Students become acquisitive objects that are

categorized, labeled, and tracked (p. 86). His words resonated with me because they captured the

focus of our PLC meeting guidelines with disturbing accuracy. Once we give an assessment, we

categorize into three groups (beginning, developing, and proficient), calculate the percentages,

make a goal to move 10 percent from the developing group to the proficient group. Then, we

repeat the process. Never do we discuss strategies or activities that might appeal to the

individuals we teach and increase the level of engagement. In Lake's (2013) imagined dialogue

with Greene and Freire, he captures this same idea claiming that, "The road to dehumanization

commences with labeling by categories" (p. 70). This dehumanization occurs because

categorizing students distances teachers from seeing them as individuals with unique strengths

and struggles, preferences and emotions, and family and cultural backgrounds that work to make

up their identities. Lake (2013) emphasizes that viewing students as the complex beings they are,

"can only happen when teachers become far better at reading hearts than they are at reading

labels" (p. 76). Why, despite the existing literature and educational philosophy and theory that

work to refute the perceived effectiveness of standardization practices for true meaning-making,

do these practices continue to dominate our education system?

When I think about my own literacy development and what instructional strategies

were "effective" in helping me become a critical reader and writer, I do not remember testing

strategies, benchmark tests, or mid-assessments. We did not have those. Learning how to read

and write was not reduced to a technical process for me. My teachers provided me with interesting novels, created challenging discussion prompts for me to consider, and allowed me the freedom to interpret the literature in my own way with their guidance. It is hard for me to imagine what learning to read and write is like for students in today's classrooms. The vignette that follows is different than the previous ones because rather than based on my own experience, it is based on what I imagine taking these standardized assessments may be like for some of my students, particularly those who struggle with reading and therefore lack confidence in their own ideas about what they've read.

The Day of the Test

Thirty minutes must have passed since Ms. Evans said, "You may begin" and started the timer. Mark was nervous about this test. English was not his best subject, and he had figured out that since it counted for 20 percent of his average for the class, he had to at least score a 60 to pass. He was pretty good at math. Although English was not his best subject, he liked the class, and he had managed to maintain a middle to high C throughout the year. He always did a good job on his projects and scored decently on his essays, but he never seemed to do very well on the unit exams. They were always readings that were unfamiliar to him and even when he felt like he did well on the multiple-choice questions, this did not turn out to be the case.

He was stuck on this one question. He must have reread the answer choices three times. The question asked about the story's theme. He felt as though he understood this story quite well. This was the most frustrating part. The story was about a dog who got lost and a couple found him and took him in only to find out that he had another owner who had been looking for him the whole time he was with the couple. The dog was even given a new name. In the end of the story, the dog has to choose which person to live with. Mark felt as though this was completely

ridiculous. Dogs aren't like humans. He knew dogs could be smart, but a dog wouldn't make a choice of who to live with. A dog would be excited to see both owners and would love both owners the way that dogs do. Not the way people do. None of the answer choices seemed to reflect the way that Mark understood this story, so he'd just have to make a guess between A and C and hope for the best.

He glanced over and saw Ansley hard at work. He had been partners with her on a few projects this year. She was so smart and always had a different way of understanding the stories; he wished he could talk to her about this one. He was sure she could help him understand just like she had helped him understand Romeo and Juliet when they worked on the timeline of tragic events in the story, or when she and their other group members created the landscape for Lord of the Flies. That was a hard book for him.

He needed to focus on finishing. He figured he could spend about 3 minutes per question just so long as the rest of the passages weren't as long as this last one. That's the other thing. He didn't feel as though he was bad at reading, but he was not as fast as some of the other kids. He looked around and saw CJ was already done. Had his head down and everything. He probably didn't write very much for his constructed response questions, but he'll probably still pass because he was always good at the unit tests.

"10 minutes remaining" said Ms Evans.

Mark needed to write just a few more sentences… he was typing fast, and he knew there were probably typos, but he did not have much time to go back and read and find his errors. He clicked submit just as Ms. Evans began the sentence, "Please stop working, and hit submit". He breathed a sigh of relief: he finished it. But he would be worried until he found out what he scored and whether he'd pass 9th grade English…

Immeasurability in *What is Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*

In Chapter Four, I will explore the teaching and learning of literature through a post-human theoretical framework, the ways that an attempt to apply pseudo-science to literary studies renders both science and literature shallow. Lesley Nineka Arimah (2017) explores what it means to be human in a post-human world in "What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky" and addresses the fragmentation such binary thinking creates. The story takes place in a world in which countries such as Biafra, Mexico, and Senegal have been absorbed by countries such as Britain, The United States, and France after "the floods started swallowing the British Isles" (Arimah, 2017, p. 155). The arrangement shows a type of imperialism brought on by limited resources, bringing together our past and our future for the speculative setting. With limited land, the Earth's population is not sustainable which has resulted in an "elimination" of those considered less fit (p. 165). Arimah captures the history of colonialism, the contemporary climate crisis, and the relationship between reason and emotion to create a speculative futuristic setting and further communicates the realities of now with the unique abilities of the character Nneoma and others like her. Nneoma is "one of the fifty-seven registered Mathematicians who specialized in calculating grief" and is capable of "drawing [emotions] from living bodies like poison from a wound" (Arimah, 2017, p. 153). The comparison is an interesting one as it implies that emotions and passions are innately negative, something to be protected against; when in reality, it is the emotions that make us human. Her calculations of emotion reflect our need to quantify even the unquantifiable, and Arimah leaves readers wondering where this will eventually take us.

Arimah addresses inequalities within this speculative society, not only with the imagined continuation of western imperialism into the middle of the 21st century, but also by characterizing Nneoma as a mathematician who "worked almost exclusively with parents who'd

lost a child, wealthy couples who'd thought death couldn't touch them, till it did" (Arimah, 2017, p. 158), and contrasting her with other mathematicians like her ex- girlfriend Kioni who donated her time and worked with people of "distressed populations" (Arimah, 2017, p. 159). When Nneoma encounters a Senegalese girl who "had been affected by the elimination" (Arimah, 2017, p. 164) during her visit to a school she can't help but take away her pain and suffering even after explaining to the girl that the process was "highly regulated and very expensive", and she would have to be a citizen (Arimah, 2017, p. 165). The description of the girl's suffering is immense and disturbing, including the murder of her mother, traumatic death of her father, starvation, and inhumane treatment. The idea that those who are well-off and financially able to pay are considered more deserving of empathy and relief is not an inaccurate portrayal of our reality. Often those who suffer the most and are in the most need of empathy are denied it, and even blamed for their own suffering.

At the beginning of the story, it is revealed that a man has unexpectedly fallen from the sky. In Arimah's speculative setting, flight and the measurement and drawing of emotions are possible because after the world "began to fall apart" a formula was discovered to "explain the universe" and suggested that "the universe was infinite", "the formula had no end", and therefore "humanity had no end" (Arimah, 2017, p. 160). People embrace the formula because it definitively explains the unexplainable, eliminates the ambiguity of human existence. However, when the man falls from the sky, many begin to question whether the formula might be flawed. This proves to be the case at the story's conclusion when "something [goes] wrong with the formula millions and millions of permutations down the line" and the grief Nneoma has taken overwhelms her and distorts her thoughts permanently. The necessary balance between reason

and emotion tips and uncontrolled emotion takes over. The attempt to measure what is unquantifiable defies reason and has catastrophic results for Nneoma.

I feel as though Arimah's plotline is applicable to the field of education because it captures a world in which ambiguities are not tolerated. The world welcomes the formula because it means everything follows a specific pattern, and that pattern is always true or right. Similarly, teachers are encouraged to follow the pattern: assess, categorize, implement instructional strategy A, B, or C, and reassess. And unfortunately, this pattern may work to improve test results however slightly, but does not work to engage our students emotionally, so the learning is shallow. In fact, I feel as though I am observing more apathy in my students than ever before, and the catastrophic result will likely occur somewhere "down the line" just as the novel suggests, not in graduation rates, but in absence of creativity and original thought.

Furthermore, it has become apparent through the recently acknowledged need and implementation of social and emotional learning programs and renewed emphasis on meeting students' needs beyond merely the academic, that our focus and preoccupation with testing and preparation has left a significant gap in the education of our children. Teachers are attending trainings about the importance of holding space for children's emotions and helping them narrate and understand those feelings. While it is true that the isolation and increased anxiety of the pandemic exacerbated the problem, our priorities and practices in the classroom are the source of it. Because if the classroom was a space where emotions were acknowledged and valued, students would have the tools and strategies necessary to cope when faced with trauma. Arimah's (2017) story shows us the importance of grappling with emotions and difficult feelings rather than eliminating or ignoring them because they cannot truly ever be eliminated.

Eventually, they come to the surface and rather than in a healthy conversation, manifest in violence towards others or the self.

Within the short story, Arimah (2017) also explores "what it means to be human" when Nneoma's validity is questioned by a little boy. He raises the question: if we could measure and eliminate grief would it be ethical to do so? We have the ethical dilemma of measuring one's grief and sorrow against another's, but also the societal ills that result when people do not experience difficult emotions. Without a bit of our own suffering, we compromise our ability to empathize with the suffering of others, and an important piece of the shared human experience is compromised. We all grapple with the deaths of loved ones, despite the scope of the trauma involved, and through shared experiences like these, we see our fundamental commonalities in a pluralistic world. Although we may never be able to measure and eliminate grief, scientific advancements continue to propel us even deeper into the posthuman world, and with this, new ethical issues arise and require navigation. We can look to story's like Armiah's to help us consider such ethical dilemmas, and perhaps consider the eventual consequences of measuring what is unquantifiable, a student's response to a work of art for instance.

Chapter Three:

Constructing Identities and Developing an 'Empathic Imagination'

It had been two weeks since the attack on the Capital and Ms. Evans had not heard any

of her students mention it. However, even the morning after the news broke, she felt tension in

the hallways and in her classroom.

Then, it happened, like an eruption that had been brewing beneath the surface. The

contentious discussion started when the new student who had just returned from virtual learning

said he did not understand why people were making such a big deal out of it. He expressed that

he felt it unfair that the rioters should be arrested when people had been violently protesting in

the cities across the country for months about George Floyd. Several of his classmates, some

muttering arguments and others expressing their thoughts clearly and emotionally, were

outraged by the comparison he had just made. Others sat silently.

Jordan, one of the most vocal, pointed out to Riley that the majority of the Black Lives

Matter protests had been peaceful, and people were not forming mobs to threaten the vice

president. She added most passionately, "We all know that if those people were Black people,

many of them already would have been shot without even getting a trial!". To which Riley said,

"I just don't get why everyone is making it into a big deal".

Jordan said, "I don't think you get to have an opinion about how other people feel."

And Miles, who had been listening to the whole exchange, very calmly explained what he

felt Jordan was outraged about. "I think what you need to understand is since you aren't black,

it doesn't make sense for you to tell black people how they should feel about things."

Ms. Evans stood back and observed the conversation, listening intently. She didn't intervene. She felt she would have if the conversation became heated rather than productive. Once the discussion seemed to reach its end, she directed the class's attention to the assignment for the day, which was to share their annotations with their group members over the last section of the novel Lab Girl and then turn their notes in.

The next day, Sydney, one of the students in 7th period, approached her in Instructional Focus. Sydney looked nervous as she said, "Ms. Roberson, I'm not blaming you for what happened in class yesterday, but I hate it when people disagree, and do you think next time there is a discussion like that, can you just stop it? It made me really uncomfortable."

Ms. Evans thought for a minute, and replied, "Sydney, can you tell me why the discussion made you feel uncomfortable?" She had observed Sydney during the discussion, and she was quietly backing Jordan's explanation to her classmate and visibly upset by the debate.

Sydney said, "What Ryley was saying was really upsetting to me. And I just want all of this to be over."

Ms. Evans smiled at Sydney and said, "Can I tell you why I allowed the conversation to continue yesterday?" Sydney nodded. "Because… If Ryley never hears Jordan explain how she feels about the events that have taken place this year… how will he ever understand how she feels? Maybe, right now, he's rethinking his words and considering why they were upsetting to her and to you. Does that make sense?"

Sydney nodded and replied, "Yeah, it does. It's just been a crappy year, and I wish people were nicer to each other." She went back to her seat and continued to make her flashcards.

About the Vignette

While in the first two chapters, I captured my personal experiences through fictitious storytelling, the vignette for this chapter is closer to a memoir than the others. While I've used different names and may not have captured the dialogue between the students perfectly, the scene actually did occur in my class last year. And while I still feel as though the conversation the students had was completely appropriate and productive, I can't say that knowing what I do now, that I would have allowed it to play out the way it did. A few months after this interaction, I learned that another teacher at a different school in the district was called into the principal's office and reproved for allowing a similar conversation to take place in his English classroom. I am not able to tell this story because I did not witness the circumstances of it, but only reference it to contextualize my own experience addressing contentious issues in the classroom; however, the end result was the teacher's resignation and a story published by a local newspaper.

As before mentioned in my introduction, our school district has made the news specifically for student and parent concerns regarding race and discipline. The first story was about a student being kicked out of a football game for wearing a Black Lives Matter t-shirt; it included an explanation about how no political messages are permitted at school or school events. The second was the event mentioned above, and the most recent article focused on the discipline disparities between Black and White students. In this article, two of my former students and their parents are interviewed about their experiences at the school and all expressed consideration of a move out of district because they felt a lack of support from the district, administrators, and teachers regarding their experiences with racial discrimination.

While the summer was contentious, it is not the first time the district has made the local news for issues surrounding race. In 2015 the NAACP met with the school board to convince

them to change the school's confederate rebel mascot. There was a petition created to keep the

mascot and ultimately, they decided that while the mascot would stay the same, they would no

longer have a confederate soldier on their sports uniforms. The caricatures however remained on

murals inside of the school, and they continued to fly rebel flags at football games. I feel as

though this history is important to provide context for the environment in which our students are

currently learning, and it is important to keep it in mind as racial tensions regarding what is and

what is not taught in schools becomes more contentious nationwide.

Power of Fictional Narrative and Storytelling

Georgia's high school English standards include three main types of writing:

informational, argumentative, and narrative. According to the narrative standard, students should

be able to,

> Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective
>
> technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. (a) Engage and
>
> orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation and its significance,
>
> establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or
>
> characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events. (b) Use narrative
>
> techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to
>
> develop experiences, events, and/or characters. (c) Use a variety of techniques to
>
> sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole and build
>
> toward a particular tone and outcome (e.g., a sense of mystery, suspense, growth, or
>
> resolution). (d) Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to
>
> convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters. (e) Provide a

conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved

over the course of the narrative (Georgiastandards.org).

While I do have some concerns about what might be considered appropriate narrative techniques

and acceptable descriptive words and phrases, I feel as though it is important for students to be

encouraged and taught how to write and develop their narrative voice. The trouble lies in the

consequences of standardizing students' narratives. And what is left out of the standard's

language is how this is assessed on the Georgia Milestone's End of Course Assessment. Students

are expected to read a provided text as a stimulus and anchor their creativity in someone else's

story. They are not writing their own stories, but instead are attempting to mirror another's,

which has the potential to do more harm than good.

When we begin to understand the power that narrative carries in liberating oppressed

groups, we can better understand the institutional desire to control it. Richard Delgado (1989)

explores the conflict between divergent stories in *Storytelling for oppositionists and others: a*

plea for narrative, when he explains how "they contend for, tug at, our minds" in order to create

what is generally accepted as reality and truth (p. 2418). After telling and analyzing three

different stories from three different perspectives about a discriminatory interview and hiring

process, he concludes with the following insight about story-telling: "[they] are useful tools for

the underdog because they invite the listener to suspend judgement, listen for the story's point,

and test it against his or her version of reality" (p. 2440). Story-telling is how we begin to see the

world differently, and move toward social changes. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory,*

Research, and Practice (2018) Geneva Gay makes the following assertions regarding

storytelling:

They serve many different functions. They can entertain, educate, inform, evoke

memories, showcase ethnic and cultural characteristics, and illuminate abstractions.

Stories are means for individuals to project and present themselves, declare what is

important or valuable, give structure to perception, make general facts more meaningful

to specific personal lives, connect the self with others, proclaim the self as a cultural

being, develop a healthy sense of self, forge new meanings and relationships, or build

community (p. 3).

Her description gives us an idea of what an important tool reading and writing narratives can be

for implementing critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. The

power of narrative is dynamic and complex, just like language is, but when we standardize

students' use of it and teacher's assessment of it, that rich complexity is made powerless and

may instead do more harm than good. When we allow students to tell their own stories, we invite

their experiences, cultures, and unique language differences into the classroom. When we apply a

standardized narrative based on the dominant culture's values and norms concerning storytelling,

we send a different message: those very characteristics that make up their identity need to be

tweaked, changed, or improved.

Hilliard (2002) makes the claim that "Language, culture, history, and oppression are

inextricably linked together where African American children are concerned" (p. 90). Because

language is so intimately tied to culture, this makes the standardization of students' use of

language problematic. Lisa Delpit (2009) provides an illustrative example in which white and

black adults were asked to listen to the narratives of a diverse group of first graders. She explains

that researchers found that white teachers were "uniformly negative" in response to the

"episodic" narrative style of a black student and favored the more "topic-centered" narrative

style of the white students. However, the black adults described the "episodic" story as "well-formed, easy to understand, and interesting, with lots of detail and description", and even selected it as "the best of the five they had heard" (p. 328). I want to point out that the language of the narrative standard includes features such as pacing, sequencing of events, and narrative techniques, which clearly are culturally dependent, and this has consequences not only for cultural minority groups, but also for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Purcell-Gates (2002) points out that "again and again we conclude that in developed countries and in third-world countries, learners from impoverished and low-status groups fail to develop as fully and productively literate as compared to learners from sociocultural groups that hold sociopolitical power and favor" (p. 124). Because people of those groups with power and favor are those who make the big decisions about what is desirable so far as language is concerned, those who are not immersed in that culture suffer academically. With this relationship in mind, Michael Stubbs (2002) asks the following question regarding language disadvantage: "Is it 'in' children's language? Or does it arise rather from people's attitudes to language differences?" (p. 79). If we are going to use standardized criteria to assess students' narrative styles, we need to at the very least provide both teachers and those who score students' work on high-stakes tests with extensive knowledge and training regarding culture and language, so they are better able to remain cognizant of and bracket their potential biases concerning language. In a training I attended a few years ago about narrative writing, the presenter revealed that those scoring student responses are often people without any teaching experience, and they spend a minimal amount of time reading and considering each response. All the professional development I have received in this area I have sought out independently through the university; in my 10 years of teaching, I have never been to a training, participated in any initiative that

recognizes any cultural diversity in our school, much less where language is concerned. And this is because they do not offer such opportunities, at least not in my district.

Furthermore, we must question what an item that attempts to measure language use is truly measuring. Michael Stubbs (2002) makes the claim that "any attempt to relate "language" directly to "education" is almost certain to be so oversimplified as to be meaningless" and poses the following questions: "Is one talking about: comprehension or production? Language structure or language use? Prescriptive norms of correctness or appropriateness to social context? Grammatical or communicative competence? The child's language itself or the school's attitudes to his language?" (p.78). The standardized assessment of students' language does not allow for the complexities which Stubbs refers to because the standardization itself attempts to divide up the processes of reading and writing and oversimplifies the complexities involved in these two interwoven cognitive processes. If a student misinterprets a reading passage, their reading of the piece will inevitably have a negative impact on their ability to write about that piece. Another concept to consider is the determination of lexile or reading levels based on these exams. Hilliard provides the following example:

> Let's examine the concept of 'word difficulty'. Is a word difficult because only a few people know it? Is a word difficult because many people know it? On many standardized test items, difficulty is measured by statistical methods. Yet it is not clear just what the nature of the difficulty is. The assumptions about difficulty are not explained. Therefore, what is being tested, difficulty or familiarity? (p. 99)

When we think about it in this context, much of what we are assessing so far as language is concerned is cultural familiarity and this has negative consequences for students whose language at home does not mirror the language of school including minority and economically

disadvantaged students; it is especially problematic for ELL students who have scored high

enough not to warrant a need for a translated text, but whose English vocabulary may still not be

as developed as their peers whose first language is English.

hooks (2021) refers to a particularly powerful line in Adrienne Rich's poetry, "this is the

oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you". It is important that teachers help students

acquire the language skills necessary to be successful in a society that largely harbors language

discrimination in many of its institutions. When Lisa Delpit (2002) considers her own daughter's

acquisition of African American language patterns, she says that she "came to realize that

acquiring an additional code comes from identifying with people who speak it, from connecting

the language form with all that is self-affirming and esteem building, inviting and fun" (p. 39).

When we use standardized curriculum and assessment as the sole means of guiding our feedback

and instruction of language, students do not feel affirmed; instead, they feel critiqued, like their

use of language is wrong. Because language is an important part of a person's identity, this

implies that there is something wrong with them, their very being. Joanne Dowdy (2002)

describes the feelings these practices can have for a student learning English: "unless she can

reconnect with the sense of familiarity of using language that she grew up taking for granted, she

loses all ability to integrate the dominant idiom into her language system and she is rendered

voiceless" (p. 12). A rejection of a students' use of language is internalized as a rejection of who

they are.

Rather, a more effective means of helping a student acquire the language skills they will

need for success both in school and beyond is to acknowledge the fact that "students have

memories, families, religions. Feelings, languages, and cultures that give them a distinct voice"

(hooks, 1994, p. 88), and welcome those voices into the classroom instead of only trying to alter

and "improve" them. bell hooks (1994) asserts that "usually it is in the context where the experiential knowledge of students is being denied or negated that they may feel most determined to impress upon listeners both its value and its superiority to other ways of knowing" (p. 88). In other words, if we as teachers recognize the ways that students' "experiential knowledge" can enhance learning, the students' will be far more open to developing their language skills within the academic discourse. Rather than shutting down and refusing to write at all because they do not feel connected with what we've asked them to do, they may actively engage in reading and writing and grow in both the discourses used at home and school. If we continue to force them into this very structured and specific way of writing and responding, the reading and writing will remain shallow and distant. But if we can give students "the dignity of shaping [their worlds] as [they see them], and the ability to name the world in the way that [they] experience it" (Dowdy, 2002, p. 11), we allow them a voice and space to learn, experiment with language, and grow.

Literature in Becoming

In the previous section, I discussed how a person's language is tied to culture and his or her sense of identity, and in chapter two, I explored how the study of literature works to promote democratic values, and in particular helps to develop the sense of empathy that is increasingly lacking in our society. Phillon and He (2004) define the "narrative imagination as the ability to reflect on experience, question assumptions, and actively empathize with others" (p. 30). With these ideas in mind, we see how the reading and writing of narrative works to establish who we become. According to Toni Morrison (1990), "For them [other writers working in a highly and historically racialized society], as for [her], imagining is not merely looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming* (p.4). The imagination

required of reading and writing the unfamiliar changes who we are and contributes to how we interact with and become a part of the world.

In "Using Life-based Narratives in Multicultural Teacher Education" Phillion and He (2004), provide insight on how narrative can work in preservice and in-service teacher education programs. They note that many of their students work in rural areas and may be "unaccustomed to being in classrooms with students unlike themselves" and have "little access to diverse classrooms for field experience" (p. 4). Phillon & He (2004) reference Christine Sleeter's (2001) findings to explain why this is problematic for education in rural areas: "populations of students of color, minority, English as a second language (ESL), and those living in poverty are growing; however, there are fewer minority teachers, and the teaching force is increasingly White and middle class" (p. 4); this description applies to the rural district in which I teach. Incorporating life-based narrative into the curriculum has benefits for both teachers, as a source of professional development, and students as they work to become a part of a pluralistic society, in which they might begin to see themselves as "agents of social and educational change" (Phillion & He, 2004, p. 5). In their study,

> students were encouraged to reflect on their backgrounds and experiences and critically examine their values and beliefs to develop understanding of the ways in which their personal histories, cultures, and experiences affected who they are, how they interact with others, and how they see the world. (p. 5)

Throughout my own course work, I was required to complete self-studies which asked me to examine my own history and tell my own story within a cultural and historical context; I find that learning more about myself and the biases I potentially bring into the classroom and to my interactions with my students has helped me remain cognizant of them.

Two projects stand out as particularly effective in helping me understand myself in relation to the students I teach. The first was a personal narrative about my family history in which I explored the socio-economic and educational opportunities that my grandparents and parents had in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, PA, and how those have led to my own identity construction and becoming. In the second, I collected data focused on my interactions with students of different academic levels (Honors and Support classes) as being positive, negative, and neutral, and I wrote narrative reflections each day focused on how I felt about the classes. Although I had more "positive" interactions with my support classes, I discovered that enthusiasm for learning was lacking for me and my students. These narratives helped me come to the realization that in classes with struggling readers, the enthusiasm and love of reading is not already present, but in large part needs to be generated through my planning and my own enthusiasm. Because I was never a struggling reader myself, largely because my mother was a teacher who impacted my access to reading and writing for academic contexts, I recognize that I cannot fully understand what it is like to be in a high school English course struggling to read on-level texts the way that my students often do. This awareness of my own experience in contrast to the experiences of the students works to foster empathy, and better enables me to incorporate strategies to connect them to the reading and writing process. Learning about myself and how my own values have been culturally constructed has had a more positive impact on my practice than any professional development focused on creating learning targets and success criteria possibly could; however, this type of focus on cultural studies is often ignored in our schools. In this way, writing and examining my own narratives, has contributed immensely in my becoming the teacher I currently am.

In Chapter Two, I spent time exploring the relationship between literary studies and democracy, specifically how reading and writing literature can help students *become* empathetic and active participants in a "world of plurality and difference" (Biesta, 2006, p. 9). Not only do narratives and storytelling enable our students to form their individual sense of identity, but they also serve to make up our collective identity, and this is important for a teacher of American Literature to appreciate. With the literature I select and deliver to my students for their consideration, I am working to help shape their understanding of the American identity and their space in it. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said works to explore how narratives, and in particular, the novel has had a significant impact on culture and makes the point that, "Before we can agree on what the American identity is made of, we have to concede that as an immigrant settler-society superimposed on the ruins of considerable native presence, American identity is too varied to be a unitary and homogenous thing" (p.xxxii). However, despite this complexity and variety, Toni Morrison (1992) reminds readers that "until recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (p. xxi), and representations, if even included in much of canonical American literature, are problematic.

According to Gay (2018), fiction "is a powerful way to expose students to ethnic groups, cultures, and experiences different from their own to which they may not have access in their daily lives" (p. 161), but she also emphasizes that "teachers need to know how to assess the cultural accuracy and authenticity of these books, essays, poems, and short stories; correct their fallacies; and build upon their strengths in teaching" (p. 162). She adds that "while classroom teachers may not be in a position to transform mass media, they can teach students how to analyze them for racial and cultural stereotyping as knowledge-constructors and image-makers

and to be critical consumers of what they see, hear, and read" (Gay, 2018, p. 174). Rather than eliminating the canonical works that may have problematic representations of marginalized Americans, teachers can help guide students toward a critical perspective that situates the work within its historical context and understand why these misrepresentations are present. Said (1993) suggests that "we must therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented in such works" (p. 82). And while this critical perspective is important, it is also important to read literature that includes accurate, responsible representations that work to empower and help our students see themselves in the American narrative and establish their sense of belonging and "develop a personal philosophy of being" (Cart, 2008 quoted in Gay 2018, p. 162).

The Power of Representations in Fiction

The representations with which we surround ourselves and our students are powerful influencers on identity construction and development of their empathic imagination. Just last week, I finished reading Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* with my American Literature classes, and one of my students who sits in the front row looked up at me and asked, "Are we ever going to read anything with any Black people in it?" I responded, "Yes, we are going to read several speeches and stories written by Black authors with Black characters." When I reflect on this interaction, I do wish our required texts included a more diverse list of authors, especially Black women. It was at this point I realized that as we volunteered for reading parts for the play, this student consistently volunteered to read the part of Tituba, a slave woman who functions as a scapegoat for the witchcraft trials. She went on to point out that she was not present in much of

the play. The character exists in the margins of the story, and if not read critically with emphasis

on culture and attitudes toward cultural difference could be read as responsible for the hysteria.

Said's (1993) suggestion about acknowledging what is marginally present is applicable here, and

I realized that it was important to address the treatment of the character in the play and how she

works to show us the religious and cultural intolerance of the time.

When we teach the traditional cannon, it is important to understand the influence these

works have had on culture and the collective understanding of the world. According to Said

(1993), "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the

world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the

existence of their own history" (p. xv). When we are talking about the literary canon, I think it is

important to realize that these are works that have been widely read across generations and have

had significant influence over cultural beliefs and values. In *Culture and imperialism* (1993),

Said's main point is that "the quest for, concern about and consciousness of overseas dominion

extended- not just in Conrad but in figures we practically never think of in that connection, like

Thackery and Austin" (p. 85). He points out that the effects of colonialism hover in the margins

of books and often the presence goes unacknowledged and untaught. Similarly, Morrison (1992)

points out that "Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that

construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the

dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground

for the imagination" (p. 38). Like Said, Morrison doesn't suggest that we avoid reading these

books, but that we read them with consciousness and a critical lens. She reminds us that, "readers

and writers are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting

darkness before its eyes" (Morrison, 1992, p. 91). In doing so, we are denying the work of a

layer of complexity and limiting its potential to engage students.

When we read *The Great Gatsby* (1925) toward the end of the year, there is such a scene

Fitzgerald includes in Chapter Four. As Nick Carraway rides along with Gatsby and listens to his

explanation of his life, they cross over the Queensboro Bridge into the city. Fitzgerald (1925)

pointedly includes two images: one--a hearse followed by carriages of friends "with the tragic

eyes and short upper lips of southeastern Europe" and the second, a limousine "driven by a white

chauffer, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl" (p. 69). To make clear his

purpose for including these images, Fitzgerald's narrator, thinks, "Anything can happen now that

we've slid over this bridge [. . . .] anything at all…" (p. 69). The "polite" reading of the text

Morrison (1992) refers to would ignore the way that Fitzgerald includes these descriptions for

the sake of adding an element of exoticism and mystery to his portrayal of the city. We could

exclude *The Great Gatsby* from our list of texts and justify that decision based on these racist

descriptions focused on physical attributes of southeastern Europeans and animalistic

terminology to describe African American men. But, instead, it is more productive and beneficial

to our students to acknowledge this scene and the ways in which writers, like Fitzgerald, drew

upon blackness to create the desired exotic effect. For many of my students the significance of

these images is lost, and discussion and historical context is necessary, and I will admit that

sometimes pointing out racism within the margins of a canonical text can be uncomfortable

especially when the majority of the class is willing to continue reading right passed it,

unacknowledged, but the discussion is more often than not, productive in enhancing their

understanding of the novel and its historical context.

For many of us, the stories that we read whether fiction or nonfiction and the stories that we see on the news and other media make up the extent of the body of knowledge we have to understand what is unfamiliar to us. bell hooks (2009) emphasizes that

> It may not be the intention of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned [. . .] Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues. (p. 101)

Her observations about film also apply to literary works such as novels, short stories, and plays. They have a powerful influence over how we understand others and how we see ourselves in the world. When we come to this realization, we can better appreciate that "the power to narrate or to block narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said, p. xv). I think understanding this connection can better help us to understand some of the culture wars currently taking place in America's schools, particularly the controversy surrounding critical race theory. The contemporary debate is illustrative of Said's (1993) point that "in the United States this concern over cultural identity has of course yielded up the contest over what books and authorities constitute 'our' tradition" (p. xxxi). The suppression and control over whose stories are told works to maintain hegemony and keep the marginalized voiceless and powerless.

Ashton Crawley (2020) asks, "what to make of the theological-philosophical modality of Western thought that produces categorical distinctions such that we are supposed to think Indigeneity apart from and in contradistinction to Blackness; that we are to think the irreconcilability of Black suffering and settler colonialism? (p.33). This tendency toward

categorical thinking in terms of the American identity is what has created the "appalling tribalism [that] is fracturing societies, separating peoples, promoting greed, bloody conflict, and uninteresting assertions of minor ethnic or group particularity" (Said, 1993, p. 22). While this fragmented tribalism prevails, so will oppression and suffering. He (2021) suggests that curriculum workers can look toward diaspora curriculum for a more optimistic future: "Diasporic consciousness enables people to find the strength, faith, and humility to join in common struggles and build solidarity across differences to fight against all forms of oppression" and claims that "such diasporic futurities inspire optimism over despair, love over hatred, and possibilities over impossibilities" (p. 1). The inclusivity of diaspora curriculum allows for emphasis of commonalities rather than difference, but also acknowledges the experiences of particular groups. Said (1993) suggests that "if at the outset we acknowledge the massively knotted and interconnected experiences- of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures-there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them an ideal and separate status"; but he acknowledges that it is important to preserve what is "unique", while maintaining a sense of "human community" (p. 38), and a diasporic consciousness paired with the power of narrative enables teachers to create this balance and look toward a more optimistic future.

According to Said (1993), "narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest form were also narratives of integration not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group but who were now fighting for a place in it" (p. xxxiii). In my American Literature course, we read a chapter from *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, "The Battle with Mr. Covey". In this chapter, Douglass tells of how he was brutally beaten and worked to a point of physical exhaustion and weakness that rendered him powerless

in the face of oppression; however, there is a turning point in his story when he physically defeats Mr. Covey and reclaims his humanity. Although he remained a slave for years after this conflict, he concludes with the idea that "the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact". I love teaching this particular piece because it help students to understand and remain "cognizant of the fact that slavery [. . .] tried to dehumanize blacks, and failed, and didn't try to dehumanize whites, but succeeded" (hooks, 2009, p. 94), and when looked at in this way, we can better understand the way that individual stories are interwoven to make up an American identity and American narrative that is inclusive and pluralistic.

Post-Colonialism and Toni Morrison's novels

In addition to reading canonical works critically, it is important to make a conscious effort to include accurate and complex representations of marginalized groups and their place in America's story, and Toni Morrison is a powerful source for including those voices. According to Dimitriadis and McCarthy (2001) "Morrison does not give us an easy moral stance toward history. The past, for Morrison, is not girded by easy ethical binaries and norms, clear distinctions for right versus wrong" (*Beloved* and Slavery in the United States, para. 40). Morrison holds true to this position in her later works as well through creation of flawed characters and psychoanalytic insights into their motivations and their pasts, both societal and personal, which influence them. Morrison says, "I know I can't change the future but I can change the past. It is the past, not the future, which is infinite. Our past was appropriated. I am one of the people who has to reappropriate it" (quoted in Dimitriadis and McCarthy, Excavating a Pedagogy of History in Toni Morrison Novels, para. 2). "You can't change the past" is a cliché widely used to quell guilt regarding actions and consequences, but through her novels, Morrison

demonstrates how a "reappropriated" past changes history, or what we thought was history and can work to repair our futures.

At the beginning of *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison brings the psychological struggles of the colonized to the attention of her readers with Sweetness's rejection of her own child. She describes Lula Ann (Bride) as "midnight black, Sudanese black" in contrast to herself: "light-skinned, with *good* (emphasis mine) hair, what we call high yellow" (Morrison, 2015, p. 3). Sweetness goes on to explain how "mulatto types" might reject their own family in favor of "pass[ing] for white," but stresses that they must have "the *right* (emphasis mine) kind of hair" (Morrison, 2015, p. 3). On the first page of her novel, Morrison communicates the complexities of the colonized—colonizer relationship. Even Sweetness, who is a black woman, is discriminatory toward her own child because of skin color because she has been conditioned to think that skin and hair most closely reflective of the white majority is "good" and "right." It is due to Sweetness's aversion toward Lula Ann, that Lula Ann feels the need to lie in court, sending an innocent woman to prison just to "get some love—from her mama" (Morrison, 2015, p. 156). She mistreats Bride and makes her feel lesser than others in the name of "protection" because she understands "skin privileges" having seen and experienced discrimination (Morrison, 2015, p. 43). One would think that someone who claims to understand the damage of oppression would not oppress another, especially one's own child. Morrison does not reveal the impact of Sweetness and Bride's environments to create sympathy for them, but to blur the lines between right and wrong.

Morrison furthers this idea with her characterization of both Rain and Brooklyn, the latter in a much simpler fashion. Bride describes Brooklyn as "a true friend" (Morrison, 2015, p. 29) without whom she "couldn't have healed" after her assault (Morrison, 2015, p. 57); however,

would Bride view Brooklyn in the same way if she knew of her attempt to seduce Booker? The revelation of this information would change their history, much the same way that history changes when the stories of marginalized peoples are paired with canonized literature. Just as Brooklyn's friendship and deceit blur the line of morality, Rain functions similarly. Rain's unusual appearance mirrors and contrasts Bride as a child: "milk white skin, ebony hair, neon eyes" (Morrison, 2015, Morrison p. 86). To further this connection, Morrison emphasizes how Evelyn nurtures and cares for this child by describing how they sing together while making dinner, something that Bride's mother could not do for a child of her own. When Evelyn and her husband, Steve, find Rain she is alone and soaked. They offer help, and Rain responds with "nastier words in a little kid's mouth you couldn't imagine" (Morrison, 2015, p. 97). Later we understand the source of Rain's hatred when she matter-of-factly reveals to Bride that her mother prostituted her out to men, and cast her out of the house for injuring one of them. Her tone makes the evil more shocking, and communicates that "evil is not something to be destroyed, but to be lived with" (Dimitriadis and McCarthy, Jazz and the Urban Migration, para. 2). Neither Sweetness nor Rain's mothers face retribution at the novel's conclusion, excepting deprivation of the love of children they never valued in the first place, but both children have to live with the sins of their mothers. We cannot punish the evil doers of our past, but we can recognize their sins and in doing so, rewrite the history we've been taught.

The relationship Morrison creates between Booker and Bride also depends on the "reappropriation" of the past. Queen, Booker's aunt, predicts their future: "They will blow it she thought. Each will cling to a sad little story of hurt and sorrow—some long-ago trouble and pain life dumped on their pure and innocent selves. And each one will rewrite that story forever, knowing the plot, guessing the theme, inventing its meaning, and dismissing its origin"

(Morrison, 2015, p. 158). She knows that if Booker and Bride are not honest with themselves and each other about their histories, a promising future is out of the question. Bride must make peace with the lies she has told and understand why she told them. She realizes that she "had counted on her looks for so long" and recognizes the shallowness of how she has determined her worth, as well as Sweetness's role in developing that artificial self-concept. She describes it as "the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it" (Morrison, 2015, p. 151). This has been Bride's miseducation, and she has begun the process of unlearning it through additional perspective.

Booker has to "apologize for enslaving [Adam, his brother who was sexually abused and murdered] to chain [himself] to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slaveowner could have done it better" (Morrison, 2015, p. 161). With this metaphor, Morrison conjures up the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. Booker has exploited and enslaved Adam as an outlet for his repressed anger. He abandons his family because he does not agree with the way they have moved on from their past pains. His treatment of them is unfair, and while he has endured a horrific experience, they have as well. He also abandons Bride in Adam's name when he learns that she is trying to help a convicted child molester without bothering to understand why. Both acts are wrong in the name of what is right, blurring the lines between the binaries.

Morrison blurs lines and furthers the metaphor when Bride describes the way that Booker makes her feel, "safe, colonized somehow" (Morrison, 2015, p. 78). Is she suggesting that among the exploitation and inhumanity we associate with colonization, there somewhere exists a sense of safety? In her *Curriculum Studies Guidebook (2016)*, Morris compares the psychic wounds of colonialism to those of child abuse: "Likewise, children who suffer from sexual or emotional

abuse might repress this abuse or move on. But one thing is certain: although the physical scars might be gone, the psychic scars remain" (Vol. 2, p. 238). The abused often protect their abusers because it can seem a safer choice than the alternative: confrontation, moving on, and the unknown. Morrison's colonial metaphors and the reoccurring child abuse work in conjunction to reveal the complicated relationship between the center and the periphery.

Briefly, Morris (2016) explores the feminist critiques of the post-colonial, claiming "women and men experience resistance to colonization differently because they are treated differently by their colonizers," and says this is "an area of study that needs much work" (Vol. 2, p. 238). With *A Mercy* (2008), Morrison reveals the different treatment of women mentioned in Morris's guidebook in the context of the 1680's slave trade in colonial America. She also provides a picture of slavery that is more complex than what students may learn from history textbooks, and is therefore a worthy candidate to accomplish Morris's vision that "imaginative fiction should be read alongside historical works" (Vol. 1, p. 396), for a deeper understanding. And just as with *God Help the Child* (2015), she demonstrates how the past can change with the relationship of Florens and her mother.

In the concluding chapter of the novel, the reader is provided access to Florens's mother's thoughts regarding what Florens perceived as rejection in favor of her younger brother at the beginning of the novel. She synthesizes the experiences of the women of the novel, Sorrow, Rebecka, Florens, Lina and herself with the following metaphor: "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (Morrison, 2008, p. 191). Sorrow is 11 years old when she is found after the ship that was once her home is destroyed along with all others on it. While the sawyer takes her in and his wife clothes and feeds her, her thoughts regarding her "monthly blood" reveal that she has suffered

sexual assault at the hands of "both brothers attending," resulting in pregnancy and delivery of a premature baby (Morrison, 2008, p. 141). It is after she arrives at the Vaark's that she is once again impregnated from "the silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew" (Morrison, 2008, p. 151). Sorrow reveals the deep psychological effects of such abuse when she says, "Although all her life she had been saved by men—Captain, the sawyer's sons, Sir, and now Will and Scully—she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important by herself" (Morrison, 2008, p. 157). She views the sawyer's sons as saviors even though they raped her. She views Captain as a savior even though he limited her reality to a ship where she patched and sewed sailcloth.

Although Lina is distrustful of Sorrow, their relationships with the colonizers are similar. Lina says of Europeans, "once they terrified her, then they rescued her. Now they simply puzzled her" (Morrison, 2008, p. 52). She elaborates by explaining her past experiences: "On one hand they would torch your home; on the other they would feed, nurse, and bless you. Best to judge them one at a time…" (Morrison, 2008, p. 53). Here Toni Morrison shows readers that morality and racism are concepts characterized by complexity and that a good and evil binary does not provide the appropriate lens for exploring the effects of colonialism. After Lina's village is torched, she vows "never to betray or abandon anyone she cherished" (Morrison, 2008, p. 57); this makes her guardianship of the once "abandoned" Florens more understandable. Morrison's creation of the character Lina works to reveal the complicated relationship between the colonized and colonizer and connects it to the concept of abandonment.

Like the other men, Sorrow refers to the blacksmith as a savior after he cures her of disease (Morrison, 2008, p. 50), but while he is a savior to her, he is Florens's colonizer. When on her way to find the blacksmith for her mistress, Florens contemplates her relative freedom,

what she has never had: "I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you" (Morrison, 2008, p. 82). She, like Bride in *God Help the Child* (2015), feels a safety in colonization because what happens to the colonized once the colonizer abandons them? Florens is a young girl who is just reaching adolescence when her mother gives her up to Vaark as "a mercy" to protect her from Senhor. Her mother realizes that "there is no protection but there is difference" (Morrison, 2008, p.195). Florens is seduced by the blacksmith. Morrison causes readers to question, is this fate better or worse, or just merely different as Florens's mother says? Like Lina and Sorrow, Florens will need to find "a way to be in the world" (Morrison, 2008, p. 56-57) amidst its evil, realizing that people have the capacity for both good and evil.

With the stories of these women, Morrison shows what lies beneath the surface of slavery in the United States and shows how women experienced colonization differently than men. To further deepen her exploration of slavery, Morrison includes Will and Scully to depict the often-ignored practice of enslavement of white men in colonial America. Morrison reveals that Scully's father "sold his son's services" (Morrison, 2008, p. 180), and Willard had "three years added on to his term for infractions—theft and assault and was re-leased" (Morrison, 2008, p. 174). In the presence of few women, Scully and Will find companionship: "There in the warmth of animals, their own bodies clinging together, Scully altered his plans [to run away] and Willard didn't mind at all" (Morrison, 2008, p. 181). With her nontraditional portrayal of slavery, homosexuality among indentured servants and the sexual abuse of women, Morrison creates imaginative fiction that reappropriates the clean version of slavery found in history textbooks. Geneva Gay (2018) addresses textbooks and claims that "most students consider their authority to be incontestable and the information they present to always be accurate, authentic, and

absolute truth" (p.144) However, there is much to be said about the absence of information with regard to textbooks, in that "contentious issues and individuals are avoided, and the unpleasant sides of society and cultural diversity are either sanitized or bypassed entirely" (Gay, 2018, p. 146). But how can a practice as horrific as slavery be sanitized for education and still be accurate? Simply put, it cannot be.

Morris (2016) claims that "entire countries can go into a state of denial about embarrassing aspects of their histories" (Vol 2, p. 234), much like Rebecka "was ashamed of her early fears [regarding Lina] and pretended she never had them" (Morrison 2008, p. 87). Currently, we see this same kind of denial with the right-wing objections and protests surrounding critical race theory, or what they think critical race theory is (the discussion reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of theory), and it has resulted in the censorship of teachers and resources. This censorship includes novels like Morrison's which explore the often difficult to hear stories of minorities. They are banning material that addresses institutional racism or includes the stories of LGBTQ people with the hope that ignoring their presence in society will somehow win the culture war, but instead, they ultimately harm their own students. Not only do they limit their knowledge of their world with such censorship, but they also deprive them of the good teachers this profession is losing as a result.

It is this faulty foundation that leads to the crumbling of the Vaark family, and the uninhabited house built by Vaark before his death. For Morrison, our collective history is no different than Rebecka's. It will not do to deny the history and experiences of the underrepresented and marginalized. Weaver (2010) states that "Vaark's hope that someday someone will fill his house is Morrison's hope for humanity" (Morrison, 2008, p. 143), but if the house's foundation is a faulty one, it too will crumble. Morrison solidifies the idea of a

changeable past with a chapter narrated by Florens's mother. Florens's past would be changed if she only knew her mother's altruistic motives for giving her up to Vaark. Florens says she "will keep one sadness. That all this time [she] cannot know what [her] mother is telling [her]" (Morrison, 2008, p. 189). Although she can find something resembling balance after the blacksmith rejects her, she lacks the necessary understanding of her past to have a complete future. A collective acknowledgement of our past, despite how shameful, is necessary for humanity's attainment of a promising future, and the study of works like Morrison's is a step in that direction.

In their discussion of the challenges of life-based literary narratives, He and Phillion (2004) make note that, "Even when empathy does develop it might be the kind that reinforces stereotypes" and reference Maxine Greene (1999) and her use of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) as an example of a piece that could potentially "reify existing stereotypes about African as American families" (Phillon & He, 2004, p. 8). In this earlier work, Morrison explores many of the same themes as in her later novels: the effects of colonialism, the mother-daughter relationship, and the psychological effects of abuse. Toward the beginning of the novel, the narrator reveals her complicated relationship with Shirley Temple; after she admits that, "[she] destroyed white baby dolls" but that "the truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls" (Morrison, 1970, p. 22). Of Shirley Temple, she says, "[she] learned much later to worship her" (Morrison, 1970, p. 23). With the narrator's thoughts about little white girls, Shirley Temple, and her classmate Maureen Peal, Morrison shows that these socially constructed ideas of worth and beauty can have a real and damaging impact on black girls: feelings of inadequacy that can impact their sense of identity.

Two aspects of the novel have the potential to "reify existing stereotypes" as Greene (1990) suggests: the relationship between Pecola and her mother and the abuse Pecola suffers at the hands of her father. When Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia, go to home of the white people Pecola's mother works for, Pecola accidently spills the hot blueberry pie cooling in the kitchen; Claudia, notes that when the berries splatter all over Pecola's legs, "the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about" (Morrison, 1970, p. 109). But rather than comforting her daughter or showing any concern for this pain, Mrs. Breedlove, "yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and [Claudia] by implication" (Morrison, 1970, p. 109). After chasing the girls away, she turns to the little white girl upset by the scene and chooses the comfort her. This scene is particularly disturbing, and certainly works to inspire an empathic imagination for Pecola's experiences but at the cost of vilifying black women through Mrs. Breedlove. Later in the novel, the narrator explains that regarding her role with the white family, "Pauline [Pecola's mother] "kept this order, this beauty, for herself" but for her children she "taught them fear; fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's [Pecola's father] mother's] (Morrison, 1970, p. 128). More problematic is the characterization of Cholly and the disturbing description Morrison includes to capture the rape of his own daughter.

There is no excuse for the depravity with which these two parents treat their own children. Amidst these appalling scenes, Morrison includes background to reveal the adolescence and eventual union of Pecola's parents, and I think she does this to contextualize the abuse within an abusive society. Morrison includes scenes that capture Cholly's own abuse at the hands of a maternal figure in the community known as "M'Dear" (Morrison, 1970, p.139), and his encounter with Darlene ends in shame and an association between sex and hatred at the hands of

a couple of white racists who stumble upon them. It is important to emphasize the way this abuse begets abuse of both his wife and his daughter, and the way Pauline's abuse at the hands of Cholly influences her harsh treatment of her children. With this, it is important to emphasize that the cyclical nature of abuse exists regardless of class and race, but that race is certainly relevant here as it is at the root of the abuse Cholly experiences at gunpoint from white men. Morrison creates a sense of disgust in her readers with these scenes, but I think more powerful is the empathy we feel for Picola and the self "interrogation" (Morrison, 1970, p. 211) her character inspires in the reader. For a piece like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), readers need to maintain a critical lens to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes of black families.

Conclusion

The reading and writing of literary narrative in the English Literature classroom has powerful potential to foster a sense of belonging and empathy in our students, and in effect help them discover themselves and carve out a space in a pluralistic society. However, the teacher can play an important role in how effective a tool literary narrative is for our students. With narrative writing that is open and accepting rather than purely evaluative and structured, we can celebrate student voices and cultures and empower them to tell their stories. And when we approach canonical literature with a critical eye and guide discussion and interpretations toward acknowledging problematic portrayals regarding race, sex, and social class, we can engage our students, many of whom may not feel interest in a work that they feel marginalizes traditionally oppressed groups of people. And finally, we must stress the importance of reading literature, like that of Morrison's discussed in this chapter, with accurate, complex, and empowering images of minorities, and names and acknowledges contemporary and past oppression and its hold on our futures.

Chapter Four

Finding the Poetry of Science and Technology in Fiction

E sat at her desk, staring at her computer screen in a completely empty school building on a Monday morning in April; she looked at her watch. It was 11:15. In another reality the halls would be filled with the student body mid-class change between 3rd and 4th periods. Nothing about this realization felt right.

She let out a sigh as she turned her attention back to the master schedule she had been working on for the last few weeks. She felt overwhelmed with anxiety and a sense of helplessness. Would she even see this schedule implemented next school year, or would this global pandemic continue to escalate and render it obsolete as it had the entire Spring semester? She had been struggling to stay focused on the work she knew she had to do. This was her first year as Instructional Supervisor and it certainly had not gone the way she had imagined it would. She had previously served as the testing coordinator for the last few years and was very proud of last year's testing results: the school had experienced achievement gains in 5 of the 8 subjects tested by the state. This year, there would be no testing at all, which was causing her somewhat of an existential crisis. All of the things she thought were so important, all of the things that had made up her approach to education… testing, TKES evaluations, school report card… none of that mattered. She thought of the students who depended on school breakfast and lunches… that mattered. She thought of the students sitting at home with no way to do their assignments without decent internet connection… that mattered. She thought of the students, who unlike her own children, may not have a parent to sit down with them and offer the assistance they needed with online assignments… that mattered.

She opened a new tab to check her email. She scanned the screen. She had emails from teachers wondering about what kind of plans to put together for the fall. Would they need to create online learning plans? She had an email from a parent about whether or not students would be refunded their prom fees. She had several emails from parents questioning the grading plan for this 9 weeks—would the work students were doing count toward their averages?

She had no real ability to make decisions regarding any of these issues, and felt completely powerless. School had been cancelled because of the risk of infection and inequalities regarding education seemed to be exacerbated as consequence. Scientists on every news station showed little optimism about this coming to an end any time soon, yet she had not heard any sort of plan from the Board of Education about how to proceed in the upcoming school year.

As she looked at this bunch of emails with no answers for those she was supposed to be leading, she felt tears form. She was not sad, but angry and frustrated. She decided she would do something. She opened a new excel tab and minimized the master schedule. She would create something new. If students were to maintain a six foot distance between them, there is no way a traditional schedule would work in a high school this size. The only way to ensure the students could receive the face-to-face instruction and discussion time they needed would be if they could stagger the attendance in a block style A/B/C day schedule.

She wondered if the Board would ever go for this. Would they even take her idea seriously? After all, she had only held the IS position for a year. But these were unusual times and the usual way of education just does not seem to fit here.

Yes, she would create something new…

It was rejected.

About the Vignette

In the first chapter, I referenced Weaver's (2019) thoughts regarding science fiction: that the settings and conflicts of these works often become the present reality too quickly to continue to be considered futuristic "science fiction". This phenomenon was true regarding the 2020 pandemic; our reality felt much like a science fiction novel and was the inspiration for the vignette. We were faced with an unprecedented situation: a highly contagious, unpredictable, deadly virus for which we had no vaccine or treatment. While this had an impact on just about every facet of life world-wide, the impact on education was incredible: schools closed and delivered instruction virtually for—some districts a few months and some for more than a year. We are still navigating the effects with increased mental health issues and learning gaps. As I think about the past few years and the students and teachers who have lost loved ones, I wonder if some of those traumas could have been lessened if we could have imagined a different model of education and dedicated resources to implementing it. Too often the reason we cannot make changes seems to only be because we've always done it a certain way. We had to continue in-person learning but refused to make any meaningful adjustments to reduce the risk of doing so while other nearby districts refused to make changes to attempt to keep students in school. In both situations, it is clear we lacked the critical thinking and imagination necessary to navigate the unfamiliar.

With this chapter, it is my goal to explore the relationship between science and literature, and argue for a unity between these disciplines. From the mid to late 19th century people began to view the sciences and the humanities as separate binary entities; this epistemology has persisted into the contemporary era, and we can look at the educational system to see this epistemology manifested: specific programs dedicated to STEM emphasis, others dedicated to

arts. When in reality, students need deep foundational knowledge of both disciplines to understand their world. Students are pushed into pathways focused on one or the other, and even labeled as a "math person" or an "English person". *In Neuroscience and Modern Fiction* (2015), Stephen Burn explains the research findings of Dr. Roger Sperry: "the left hemisphere was the brain of speech, writing, and calculation" which performed "analytic, symbolic, computer-like sequential logic" while the right functioned more intuitively and involved the "apprehension and processing of spatial patterns, relations, and transformations" seemingly "holistic and unitary rather than analytic and fragmentary" (p. 216). However, both sides of the brain influence one another and create and make meaning. In this way, the brain can function as a symbol for the arts and sciences, perceived and erroneous binaries that are woven together to make up the fabric of our realities.

And it is an unsettling truth that the value society places on the humanities is in a steep decline. As explored in previous chapters, everything must be quantified, and the imagination, art, and literature are immeasurable. We apply a kind of pseudo-science to our teaching of literature and reduce its potential. But a world without these would be impoverished and incomplete. Art and literature allow us to understand our world and humanity, its beauty, and its destructiveness, and instills in us a sense of empathy for the suffering of others. It allows us to make connections with the unfamiliar, and for this reason is crucial to understanding science and technologies as these fields continue to advance. However, the "humanities" can be problematic as they have historically worked to capture what is human and labeled everything that is not human inferior. The anthropocentrism that has been so engrained in our culture, in large part through the humanities, has caused a global ecological crisis and it is imperative that we work to shift this mindset and grapple with the realities of our situation. Ironically, we cannot hope to do

so without the help of speculative and science fiction; therefore, it is essential that we redefine the humanities. The literature of the post-human era must not only inspire empathy for humans, but for non-humans with whom we share the Earth. As explored in earlier chapters, the humanities play an important role in developing a citizenry that thinks critically, and today, that means thinking critically through a post-human lens.

In my exploration of how the sciences and humanities are naturally connected through poetry, I explore how our tendency to set humans apart from other organisms, is not only a misguided philosophy, but how it has ultimately hurt us, leading to the oppression of other humans as well as non-human organisms and ecological crisis. Works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explore how the lingering effects of humanism can potentially play out in a post-human world and function as powerful examples of how issues related to science and technology can be explored through fiction.

Science and Literature

Although science and literature are often perceived as binaries, when we look at the literary trends throughout our history, there are clear shifts in the way we view the world, and these shifts are clearly influenced by scientific discovery. In *Chaos bound: Orderly disorder in contemporary literature and science*, Hayles (1990) explains this relationship: "as metaphor is enfolded into metaphor, the scientific tradition is forced to confront the fact that thought, language, and social context evolved together. Social context affects language, language affects thought, thought affects social context. The circle is closed" (p. 48). The disciplines are naturally connected. There are clear Darwinian influences on the literature of the Victorian era—Dickens' concern with origins and ancestry for example, and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (2016) which celebrates the interconnectedness of Earth's organisms. Furthermore, we can see how scientific

discoveries in neurology influenced the modern period with the work of authors like Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In our contemporary literature, we are seeing authors explore how the artificial and the real interact to influence our consciousness and being in the world. It is my position that not only can the literary take inspiration from the scientific, but the sciences can benefit from the ethical exploration of advancements through fiction. Fiction provides a realm between the real and imaginary, where writers of all disciplines, ecologists, humanists, educators, and other stakeholders can contemplate and imagine the possibilities.

In *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* (2006), David Quamman explains a paradoxical foundation to the relationship between science and literature. He writes of Darwin's ideas:

> Think of evolution as the result of fixed laws, he urges: like gravity, or the movement of heat. Evolution's governing laws include biological growth, reproduction, inheritance, variation. Population pressure, and the struggle for existence, all combining to yield a natural selection, divergence, and the extinction of less adapted forms. From the war of nature comes an exalted result: the higher animals. Isn't that a more satisfying and majestic notion that requiring God personally to design every tick, clam, and flatworm? (p. 197)

He has interpreted Darwin's work to capture both the fixed and unchanging rules of the universe and the dynamic, continuously changing population of organisms with a connected complexity that those rules work to create. Furthermore, it is the very trauma that organisms endure for their survival that works to transform and create new species.

Darwin's discoveries had profound influences on the poetry and philosophies of Walt Whitman; according to Quamman (2006), "Darwin denied mankind its self-assigned demigod status and included us in the jumble of struggle and change" (p. 13). In his depiction of a diverse

American citizenry including the carpenter, the pilot, the duck-shooter, the deacons, the farmer, the lunatic, the machinist, etc.," Whitman employs parallelism in his syntactical constructions throughout *Leave of Grass* (2016) which suggest an equality among humans; later on in the poem, he extends this idea with both non-human organisms and objects such as the quail, the bat flies, the brook, the cattle, the cheese cloth, the she-whale, and the steamship etc. (Whitman, p. 50). In his poetry, he suggests an interconnectivity between human animals, nonhuman animals, and even the objects that work to transform and impact their environments for one unified story.

Like Darwin, Whitman sees a "grandeur" (Quammen, p. 198) to this dynamic and unified world around him. He writes, "I see something of God/each hour of twenty-four, and each moment then, /In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass" (p. 71). Darwin's research caused a great societal disturbance and an impassable rift between the sciences and religion, a binary that continues to inhibit our society's ability to address global issues such as climate change and mass extinction. Whitman, rather than thinking in binaries, found no reason why reality must fall between one or the other. Whitman claims that, "the smallest sprout shows that there is really no death" (p. 26), that "[he] has died [himself] ten thousand times before (p. 71), and "if you want [him] again, look for [him] under your bootsoles" (p. 73). He connects the scientific idea of atomic regeneration and recycling with the spirituality of religion in a contested, yet harmonious space, seeing God all around him, in every organism and object.

This is a space where, according to Aaron Moe (2014), inspiration "is found not only in the forces of earth, but also so, in the forces of other animal makers", where "human poiesis" is not "elevated" over the poiesis of other animals (p. 38). When Whitman writes of the "spotted hawk [who] swoops by and accuses [him]" and personifies him with "complaints of [his] gab

and [his] loitering" (p. 73), he is creating what Moe (2014) defines as a "multispecies event" (p. 24). He is seeing the human in the hawk and the hawk in himself when he continues with, "I too am not a bit tamed. . . . I too am untranslatable/ I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" (p. 73). Whitman's use of language and syntax does not prioritize his existence over that of the hawk, but gives equal weight to both organisms; both the poet and the hawk have contributed to the creation of the moment, and thus, the poem. Through his writing, Whitman is acknowledging the agency of the hawk and honoring its contribution.

Before Whitman and even Darwin's research, Alexander Von Humbolt contributed similar philosophies through his study of ethnography. According to Laura Dassow Walls (2009), "Humboldt's Cosmos is about regrounding and reimagining science, about reminding us that humans are natural and nature is human. This division that built the modern world no longer makes sense; we must begin to think of humans and natures as braided and roped and woven together in a resilient new Casiquiare exchange" (p. 316). When Walls (2009) refers to the "modern world" in this passage, her phrase carries connotations of anthropocentric practices, governmental policies, and evolutionary human inventions that have worked to threaten the existence of nonhuman organisms. The idea of the division between human and every other organism is one that Katherine Hayles (2017) provides some thought-provoking insight: "There is something weird about this binary. On one side are some seven billion individuals, members of the Homo sapien species; on the other side sits everything else on the planet, including all other species in the world, and all objects ranging from rocks to clouds" (p. 30). When we begin study of the Romantic period, and look at William Cullen Bryant's (2015) "Thanatopsis,"I like to emphasize this idea with my students. The speaker of the poem reflects on how "all who tread the Earth are but a handful to the tribes that slumber in its bossom" (lines 48-50). When we talk

about this poem, we think about not only the humans included in this number, but the multitudes

of nonhuman organisms. As Hayles (2017) points out, this separation between humans and

nonhumans is not a separation of equal division, but rather a small minority of creatures having

laid claim upon the rest of the world, and we can narrow this even further to a capitalist minority

of people who have separated themselves and profited off the majority of humans and nonhuman

animals.

Despite the profound influence Darwin and Whitman have had on American culture,

bringing together science and poetry, their ideas were not enough to inspire a shift in the way

humans view themselves in relation to all the worlds other organisms, as we still strive to

"overcome the (mis)perception that humans are the only important or relevant cognizers on the

planet" (Hayles, 2017, p.11), an ideology that has lead to serious environmental implications. As

before mentioned, Darwin claimed that the world abides by static and constant rules that allow

for evolutionary growth from struggle, and it is perhaps this very principle that will hopefully

lead us to new imaginings and creations to save it. Humanity may learn from its experiences and

trauma how to exist in the world with other organisms. But this will require us to think beyond

the binary possibilities into undefined realms.

Environmental Justice: Humanism and its Consequences

Much thought and debate has been dedicated to the question of what sets humans apart

from other organisms, and much of the energies regarding this philosophy works to justify the

way that humans have used all other organisms for his own advancement; however, these

practices are what will ironically bring about our downfall. Derrida (2002) challenges the idea

that humans are distant from animals and plants with the following thoughts:

One doesn't need to be an expert to foresee that they involve thinking about what is meant by living, speaking, dying, being and the world as in being-in-the-world or being towards the world, or being-with, being-before, being-after, being and following, being followed or being following, there where I *am*, in one way or another, but impeachably, *near* what they call the animal (p. 380).

This recognition that humans are equally being in the world with nonhuman animals and plants refutes the principles of humanism; while organisms are all different from one another, we are part of the animal world. He emphasizes the way they exist and die the same way humans do. Carey Woolf (2013) takes this idea further and asks, "why shouldn't nonhuman lives count as 'grievable lives' particularly since many millions of people grieve very deeply for their lost animal companions?" (p. 18). Those of us with companion animals feel their loss, often as deeply as a close relative. They live with us and are an integrated part of our families, yet it is still difficult for even those of us with beloved companion animals to apply this same idea to other nonhuman organisms outside our own homes. The same kind of othering that takes place among humans is similarly applied to nature.

Derrida (2002) also explores human interconnectivity with animals and their perspective regarding humans when he writes,

The animal is there before me, there in front of me—I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind me. It surrounds me. And from this vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also—something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me. It has its own point of view regarding me (p. 380).

He contemplates how human lives intersect with animal lives in ways we tend to overlook. We surround one another. But what he calls "calculated forgetting" occurs because when we grant the animal its own point of view because their point of view may not be convenient for us and we may not like to acknowledge the way they view us. Despret (2013) claims that "for a history of animals to be possible, the historian should take the risk of speculating: how did animals understand and experience what humans offered them or forced on them?" (p. 32). Although humans have a long history of interaction with animals for utility, the perspective of the animal is absent from the telling of this story because it is only filtered through human perspective, however empathetic or indifferent. This idea is applicable to the ways in which we utilize dogs to fulfill purposes in law enforcement or the military. While a human man or woman makes a conscious choice to serve, the dog is bred for the role without a choice. Chris Pearson (2013) explores this topic when he argues that the role of dogs in the war effort is more than just "purposeless objects that were unwittingly drawn into the conflict, but whose abilities and characteristics allowed them to perform varied and skilled work in conjunction with human agents" (p. 129). He recognizes that animals have an agency and a purpose beyond that of human utility and emphasizes that in many ways the animal abilities are actually superior to those of humans. When we think about having a purpose or agency the concept of fulfillment is connected. When dogs have responsibilities, behaviors change as if they've found fulfillment in performing their responsibilities. Bearing this in mind causes one to rethink the philosophies at the center of humanism, as dogs are much closer to humans than the philosophy allows for, and furthermore, are even superior in many intuitive ways.

Derrida (2002) contemplates the humanistic idea that language sets people a part from animals and argues that perhaps the distinction does not lie in language, but rather "the power to

name" (p. 388), or our ability to create culturally constructed definitions for the organisms around us and ourselves. And we can consider the animal influence on our own language to support Derrida's philosophy of interspecies connectivity. As previously explored, Whitman's poetry reveals, "the dynamic where nonhuman animals shape the form of human writing pervades poetry and poetics" and "the etymology also suggests that when a poet undergoes the making process of poesis in harmony with the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals, a multispecies event occurs" (Moe 2014, p. 2). While language has the power to divide humans from animals, it also, has the ability to demonstrate how close we actually are to them. When we listen to the language of nonhumans, it is possible to capture the essence of different species in our fiction, which is a critical part of our culture. When we refuse to listen to other species, and our literature reflects humanism, we are disconnected from nature and from one another.

Peter Sloterdijk (2009) explores this damaging relationship between humanism and language: "Literacy itself, as least until the very recent development of universal literacy, has had a sharply selective sorting effect. It sharply divided our culture and created a yawning gulf between the literate and illiterate, a gulf that in its insuperability amounted almost to a species differentiation" (p. 23). Language has functioned as a means of determining what it means to be human; it was once thought to be what separated us from animals. Therefore, those who are not literate do not count as human, and in this way, humanism has not only impacted nonhumans, but other humans. Braidotti (2013) summarizes the impact when she explains that "the political economy of difference resulted in passing off entire categories of humans as disposable others: to be 'different from' came to mean to be 'less than' (p. 28). As explored in the previous chapter, this idea is captured in the way that North American culture insists that to be successful, to have worth in our society, one must speak English. Those who do not, are valued less.

Like humans, animals have their own cultures with "different social norms and different behaviors" (Beckoff & Pierce p. 19). I think it also reasonable to assert that they have their own means of communication, considering that language is culturally constructed. We see communication between particular species, whales and dolphins for instance. They clearly demonstrate the ability to understand one another, and in many cases demonstrate the ability to understand our languages. Despret (2008) explains this with his description of a parrot who would not only "speak, describe, count, classify objects in abstract categories, and concepts like 'same' and 'different', but he was also able to use speech so as to influence the behavior of others: 'come here', 'I want to go to that place', 'no', 'I want this' (p. 126). Isn't it interesting that animals are able to understand us and respond to us, yet we struggle to understand and respond to their language? This, I believe, is a part of the "calculated forgetting" to which Derrida refers, and yet another way we can question the principles of humanism.

Just as language has been historically used as a means to separate humans from nonhumans, so have ideas such as morality, justice, and reason; however, these once considered human character traits, have also been observed in nature. Beckoff and Pierce (2009) show how "mammals living in tight social groups appear to live according to codes of conduct, including both prohibitions against certain kinds of behavior and expectations for other kinds of behavior [. . .] often showing signs of what looks like compassion and empathy" (p. 5). They define morality as "a suite of interrelated other-regarding behaviors that cultivate and regulate complex interactions within social groups" (Beckoff & Pierce, 2009, p. 7) and emphasize the importance of a "species relative view" of the concept (p. 19). In other words, what morality looks like is dependent on culture, but is a basic concern for others. Some of the examples Beckoff and Pierce

(2009) provide in *Wild Justice* as evidence of empathy are primates, birds, mice, and elephants who even grieve the loss of relatives.

Not only do animals show us morality, but they demonstrate a sense of justice during play time as well. Beckoff and Pierce (2009) provide role reversal as an example of fair play: "Role reversing happens when a dominant animal performs an action during play that wouldn't normally occur during real aggression. For example, a dominant wolf would not roll over on its back during fighting, but would do so during playing, making him more vulnerable to attack" (p. 124). Also, Sarah Brosnan's group of capuchin monkeys "seemed to measure and compare rewards in relation to those around them" (Beckoff & Pierce, 2009 p. 127). Beckoff and Pierce (2009) argue that "greed and envy exist in counterparts to justice" and point out that "unless you feel shortchanged, why would you feel envious? And why would you feel shortchanged unless you thought you deserved more?" (p. 128). These behaviors surrounding morality and justice observed in the wild are also clearly observable in domesticated pets. Through research and observation, we can conclude that animals do have a sense of morality; however, Beckoff & Pierce (2019) acknowledge how increasingly problematic this becomes concerning our own sense of morality: "these studies are especially troubling because of the pain and suffering that individual experimental animals endure" and "the more we understand about animal cognition and emotions, the more ethically problematic this sort of research becomes" (p. 30). Ironically, in discovering that animals do have morality, we have compromised our own.

In thinking about the connections between human and animal, we are using human understanding of words like language, morality, justice and applied them to animals. According to Beckoff and Pierce (2009) "some scientists complain that using 'human' language to describe the behavior of animals is anthropomorphizing, or attributing human characteristics to nonhuman

beings" (p. 40). The issue with anthropomorphism lies in our tendency to only see what we want to in the animal world and use this skewed understanding to justify the social structure of the human culture such as hierarchy. Through her research with baboons, Shirley Strum came to the conclusion that "the dominance of males is a myth. All of her observations are consistent: the most aggressive males, and those classified the highest in hierarchy [. . .] are often the last ones chosen as a companion by females" (Desperet, 2012, p. 56). And Thelma Rowell similarly concluded that "hierarchy only appears so well and so stable within conditions where researchers have actively provoked and maintained it" (Desperet, 2012, p. 56). Could it be that we want to validate our own unjust social structure by manipulating nature to emulate it?

Humanism fosters a lack of respect for the animal and his being and it creates a hierarchy not only between human and nonhuman, but also among humans themselves, as humans who do not fit the mold are dismissed and dehumanized, which is an unhealthy society. Anthropomorphism attributes human characteristics to nonhuman animals and strips them of their unique differences and freedoms. In *Zoographies* Calarco (2008) explores this difficulty when he asks, "should the human-animal distinction be redrawn along different lines? And if so, along which lines precisely? Or should it be abandoned altogether? (p. 3). I agree with his concluding idea regarding this important question:

> Even if one does agree with Derrida that the task for thought is to attend to differences that have been overlooked and hidden by philosophical discourse, this does not mean every difference and distinction that guides common sense and philosophy should be maintained and refined. Might not the challenge for philosophical thought today be to proceed altogether without guardrails of the human-animal distinction and to invent new concepts and new practices along different paths? (p. 149)

To establish and live in an equilibrium with animals and nature, it is important that we find new ways of thinking about our relationships, ways that allow for both similarity and difference, because the prevailing popular opinion about humans and the environment has not been healthy for any species. It is essential that we accept the differences between humans and humans, humans and animals, and animals and animals and eliminate these fictitious hierarchies that have resulted. I have my AP Language students read Hope Jahren's novel *Lab Girl* (2016) concurrent with the transcendentalist essays. Throughout the novel she makes human connections with plants demonstrating how her life as a geobiologist is so entwined with them. Finally, she makes this important claim in the epilogue:

> Plants are not like us. They are different in critical and fundamental ways. As I catalog the differences between plants and animals, the horizon stretches out before me faster than I can travel and forces me to acknowledge that perhaps I was destined to study plants for decades only in order to more fully appreciate that they are beings we can never truly understand (p. 279).

I find the study of this novel valuable because in addition to posing this important realization for my students to consider and discuss, she also challenges them to go out and plant a tree, and I've actually had a few take her up on this.

When examining these hierarchies, it is worth noting that, "some animals are receiving unprecedented levels of care, so much so that the pet care industry in the United States grew in total expenditures from $17 billion in 1994 to nearly $36 billion in 2005 and to $45.5 billion in 2009" (Wolf, 2013, p. 53). Wolf (2013) points out the great irony in our relationship to animals by juxtaposing this information with the fact that "the scale and efficiency of factory farming has never been more nightmarish" (p. 53). And Haraway (2008) similarly takes this idea further

when she states what she calls, "the underlying obvious fact" that "industrial pet food is a strong link in the multispecies chain of global factory farming" (p. 49). We are killing animals in mass numbers to feed our humanized companion animals. In *Accumulating extinction planetary catastrophism in the necrocene* (2016) Justin McBrien explores the idea of death and capitalism; he claims that "capital was born from extinction, and from capital, extinction has flowed" (p. 116). And he supports this idea by explaining how "capitalism is the reciprocal transmutation of life into death and death into capital" (p. 117). Just like the "decimation of indigenous populations", the extraction and use of fossil fuels, and "nuclear warfare and the environmental consequences of nuclear testing" referenced by Mcbrien (p. 119), the way that factory farming works to fuel an industry like pet care demonstrates this cycle. We kill in order to produce.

Our culture is taking our treatment of animals in two opposing directions. While some are being treated better than many humans with regard to healthcare, housing, and nourishment, others are being slaughtered for food with little to no regard for their suffering. Weaver (2015) asks "What can we say about the priorities of a country when some humans cannot get access to basic health care needs while [some] animals can?" (p. 191). I do not think Weaver is suggesting that we neglect to take care of the health needs of our companion animals, but rather questioning what it is about humanism that causes people to see some humans or animals as less than others? Furthermore, "what is it that moves humans to rationalize that our exceptionality means we can exterminate species and even proclaim superiority over many of our own species?" (Weaver, p. 186). Because we claim this superiority, we are able to create a hierarchy within the animal and human societies that fits our utility and drive markets reflective of these values.

Although it is difficult to determine whether our anthropocentrism found its way into our art and literature or if our art and literature is a reflection of our anthropocentrism, there is a clear

connection between the two. In a cyclical fashion, they support and fuel one another. In *Posthuman education and animal interiority*, Morris (2015) states that "children should learn early on that animals are our relatives and we must treat them with the utmost respect. We do not want children learning from adults that animals are dumb and do not matter because these children will carry these attitudes into adulthood and perpetuate indifference and even intolerance toward animals" (p. 51). I agree with Morris and believe that educating students about their relationship with their environment is of the utmost importance, and this not only includes respect for animals, but also an understanding about human impact on ecology, including its future consequences and how to navigate their future worlds. According to Martha Nussbaum (2010) "works of art (whether literary, musical, or theatrical) can be chosen to promote criticism of this obtuseness, and a more adequate vision of the unseen" because they work in the imagination (p. 107). It is crucial that in order to facilitate student learning about the environment and their relationship with plants and animals, we save the humanities; but, this will inevitably require their reformation and refocus on the post-human.

However, this could be problematic in that, "fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not the kind that is taken seriously by serious literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or short story to the genre of science fiction" (Ghosh, p. 7). This statement implies that science fiction should not be taken seriously; but since authors "inevitably mine their own experience when they write" (Ghosh, p. 15), should not those experiences be given careful consideration when it comes to science? Ghosh makes the argument that this refusal to give science fiction its due recognition in the literary world will lead us to eventually "conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing their plight" (p. 11). If

there is evidence that global climate change is a reality, why is it such a difficult subject to explore through fiction? Ghosh (2009) claims that "the very gestures with which [the realist novel] conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real" (p. 23). Science fiction is dismissed of serious literary merit because it attempts to capture what we have always thought as improbable. But the paradox is that "it appears that we are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normalcy, highly improbable" such as "flashfloods, hundred-year storms, persistent draughts, unprecedented heat, sudden landslides" etc. (Ghosh, p. 24). In order to capture the reality now, fiction writers must embrace the improbable because failing to do so will ironically conceal our reality.

Post-humanism in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

I first read Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in 2017 just before the popular television series aired on Hulu. This first reading of the novel had a significant impact on me: I felt the work provided powerful and insightful exploration of the relationship between power, fear, and oppression. When I began teaching AP Language a few years later, I had the opportunity to see an exhibit at SCAD dedicated to the costume design for the film adaptation of the piece at a workshop for certification, and I decided to add the novel to my summer reading list for the class. Because one parent complained about the explicit content of the book, I was asked the following year by a former instructional supervisor to add a note beside the title for students to request parental permission before selecting the work. I am still unsure whether the parent objected to Atwood's perfectly placed "f" bombs, the sexual oppression experienced by the main character, or her portrayal of Christian fundamentalists, but I expect it was likely a combination of all these aspects of the novel that gave offense. Each year I have about a third of my students pick this book to start out their journey in AP Language, and it is a good choice

since their first argumentative essay in the class is focused on the role fear plays in American politics. I think there is something to Pat Conroy's (2019) argument that banning books only achieves the opposite of the book-banners goal: it increases interest in the work. This year, my school district has done away with summer reading completely "to give students a rest during the summer"; but I wonder if there isn't an underlying motive to control what works students read.

In an earlier chapter, I explored the way that readers bring meaning to the text through personal experience and how reading the same book at different points in one's life can affect interpretation. Since first reading the novel, I have had two baby girls, the Supreme Court has tilted conservative and overturned legislation that protects reproductive rights. My most recent reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* post-partum and post-Roe has been an entirely different experience for me. As I read, I had the kind of disturbed feeling that Maxine Greene claims makes fiction so powerful, imagining the unimaginable: to have my babies taken from me, and not by an individual subject to lawful consequences, but by a totalitarian regime enforcing the law. The very idea is seemingly outlandish, but the setting that Atwood creates is, at the same time, strikingly relevant.

In the introduction to the novel, Valerie Martin (2006) summarizes the setting as a "dystopian vision of a future in which Christian fundamentalists have executed the President, machine-gunned the Congress (blaming the assassinations on Muslim fanatics), suspended the Constitution, and created a new social order, in which women are, at best, commodities" (p.viii), these details of the setting are also given new meaning after the 2021 insurrection in which a group of extremists actually stormed the capital with an intent of over-throwing the government. This introduction was written in 2006 and, in it, Martin makes the claim that "twenty years have passed and a vision that once seemed wildly imaginative has become weirdly prescient" (p. x).

Add sixteen more and "prescient" seems like an understatement. Within the novel's first pages, the narrator Offred comments on how Gilead's way of life is a "return to traditional values"; reading the phrase in a contemporary context gives the reader pause as it is so reminiscent of the "Make America Great Again" campaign slogan to which many of the country's extremists ascribe. According to Martin (2006), "Gilead is both the future and history. Like the word 'utopia,' which means both a perfect world and nowhere, Gilead is neither here nor there, but two places at once, and the events of the novel take place outside of time" (p. xi). This idea is precisely what makes speculative fiction so powerful; it is everywhere and nowhere; everything and nothing. It isn't reality, but it certainly could be.

To create the novel's unique setting, Atwood imagined a world that was plagued by the environmental consequences of irresponsible human behaviors. When the narrator is telling the story of a fellow handmaid's labor, she reveals that "the chances are one in four, the air got too full, once of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body" (p. 128). This is a world where the pollution and chemicals emitted by humans has not only caused infertility issues for men but has also resulted in a dramatic increase in birth defects and stillbirths, what the people of Gilead call "unbabies" (p. 129). Offred continues to elaborate on the environmental and post-human issues her people faced:

> Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas fault, nobody's fault, during the earthquakes, and the mutant strain of syphilis no mold could touch. Some did it to themselves, had themselves tied shut with catgut or scarred with chemicals. (p. 129

Atwood creates a pre-Gileadean world where the dropping birth rate is caused by a confluence of factors, rather than just one: responsibility for the crisis the people find themselves in falls on everyone and no one in particular, which seems to be the problem with environmental consciousness. She develops the environmental wasteland of her setting further by adding details about animal extinction and food scarcity; she wonders about fish on one of her shopping trips, "could they all be extinct, like the whales?" (p. 189).

In the historical notes, she adds to the reader's understanding of the male impotency mentioned in the novel, when she explains that many of the commanders, "had come in contact with a sterility-causing virus that was developed by secret pre-Gilead gene-splicing experiments with mumps, and which was intended for insertion into the supply of caviar used by top officials in Moscow" (p. 3346-347). These details used to develop the setting and explain the context for the utopian dystopia are what qualify Atwood's novel as a piece of "science fiction", since what she creates and describes really could happen. Although in large part, the infertility crisis has more to do with the male population than the female, the result is a society in which women are the most oppressed and abused. She has created a space where our future crisis cannot be rid of the transgressions of our past. Ours is a history in which women have been traded like commodities, used to forge relationships between men, and valued solely for their reproductive capacity. This renders the notion, "it can't happen here" (Martin, p. ix), absurd since humanity does have its roots in such misogynistic practices. It is not a wild idea that given certain societal pressures, especially something like a plummeting birth rate that could have not only a personal impact on individuals, but a wide-scale economic impact as well, that our philosophies could revert to this archaic way of thinking, and in some ways already have.

There is also an underlying paradox of fact and fiction at work in the novel which adds a layer of reality to the piece within the context of my exploration. As before mentioned, this is a world in which women are scapegoated for the infertility issues the world faces. After some time without successful reproduction, Serena Joy suggests to the narrator that perhaps "maybe he [the commander] can't", which Offred notes, "is heresy. It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective" (p. 233). She speaks a reality that is not even permitted as a consideration and implies that the commanders of the novel will dispose of handmaid after handmaid, discarding them to "the colonies" or some other fate worse than their sexual servitude when it is in fact their own defect responsible for the failure.

There is not only irony in the oppression of women due to male impotency, but also that the principles of Gilead were somehow enacted out of a feminist guise. Offred mentions some of the unrest the United States experienced before the government take-over as she thinks about the last time she sees her mother: "the porn riots, or was it the abortion riots, they were close together. There was a lot of bombings then: clinics, video stores; it was hard to keep track" (p. 207). She doesn't elaborate on the goals of these riots, but the reader imagines radicals on both sides taking part in the unrest. Later in the novel, when the commander presents her with a risqué, unlawful, garment to where to "the club", she reflects on the destruction of such clothing: "There were bonfires in Time Square, crowds chanting around them, women throwing up their arms thankfully into the air when they felt the cameras on them" (p. 262). The image Atwood creates is one of women freeing themselves of the objectification of such clothing, and to some extent this society was created under the guise of feminist concerns. The commander makes the argument that they've "given [women] more than [they've] taken away" (p. 249) and supports this idea by asking Offred,

Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat

market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man

easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves

thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human

misery (p. 249).

Based on the ways he attempts to make Offred's life "bearable" for her, we can infer that he does

not believe that he and the other commanders have taken action to help women. This is a

narrative he has created, so he can live with himself: a fiction. Throughout the novel, the

character Aunt Lydia refers to the abuses women used to endure, and it is a paradox that they use

such claims to justify government sanctioned rape and abuse at the hands of the commanders and

their wives.

Similarly, the wives in the *Handmaid's Tale*, create their own narratives to live with

themselves after playing their part in oppressing other women. The details Atwood includes to

develop the consciousness of the wives is reminiscent of white women complicit in the historical

oppression of African Americans: an oppressed group who exerts what little power they do have

on a group of people who are even less powerful. Offred overhears them talk of handmaids

reasoning that "they aren't squeamish, they don't have the same feelings we do" (p. 245). In this

way the oppressor must dehumanize the oppressed to justify their treatment of them. For it to be

common practice for some women to take babies from other women, widespread

dehumanization would be necessary; it again, is not unlike the treatment Black enslaved women

suffered being used to create more slaves as commodities to possibly be sold for profit. When

Offred learns that Janine, the handmaid we see give birth earlier in the novel, has been

transferred, she speculates why this might happen: "had something gone wrong with her

breastmilk? That would be the only reason they'd move her, unless there's been a fight over the baby; which happens more than you'd think" (p. 244). Her statement about the relationship between handmaid and wife adds another layer of the unexpected. I cannot imagine a world in which there would not always be a fight over the baby; yet, she has created one where this is somehow exceptional. This is the hyper-individualism we see in our own society taken to a new level: to obtain one's own self-interest at the expense of others, but instead of it being poor people who the privileged will likely never come face-to-face, the relationship is as personal as possible.

Another striking aspect of Atwood's setting is the portrait she paints of how such a government approaches women's health. In her explanation of the common birth defects that the babies of Gilead often suffer from, she explains, "They could tell once, with machines, but that is now outlawed. What would be the point of knowing anyway? You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term" (p. 128). Gilead is a world that has the technology capable of detecting birth defects and necessary for doctors to ensure that pregnant women get the care they need; however, they've reverted to archaic pre-natal care practices. These details of the story are particularly disturbing in the context of the current political climate surrounding abortion laws. More and more states are adopting bans that make no exception for unviable pregnancies that will inevitably compromise the quality of health care women receive as doctors face having to prove the necessity of such procedures to avoid a criminal charge. Offred describes birth before Gilead: "once they drugged women, induced labor, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anesthetics, even. Aunt Elizabeth said it was better for the baby" (p. 131). The world of Gilead is an example of what women's health could look like if the most extreme principles of the "pro-life" movement were enacted. From the perspective of a woman who

would not be here if not for an emergency c-section to deliver my first baby, this is an unsettling

thought, and while my birth story is considered an exceptional one, there are so many similar

stories of pregnancy complications in which the very technology outlawed in Gilead would be

necessary to save both mother and baby. The United States can certainly make improvements

with regard to pre- and post-natal care, and unfortunately, the legislation put forth by pro-life

politicians is only going to work to put further strain on health care providers and compromise

the quality of services.

Not only does *The Handmaid's Tale* provide readers with a chilling setting in which our

environmental and health care crisis has finally caught up with us, it also is a cautionary story

about the importance of a critical thinking and active citizenry. In her reflection of the period

leading up to Gilead, Offred says, "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating

bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it." (p. 67). The comparison is reminiscent of

Arthur Miller's selection of the title *The Crucible*, to tell the story if the Salem Witch Trials

within the context of The Red Scare, two real world instances where authoritarian government

unjustly persecuted innocent people and attacked individual freedoms. Offred remembers, "the

newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others" and "[they] lived in the

gaps between the stories" (p. 68), to explain the collective tendency to ignore such problems

until it is too late, a phenomenon that occurs time and time again. Valeria Martin provides the

following insight about the tone of Atwood's narrator as she remembers and describes her old

and new world:

> She does this with the same bewildered calm one hears again and again in the stories told
>
> by survivors of human brutality, from the Spanish Inquisition to the Balkans, from the
>
> Middle Passage to the Russian Gulags [. . . .] It won't tell us were so cruel and unjust

then, but it can remind us of the way we would, the way we do, on any given day, explain

our participation in the injustices we accept and perpetuate. (p.xvii)

Atwood creates an imagined world where these very real aspects of ourselves and our own

society have come together to allow the unbelievable. She synthesizes the potential post-human

problems of our future with the abuses of our past and emphasizes the importance of protecting

democratic values through critical thinking.

The teaching of novels such as *The Handmaids Tale* work to foster the literary

imagination necessary for a critical thinking citizenry and bring together science and literature; it

is no wonder that these pieces are often the target of book-banners. As our district works to

censor teachers with emails admonishing teachers for using College Board resources, creation of

their new "ap approval process", and elimination of summer reading opportunities for students, I

will quietly continue to recommend this novel to students who wish to extend their

understanding of the world and the relationship between power, fear, and oppression beyond

what has been narrowly approved by a school board. After all, passive compliance with

censorship is the first step to our past becoming our future. With consideration of all the other

strangely similar aspects of a pre-Gileadean society and our own, I think resistance here is in

order.

Conclusion

Our humanist philosophies, the way we see ourselves in relation to the rest of the world,

have created an indisputable environmental crisis. It is also clear that our students are going to

have to navigate these issues as well as the ethical dimensions of an increasing technological and

scientific landscape. Our current practice involves integrating science and technology in the

English Language Arts curriculum through nonfiction articles and argumentative writing, which

I think is an appropriate focus for science classes. We apply what we think is scientific process to our teaching methods, collecting data through multiple choice assessments and categorizing our students. But if we hope to give students the critical thinking skills necessary to tackle these post-human issues, we cannot dismiss fiction as a powerful tool, and should do everything to utilize it to its fullest potential rather than reducing it to its simplest form. I agree that teachers need to work to bring together the sciences and the humanities, but it is my position that this is best accomplished through complex science fiction texts that allow for imaginative thinking about our present, future, and past. Bringing the literary into the discussion about issues related to the sciences will prove a more effective approach than applying pseudo-science to the teaching of literature.

Chapter Five

The Power of the Fantasy Series: Understanding Oppression Through Imagined Worlds

Ansley arrived at Ms. Evans's classroom, put down her things, and immediately pulled her book out of her bag to try to finish the chapter before class got started. She probably could have already finished if Mr. Burr had not told her to put her book away and pay attention to where she was walking in the hallway. She read quickly and completely tuned out all of the noise her classmates were making around her. Daniel was showing a group of other students a silly reel about a chicken.

She had just started Book Four of The Harry Potter Series and was just at the part when Harry's name mysteriously pops out of the goblet of fire for the Triwizard tournament. She loved all three of the previous books, but this one was impossibly even better. There were already so many new characters and magical creatures.

The bell rang just as her eyes were able to scan the last few sentences of the chapter. Ms. Evans was quieting the class down and getting everyone started on their warm-up. She directed everyone's attention to the new groupings she had posted on the board to the left of the projector screen. She scanned and found her name. She was happy with her group: Blaine who was probably the smartest kid in the whole 7th grade and Mark who wasn't super bright, but was really good at following directions; she had been partners with him on a previous project. She heard Jackson say, "Who is CJ?" and saw him looking around the room. It was February and they had all been in the same class for months. CJ looked lost. Ansley knew that feeling. Jackson played sports and had tons of friends, and seemed to overlook students like her and CJ. Ms. Evans directed him, "CJ you are with Jackson and Ember, but Ember is absent, so it will just be two of you today."

Jackson groaned, "That isn't fair. I don't want to be his partner. He doesn't even talk".
Ansley thought about how funny it was that in reality, no one wanted to be Jackson's partner
because he never did any work.

She wanted to say something, to stand up for CJ. She thought about Hermione in The
Prisoner of Azkaban and how she punched the bully Malfoy in the face. She didn't think Jackson
deserved to be punched in the face, and besides she'd never been in any real trouble at school,
ever. But he probably did deserve to work alone. So she spoke up, "CJ, we would love it if you
came and joined our group!"

Ms. Evans smiled at her; then, she turned to CJ and reassuringly said, "That's fine. You
can work with them if you want." CJ didn't say anything, but a smile grew on his face and he
slowly walked over to join them.

Jackson shrugged his shoulders and looked around for someone to talk to, but everyone
was already engaged in the activity. She felt a little tinge of guilt, and she didn't quite
understand why when Jackson's predicament was clearly of his own making. She sighed, and
said, "Jackson, you can come work with us too if you'd like". Afterall, he was not nearly as bad
as Malfoy. Jackson shrugged his shoulders and half-heartedly scooted his chair over to join the
group.

About the Vignette

As explored in chapter three, the teaching of literature offers valuable opportunities to
implement cooperative learning in the classroom which works to foster democratic values. In my
own classroom, I try to implement cooperative learning strategies as much as possible especially
since the effect size for such strategies is considerably high compared to individual practice.
However, each year, especially with younger students, implementing group work means students

express their negative feelings or disappointment with their group members verbally. These comments are perhaps not meant maliciously, but with little concern for how they might impact another. When these situations occur, I try to have conversations with students about how their words, facial expressions, perhaps even groans, might make another person feel. This, I believe, is all part of learning to work with others. And perhaps while a teacher might decide not to implement cooperative learning strategies because it seems like it adds more to manage behaviorally, it is well worth the effort to teach the expectations for working in groups because these are skills students need in any field. The vignette for this chapter was inspired by those interactions.

At the beginning of our first ninth-grade unit, we read *The Odyssey* and we talk about the Hero's Journey. Each year the students who have read fantasy series or have watched adventure films, even children's films, such as Disney's *Encanto* (2021*)* or *Moana* (2016), bring with them a foundation for understanding and prior knowledge that helps them start the year successfully. The student featured in the vignette represents these students. She can draw upon her experiences through literature to help her understand her world and how she interacts with others, applying a sense of fairness and empathy to those interactions. In this chapter I will explore pieces of adolescent fantasy literature and how these works can be a powerful tool in not only developing the important literacy skills students need, but also in helping them begin to understand difficult ideas such as hegemony, oppression, and othering. Students who interact with these texts have exposure to difficult subjects and the ability to suspend their disbelief to comprehend the impossible, beyond the literalisms, and begin to think imaginatively.

Laying a Foundation for Imagination through *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Hobbit*

  As an English teacher, it has been helpful to me to spend some time reflecting on my own literacy development. It can be difficult to empathize with struggling readers when you've never struggled with reading in school; therefore, I think it is beneficial for me to think about what contributed to me becoming a successful reader, and the impact that the fantasy series had is clearly significant. I remember in middle school, devouring *The Chronicles of Narnia* books for Accelerated Reader points. When I finished the first one, it was an obvious choice to move on to the next, and the next, until I had read all seven. The same was true when I read *The Hobbit*. My mom introduced me to the book in middle school, and I later flew through the rest of the *Lord of the Rings Series* in high school, not because I needed points or they had been assigned to me to read at school, but because I wanted to read the stories. In this way, I was introduced early to reading for enjoyment.

  In previous chapters, I explore the failings of categorical and binary thinking as they are applied to complex and dynamic concepts and relationships. A reading of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950), a classic piece of the fantasy series genre reveals a rejection of the idea of binaries: good and evil. While Aslan works to represent the good and the White Witch evil, many of the characters show a dynamic capacity for both. The narrator comments upon the children's first look at Aslan: "People who have not been in Narnia sometime think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time" (Lewis, p. 126). This commentary emphasizes one of the novel's major themes: good and evil coexist in the world simultaneously and paradoxically. At the beginning of the novel, the fawn in whom Lucy confides and trusts, contemplates the idea of turning her over to the White Witch before reconsidering and confessing his intentions. Similarly, it is the previously "spiteful" (Lewis p.26) and "beastly"

(Lewis, p. 46) Edmund who ultimately saves the day and destroys the White Witch's wand at the end of the novel redeeming himself in the eyes of his siblings and the reader.

The novel works to introduce young readers to the concepts of oppression and power through the White Witch and her cruelty toward the creatures of Narnia. When Lucy describes her to her brother Edmund at the beginning, she informs him that "she calls herself the Queen of Narnia though she has no right to be queen at all, and the Fauns and Dryads and Naiads and Dwarfs and Animals—at least all the good ones—simply hate her. And she can turn people into stone and do all kinds of horrible things" (Lewis, p.42). Edmund at first seems drawn to her and believes she can't be that bad because she's provided him with all the sweets he could eat. Through manipulation, the White Witch gains Edmund's trust; she appeals to his self-interest and is even able to convince him to sell out his own siblings. Lucy continues her description: "she has magic so that it is always winter in Narnia—always winter, but it never gets to Christmas" (Lewis, p.42). This detail about winter and Christmas appeals to a developing understanding of justice, and Edmund's lapse in judgment helps young readers understand how powerful people work to manipulate others to get what they want.

C.S. Lewis also provides some noteworthy commentary regarding schools in the novel, which can work to prompt students to think critically about their own experiences with education and learning. Early in the book, Peter scolds Edmund for letting Lucy down revealing that he "always liked being beastly to anyone smaller than [himself]; we've seen that at school before now" (Lewis, p. 46). The narrator reveals that after Edmund redeems himself and is healed, he looks better than he had in ages "ever since his first term at that horrid school which was where he had begun to go wrong" (Lewis, p. 180). Edmund's time at school exposed him the practices of the oppressors, and he in turn, applies those concepts to his interactions with others, and turns

into a bully. It isn't until he is immersed in the fantasy world, seeing the white witch turn small creatures into stone that he "for the first time in this story felt sorry for someone besides himself" (Lewis, p. 117). His ability to feel for others is restored and he begins his journey to redemption. Lewis concludes the novel with the Professor wondering, "what do they teach them at these schools?" which leaves readers with the implication that, rather than fostering imagination and critical thinking, school is a place void of imagination. Narnia can teach the children, especially Edmund, empathy where the school has failed. It is also able to give the children power and agency because in Narnia, they are kings and queens who have saved the inhabitants from tyranny and oppression, whereas at school, students often feel powerless and small.

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) is another piece of classic fantasy literature that can be valuable to the literacy development of young readers. Like *The Lion the Witch in The Wardrobe* (1950), it is a story about how someone seemingly small and powerless, can contribute to big changes. Bilbo is introduced as a reluctant hero, happy to continue life safe and sound in his comfortable hobbit hole. When Gandalf presents him with the idea of an adventure, he calls adventures "nasty disturbing uncomfortable things!" (Tokien, p. 7) and declines. Students are presented with a protagonist who steps out of his comfort zone and undertakes something previously unthinkable: a journey with the dwarves to recover the treasure under the Misty Mountains. Taking risks is an important part of learning, and readers are presented with a character who does just this to achieve personal growth. This seemingly insignificant hobbit is not only able to help the dwarves recover their treasure and defeat a dragon, but he is also able to help a divided Middle Earth unite and conquer evil represented by the goblins.

Leading up to the final battle and conflict of the novel, Tolkien includes details to develop the division among the dwarves, elves, men, and even the eagles. Gandalf, who once

"healed the [eagles] lord from an arrow wound" (Tolkien, p.121), negotiates with them to carry him, Bilbo and the dwarves "far away [from the mountains] and setting them down well on their journey across the plains below" (Tolkien, p.121). The Lord of the Eagles would not take them anywhere near the men for fear of being shot with arrows because they would think they were "after their sheep" (Tolkien, p. 121); he acknowledges that "at other times they would be right" (Tolkien, p, 121). He tells Gandalf that the Eagles "will not risk [themselves] for dwarves in the southward plains" (Tolkien, p. 121). While the eagles are willing to do a favor for Gandalf, their conflict with the dwarves and the men is clear. Tolkien also provides the following details to characterize the relationship between the elves and dwarves as one wrought with enmity: "So to the cave they dragged Thorin—not too gently, for they did not love dwarves, and thought he was an enemy. In ancient days they had had wars with some of the dwarves, whom they accused of stealing their treasure" (Tolkien, p. 183). Among these groups, the conflicts are centered around obtaining profit and resources, and in this way, Tolkien reflects the real world in the fantasy realm.

There is similar division sown among the men of Esgaroth by the Master of the town. After the town is severely damaged by Smaug, they complain about the Master "who had left the town so soon" (Tolkien, p. 271). They say that "He may have a good head for business— especially his own business, but he is no good when anything serious happens!" (Tolkien, p. 271). They determine to replace him with Bard whose bow slew the dragon, but the Master addresses the people and attempts to turn them against the dwarves; the narrator reveals that "the people quite forgot their idea of a new king and turned their angry thoughts towards Thorin and his company. Wild bitter words were shouted from many sides, and some of those who had song the old songs loudest were now heard as loudly crying that the dwarves had stirred the dragon up

against them deliberately" (Tolkien, p. 273). Readers are presented with the kind of political figure who purposely creates division for his own profit and political gain, and Tolkien contrasts him with the heroic Bard who selflessly sacrifices for the good of all.

However, at the novel's conclusion, these otherwise divided groups come together in a great battle against evil. Tolkien describes this at the "Battle of Five Armies": on one side the goblins and the wild wolves and the other were the Elves, Men, and Dwarves (Tolkien, p. 303). They come to understand that "the Goblins were the foes of all, and at their coming all other quarrels were forgotten" (Tolkien, p. 304). Tolkien describes a great battle turning in the goblins favor, and when it seems the Elves, Men, and Dwarves will be defeated, the Eagles enter the fight "in the nick of time" (Tolkien, p. 313) and "dislodge the goblins from the mountain slopes, casting them over precipices" (Tolkien, p. 313). The Eagles who had previously refused to risk themselves for the dwarves, for fear of the men, save both men and dwarves from the goblins. Not only do these otherwise contentious groups come together to defeat the Goblins, but afterward according to the songs, "the mountains had peace for many a year" (Tolkien, p. 314), as they honor their promises to one another, and each is given gold and treasure as reward for their role in the fight. It is at the novel's end that Tolkien reveals Gandalf's earlier whereabouts: "Gandalf had been to the great council of white wizards, masters of lore and good magic; and they had at last driven the Necromancer from his dark hold in the south of Mirkwood" (Tolkien, p. 322). In this way, Tolkien begins to lay the foundation for the next adventure.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (1950) and *The Hobbit* (1937) are both works that appeal to young readers and allow them to understand concepts they will begin to see in their own worlds like power, division, and oppression in the fantasy realm. But it also introduces them to the Hero's Journey plotline that they will continually see as they progress through high school

and college English classes. The popularity of the journey is that it allows the reader to go from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and through sharing these experiences with the protagonists may be able to see and work toward their own big achievements, all while building their literacy skills because perhaps most importantly, the fantasy series keeps students reading.

The Power of Rowling's Harry Potter Series

In *The Harry Potter Series*, the binary relationship between good and evil is also challenged as J.K. Rowling reveals many of the characters, even Dumbledore's (*The Deathly Hallows, 2007*), struggle with power. Throughout the series Dumbledore is steadfastly characterized as the symbol of good against evil. However, in the last installment, Rowling reveals details of Dumbledore's early life, experimenting with dangerous ideas of wizard superiority and the notion of muggle domination alongside Grindelwald. Dumbledore, like Grindelwald and Voldemort, achieves at the top of his class in school, and when he meets Grindelwald is "inflamed" by the idea of "muggles in subservience" and "wizards triumphant" with Grindelwald and he "glorious young leaders of the revolution" (Rowling, 2007, p. 716). Grindelwald is portrayed as the notorious dark wizard before Voldemort's rise to power, so Dumbledore's association with him is unexpected, and causes even Harry to doubt his character. He explains to Harry that the tragedy of his sister being caught in the fray and killed made him realize, "that he was not to be trusted with power" (Rowling, 2007, p.717). Similarly, later in the novel, Rowling reveals the heart-breaking goodness of Severus Snape, the teacher who appears to be one of Harry's antagonists throughout the whole series. While the reader, and Harry have thought all along that Snape held nothing but contempt for him and his friends, we learn of his deep devotion to uphold a promise to protect Lily's son, Harry. In this way, Rowling creates dynamic and flawed characters who are not good or evil completely, but rather show how all

people have the capacity for both, and often it is perception that works to categorize acts as either/or. Her character development helps to move readers away from the binary and categorical thinking that currently dominates our society and plagues our educational system.

The Harry Potter Series also provides students with an opportunity to contemplate the concept of injustice. In *The Chamber of Secrets* (1998), Cornelius Fudge, the minister of magic, has Hagrid, the gamekeeper at Hogwarts, removed from the school and sent to Azkaban wizarding prison, not based on any evidence, but to be "seen as doing something" (Rowling, 1998, p. 261), due to pressure from school governors. Plot points such as this one work to engage students in critical thinking about just judgement and power. As the *Harry Potter Series* continues, Cornelius Fudge's judgement continues to be fudged as he attempts to hide the truth of Voldemort's return in *The Order of the Phoenix* (2003) from a fearful and anxious wizarding world, allowing Voldemort to gain power. In *The Chamber of Secrets* (1998), the pureblood faction is revealed when Malfoy calls Hermione a "filthy Mudblood" (p. 115). Based on the other students' reactions to his slur and Ron's explanation of the term, "some wizards—like Malfoy's family—who think they're better than everyone else because they're what people call pure-blood [. . .] I mean, the rest of us know it doesn't make any difference at all" (Rowling, 1998, p. 116), the reader understands that those of the wizarding world who hold this belief about superiority is a small minority of the community. However, by the Series' end (*Deathly Hallows*) this small minority can subjugate and control by force, due to misinformation in *The Daily Prophet*, supported by the Ministry, and a largely passive citizenry. Weaver (2010) provides the following thoughts on Rowling's references to blood and purity throughout the series: "It can be a reference to Eugenics and the notion of pure lineage lines and notions of genetic superiority. She can be referring to racist notions of pure blood in the United States and

the discriminatory laws such as the 1/32 laws that littered the Southern States for many decades"
(p. 127). With these references, Rowling can reflect the real within the fantasy and exposes
young readers to difficult content in a developmentally appropriate way.

In addition to the exploration of the importance of active citizenry in maintaining a society's
democracy, *The Harry Potter Series*, allows a space for students to metaphorically explore their
own educational realities. In *Installing the Mimetic in Public Schools: I Repeat Producing the
Posthuman Other, Fiction, the Biosciences, and Curriculum Studies in Schools* Weaver (2010)
explores how *The Order of the Phoenix* (2003) shows readers how "the schools have become
like Death Eaters and Dementors in Harry Potter: They suffocate all learning opportunities and
take the life out of students" (Weaver p. 125), as students are stripped of any active hands-on
application by the High Inquisitor for the sake of drilling for exams. The connection between the
new educational philosophies Umbridge enforces at Hogwarts and the prevailing approach to
learning in our schools is clear: learning has been reduced to drilling for an exam disconnected
from real world relevance, and hands-on learning (magic) sacrificed. In his analysis, Weaver
(2010) breaks down Umbridge's curriculum:

> She uses all the code words. Carefully structured means the curriculum is teacher
> centered, not student centered, learning is minimal, and always under control. Theory
> centered within the same sentence as carefully structured is an oxymoron therefore there
> is not theory involved just steps to follow to conduct "legally" authorized magic. The
> phrase "legally be used" exiles any spontaneity and creativity in the use of magic [. . . .]
> The last code word is practical use This phrase means the class will not connect practice
> with theory and therefore both theory and practice within the classroom will be
> disconnected from real life. (p. 120)

The curriculum she implements is oppressive and uninspiring, and if we didn't know Weaver was describing a Hogwarts under siege by a death eater, we would think it was about our own classrooms. His analysis does not only seem applicable to the students' experiences with learning, but the way teachers are expected to implement carefully structured steps to assess and categorize their students. These requirements inevitably trickle down and stifle creativity. If possible, the capacity for deep learning is more compromised in the real world. Because as Weaver (2010) points out "The O.W.L.s were nothing like Dolores Umbridge's pedagogical style" and "they were given the same examinations, but the students were able to show in different ways what they knew" (p.135). The standardized tests our students are given do not allow for that. They are dominated by multiple choice questions, and when they are given the opportunity to write, we expect them to respond specifically to the prompt in a carefully structured manner. In middle school, they even give them an acronym to remember, RACE (restate, answer, cite, explain). It allows little to no room for creativity or exploration. As a teacher who tries her hardest to work in projects into this processed curriculum, it can be especially discouraging to find that many students lack the motivation and creativity to excel at these chances to explore and create something. We have essentially trained them to expect not to have to think to "learn".

  In this way, *The Order of the Phoenix* (2003) can prompt powerful critical thought about our own education system and help students to see themselves as agents of change, just as the adolescents at Hogwarts, who ultimately take it upon themselves to overthrow the new administration and her stifling curriculum. Fred and George Weasley who have determined for themselves that they've learned all they can at Hogwarts, use their talents to inspire the rebellious spirit of the school when they "turn the school corridor into a swamp" (Rowling, 2003,

p 674), to create a diversion for Harry to be able to communicate with Sirius. Umbridge and

Filch think that they have Fred and George cornered; she threatens them with punishment, but

unexpectedly Fred and George declare that "its time to test their talents in the real world"

(Rowling, 2003, p. 647) and flee the school and Umbridge's reach of power. They announce

their intent to open a store in Diagon Alley, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, promising "special

discounts to Hogwarts students who swear to use [their] products to get rid of this old bat

[Umbridge]" (p.675); the students respond with applause, and Fred and George "sped out of the

front doors into the glorious sunset" (Rowling, 2003, p. 675) on broomsticks.

While Fred and George have been characterized throughout the series by their pranks,

Hermione's cleverness consistently helps Harry, Ron, and her out of difficult situations.

Similarly, she uses this power to rid the school of Umbridge. With quick thinking she lures

Umbridge into the Dark Forrest where she knows the centaurs reside. The centaurs come upon

them and seize Umbridge who yells, "Unhand me, you animals" (Rowling, 2003, p. 755).

Umbridge shows little respect for the centaurs or any other nonhuman creature and clearly

ascribes to the wizard superiority philosophy espoused by Voldemort's followers. While

Hermione's plan accomplished the goal: the centaurs took care of Dolores Umbridge, Hermione

and Harry also find themselves at their mercy. One of them accuses Harry and Hermione: "They

already have the ignorance of their kind! So we were to do your dirty work, were we, human

girl? We were to act as your servants, drive away your enemies like obedient hounds?"

(Rowling, 2003, p. 756). Their actions allow readers to realize that they too have the power to

transform their own world, but they also prompt thinking and discussion about human

relationships with nonhuman animals and notions of human superiority. Harry and Hermione can

escape the centaurs because the giant Grawp, who Hagrid has kept hidden in the forest comes to

their rescue. Grawp is shot with "fifty arrows" to his face. He "howl[s] with pain and rage" (Rowling, 2003, p.759). Harry and Hermione can flee while "Grawp was snatching blindly at the centaurs as blood ran down his face" (Rowling, 2003, p.759), and Hermione expresses regret with "On that was horrible. And he might kill them all…" (Rolwing, 2003, p. 759). The humans bring these two species together and against one another, and the interaction ends in bloodshed.

Rowling establishes this exploration of the human relationship with other animals in her first book. The school grounds-keeper Hagrid has a complicated relationship with magical creatures whose fates are ultimately compromised by his attempt to domesticate them. He indisputably loves these creatures; however, his interactions with them do not benefit any of them, but rather work to satisfy his selfish interest in them. The first of these relationships is with a dragon he obtained from a mysterious stranger. He names the dragon Norbert and keeps him in his hut all the while acknowledging that he cannot keep him forever "but he can't jus dump him" (Rowling, 1998, p. 237). In this first novel, Hagrid also utilizes a giant three-headed dog named fluffy to guard the important philosopher's stone from those who wish to use its powers for evil means; his existence has been reduced to a secret passageway in the castle which is not a fulfilling life for a three-headed giant dog. Hagrid's relationship with magical creatures is explored in subsequent novels through Aragog and Buckbeak. Aragog is a giant spider who lived in the castle with Hagrid as a Hogwarts student, who is wrongly accused of killing students at the school and is almost executed. He narrowly escapes and creates a home for himself in a much more suitable environment, forbidden Forest, away from Hagrid and danger. Buckbeak, a hippogriff, is executed after Hagrid introduces him to students and he is blamed for an accident involving one of them; only a manipulation in time can save his life just in time. These first three novels can serve as a starting point to discuss the human relationship with nonhuman animals

and the ethics involved with these relationships. Donna Harraway writes in *When Species Meet* (2008), that she advocates for "the understanding that earthly heterogeneous beings are in this web together for all time, and no one gets to be Man" (p. 82). While three-headed dogs, hippogriffs, and centaurs are certainly not earthly beings, their role in the *Harry Potter Series* works to explore relationships between species, which is an important consideration for post-humanist thought and environmental justice.

Posthumanism and Dystopia

Like fantasy and speculative fiction writers before her, Suzanne Collins includes the exploration of the role school plays in the system of oppression in her *Hunger Games Series*. Katniss reveals that where she lives, "District 12 was in the region known as Appalachia" and that "somehow it all comes back to coal at school. Besides basic reading and math most of [their] instruction is coal-related" (Collins, p. 42). Katniss reveals that coalmining is the dominant job for people in the Seam since other options are few. She describes the way the men and women look in the morning during shift change: "hunched shoulders, swollen knuckles, many who have long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of the sunken faces" (Collins, p. 4). She characterizes them as down-trodden and hopeless. Panem is a place where education is impoverished because it only serves the purpose of preparing the poor people of the Seam for their inevitable low-paying jobs with dangerous working conditions. It is beholden to the economic needs of The Capital, and the people are afforded little to no opportunity to change their lives.

Katniss struggles to provide for her mother and younger sister through hunting, scavenging, and trading after her father is killed in a coal mining accident. She emphasizes the poverty of District 12 by adding that "since no one can afford doctors, apothecaries are [their] healers"

(Collins, p. 8). Leaders of Panem allow the quality of life to be so poor, people are without access to acceptable medical care. Katniss also reveals that "starvation is not an uncommon fate in District 12" but that it is "never the cause of death officially. It's always flu, or exposure, or pneumonia. But that fools no one" (Collins, p. 28). The society Collins has created is one plagued by stark income inequality, where the wealthy people in the Capitol enjoy luxuries and technology while the people in poorer districts struggle to survive. Aboard the train on the way to the Capital, Katniss describes the food she is served:

> an enormous platter of food. Eggs, ham, piles of fried potatoes. A tureen of fruits sits in ice to keep it chilled. The basket of rolls they set before me would keep my family going for a week. There's an elegant glass of orange juice. At least I think its orange juice. I've only ever tasted an orange once, at New Years when my father bought one as a special treat" (Collins, p. 55).

Her thoughts about the rolls and oranges show how differently she views food and even unfamiliar she is with what they typically eat.

In this way, there is a clear division between the poor and the wealthy. Katniss explains the way the reaping for the Hunger Games works: "You become eligible for the reaping the day you turn twelve. That year, your name is entered once. At thirteen, twice. And so on and so on until you reach the age of eighteen, the final year of eligibility, when your name goes into the pool seven times" (Collins, p. 13). She adds that people, like her and Gale, can add their names more times in exchange for tesserae which can be used to buy grain and oil for a year for one person. Because she has needed to do this to help her family survive, her name is in the drawing twenty times. Early in the novel, Katniss and Gale have an interaction with a more fortunate young person in the district who surely has fewer entries than either of them, and Gale shows

resentment toward her. Katniss, provides the following insight about the tesserae: "A way to plant hatred between the starving workers of the Seam and those who can generally count on supper and thereby ensure we will never trust one another" (Collins, p. 14). Not only do they keep the districts divided by requiring children from each to fight against one another, but they also keep the people of District 12 divided amongst themselves. Division eliminates their ability to rebel against the oppressive Capital. In Collins's Panem it is impossible for children of the Seam of District 12 to improve their situation in life unless they literally fight to the death to obtain wealth and status. Given these details, we must ask ourselves if her dystopian world is such an exaggerated depiction of a reality in which most children will never leave the social classes into which they were born? Or is it such a far cry from a society in which so many live in poverty and rely on food pantries for survival because corporations could not possibly be expected to pay their workers livable wages?

Collins (2008) has created a science fiction setting that prompts thinking about the human relationship with animals. Early in the novel, Katniss reveals that "during the rebellion, the Capitol bred a series of genetically altered animals as weapons" (p. 42), one of which, the "mockingjay", functions as a symbol of rebellion throughout the series. The mockingjay is a new species which emerged when the "jabberjay", created to overhear intelligence and pass along information mated with mockingbirds. The dystopia which requires children to fight to the death each year is a result of a society with a human-centered philosophy that viewed animals as merely in existence for human utility, showing that the oppression of the Capitol also extends to plant and animal life and even those organisms find ways to rebel against its control. *The Hunger Games Series* offers a world for students to explore the ethical issues related to science and

technology particularly how these advancements can potentially function to spread and exploit fears and ultimately compromise the basic freedoms and quality of life of a population.

The geographical details of the novel also engage students in critical thinking about their own world since Collins has taken the United States that they know and turned it into an unsettling version of itself. The details given previously about District 12's coalmining industry and distance from the Capital suggest it is located around Pennsylvania and West Virginia, a region known for its working class. She mentions that the Capital "was built in a place once called the Rockies" (Collins, p. 41), and "the mountains form a natural barrier between the Capital and the eastern districts" which was "a major factor in the districts losing the war" (Collins, p.59) that led to the creation of The Hunger Games. Throughout the Series, Collins provides details about the tributes and their districts which suggest where each of the 12 lies on the map. In this way, Collins reflects the real in her fictional world which inspires young readers to consider the possibilities. When the mayor addresses the crowd before the reaping in the first chapter, he refers to Panem as "the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place once called North America" and he "lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching sea that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained" (Collins, p. 18). She makes it clear that Panem ultimately is the result of environmental crisis, and instead of shifting their habits and philosophies to try to live harmoniously with one another and Earth's other organisms, they doubled down and installed an oppressive government that works to keeps people living in poverty and instills fear by choosing children to fight to the death every year.

At the end of the novel, Katniss and Peeta, the other District 12 tribute, outsmart the gamemakers in the arena when they agree to eat poisonous berries simultaneously to ensure the Capital does not have a winner; this conclusion is unacceptable to them, so they end the game

with two winners. Katniss and Peeta are able to show the viewers of Panem that unity is possible despite the Capital's efforts to divide and oppress. In subsequent novels Katniss becomes an inspiration to not only the people of District 12, but also to people of other districts as well. She unites them in an effort to overthrow the Capital and restore a sense of morality. In this way, the *Hunger Games Series* works to show readers that the seemingly powerless can change the world and stand up to tyranny.

Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011) series' dystopian setting feels very similar to Collins' Hunger Games. Her main character, Beatrice "Tris" Prior is also introduced sympathetically as an adolescent who does not seem to fit into her community: the Abnegation, who are known for their selflessness. In the world Roth creates, people have been divided up into five factions according to their dominant personality traits: the Abnegation, the Erudite, the Candor, the Amity, and the Dauntless. Each faction is dedicated to upholding a specific trait and ascribe to the position that the collapse of society would not have occurred had the particular trait been fostered among the people. The Erudite value knowledge and learning; the Candor value honesty and transparency; the Amity value peacefulness and neutrality; and the Dauntless value bravery and fearlessness. When children turn 16, they are forced to participate in an aptitude test which tells them which faction in which they belong. This may or may not be the faction in which they've grown up. Then, they are forced to choose which faction they will dedicate the rest of their lives to.

Beatrice tells readers at the beginning of the novel, "today is the day of the aptitude test that will show me which of the five factions I belong in" (Roth, p. 2). This is a world in which children take a test and are categorized by the results. The connection to our own society is clear. Roth's setting and conflict are reminiscent of the tracking system that has dominated our own

educational system since its inception. At 16, they are faced with making a decision that will determine the rest of their lives, and the information they have to consider is gathered from one test. After the test, Beatrice nervously awaits her results, convinced she must have failed; she questions, "How can you fail a test you aren't allowed to prepare for?" (Roth, p. 20). Her anxiety reflects the testing anxiety that many of our students experience going into cold read tests for which they are largely unable to prepare. In previous chapters, I argued against this pedagogical approach because it dehumanizes students and neglects to see them as dynamic. In Roth's world, students are not categorized by their abilities, but rather their personalities. In this way, she shows what a practice like tracking could look like in an apocalyptic dystopia.

Beatrice's results are unclear, and she is labeled Divergent by the examiner; however, the examiner cautions her that this is a dangerous result. She is not to tell anyone, and her result is recorded as Abnegation. The examiner explains the way the test works: "Normally, the simulation progresses in a linear fashion, isolating one faction by ruling out the rest" (Roth, p. 21); but Beatrice's choices show a complexity that the simulation isn't designed to accommodate. They cannot categorize her because her choices showed "equal aptitude for Abnegation, Dauntless, and Erudite" (Roth, p. 22). We learn later in the novel that people who test this way are killed. Anyone who does not fit neatly into the preset categories is othered and disposable, and perhaps this is because their complexity makes them free thinkers who are less easily controlled. They have a capacity for critical thought and are therefore "dangerous". When Beatrice contemplates her results she dwells on the fear of being factionless because "to live factionless is not just to live in poverty and discomfort; it is to live divorced from society, separated from the most important thing in life: community" (Roth, p. 20).

Like Collins, Roth includes details to suggest that the fall of society came either as a result of or simultaneously amidst environmental strife. When she describes the city she mentions the stoplights that "dangle precariously over the road like they might crash down any minute because they are of no use now that "there are so few cars" (Roth, p. 24). To add to this, she mentions that the "new buildings are next to the marsh, which used to be a lake a long time ago" (p. 24), which suggests the human impact on the environment has exhausted resources needed for survival. She builds this idea by also including that Beatrice learned from her mother that "there were people who would buy genetically engineered produce because they viewed it as unnatural. Now we have no other option" (Roth, p. 31). With a reference to a common tendency of reality, Roth connects her fictional setting with reality and challenges readers to think of possibility.

By the novel's conclusion, war has broken out among the factions. Beatrice, her family, and Four (Tobias), who was also labeled divergent in his aptitude test, have uncovered a plot by Erudite and corrupt members of Dauntless to attack Abnegation and seize power. Although Beatrice does not reveal an in-depth description of the way the government works, she does tell us that the Abnegation are responsible for distributing resources, and she explains the rationale for this: "my father says that those who want power and get it live in fear of losing it. That's why we have to give power to those who do not want it" (Roth, p. 68). The Erudite have spread misinformation about the Abnegation, accusing them of corruption, but in reality, were guilty of a plot to overthrow the whole system. The novel encourages readers to think about the relationship between power and division in American politics, but also question binary thought. At the end, Beatrice considers her situation and her identity when she thinks, "I have no home, no path, and no certainty. I am no longer Tris, the selfless, or Tris the brave. I suppose now, I

must become more than either" (Roth, p. 487). She rejects an oversimplified version of herself and embraces her complexities despite the ambiguity of what they mean for her future.

Conclusion

Engaging students in the fantasy genre not only works to expose young readers to relationships and issues reflective of their realities and foster critical thinking about those important concepts, but it also just as importantly, works to develop important literacy skills. When I consider my own students and their literacy journeys, there is a clear correlation. When I ask students in my ninth grade on-level classes whether they have read any of the novels explored in this chapter, few students raise their hands. When I ask my AP English Language students whether they've read them, most of the class has read at least one, and many students have read all. Engaging students in reading at a young age sets them up to be successful in school because when they read, they're invited to think critically and creatively about their world.

Despite all their strengths, the works explored in this chapter are admittedly lacking in diversity. J.K. Rowling suggests some diversity in the names of some of her supporting characters. Two of the protagonists, Katniss and Beatrice, are female, one of whom is introduced as severely disadvantaged, but none of them are of racial or cultural minorities, and this lack of representation is important. As before mentioned, Rowling's work explores issues related to race with her references to "pureblood" and *The Fantastic Beasts Series* addresses segregationist philosophies between muggles and wizards. The *Lord of the Rings Series and Game of Thrones* newest film installments have received criticism for writing diversity into their prequels. The genre has a long way to go to be culturally inclusive. Like with the canonical literature discussed in Chapter Three, there is a place for these works in the literacy development of students;

however, it is important to point out that representation is absent. I think it interesting that the fantasy and science fiction genres are often most appealing to white male students because this is the demographic that seems to struggle the most in my classes. Illiteracy and apathy are barriers to student success across demographics, and if we can expose young readers to fantasy and science fiction works early, we can begin to unleash imaginative and critical thinking skills necessary for learning.

In *Resistance to Mere Things: Art and the Reach of Intellectual Possibility*, Maxine Greene (2001) poses the question of whether books like *Harry Potter* can be valuable to curriculum, noting the books' popularity as "testimony to the eagerness of many young people for imaginative adventures. Wizarding, yes, magic, ingenious games, journeys outward from the dull and unkind: *The Harry Potter* books absorb, initiate many into the delights of reading" (p. 124). Yes, these books are undoubtedly absorbing and have the power to engage our students, but they also work to explore reality in an imaginative way. Perhaps the best part of the fantasy series genre is that there is always another one ready to absorb.

Epilogue

Eden looked at her clock on her desktop, it was 3:25— time to wrap up her planning and walk over to pick up Eliza from the PreK room across the building. Finally.

Eliza had just started PreK and simply loved it. Every day when Eden walked up to the room and Eliza saw her, she would yell "Mommy!" and come running with a hug. On the walk back to her classroom, Eliza would excitedly tell her about all the fun activities she experienced at school. While the first day was hard for Eden, she felt recharged by Eliza's enthusiasm about learning new things and being with her friends.

Today, as she came running, her bookbag, which was half her size, bouncing behind her, she had a picture in her hand. She couldn't wait to tell her mommy about what she had drawn. Eliza's teacher, Ms. Kari, explained that she wanted to keep the picture out to show her because she was so proud of her work. Ms. Kari told Eden, they were going to be reading several stories in class, so today she had the children draw a picture of their favorite book to share with their classmates.

Eliza drew what she could remember from Goodnight Moon. She'd listened to Eden read it for almost 3 years before bed and had the book practically memorized. She drew a picture of herself, Mommy, Evy, and Dada reading the book. She drew a moon and a bowl full of mush.

On their way back to Eden's classroom, Eliza talked about eating a bowl full of mush for dinner and reading the book. This moment with Eliza made Eden wonder about her own students. How does a child go from being so excited to read a book, and illustrate their favorite parts of it to share, to absolutely hating to read? Refusing to read? Something changes for children between these early years of learning to read and building on those literacy skills in their adolescent years.

Eden knew that Eliza was so excited about reading because Ms. Kari knew how important it was to bring her students' personal experiences with reading into the classroom and to celebrate those experiences. But also, she thought about how she attempted to do this very thing by having conversations with so many of her students about their favorite books; often the response was always, "I hate reading" or "I don't read". Were they so disenchanted by reading passages for assessment and answering multiple choice questions that they couldn't think of a single book they had enjoyed?

She wondered how teaching and learning would be different if from PreK on, the focus was on allowing students to read what they wanted to read and providing unique open-ended opportunities to share what they've learned through reading. Would they still respond with, "I hate reading" by ninth grade? What if we offered opportunities for students to show what they can read rather than asking them to read passages too difficult for them to show what they can't.

She prayed Eliza would never lose her love for reading and couldn't wait to read Goodnight Moon tonight.

About the Vignette

This final vignette is inspired by my two and a half-year-old daughter and her love for reading stories. She and my nephew, who is just a few months older, love picking out books from their bookshelves and reading several of them before bed. In fact, they'd love to delay bed time and read another and another. When I think about their love for reading and the way they seem to naturally apply the stories we read with them to their own lives and truly experience the world through books, I feel sad that so many of my teenage students have lost this passion for reading somewhere along their educational journey. I worry that through a system that puts little emphasis on engaging students and so much value on constantly assessing through standardized

tests, that one day, she might also lose her enthusiasm for reading. Going forward, I plan on

doing everything I can to foster reading for enjoyment rather than as a task to be completed or

for the sake of measurement. I plan to expose her to a wide range of inclusive books that will

help her understand and appreciate the beauty and destruction of the world around her. Hopefully

she will grow up to love reading, but unfortunately if current practices continue, it will not be

because of school, but despite it. She may be lucky enough to have great teachers who find ways

to foster engagement in learning despite the red tape imposed by state and district testing

procedures and expectations.

It is a stereotypical complaint of every generation of English teachers, that the children

they teach just do not appreciate the great literature they attempt to teach them. Much of the

time, it is true that many traditional works used in the classroom do not reflect the lives of

students. Perhaps I am just one of these old English teachers lamenting about the days when

children loved reading, but I think my observations over the course of my time in the classroom

point to a different conclusion. Through my vignettes, I've attempted to synthesize snapshots of

what I've experienced and witnessed my students experience while teaching literature in an

increasingly standardized space. With the essays that follow the vignettes, I've worked to capture

what I find are the results and consequences of practices of a pedagogy of standardized testing as

well as an exploration of the unlimited possibilities literature can offer educators in helping

students grow, discover, and form their identities.

Everyday I watch my students attempt to complete assignments without reading. They

scan the texts and hunt for "answers" to guided questions or multiple-choice questions because

that is what they've been trained to do. They seem bewildered when they come across an item

that requires them to make an inference or think deeply about the overall message of a work

because those answers are not directly stated anywhere. They misunderstand that the point of the questions is not the answers to them, but rather the way they guide their comprehension of the piece. The point of the projects I assign are not to check off as complete, but an opportunity to synthesize and show their learning. In AP Language, students are struggling most with argument construction because that essay requires them to draw upon works that they've read and discuss them in detail, and they have not read much, so the arguments become vague, general, and shallow. We can speculate about the effects constant media has had on them through their hand-held devices, and this undoubtedly has had an impact on literacy as well, but the reality is, school has trained them to do this.

As a society, we've become so concerned with holding teachers accountable and making sure that they are earning their paychecks, that we've disregarded authentic learning experiences through art and literature and compromised the very thing we are supposedly trying to protect: student growth. It is worth questioning the sincerity of the motive. Perhaps the proposed merit-based pay and the failed attempts to use test scores as an accountability piece to teacher evaluations is simply a means of justifying relatively low wages for teachers. Perhaps it works to further a narrative about failing students, teachers, and schools to justify spending money on resources that only do more of the same: drill for test preparation. Or perhaps the accountability piece and the narrative about failure and distrust of teachers is part of the culture war allowing local politicians to exercise control over what books students are allowed to read. Likely, the motive is a confluence of all these, but student achievement is bottom on the list of priorities.

With this inquiry, I have tried to synthesis the research I've done throughout my studies in the Curriculum Studies program integrating principles of critical pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching with what I know about teaching literature and the struggles I have

encountered while attempting to apply these philosophies in my own classroom. I began the discussion by addressing the flaws involved with attempts to quantify, measure, and reduce the literary experience and the learning environment to mere pattern and process. Then, I moved into an exploration of the ways teaching and learning through literature works to foster democratic values and critical thinking skills, emphasizing the way that our current approach to teaching literary concepts limits its potential to reach and inspire students. The next chapter builds on those ideas and goes into depth about the power of narrative in helping students see themselves and others in the works they read and engage in self-discovery. It addresses our current short-comings and the disservice we do to all students when we fail in this. The next chapter goes on to show how these philosophies are not only reducing our understanding of literature, but science as well, and works to bring the perceived binaries together and celebrate the complexities of these related disciplines. And finally, I explore the way that science fiction and fantasy can work to cultivate imagination and critical thinking about the world, past, present, and future.

Through this synthesis of experience and philosophy, the most significant conclusion I can make is that without a shift in how we approach literary studies in the classroom, we will continue to not only perpetuate the inequalities that have historically plagued American society, but we will exacerbate them as more and more students become apathetic and passive. The critical thinking skills and imagination developed and honed through literature are crucial to problem solving the environmental crisis our students inevitably face, and rather than preparing them to collaboratively take on the world, we are training them not to think. If we are going to minimize the damage, we need to critically look at how and why we have chosen to reduce the complexities of learning, especially in our approach to literacy; rather than reject them, embrace the subjectivities and ambiguities that make learning complex and celebrate the way that

literature is inclusive of difference and perspectives as well as its ability to offer opportunity for shared experiences and collaboration. It is essential that we give students the freedom to develop a love for literature, and it is essential that teachers have the professional freedom to figure out what that means for their students. If we continue to dominate the curriculum with test preparation materials supposedly guaranteed to boost scores, our students will continue to hate reading and the scores will suffer anyhow.

Next year, the state of Georgia is adopting new English standards for K-12. We were asked earlier this year to review the standards and provide feedback for the state to consider before they release a finalized version of these standards. When I read through them, I believed them to be an improvement compared to the current standards, particularly the approach to narrative writing, which I addressed in detail in Chapter Three. One of the greatest strengths of the proposed new standards is that they potentially will allow for more freedom within the classroom, and they lend themselves to a more project-based curriculum. The most resounding complaint in a room full of English teachers was that they felt as though the standards did not seem to be easily measurable and would be difficult to create "learning targets" from the language. I whole-heartedly disagree with that criticism and feel as though this is their biggest recommendation. There are two important take-aways from this anecdote: I feel encouraged that perhaps the educational pendulum might be swinging away from an emphasis on testing as its backbone for curriculum, but also discouraged because the push back from a group of people who typically claim to disagree with this reliance on testing shows us that any move away from what has become the norm will be met with resistance even from those who benefit from those changes.

I conclude this by returning the discussion back to Eliza and my resolve to protect her beautiful curiosity and love of learning through stories. In the *School and Society* (1899) John Dewey wrote that "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (p. 220). I do not claim to be the best or the wisest parent, but what I want for my girls is an educational experience that is validating and challenging. I want them to have the freedom to explore their curiosities about the world and delve into its complexities. I want them to develop empathy for others and the critical thinking skills they will need to tackle whatever obstacles they may encounter. I want them to develop a passion for reading that will enrich their lives in innumerable ways. And because I want this for them, it is what I will work toward for all my students even if offering these opportunities to cultivate imagination means quietly rebelling against mandates and procedures that work to compromise them.

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