Contrived Conversions: The Master Narrative of Educational Uplift

by

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Abstract

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Education in the United States has responded to the evolving demands of society. Historically, it has been tasked with supporting religion in colonial America, preparing citizens to support the republic, integrating new Americans into society, and cultivating an industrialized workforce. Throughout these movements in education, one enduring purpose for institutional schooling has been to adapt people to an extant social order. The master narrative of educational uplift has been a cornerstone of this project. Uplift prescribes a transformational trajectory by which anyone can achieve greater social and economic success through the pursuit of purportedly meritocratic education. It frames the world as fixed, and the ways to achieve success as scripted, as if education has always been the unequivocal pathway to accessing the privileges of subjectivity. Dominant in-groups sanction uplift as an equitable means for individuals to transition from object to social subject. However, uplift achieves the opposite of its ostensible objective: it does not move society towards greater egalitarianism, but rather reproduces structural inequalities and maintains exclusionary power relations. Instead of liberating individuals, it oppresses people by preventing them from recognizing and engaging with the world as a changeable reality they have the capacity to shape.

This study, informed by critical pedagogy and critical race theory, examines how educational uplift operates in the modes of narrative, economic, and cultural conversions. Each mode is beholden to the uplift plot line, which requires that individuals change. In order to achieve liberating social transformation, oppressed peoples must develop critical consciousness and come together in solidary praxis, combining action with critical reflection. Mainstream educational uplift presents itself as a transhistorical emancipatory narrative that converts subpersons into full subjects, yet complete subjectivity is an unattainable ideal couched in normative middle-class whiteness. Closer analysis reveals that uplift is deeply ahistorical in its treatment of students as objects of conversion. A fully historicized narrative would acknowledge these individuals as makers of that narrative, capable of altering its terms themselves.
For those who imagine a better world and strive to make it real.
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Introduction

The Subject of Education

Horace Mann, leader of the nineteenth-century American Common School Movement, touted education as “the great equalizer of the conditions of men -- the balance wheel of the social machinery.” Since then, Americans have conceived of public schools as instruments of social reform. This line of reasoning approaches education as a meritocratic institution that provides equal opportunities for success, but does not promise equal results. It confirms the basic principles of the “American dream” — that all people “should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative.” Individual ability may vary, but it is possible to improve one’s circumstances, and education is the means to that egalitarian end.

This concept forms the basis for the master narrative of educational uplift, which categorically explains the broad phenomenon of social and economic betterment in terms of education. Educational uplift frames advancement as equally accessible to those who seek it. It reinforces a sense of control over one’s life by minimizing the extent to which socioeconomic and cultural positionality impacts access to opportunity. Such a perspective is particularly appealing to those who achieve success; it reinforces the notion that they deserve what they have because they earned it by dint of their own hard work. It tends to support the illusion that success is entirely self-made and independent of external factors, and it can be used to rationalize a policy that gives all students equal treatment in spite of unequal circumstances and fails to address unequal needs. Educational uplift legitimates its own discourse as universal and explains not only how one can achieve such improvement, but also how those who have already achieved it did so. That is, the master narrative posits itself as both prescriptive and descriptive.

Educational uplift is just one of many narratives that help our society cope with issues like inequality and make sense of the events of our lives. Historian Hayden White refers to the process by which “stories…are made out of chronicles” as emplotment, and explains that facts become encoded as parts of certain plot structures. White acknowledges the cultural specificity of a given set of plot lines; these are not universal codes, and yet the need to explain events to ourselves in terms of causality is itself embedded in Western positivist culture:

One of the ways [to make sense of events] is to subsume the events under the causal laws which may have governed their concatenation in order to produce the particular configuration that the events appear to assume when considered as ‘effects’ of mechanical forces. This is the way of scientific explanation. Another way we make sense of a set of events which appears strange, enigmatic, or mysterious in its immediate manifestations is to encode the set in terms of culturally provided categories, such as metaphysical concepts, religious beliefs, or story forms. The effect of such encodations is to familiarize the unfamiliar.

When we cannot rationalize a logically causal relationship, we resort to other cultural explanations that are none the less causal. For example, the sudden and unexpected cure of illness might be attributed to earnest prayer if not medicine, or in White’s terms, spiritual force
instead of “mechanical force.” Emplotment makes it possible for readers to recognize generic categories within historical narratives, a process that renders events familiar and understandable. Once a reader discerns genre, “the original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled…. They are familiarized…because he [the reader] has been shown how the data conform to an icon of comprehensible finished process, a plot structure with which he is familiar as a part of his cultural endowment.” Cultural reproduction occurs on the level of narrative, since historical narratives, including those of personal experience, “translat[e] … fact into fiction.” Narrative coheres otherwise random events into a familiar telos, a trajectory that reassures and reaffirms what we believe to be true.

One such belief is that educational institutions serve democratic purposes, and that literacy and knowledge about the world and oneself is the path towards improving both. Yet an essential part of schooling is also to teach students how to fit themselves into the extant social order, not change it. In the 1970s and 80s, educator-activists began to question the ideological underpinnings of education and reject the notion of a neutral education. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have demonstrated the ways in which schools reproduce socioeconomic inequalities, and Paul Willis’ ethnographic study of working-class boys’ subversive counterculture acknowledges that their reification of their class position ultimately reinforces the hegemonic order that they experience as oppressive. Annette Lareau has discussed how differences in parenting styles between middle and working-class families confer social skills that perpetuate class distinctions. While schools are traditionally viewed as maintaining extant social structures, critical pedagogy scholars approach schools as agents of social change, egalitarianism, and critical consciousness. With origins in Marxist theory, critical pedagogy has historically imagined this social change as a matter of class. More recently, scholars have argued that the field must address other categories of difference, particularly race and gender. Yet even critical pedagogy that incorporates critical race theory or gender studies tends to overlook how forms of textual representation, such as narrative, produce and reproduce oppressive ideological structures in the context of educational institutions.

Works of educational uplift describe moral, social, and economic improvement via education, modeling success for marginalized students. They exemplify cultural values like individualism, perseverance, egalitarianism, and mobility. In order to offer a procedure for self-betterment and maintain the inequalities that make such a procedure desirable, educational uplift relies heavily on the metaphor of conversion. Describing the transition from subperson (object) to person (subject) as conversional shores up the difference between the two categories and enforces the otherness of the pre-conversional individual. One consequence of metaphorizing uplift as a conversion is that the purpose of education becomes not just to impart a specific set of academic skills, but also to transform the student into a particular kind of subject acting upon certain beliefs. This implicit goal disproportionately affects marginalized students because education is only framed as an uplifting conversion for those who are marginalized, particularly in terms of race and/or class. “At-risk” students must “turn their lives around” and transform themselves through ritualistic engagement with educational institutions in order to become successful. Conversion is a turning, a revolution in condition, function, or belief; therefore, those in the lowest positions are prime candidates for it. For those more privileged, education tends to sustain an already elevated position and complement extant trajectories of success rather than turn students in a different direction. In this way, educational uplift rhetorically structures the imperative to “save” disadvantaged students — mind, body, and soul — as explicitly moral.
These educational conversions are contrived in two senses: first, they are premeditated and coerced, part of the socializing functions of schooling. Students who become successfully educated and “convert” to this privileged status are able to participate in the ruling class practice of reiterating master narratives. Such narratives express and perpetuate ruling class ideology, subordinating potential alternative narratives as less culturally valuable. Narratives of educational uplift in particular present a clearly defined pathway for marginalized individuals to succeed: poor, minority students are compelled to follow this path to escape the undesirable alternatives, not because it is the only option available, but because it is the path that our structurally unequal society presents and accepts as legitimate. Educational uplift purports to dismantle structural inequality, when inequality is in fact necessary because it provides justification for uplift.

Second, educational conversions are contrived in the sense that educative experience is imagined and emplotted as transformational. Representing education as conversional sustains the belief that subjectivity is available to anyone, so long as they are willing to change themselves. It generates the belief that one has the capacity to change one’s subject status. It also generates the sense that one has an inherent deficiency prior to education — if success demands that one change in some fundamental way, then one’s previous state must be in some way antithetical to success. Before going to school, an individual is somehow incomplete, but by experiencing transformational education, the individual can become whole.

The central conversion at the heart of educational uplift is a shift towards subjectivity, the *sine qua non* of self-improvement. Every tale of educational uplift is ultimately about either subject formation or the pursuit of a greater degree of subjectivity. *Subjectivation* — the process by which an individual becomes a subject — simultaneously results in a subject’s sense of agency and in that subject’s subordination to the authority that brought it into being. Through schooling, students both develop self-conscious agency and submit to education as a subjectivating authority. Education makes mastery of a skill set accessible, and because those skills are expressions and tools of state power, mastery over them means participating in and becoming subjected to state power.

Despite its self-presentation as emancipatory, educational uplift models a form of subjectivation that subordinates more than it empowers. The current models for neoliberal education reform assert positivist solutions, and they endorse educational uplift precisely because the plot line reinforces the dominant power structures that compel oppressed individuals to adapt to exclusionary power relations. Since uplift proves itself to be injurious and oppressive, we need a different path to emancipatory education. Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a foundational text in the field of critical pedagogy, argues for critical literacy as a liberating practice. Freire offers an alternative in which he seeks to humanize society by transforming oppressive power structures instead of compelling individuals to conform to these structures. He conceives of a subjectivity that is not predicated upon subordination to an authority that hails it into being, as in Althusser’s interpellative model. Instead, Freire argues for a model of the subject as processual and functionally defined through encounters with other people that result in transforming the world. That is, he posits that subjectivity is a *becoming* rather than a state of being. Moreover, the subject comes into being the same way freedom does: through liberating praxis that consists of problem-posing education and dialogue.
Freire argues that the way towards subjectivity is praxis, the combination of reflection and action. Narratives of educational uplift appear to empower marginalized individuals by showing them how to make decisions and how to broaden the range of choices available to them. However, it also limits the scope of these choices and discourages people from examining the limiting character of these choices. It prevents people from taking a close, critical look into why these particular choices are acceptable — that is, why and how they actually reinforce extant oppressive structures. Freire explains:

“any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.”

Uplift turns marginalized people into objects by inculcating the belief that it provides a way to change from object to a subject, as if these individuals could only become subjects by adhering to its plot. If one follows the pathway laid out in educational uplift without question, one surrenders critical inquiry and becomes even more deeply objectified.

Uplift explicitly characterizes marginalized students as in need of elevation from an implicitly inferior state as if they were responsible for their own marginalization. Cultural deprivation theorists contend that children with low socioeconomic status are socialized in a culturally deprived environment that causes cognitive deficiencies. They believe that the problem lies with the students’ culture, and that schools must compensate for their deprivation in order for them to achieve academic success. That the school’s culture furnishes exactly what students lack at home or in their communities means that educational institutions have the authoritative support of dominant groups.

Meanwhile, Westerners who assert ownership of another culture turn it into an object of knowledge and delimit its meaning. This control derives from epistemic authority, which systematically enforces a certain kind of knowledge as correct: middle-class cultural knowledge that reflects heteronormative patriarchy, and is racialized as white. This form of knowledge is “official” not because it is more accurate, truthful, or real than any other forms of knowledge, but because dominant in-groups are the cultural authorities that determine what counts as accurate, truthful, and real, and because it compels obedience to its own perspective. It constructs itself as “official.” At the same time, it obscures its own machinations such that this knowledge appears neutral and legitimate. What poor students and students of color do not have is “official” knowledge, and they can acquire it at school. In an educational context, uplift seeks to close the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and this “achievement gap” is code for a racial gap in achievement between white students and nonwhite students.

Confronting the racialization of educational uplift allows us to see that it constitutes a literary rendering of what Charles Mills calls The Racial Contract, a set of tacit agreements about who counts as a full person or a subperson, and about the sociocultural associations attached to racial categories. Mills acknowledges the variety of social contract theories, but argues that they share the implicit assumption that the social contract applies exclusively to whites. In all classic social contract theories, such as those Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant set forth, “the crucial human metamorphosis is from ‘natural’ man to ‘civil/political’ man, from the resident of the state of nature to the citizen of the created society.” The “state of nature”
applies to all men, and the subsequent change into a civilized state therefore affects all men uniformly. However, these ideal, abstract theories fail to account for extant social inequities.

Mills argues that the categories of “natural” and “civil/political” actually rest upon race: “in the Racial Contract… the crucial metamorphosis is the preliminary conceptual partitioning and corresponding transformation of human populations into ‘white’ and ‘nonwhite’ men.”\textsuperscript{16} While the social contract implicitly endows only white people with personhood, the Racial Contract transforms nonwhite people into subpersons and comprises the foundation for classic social contract theories. The Racial Contract is both descriptive because it explains actual inequalities in a non-ideal social body, and also theoretical because it functions metaphorically. Above all, the Racial Contract obscures its effects from those in power. Its functions depend upon ignorance of its intrinsic contradiction, and upon the misconception of racialized categories and hierarchies as natural or neutral.

Classic contractarianism insists that racial power dynamics and conflicts deviate from the norm rather than constitute it. This is one of the key myths that fuels traditional educational uplift plot lines, which seeks to correct deviations from the ideal society set forth in classic contractarianism. However, instead of correcting for such “deviations,” educational uplift actually perpetuates the norming of non-whites as subpersons. The ideal of the full subject is one of the primary structures of oppression because it is racialized as white. Subjectivity is also normed as middle or upper class, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and any number of other dominant positionalities. Since dominant theories of subjectivation are based primarily on the binary of whiteness or nonwhiteness, it follows that one either is or is not a subject, depending on one’s relationship to whiteness. In practice, however, subjectivity is a continuum that mirrors racial hierarchy, and the fullest degree of subjectivity inheres in the ideal of the purely white subject. The racialized foundations of subjectivation undergird mainstream uplift, which encourages people to strive for full subjectivity though education.

These conditions present two problems: first, complete subjectivity is unattainable because it is predicated upon the impossible ideal of absolute whiteness. No one, including white people, can achieve it. The second problem is that, even if full subjectivity were attainable, it is still implicitly white, and people of color can only achieve partial subjectivity unless the racial formation shifts to include them in the category of “white.” The current racial formation features whiteness in the top position within the racial hierarchy. However, there is nothing intrinsically superior about whiteness. Whiteness is the result of particular historical circumstances, and given a different set of circumstances, we might have had a Racial Contract that privileged Yellowness, Redness, Brownness, or Blackness. Mills explains that “whiteness is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations.”\textsuperscript{17} These power relations do not inhere in skin pigmentation, but rather function through historicized perceptions of biological difference.

The significance of perceived differences, and indeed, modes of perception and codification themselves, depend upon sociohistorical context. Whiteness has expanded to include certain groups once considered nonwhite, such as Mediterraneans, Celts, Slavs, and Jews.\textsuperscript{18} What constitutes whiteness is diachronically unstable, changing over time in a dynamic dance of inclusion and exclusion as the criteria for being white shift. Whiteness itself is contingent upon social, political, economic, temporal, and geographic circumstances. It is contextually defined, categorically unstable, and ultimately unverifiable. It is difficult to pin down, yet its instability
also offers hope to those who aspire to whiteness. Theories of subjectivation are likewise located in history, under specific cultural and intellectual conditions; as such, they too can be changed. This means it is possible to move away from the ideal of the subject as necessarily white, and to develop an alternative way to conceive of subjectivity more broadly.

Originating in Marxist theory, critical pedagogy tends to approach class as the primary organizing principle behind social and political activity, and to subordinate issues of race as symptomatic of class. Critical race scholars, who consider class (and other ideological structures) a function of color, have drawn attention to critical pedagogy’s omission of a specifically race-sensitive theory of oppression and social consciousness. Despite these valid criticisms of the field of critical pedagogy, Freire does acknowledge intersectionality: “One cannot reduce the analysis of racism to social class, one cannot understand racism fully without a class analysis, for to do one at the expense of the other is to fall prey into a sectarianist position, which is as despicable as the racism that we need to reject.” The two are so closely linked that Zeus Leonardo uses the term raceclass to encompasses the intersection between these categories in an attempt to achieve a more complete perspective on how they manifest. Conceiving of oppression as belonging exclusively to one or another category of difference — race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, etc. — forecloses critical consciousness because it fragments the reality of oppression. Experiences grounded in multiple, intersecting identities cannot be accounted for through identity politics focused on singular categories.

Uplift envisions social progress as comprised of an aggregate of individual transformations that follow a similar trajectory. Its assumptions about shared cultural values and how individuals change invoke a universal humanist perspective. Humanist ideology champions a monolithic view of the human, which means it cannot recognize the particularities of racialized (or class-specific) experience. Its assertion of “the” human experience appears to exclude race, but it actually universalizes a specific racialized experience, namely that of white humans. At the same time, humanism advances the autonomous individual, and this individualism cannot account for structural inequalities between racially differentiated groups.

At its most basic level, educational uplift supplies a narrative arc to the process by which one achieves a greater degree of subjectivity. Like the Racial Contract, educational uplift represents an ideal, not a descriptive roadmap for how to achieve subjectivity. Part of the problem is that the uplift narrative is disseminated as if it were a “how-to” when it is more of an ideal “if-only.” As the literary iteration of the Racial Contract, educational uplift ostensibly converts non-whites into individuals with full personhood, but instead of mitigating racial divisions, uplift actually preserves the Racial Contract’s effects by norming the identity of non-whites as subpersons. The Racial Contract’s narrative mode brings to the fore literary practices that present themselves as egalitarian and liberating, but actually constitute a rearticulation of the Racial Contract. And yet, the Racial Contract’s operation on a figurative register enables those who engage with it to narratively renegotiate its terms in their own writing. This rewriting opens up the possibility for change.

Chapter One of this dissertation demonstrates how Booker T. Washington promotes industrial education as a strategy for transforming former objectified slaves into subjects in Up from Slavery. During the post-emancipation era, former slaves face the challenge of claiming and asserting personhood, and often find success through economic appeals. The same material logic
that converted black people into objects is also capable of effecting the reverse, and Washington asserts a humanizing self-ownership of the laboring black body. Through economic participation, former slaves convert from objects to be bought and sold into subjects that own their labor and its products. Ex-slaves who gain control over the means of economic production also participate in cultural production, since the material results of labor have both use value and cultural significance. The transition from slave to subject is foundational to educational uplift, and yet reclaiming ownership of one’s body is the first step towards subjectivity, not the last.

In *Hunger of Memory*, Rodriguez continues to chase the elusive ever-fuller sense of subjectivity through cultural and linguistic assimilation. Whereas Washington asserts subjectivity in the form of material and economic self-ownership, Rodriguez claims cultural ownership. He discovers, however, that complete subjectivity is an ideal impossible to obtain because it is pegged to the unattainable ideal of whiteness, regardless of the extent of his education. Chapter Two examines the limits of educational uplift that are revealed in Rodriguez’s pyrrhic victory of its fulfillment. Although *de jure* acknowledgement of his status as human is already in place, Rodriguez finds this is insufficient for establishing complete subjectivity in a society that privileges certain humans over others on the basis of race, gender, class, and to an extent, language. To borrow from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: all humans are equal, but some humans are more equal than others.

Rodriguez lays bare the problems inherent in the successful achievement of educational uplift. He narratively enacts the double-edged sword of subjectivation that Washington encounters when uplift starts to become successful. Like Washington, Rodriguez reaps the benefits of his carefully cultivated status as a legible, public subject, and yet this status demands subordination to the Racial Contract. His assertion of subjecthood is simultaneously an acquiescence to subjection. His autobiography reveals what happens when educational uplift is successful — the sacrifices that one must make in order to succeed in “White America” if one is not white, and how education both enables and circumscribes that success. Narratives of educational uplift teach readers how to become subjects and improve upon their lives, but they also demand that one changes oneself in order to achieve success.

Washington advocates for an economic transformation, and Rodriguez a cultural one. Chapter Three turns to the Freedom Writers who, having encountered the limits of these strategies for achieving the ideal of full subjectivity, attempt a narrative solution in *The Freedom Writers Diary*. The goal is to change from the object of narration to its subject (its narrator) — to become an owner of the narrative instead of being owned by it — as is the case in colonialist narratives. The problem with a subjectivity expressed and reified through narrative arises when the basic plot line of that narrative is implicitly racialized. Subjectivity then becomes a question of how to transcend, through narrative, subperson status when it is linked to race. To repair that narrative, *The Freedom Writers Diary* takes race out of the equation, but doing so only advances an illusory color-blindness in an unequal social hierarchy organized largely by color.

Chapter Four approaches educational uplift more broadly as mode of reform, exemplified in *Waiting for “Superman”* and Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. “Superman” recruits audiences to enact uplift through activism, and the documentary presents varied perspectives, yet the overarching message is consistent with a neoliberal approach to education reform. The call to action that director Davis Guggenheim issues through the film and its companion book prompts a
circumscribed range of responses from audience members, and these responses are based on Guggenheim’s reflections, not the people’s. That is, Guggenheim presents a set of solutions to the problem of educational inequality without posing the problem to the oppressed. Instead, he prescribes a packaged solution that has not grown out of oppressed individuals’ critical reflection and action.

Freire, on the other hand, proposes an alternative to mainstream educational uplift. He argues not for converting individuals to accommodate an unequal society, but for oppressed peoples to come together to change that society. This goal demands solidaic praxis and critical consciousness instead of autonomous individual action. It requires an understanding of oppression as structural, and not only as a set of personal challenges, especially when many people experience multiple forms of oppression. Freire’s definition of oppression proves extensible to such intersectional positions. He asserts that “any situation in which ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence...because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human.”

One persistent critique of critical race theory is that prioritizing race as the lens through which we apprehend social and political phenomena means the field of study reifies race as inevitable. Applying Freire’s “language of possibility” to racialized systems of oppression shifts the focus towards building an egalitarian society based on radical humanism. A Freirean approach does not ignore race, but rather imagines a world in which neither race nor class determine the degree to which one is considered human.

Narrative functions as a mode of social reproduction, and the more a particular narrative — for example, that of educational uplift — is invoked and reiterated, the more entrenched it becomes in our cultural imagination. If, as Althusser argues, ideology represents our relationship to the conditions of our existence, then narrative becomes even more crucial because its ideological underpinnings give form to experience. In order to generate an alternative to the oppressive plot line of educational uplift and subvert extant inequities, we must reconsider the master narratives that animate discussions about education.

Notes


4 White, 1716.

5 White, 1717.
6 White, 1722.


15 Mills, 12.

16 Mills, 12-13.

17 Mills, 127.

18 See Jacobson, Ignatiev, Roediger 2006, and Brodkin for discussions about how these nonwhite groups became white.


24 Freire, 55.

25 Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”
Chapter One

From Slave to Subject: Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*

Mainstream uplift narratives present education as the principal means to achieve social, moral, and economic improvement. Booker T. Washington’s autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901) represents a dramatic iteration of the genre, furnishing an account of how objectified slaves transform into subjects through industrial training. His text exemplifies the ideals of educational uplift because the primary gap between subject and object determines other disparities between social groups that uplift attempts to ameliorate. Washington writes during a historical moment in which the category of the human is actively renegotiated, presenting an opportunity for him to redefine the standards by which humanity is measured. He maintains that enslavement is materially conditioned, and that rehabilitating black subjectivity is likewise a material matter.

It has become a commonplace in recent years to refer to race as a “social construction,” but uncritical use of this phrase risks characterizing race as only a social construction and minimizing the real and tangible effects of race and racism.¹ Race emerges through historical and material processes that lend sociopolitical and cultural significance to skin pigmentation and other physical markers. Attuned to the material dimensions of race, Washington contends that industrial education humanizes the black body by creating the conditions under which former slaves can assert ownership of their labor. Education has the capacity to reverse the material processes that dehumanized African Americans and convert subpersons into persons.

Washington’s strategy for reclaiming black subjectivity frames racial uplift as a material challenge, and primarily an economic one for several reasons. On a pragmatic level, focusing on economic conditions makes progress measurable. Quantifying economic parity and using it as a proxy for progress towards racial equality are far more straightforward than many qualitative alternatives. Connecting the issue of racial reconciliation to post-Civil War economic survival also creates a problem all Americans must face, regardless of racial identity. Beyond these practical rationales, approaching structural racism as an economic issue makes a case for subjectivity as contingent upon one’s economic role. Post-emancipation, this role can change because it does not inhere in skin pigmentation or blood, and that means former slaves can become subjects. The laborer’s freedom, as Marx explains, rests upon selling a restricted portion of his labor power, which means that the difference between a laborer and a slave is a matter of degree, not kind.² A person’s role in the labor process is not racially essentialized, making it easier for Washington to advocate for an uplift model based on economic activity. He endorses labor ownership as a pathway to subject status because it is a tangible and clearly defined means of demonstrating subjectivity in the context of the marketplace, where all economic agents (buyers and sellers) are equal in the eyes of the law that governs it. Slaves cannot be laborers because they are property. They are commodified instruments of labor incapable of ownership, while being a laborer is an outward and visible sign of subjectivity.

Considering systems of racial signification in economic terms also foregrounds the common principle of fungibility and relative value. Economic value corresponds metaphorically to currency in the same way that relative values assigned to race correspond to racialized
biological differences. Washington’s preoccupation with materiality signals his investment in what that material represents. He strives to alter material conditions such that the meaning of those conditions might change. Doing so draws attention to the constructed nature of economic as well as racial representation, and of race itself. As a result, forms of racial representation and valuation become as variable as economic ones. Applying the concept of fungibility to society makes conversion — transforming certain characteristics of a person or group of people — a feasible method for effecting social change. If economic mutability made it possible to turn people into chattel, then applying that same logic can achieve the reverse. An implicit corollary is that it is also possible to humanize former slave owners. Wrestling with race as an economic challenge permits Washington to examine it both as a sociocultural structure with material consequences and as a material circumstance that produces and reproduces that sociocultural structure.

The Material Conditions of Enslavement and Black Subjectivity

Washington’s pursuit of an ideological shift by means of altering material practice is consistent with Althusser’s argument that ideology has material modes of existence. Although ideology itself is immaterial, it has material manifestations and effects. For example, institutions like school and church represent ideology, and the practices and rituals of such institutions render the material of ideology. Althusser begins with Marx’s concept of ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.” Such ideas and representations exist materially in one’s actions, which are related to certain recurring practices. In turn, these practices hold significance in the context of more formal rituals. Althusser brings this point home by paraphrasing Pascal’s assertion that one need only to kneel and move one’s lips in prayer in order to believe. Participating in the material ritual of prayer generates belief, not the other way around. Moreover, actions, practices, and rituals are part of the material existence of what Althusser refers to as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). These ISAs, such as educational institutions, religious organizations, and families (among others), function largely in the private domain to reproduce the relations of production under ruling class ideology. This ideology finds material expression through ISAs and their rituals.

In order to address racist ideology on a material level, Washington advocates for industrial education that prepares blacks primarily for manual labor. Such labor will provide for their material needs either directly (as use-value, in Marx’s terms) or through economic exchange (exchange-value). In this way, industrial education can change the material circumstances in which its students live. Washington’s intense interest in these material conditions is both symptomatic of anxieties surrounding the subperson status of slaves and gestures towards recovery from those anxieties. That is, a humanism based on whiteness denies slaves’ subjecthood and falsely limits their existence to the physical, to being without meaning. Instead of trying to endow black people with meaning — a tactic that whiteness has leveraged against them by circumscribing that meaning within the confines of otherness — Washington attempts to alter the material circumstances of being in order to make being legibly meaningful. Conceiving of being as a form of signification recognizes materiality as meaningful, and therefore ideological. If ideology has material modes of existence, such as institutions, then changing those can alter the ideology behind them.
In addition to producing appreciable material results, black labor also renders the black body meaningful through changes in its material conditions. Washington’s plan for rehabilitating black subjectivity hinges upon the material manifestations of ideology. Framing the problem of race relations as a material and representational matter — specifically, as an economic matter — makes it possible to both explain how blacks are subjugated as subpersons and postulate a solution for achieving the reverse.

Washington repeatedly discusses the makeshift material accoutrements of life as a slave. The loud and inconvenient wooden shoes, and the extraordinarily uncomfortable shirt made of rough flax, are not only symptomatic of the economic circumstances of slaves; they also indicate how these factors condition and convert the individual into a subperson. The cheap shoes disregard nature and offer “no yielding to the natural pressure of the foot,” resulting in “an exceedingly awkward appearance.” The flax shirt is so painful that Washington remarks upon the generosity of his brother John for wearing the shirt “till it was ‘broken in.’”9 The unnatural use of the shoes and shirt calls attention to the flawed and circular logic of a racial hierarchy. The slaves allegedly wear them because they are inexpensive and slaves deserve no better. However, the deforming effects of this clothing indicate the opposite: it is entirely unsuitable for any person to wear.

It is not blacks’ inferior status that makes rough clothing appropriate for them, but rather, forcing them to wear these items materializes their position as inferior. Conditioning the body to conform to enslavement disciplines the slave into adapting to, if not accepting it. The flax shirt represents a material world that subsumes that self, carrying out the subjection of the human into a thing. The suffering associated with “breaking in” the shirt and the awkwardness of wearing the shoes are necessary conditions for wearing these items. Being shirtless and barefoot in a society that considers nakedness uncivilized belies the reality that these clothes are unfit for civilized use. Invoking the common practice of “breaking in” new slaves, the flax shirt is “broken in” to soften its fibers and make them conform more comfortably to one’s skin. At the same time, the shirt also conditions the person who wears it, marking the slave and maintaining this status as long as the shirt is worn. The phrase “broken in” illustrates the reciprocal subordination between slaves and their material conditions: the slave is subjected to the discomfort of the shirt, while the shirt must yield to the slave’s body. The wooden shoes are not shoes at all, and neither does the flax comprise a shirt. They are the non-shoes and non-shirt, or subshoes and subshirt, both tailored for and tailoring the subperson.

Experiencing the (de)humanizing power of clothing and shelter engenders Washington’s fixation with basic material amenities capable of restoring and preserving bodily integrity. Ideological beliefs about which practices are appropriate for humans, and therefore humanizing, also motivate the material process of rehabilitating subjectivity through hygiene. As Washington explains, bathing and bed sheets are more than matters of health or even comfort; they are fundamentally humanizing practices. He writes that “Life at Hampton was a constant revelation to me; was constantly taking me into a new world. The matter of having meals at regular hours, of eating on a table cloth, using a napkin, the use of the bath-tub and of the tooth-brush, as well as the use of sheets upon the bed, were all new to me.”10 Such commonplace hygienic activities were revelatory for a man who had never before engaged in them, never learned how to maintain his body, or considered that it was worthy of such attention. Since the slave’s body belongs to the master, its maintenance falls to him, and the flax shirt and wooden shoes indicate the master’s
disinterest in treating this body as more than an instrument of labor. The challenge for the former slave is to re-appropriate one’s body as an essential part of one’s human self. This new approach to one’s own body is, indeed, “a new world.” It is both a new relationship to one’s body as well as a new perspective on the physical world as incorporated with one’s self.

Washington strives to re-value and re-claim his body through physical acts of self-care, and he observes these rituals with a diligence typically reserved for religious practices. He explains that bathing has value “not only in keeping the body healthy, but in inspiring self-respect and promoting virtue.”11 and that “In all my teaching I have watched carefully the influence of the tooth-brush, and I am convinced that there are few single agencies of civilization that are more far-reaching.”12 These are cultural practices of white hegemony, and white society sets the standard for what is “civilized” and “human.” The institution of slavery simultaneously identifies and constitutes individuals as either slaves or masters, and does so by prescribing a set of cultural practices for slaves that mark their exclusion from the human.

Beyond the overtly horrific acts of violence committed against blacks, a multitude of subtle aggressions persistently dehumanizes black people. To say that a toothbrush and sheets are unnecessary for them is to say that they command a material environment commensurate with their lack of humanity. Washington’s focus on the niceties of healthful living lays bare the nuanced ways in which black people are denied civilized necessities because they are deemed uncivilized, even as these denials construct their status as uncivilized. Conversely, this dehumanization is critical for establishing both white humanity and civilization.

Whereas the material circumstances of slavery physically condition the body into a state of enslavement, hygienic practices condition the body into subjectivity. Such practices inculcate within and through black bodies the social dispositions that mark one’s status — structures that Bourdieu refers to as habitus. The taken-for-granted, commonsense practices of bathing for humans (implicitly whites) and wearing coarse flax for slaves (explicitly blacks) are part of habitus, a “socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures.”13 This system renders individual action void of any particular signifying intent; bathing is a common, sensible activity, not undertaken in order to demonstrate one’s status as a subject or to make any other kind of point. However, its commonplace significance applies only to whites. As Bourdieu explains, “it is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know.”14 Collectively, these objective actions constitute and perpetuate dispositions that mark social position.

In this case, habitus generates and is generated by the specific practice of bathing. Because habitus obscures its own functions under the guise of common sense, it may appear as if people bathe because they are civilized, as if the practice proceeds from some inner quality. However, it is bathing that produces the effect of identity, “inspiring self-respect and promoting virtue” (italics mine). It is no surprise that Washington perceives bathing this way, since these qualities can exist only for subjects, or — those who bathe. The materiality of habitus makes it possible for Washington to advocate for cultivating black subjectivity through such humanizing practices.
Subjectivity as an Economic Function

Educational institutions are the foundation for Washington’s approach to re-establishing black subjectivity. *Up from Slavery* follows the script of educational uplift by depicting the conversion of black slaves into social subjects through industrial education and labor. Such education intended specifically for black students inculcates subjectivity by changing the way they engage with materiality. First, industrial education affirms that black bodies belong in spaces of learning, a privilege reserved for subjects. Second, these schools teach students to take ownership of their bodies by helping them become — and see themselves as — productive workers entitled to the products of their labor. Under slavery, the black body belongs to a white master, and so does its labor and the products of this labor. By comparison, the situation is different for the wage laborer, who owns his or her body but not his or her labor. Industrial education teaches former slaves to relate to their bodies as their own. Promoting hygienic practices is part of this endeavor because reclaiming the body that labors entails caring for and maintaining it. The Hampton and Tuskegee schools produce not only bricks and buildings, but also black subjects whose labor produces and reproduces their own subjectivity. By teaching students to teach each other, industrial schools reproduce the material conditions of production for both black subjects and the results of their labor.

As centers for rehabilitating black subjectivity, industrial schools show former slaves how to reclaim self-ownership through labor. Washington’s essay “Industrial Education for The Negro” (the first in *The Negro Problem*) declares: “It has been necessary for the Negro to learn the difference between being worked and working — to learn that being worked meant degradation, while working means civilization.” The first lesson is on the “degradation” attendant to passively “being worked” and the “civilization” associated with actively “working.” It is possible that readers do not yet know the difference, but will learn it by the end of Washington’s edifying essay. Washington writes in the final paragraph: “I close, then, as I began, by saying that as a slave the Negro was worked, and that as a freeman he must learn to work.” However, Washington does not “close…as [he] began,” but rather goes farther in his argument by connecting slavery to the degradation of *being worked*, and the status of the freeman to *learning* to work. He starts by emphasizing the difference between “being worked” and “working,” and ends with a categorical distinction between the slave and the freeman in terms of how each relates to work. The freeman’s task is to *learn* to work, and being fully and consciously engaged with industrial education separates the freeman from the slave, the “civilized” human from the “degraded” subhuman.

Beyond direct labor, general economic participation is one of the few avenues for affirming black humanity. Washington argues in favor of industrial education knowing that others, most notably W. E. B. DuBois, advocate more explicitly for equal rights. Washington acknowledges critics who believe an education in the humanist tradition would go farther in uplifting the race, yet he insists, “I plead for industrial education and development for the Negro not because I want to cramp him, but because I want to free him. I want to see him enter the all-powerful business and commercial world.” The marker of personhood becomes legible upon entrance into “the all-powerful” market economy because it has the capacity to alter how blacks are viewed by others and by themselves. Of course, slaves were also part of the “business and commercial world,” but they were forcibly expropriated as property; they did not “enter” the
commercial world any more than livestock did. Entering the business world is a privilege reserved for those recognized as autonomous, human beings.

The power of Washington’s argument for black economic engagement lies in his corrective vision of how the Southern economy actually operates. He seeks to replace the false conception of slaves as beneficiaries of white paternalism with a more accurate understanding of the black population’s crucial role as workers. The post-Civil War South needs an economic model in which all people function as subjects, and none as objects (i.e.: slaves). Washington envisions vocational education as a remedy for the counterproductive notion that labor itself is a condition of slavery, and that emancipation means freedom from work. He blames the institution of slavery for inculcating this belief in blacks and whites alike, but he specifically seeks to uplift blacks through industrial education. Given the nation’s economic dependence upon slave labor, especially in the South, Washington recognizes the urgency of re-incorporating and recontextualizing black labor as both dignified and necessary.

The rationale for repairing race relations is the exigency of repairing the economy, not rectifying the injustices of racism or even slavery. Washington assures his white audience at the Atlanta Exposition that “Casting down your bucket among my people, helping and encouraging them as you are doing on these grounds, and to education of head, hand, and heart, you will find that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories.” He makes a humanitarian appeal cloaked in economic discourse: in exchange for intellectual, manual, and character education, blacks will help run the engine of the Southern economy. As free men, however, their role will be as economic agents endowed with rights of ownership rather than as commodities to be owned.

Washington advocates a form of uplift intended for all races that is achievable only through mutual recognition that also acknowledges difference. He tells his white audience members that blacks “shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defence of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way to show make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” At first, this appears to be a compelling argument about combining black and white social interests, but this form of “mutual progress” is strictly on economic terms. He insists that blacks would put their lives on the line in defense of whites, yet he does not go so far as to claim that whites would do the same. Washington’s model for racial unity happens to bring members of different races together through their mutual interest in capitalism.

Prior to emancipation, economic self-interest for Southern whites involved endorsing slavery. Washington inverts this model and demonstrates how choosing race prejudice in the Reconstruction-era South amounts to choosing economic failure:

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. We shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one-third to the business and industrial property of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic.
Washington gives voice to a thinly veiled threat of a zero-sum outcome for the black population, as if they would all categorically either help or harm reconstruction efforts. Even as Washington stresses the importance of cooperation, he also leverages the threat of the black politico-economic body’s capacity to derail white hegemony. Contextualizing racism as a fundamentally economic problem also makes white audiences far more likely to accept such an argument, since they would not be required to disavow racial bias directly. Most importantly, Washington frames their actions as reactive, and places responsibility for both positive and negative economic consequences on the shoulders of his white audience.

The future of the Southern economy depends on white people’s ability to accept black subjectivity, the source for black labor. The difference between owner and owned is the difference between subject and object, and a functional economy demands that former slave owners begin relating to former slaves as subjects. Freedom in practice, according to Marx, means having the ability to sell one’s labor power, and a lack thereof would mean that one is a commodity and not an agent:

labour-power can appear upon the market as a commodity, only if, and so far as, its possessor, the individual whose labour-power it is, offers it for sale, or sells it, as a commodity. In order that he may be able to do this, he must have it at his disposal, must be the untrammelled owner of his capacity for labour, i.e., of his person. He and the owner of money meet in the market, and deal with each other as on the basis of equal rights, with this difference alone, that one is buyer, the other seller; both, therefore, equal in the eyes of the law. The owner of the labour-power should sell it only for a definite period, for it [sic] he were to sell it rump and stump, once and for all, he would be selling himself, converting himself from a free man into a slave, from an owner of a commodity into a commodity.19 (italics mine)

Herein lies the crux of achieving subjectivity through labor relations: the act of selling one’s labor power for any period of time, restricted or not, demonstrates one’s agency as a subject. Yet a black person selling the entirety of his labor power amounts to “selling himself” and forfeiting agency, which “converts” him into a slave. Marx describes this change from owner to owned as a conversion, indicating a conservation of equivalent value in the labor power of a single individual. Whether he is a free man or a slave, the same individual has a consistent capacity for labor, whether it be physical, mental, or spiritual, since all forms of labor depend upon this same material body. Referring to the totality of labor power as “rump and stump” indicates the embodied nature of labor power. Of course, changes to the body subsequent to enslavement would impact its labor power, but Marx’s example presents the moment of exchange in the marketplace as an instant conversion from owner to commodity. Unbounded periods of sold labor power results in a corporeal bind.

While Marx’s economic explanation of slavery conspicuously eschews any discussion of race, this omission lends itself to Washington’s narrative of uplift. The laborer’s freedom rests upon selling a restricted portion of his labor power, signifying the difference between a laborer and a slave as a matter of degree, not kind. One’s role in the labor process is not racially essentialized, making it easier for Washington to advocate for an uplift model based on economic activity. He endorses labor ownership as a pathway to subject status because it is a tangible and
clearly defined means of demonstrating subjectivity in the context of the marketplace, where all economic agents (buyers and sellers) are equal in the eyes of the law that governs it.

By emphasizing productive labor instead of race, Washington approaches rehumanization as an economic transfiguration. Industrial schools teach students how to generate new economic identities as valued workers in trades with market demand. Instead of changing essentialist cultural interpretations as tied to skin color, he circumvents race and approaches subjugation as a consequence of economic passivity. His rhetoric consistently indicates that both the slave and the freeman are “Negro,” and the difference between them lies in their relationship to labor. Detaching subjection from the fixed phenotypic trait of color and attaching it to an adaptable economic position makes it a solvable problem.

Washington’s contemporary critics and proponents of slavery might argue that blacks are economic commodities because of their status as sub-human, but Washington would have it the other way around. Arguing that former slaves play a critical role as agents in a post-emancipation economy asserts their status as human. Changing the economic role of black people would undermine the racist logic that supported slavery as an economic model. Washington subverts the economic rationale for slavery in an effort to extend that subversion to the racist rationale that props up the economic. Slavery was possible only insofar as black people were considered less than human, which is absent even in the most exploitative economic exchange between owners of capital and workers. Their enslavement rested upon their status as chattel, and a slave’s labor belonged to his owner according to the same logic by which a horse’s work plowing a field belonged to the horse’s owner. The horse — and the slave — have no claims to ownership of any kind. While Marx’s proletariats are alienated from their own labor, slaves are alienated from both labor and body because they are denied ownership of either. Yet only subjects bear the privilege of experiencing alienation and having it acknowledged, while non-subjects are denied the capacity for alienation, a state that Kelly Oliver refers to as “debilitating alienation.”

Washington advocates for a re-valuation of black people in terms of their labor, their capacity to produce marketable goods and services separate from their corporeality, rather than in terms of their bodies.

Cultivating manual skills is one way of claiming ownership of one’s body, a way of developing an economically productive and active (as opposed to passive) body. Like hygiene, conscious and autonomous labor has the capacity to humanize, and Washington presents this work as a form of self-care. An early experience tending to Mrs. Ruffner’s lawn generates in him a deep sense of fulfillment:

When I saw and realised that all this was a creation of my own hands, my whole nature began to change. I felt a self-respect, an encouragement, and a satisfaction that I had never before enjoyed or thought possible. Above all else, I had acquired a new confidence in my ability actually to do things and to do them well. And more than this, I found myself, through this experience, getting rid of the idea which had gradually become a part of me, that the head meant everything and the hands little in working endeavour, and that only to labour with the mind was honourable while to toil with the hands was unworthy and even disgraceful.
Reflecting on the visible results of his labor is only possible thanks to Washington’s ownership of his body, of the hands that create. He finds joy in recognizing himself in the work he has done, in realizing through labor what he had imagined — a distinctly human ability, according to Marx. Washington declare, “I found myself, through this experience,” indicating not only a newfound appreciation for manual labor, but also a transformative self-discovery through such labor. Moreover, his work makes it possible for him to change his environment, and he is himself changed by transforming his material conditions. Washington takes pride in the “well-ordered” lawn, and its state of order indicates fidelity to broader ideals about what constitutes a well-ordered lawn. Work that externally substantiates these ideals, combined with an ability to perceive the distance between the self and the product of labor, helps Washington become conscious of the power of his own mind. Though the master refuses to recognize the slave as human, the slave is able to apprehend his own humanity in the material products of his labor.

In order to restore black subjectivity in the eyes of both former slaves and former masters, Washington declares that “it is in the South that the Negro is given a man’s chance in the commercial world.” To be given this “man’s chance” initiates one’s conversion to a state of personhood. “The Negro” deserves “a man’s chance” because he is a man, and the world is able to discern who counts as a man based on an ability to engage with “the commercial world.” However, to be “given a man’s chance” in a market economy is also to passively receive the opportunity to prove one’s personhood by participating in commerce as a laboring agent. This “man’s chance” belongs to whites and is “given” to blacks who cannot access it on their own, much like the freedom conferred upon them in emancipation. Although the former masters no longer own black bodies, they still have the power to accept or reject black labor. Keenly aware of the need to change whites’ perception of blacks, Washington mobilizes the language of economic exchange to bridge the ideological gap between owning slaves and owning only the products of their labor. If freedom depends not on race, but on ownership of labor power, then former slaves can recover freedom, while former masters can continue to wield purchasing power over black labor.

**Representing the Conversion to Subjectivity**

Even as Washington prioritizes an economic account of racism over a social one, his anxieties surrounding the sociopolitical status of former slaves and the structural challenges of being black manifest through his spatial metaphors. Early on, he discloses the dismal conditions of his childhood as well as the exigency of improving them. In the tradition of the slave narrative, Washington begins his autobiography with “I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia.” The start of the second paragraph continues to locate him in an unfavorable environment: “My life had its beginnings in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings.” He describes his ambiguous ancestry, and then his family’s slave cabin and its nominal door. His description of the door reveals his preoccupation with ideals: “There was a door to the cabin — that is, something that was called a door — but the uncertain hinges by which it was hung, and the large cracks in it, to say nothing of the fact that it was too small, made the room a very uncomfortable one.” (2) The extended description emphasizes the door’s function (and dysfunction) as a means of both entry and exit from a space specifically designated as slave quarters. This “living-place” is never called a home or a house, but is an ordered social space in which the family carries out domestic activity. Even so, the
slave cabin is by definition a nonpolitical space insofar as institutional slavery is concerned. The door represents in the chance to exit this nonpolitical state, to transform oneself by changing one’s environment or material circumstances.

Washington was born a slave in his family’s cabin, and the state of the door reflects his perspective on economic and social opportunity for freed slaves. The door is an opening, a way out of the slave cabin and out of a state of subjection. Exiting slavery is more fraught than leaving this cabin or declaring emancipation; the door’s “uncertain hinges” do provide a means of egress, yet success is not guaranteed. This door’s status as such is questionable: it is “something that was called a door” in name, but its form and structure do not suit its intended function. Similarly, something that was called “freedom” was conferred upon former slaves, and yet the forms and functions of de jure emancipation failed to deliver its promise. Washington’s description of the door is an iteration of the glass ceiling — one might say there is a door after all, but what kinds of opportunity lay on the other side of such a door? What sacrifices, self-deceptions, or distortions would result from passing through such a door in the hope that one might emerge on the other side of it a free man? Exiting slavery is not tantamount to entering freedom. Crossing the threshold of this slave cabin door involves passing through an uncertain, liminal space. The door marks the point at which a slave is no longer enslaved; exiting the cabin renders him not a slave, but it does necessarily not make him free.

Freedom from bondage is insufficient. Former slaves also need the freedom to pursue their ambitions, and education offers opportunities not only to gain skills and build character, but also to change the way they imagine their place in the world. Washington makes a case for the schoolhouse as the new center for black life, a civilized and civilizing place meant to replace the slave cabin both materially and symbolically. He writes, “I had no schooling whatever while I was a slave, though I remember on several occasions I went as far as the schoolhouse door with one of my young mistresses to carry her books. The picture of several dozen boys and girls in the school room engaged in study made a deep impression upon me, and I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.” As a slave, he carries books without being permitted to read them, literally bearing the material weight of white privilege, and keenly perceives the value of the education he is forbidden. The word schoolhouse suggests an intellectually nurturing place for students who have the opportunity to enter, juxtaposed with the decidedly un-homey “living-place” of the slave cabin that perpetuates subordination. Yet, even after emancipation, Washington finds himself unwelcome in schools intended only for whites. He has exited the slave cabin but remains unable to enter the house of learning that represents the promise of true emancipation. Leaving a state of institutional subordination does not automatically mean entry into freedom.

Washington’s vision of freedom inheres in what he considers a proper door — that of the schoolhouse. Unlike the door to the cabin, he uses no qualifiers when describing the schoolhouse door. There is no doubt that it is, in fact, a door — a gateway through which one might pass “into paradise” and transition out of a state of servitude. It marks access to the transformative powers of education. Denying black Americans access to educational opportunity is especially cruel when it is open to white foreigners: “All the Negro race asks is that the door which rewards industry, thrift, intelligence, and character be left as wide open for him as for the foreigner who constantly comes to our country.” To move beyond this door is to achieve the attributes that distinguish the freeman.
Proclaiming emancipation is not equivalent to conferring freedom in ideal or practical terms, and Washington’s preoccupation with conceptual ideals reveals his uncompromising commitment to racial equality. When describing his attempt to assemble his first “library” while living and working under Mrs. Ruffner in anticipation of his journey to Hampton, Washington observes: “I secured a dry-goods box, knocked out one side of it, put some shelves in it, and began putting into it every kind of book that I could get my hands upon, and called it my ‘library.’” This echoes the references to the slave cabin ‘door’ that aspired to be a true gateway. The aspirational designation of an old crate filled with books as a ‘library’ demonstrates Washington’s desire for a collection that may one day be unequivocally recognized as an actual library. Pondering what makes a door — or a library — interrogates what it means to be free. If he concedes that a slipshod, defunct entryway can be called a “door,” it would mean that he considers former slaves truly free after Lincoln declared them so. The Emancipation Proclamation is insufficient as an illocutionary act so long as any former slave does not enjoy the full extent of privilege afforded to whites. His exacting standards for conceptual structures like doors and libraries reflect his steadfast position as an advocate for fully realized racial equality.

Washington’s pedagogical approach at Tuskegee Normal School is consistent with his attentiveness to ideal conceptual standards, especially that of freedom. Just as caring for one’s character necessitates caring for one’s body, so does shaping students’ minds demand a conscientious approach to engineering the learning environment. Building the Tuskegee school from the ground up with black hands is Washington’s way of creating doors out of the slave cabin and into the schoolhouse. The building is an educative space intended to change the lives of every student who enters. At the same time, each student transforms the school, making its furniture, cultivating food for its community, and shaping the bricks that form the school itself. The process of constructing buildings also re-constructs black humanity: the clay that Washington and his students painstakingly mold into bricks passes through a kiln the same way “my race must continue passing through the severe American crucible.” This comment, spoken upon accepting an honorary Master of Arts degree from Harvard, alludes to Washington’s enterprise in brickmaking and emphasizes the bricks’ symbolism of former slaves’ capacity to transform themselves through experience and endurance in the face of hardship. It takes the Tuskegee community four attempts to succeed at brickmaking, and each failure compels more students and teachers to abandon the project. Those who persevere choose to do so, and that decision itself expresses freedom.

As students become skilled workers at engineering, constructing, and maintaining the campus, they further enact their freedom through their service to the school. The students’ sense of pride and ownership towards Tuskegee proceeds from conscious labor performed as an act of freedom: “Not a few times, when a new student has been led into the temptation of marring the looks of some building by leadpencil marks or by the cuts of a jack-knife, I have heard an old student remind him: ‘Don’t do that. That is our building. I helped put it up.’” The older student justifies the imperative “Don’t do that” by reasoning that it is “our building” because “I helped put it up.” Given the work they put into the school, any of its buildings “belongs” to both students. The collaborative effort necessary to maintain the school generates a broader consciousness that the school’s mission is also the students’ mission. Tuskegee is an institution comprised of aggregate acts of freedom, and its objective of liberation through educational uplift is a distinctly collective enterprise.
The industrial schoolhouse door represents Washington’s gateway to a new identity as a freeman. Sites of learning — Washington’s writings as well as his schools — are also sites of conversion, places where learners change as they begin to see themselves and their relationship to the world differently. For slaves, education is a rite of passage that makes the transition from object to subject possible. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep contends that rites of passage consist of three stages: preliminal rites of separation from the old state, liminal transition rites, and postliminal rites of incorporation into a new state. Washington never knew his father, but does take leave from his ailing mother; he “hardly expected to see her again, and thus our parting was all the more sad.” Although he reunites with her later, he nonetheless separates from his social group and makes great sacrifices to undertake the arduous journey to the Hampton Institute, where he gains knowledge of humanizing hygiene and learns the value of labor. Learning to bathe and brush his teeth regularly are not simply about cleanliness; these purification rituals also separate him from his prior identity as a slave. They prepare him for transitioning to his new identity as a Hampton student, and their subsequent repetition becomes a rite of incorporation that sustains the subjectivity he cultivates at school.

The Hampton Institute is Washington’s primary site of transition into the world of social subjects. Upon seeing the school, founded in 1868 by missionaries intent on uplifting freed slaves, Washington describes his own rebirth:

It seemed to me to be the largest and most beautiful building I had ever seen. The sight of it seemed to give me new life. I felt that a new kind of existence had now begun – that life would now have a new meaning. I felt that I had reached the promised land, and I resolved to let no obstacle prevent me from putting forth the highest effort to fit myself to accomplish the most good in the world. (24)

He envisioned the school as “the promised land,” evoking both a contested biblical birthright as well as the forty acres and a mule promised to emancipated slaves. Since this land was not forthcoming in literal terms, the school, a vehicle of economic opportunity via education, substitutes for the chance to earn land and material wealth. The sight of the building revives him after his pilgrimage and also generates a new kind of life, “a new kind of existence” which “would now have a new meaning.” Arriving at the school amounts to Washington’s first personal encounter with a symbolically functional door, a means by which he believes he may pass from a state of subjection into liberation. The sight of Hampton triggers a revelatory response, just as the sight of the schoolhouse catalyzes Washington’s longing for an education. The difference is that, instead of feeling an outsider as he does upon viewing the schoolhouse, Washington knows even before he enters the building that this is a place of education made specifically for African-American students.

The Double-Edged Sword of Subjectivation

Subjectivity is empowering and desirable because it marks the human, but it also entails subordination. Althusser’s model for subject formation illustrates how the subject emerges when hailed, or interpellated, by an authority. In that same instant, the subject is necessarily subordinate to this authority, precisely because the subject needs that authority to bring the
individual into being. In this way, the subject is beholden to the authority that constitutes the subject, and any challenges to that authority also threaten the subject’s existence. Emancipation exemplifies the double-edged sword of subjection: in order to accept emancipation as conferred by the state, one must also acknowledge the same authority that enforced slavery and has the power to reinstat it. Washington’s program of industrial education endorses the values of the society that emancipated him as it seeks to change them.

Educational uplift initiates African Americans into the category of the human, but in doing so it simultaneously shores up the boundaries between human and non-human, between subject and object. Representing uplift as a conversion is a necessary conceit for sustaining dominant race/class ideology because it ritualizes the integration of certain nonwhite, ideologically subjugated peoples into the dominant class. Such integration cannot happen quietly—that is, without something as dramatic and all-encompassing as a conversion—because the dominant in-group cannot abide by interlopers suddenly enjoying privileges previously reserved for those in power. Entering a new class must be ritualized as a transformation in order to make the event more acceptable; the out-group must become more like the in-group to justify their access to the same benefits. Greater access to these benefits must be the result of exceptional individual action; otherwise, privilege loses its exclusive luster. The educational conversion metaphor does not apply to those who are already privileged; it is only used to describe the experiences of subpersons who must surrender a prior identity in order to assume a new one as a full subject. Uplift demands both the turn away from that prior identity and a turn towards a new one.

The conversion trope demarcates boundaries between in-group and out-group, sustaining the structural integrity of dominant race/class ideology. First, any in-group needs an out-group. Nonwhite subpersonhood mediates white personhood in a dialectical relationship; in order for whites to experience self-consciousness, they need the “other” outside of themselves. Second, an explicit, scripted “turn” from one group to another both makes change possible and limits how change can be achieved. Uplift through conversion may benefit the oppressed, but it also preserves the prevailing social order and its inequities. The conversion trope is what Bourdieu refers to as a habitus that facilitates the transition, or at least the appearance of a transition, from one social class into another. Habitus — commonsense practice — produces and reproduces one’s social position and generates certain dispositions indicative of class. It both creates and is created by the structures that inculcate a sense of “‘knowing one’s place’ and staying there.” As such, habitus renders opaque its own ideology, including the racist ideology that insists hygiene is irrational for black people. The habitus of slavery supports the tautology that blacks act like animals because they are, and that whites act like civilized people because they are.

From the perspective of whites, declaring that blacks act like civilized people is a large shift that requires an explanation. Whiteness is reluctant to re-categorize subpersons as human without accounting for that change, so humanizing ex-slaves involves a series of activities that progress towards that goal. Ultimately, framing black subjectivity as dependent upon conversion means pre-conversion African Americans are still animals that must be fundamentally altered in order to take on full subjecthood. Uplift narratives must involve conversion, some essential change in subpersons, in order to validate their place within the category of the human. Conversion may not actually transform individuals, but it does serve its social function of maintaining boundaries.
Even as the “promised land” of the Hampton Institute offers a safe harbor for African-American students, admission is still contingent upon a white gatekeeper’s approval. Upon arrival at Hampton, Washington reveals his impulse to prove that black people are productive members of society in his first encounter with head teacher Mary Mackie. He solicits Mackie for admission, but she neither accepts nor rejects him, and he rationalizes her indifference as a reaction to his appearance: “having been so long without proper food, a bath, and change of clothing, I did not, of course, make a very favorable impression upon her.” He attempts to “impress her in all the ways I could with my worthiness,” yet watches as Mackie admits other students and not him. Finally, “after some hours had passed, the head teacher said to me: ‘The adjoining recitation-room needs sweeping. Take the broom and sweep it.” Mackie may have acknowledged Washington’s presence prior to this order, but he notes only her interpellating imperative to clean the floor. He uses indirect speech throughout the autobiography, and this is the first instance of a direct address — an interpellating gesture that recognizes and endows him with subjecthood and simultaneously establishes his state of subjection. His first direct address is an order to engage in manual labor. He represents this pathway towards subjecthood as the only one available, and he leaps at the chance to confirm his worthiness through a job well done. This means of achieving subject status becomes the centerpiece for Washington’s uplift agenda.

Not only does Mackie’s speech establish Washington’s subjectivity — his agency and his subordination — but it also foregrounds her role as an authority charged with evaluating his fitness for entrance into the Hampton school. She tests Washington’s standards for cleanliness, possibly in response to his unhygienic condition, as if measuring these would indicate a deeper, latent purity. His unkempt state matters less than the degree of purity to which he aspires. Cleaning that room to Mackie’s satisfaction is Washington’s “college examination,” the first of his transition rites and a prerequisite for admission, and his success depends entirely upon the judgment of “a ‘Yankee’ woman who knew just where to look for dirt” — an indirect but pointed way of connoting the whiteness Mackie represents, embodies, and enforces.

During Washington’s time at Hampton, Mackie proves herself an ally as well as a gatekeeper, but it is principal Samuel C. Armstrong who “made the greatest and most lasting impression upon me” — significant praise, considering Washington’s investment in material impressions upon the body. He describes his relationship with Armstrong as one between an unwashed neophyte and a religious leader:

“Fresh from the degrading influences of the slave plantation and the coal-mines, it was a rare privilege for me to be permitted to come into direct contact with such a character as General Armstrong. I shall always remember that the first time I went into his presence he made the impression upon me of being a perfect man; I was made to feel that there was something about him that was superhuman.”

Washington contrasts the degradation of slavery with the uplifting experience of making contact with Armstrong, a figure who seems “perfect,” “superhuman,” and “Christlike” in the eyes of those who struggled to overcome the subhuman status slavery imposed. If the school that Armstrong founded is the “promised land,” then, as Washington observed, “It would be difficult to describe the hold that he had upon the students at Hampton, or the faith they had in him. In fact, he was worshiped by his students. It never occurred to me that General Armstrong could fail in anything that he undertook.” Outside the context of the school, Armstrong might not appear
so godlike, but at Hampton he becomes a paternal figure with the power to validate every student’s subject status. His failure must be out of the question, since it would mean a failure to reinstate black subjectivity.

Although Washington never explicitly comments on how race influences his personal experiences with Mackie or Armstrong, their whiteness manifests as judgment and as a “superhuman” quality, respectively. Washington must pass Mackie’s exacting inspection in order to access educational uplift. The fact of her whiteness, her authority to deny or grant admission, and Washington’s investment in the “civilizing” effects of hygiene converge to demonstrate his dependence on white acknowledgment. Armstrong’s godlike status distances him from his students: he is “worshipped” and so “perfect” that direct contact is an experience unto itself. Yet he has made it his life’s work to advocate for African-American education. Clearly, he embraces humanity in others in spite of the gap between his superhuman status and their allegedly subhuman condition. Nevertheless, he does so from a position of power. He has the authority to recognize the subjectivity of black students while his own remains unquestioned.

Armstrong’s subjectivity may be beyond reproach, but this is not solely a consequence of his race. Washington’s strategy to make blacks legibly human through economic means cuts two ways:

“My experience is that there is something in human nature which always makes an individual recognize and reward merit, no matter under what color of skin merit is found. I have found, too, that it is the visible, the tangible, that goes a long ways in softening prejudices. The actual sight of a first-class house that a Negro has built is ten times more potent than pages of discussion about a house that he ought to build, or perhaps could build.”

He fully expects those who see a building constructed by black hands to experience a revelation similar to the one he has on seeing the Hampton Institute. Framing recognition of the individual as intrinsic to “human nature” places the burden on whites to either live up to this standard or be considered inhuman. If whites can demonstrate humanity by acknowledging it in people of color, then racism is a failure of character on the part of whites, a matter of individual self-interested response, and cultivating individual merit in black people is the appropriate means to combat it. These principles are necessary components of Washington’s strategy: he rejects the notion that racism is irrevocably structural because his project of converting individuals depends on personal accountability. Focusing on changing individual perspectives makes conversion a viable strategy for eliminating racism, a way to uplift both blacks and whites. Washington has no choice but to minimize the significance of structural racism because he endorses uplift as a means of overcoming individual race prejudice. Instead of viewing race as a monolithically persistent systemic construction, shifting the onus for change onto the individual turns it into a personal decision.

White recognition of black humanity is paramount for Washington, and he eventually seeks such validation from a source more powerful and authoritative than even Armstrong: the President of the United States. He confesses that, “Soon after I began work at Tuskegee I formed the resolution, in the secret of my heart, that I would try to build up a school that would be of so much service to the country that the President of the United States would one day come to see
His secret hope is to draw the approving gaze of the President to the school he has built, and to draw it not through political influence, but through merit alone. Washington’s first attempt to attract President McKinley’s attention fails. For his second attempt, “Mr. Charles W. Hare, a prominent white citizen of Tuskegee, kindly volunteered to accompany me, to reenforce my invitation with one from the white people of Tuskegee in the vicinity.” The school’s excellence and service are not enough to compel a presidential visit, and neither is the black principal’s solicitation, but having a white advocate on his side proves effective. Washington describes Hare’s role as “reinforcement,” yet his presence is what lends legitimacy to Washington’s request. In order to elicit the President’s validating white gaze, he needs to engage Hare’s first. And yet, perhaps even Washington’s and Hare’s combined efforts might not have been adequate. When they invite McKinley to see Tuskegee, he expresses concern over a series of intense race riots that precede the second invitation, and Washington “told him that…scarcely anything would go farther in giving hope and encouragement to the race than the fact that the President of the Nation would be willing to travel one hundred and forty miles out of his way to spend a day at a Negro institution.” Again, ideology manifests as material action: the symbolic power of the President’s physical journey to and presence at Tuskegee trumps any verbal expression of racial harmony, and McKinley decides to visit Tuskegee as a strategic public relations move.

Washington’s advice for McKinley likely proceeds from his own experience handling race relations. His speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition urges African Americans to set aside aspirations for racial equality and political rights, and to put their efforts into working for white employers. Meanwhile, he counsels whites to act as patrons and provide blacks with education and employment. His account of the event incorporates numerous endorsements from white public figures who help to “reinforce” his message, as Hare does with the President. To circumvent accusations of immodesty, Washington cites positive reviews of his address that describe him as a messiah for racial unity. James Creelman’s editorial introduces Washington:

When Professor Booker T. Washington, Principle of an industrial school for colored people in Tuskegee, Ala. stood on the platform of the Auditorium, with the sun shining over the heads of his auditors into his eyes, and with his whole face lit up with the fire of prophecy, Clark Howell, the successor of Henry Grady, said to me, “That man’s speech is the beginning of a moral revolution in America.”

… A strange thing was about to happen. A black man was to speak for his people, with none to interrupt him. As Professor Washington strode to the edge of the stage, below, descending sun shot fiery rays through the windows into his face. A great shout greeted him. He turned his head to avoid the blinding light, and moved about the platform for relief. Then he turned his wonderful countenance to the sun without a blink of the eyelids, and began to talk.

There was a remarkable figure; tall, bony, straight as a Sioux chief, high forehead, straight nose, heavy jaws, and a strong, determined mouth, with big white teeth, piercing eyes, and a commanding manner. The sinews stood out on his bronzed neck, and his muscular right arm swung high in the air, with a lead-pencil grasped in the clinched brown fist. His big feet were planted squarely, with the heels together and the toes turned out. His voice rang out clear and true, and he paused impressively as he made each point. Within ten minutes the multitude was in an uproar of enthusiasm — handkerchiefs were
Washington’s “whole face lit up with the fire of prophecy” and he “turned his wonderful countenance to the sun without a blink of the eyelids, and began to talk,” as if prophesying the future of America. His unblinking eyes allude to a tradition of blind prophets endowed with a second sight, a unique ability to see what others cannot. In this case, Washington envisions a bright future for the Southern economy, provided that blacks and whites manage to cooperate. Characterizing Washington as “a Negro Moses,” a prophet recognized by multiple faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, emphasizes his position as a point of commonality between historically opposed groups — an apt description for a man who declares it his mission to “cement the friendship of the two races.” The metaphor also alludes to Moses as lawgiver, encouraging listeners to receive Washington’s speech as prescriptive — a convenient comparison for Creelman to make, given Washington’s accommodationist position. Like Moses, who converted the Israelites away from worshipping the false idol of the Golden Calf, Washington directs his black audience away from the cause of political equality and towards the path of self-actualization through labor and industrial education. This path also happens to be the road to fiscal solubility, paved with accommodations to white hegemony.

Although Creelman praises Washington’s performance, he says little about the speech’s content and focuses disproportionately on Washington’s body. The first half of Creelman’s editorial emphasizes what a rare event it is to have a black speaker address a predominantly white audience: “A strange thing was to happen. A black man was to speak for his people, with no one to interrupt him.” Washington’s strength manifests not in his rhetorical skill, but rather in “the sinews that stood out on his bronzed neck, and his muscular right arm swung high in the air, with a lead-pencil grasped in the clinched brown fist.” Creelman’s description of Washington’s physique invokes the stereotype of the powerful and hyper-masculine black male body, but also reinscribes it within the gendered tradition of the muscular intellectual. Emerson champions such a figure as one with a wealth of life experience beyond bookish learning, who understands that “colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.” Washington is precisely this new kind of American Scholar, whose “sinews” and “muscular right arm” imply familiarity with the world of manual labor, and whose grip on the pencil shows his command of that intellectual instrument. At the same time, however, the “clinched brown fist” suggests a latent capacity for wielding the pencil as a weapon. The threat of the violent black body looms over even this emblematic moment of racial progress.

This threat is, of course, a function of Creelman’s text, and yet Washington’s body is the receptacle for such racialized projections. Creelman’s review of the speech delineates the speaker’s body, but conspicuously omits his voice. The first five paragraphs set the stage for an account of the address and close the lengthy introduction with an anticipatory declaration: “Then he turned his wonderful countenance to the sun without a blink of the eyelids, and began to talk.” Yet the following paragraph does not repeat any of Washington’s words. Instead, Creelman provides an exacting physical description of Washington that appeals to phrenological interpretations of his features, noting the “high forehead” indicative of intelligence and the “determined mouth,” all without disclosing any of the content of Washington’s speech. Creelman does, however, dutifully describe the audience’s ebullient reception: “the multitude was in an uproar of enthusiasm — handkerchiefs were waived, canes were flourished, hats were tossed in
the air. The fairest women of Georgia stood up and cheered. It was as if the orator had bewitched them.” Washington takes control of his listeners and subordinates them to his message, “bewitching” various objects — handkerchiefs, canes, hats, and even white women. Creelman expresses awe at Washington’s effect on the audience, but he attributes this potency to some magical spell rather than rhetorical skill. The review concludes, “Governor Bullock rushed across the stage and seized the orator’s hand. Another shout greeted this demonstration, and for a few minutes the two men stood facing each other, hand in hand.”

The article cites exactly one line from Washington and ends with a dramatic semaphore of cooperation between races. For a “black man [who] was to speak for his people,” Washington said very little, by Creelman’s account. Creelman’s priorities in writing his review reveal a broader cultural valuation of the black body as a vehicle for corporeal rather than verbal articulation.

Despite Washington’s notable achievements throughout his career, public figures often insist on reducing his contributions to acts of racial representation. Instead of noting his specific accomplishments, they celebrate the fact that these have been realized by a black man. During President McKinley’s visit to Tuskegee, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long delivers a speech describing the event in such representational terms:

The [Negro] problem, I say, has been solved. A picture has been presented today which should be put upon canvas with the pictures of Washington and Lincoln, and transmitted to future time and generations — a picture which the press of the country should spread broadcast over the land, the most dramatic picture, and that picture is this: The President of the United States standing on this platform; on one side the Governor of Alabama, on the other, completing the trinity, a representative of a race only a few years ago in bondage, the coloured President of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute.

God bless the President under whose majesty such a scene as that is presented to the American people. God blessed the state of Alabama, which is showing that it can deal with this problem for itself. God bless the orator, philanthropist, and disciple of the Great Master — who, if he were on earth, would be doing the same work — Booker T. Washington.

Long celebrates the spectacle of the President standing between the Governor and the President of Tuskegee as a tableaux of racial reconciliation and as a legacy to pass on to future generations, specifically in the materially visual form of a painting. He refers to the “picture” as a “trinity,” and although he does not elaborate upon the metaphor, racial and administrative hierarchies suggest that the President — the seat of national power — stands in for the Father, the Governor for the Son, and Washington for the Holy Spirit. The consubstantial status of these three entities affirms their shared humanity even as they remain separate individuals, signaling a higher-order basis for commonality beyond racial identity.

Creelman’s earlier characterization of Washington as the black Moses supports Long’s view of him as a “disciple of the Great Master” who articulates the interests of a higher power — in this case, whiteness, or racial collaboration so long as it accommodates and preserves white hegemony.

Long assumes that a painting of the scene would hypostasize a vision of hope and cooperation between races. The underlying assumption is that the meaning of this painting will remain diachronically stable along with the specific configuration of racial meaning in the
speaker’s historical moment. Although he expresses an optimistic sentiment, his assumptions reveal the extent to which he subscribes to an enduring racial configuration in which white leaders concede to partnerships with subordinate blacks. That he believes a painting of this scene will remain relevant throughout ages to come indicates his belief that whiteness will prevail as the dominant form of racial power such that evidence of reconciliation will mean the same thing in the future as it does for him in his present moment. Long defers naming Washington until the end of his speech, referring to him instead as “representative of a race” and “the coloured President.” For Long’s purposes, and for those of “future time and generations” who might view a painting of this “trinity,” Washington’s name hardly matters. Depictions of Washington as a prophet prioritize his message and the knowledge he brings to the world over his name. Numerous invitations to speak indicate that society values what he has to say, yet accounts of these lectures show that he articulates his message representationally. It is the fact of his race — that he speaks not just as a man, but as a black man — which signifies.

The premium placed on the articulate black body confirms Washington’s investment in the representational function of black labor. Black labor articulates subjectivity because ownership, beginning with ownership of one’s body and its labor power, demonstrates economic agency. The convenience of this materialist humanism — marking who counts as a subject through material practices — is that changing those activities becomes a recognizable way to change one’s status. If ex-slaves continue to engage in practices that produce and indicate subjectivity en masse, then their subject status will inevitably become obvious and incontrovertible. What is rather inconvenient is that actions and environmental conditions are inconsistent. Washington would like to believe that one’s work articulates one’s humanity, but why must humanity rest upon the unstable value of one’s work? Even as he expresses his staunch belief in the power of the market economy to humanize, he inadvertently reveals his insecurity: “No man who continues to add something to the material, intellectual, and moral well-being of the place in which he lives is long left without proper reward. This is a great human law which cannot be permanently nullified.” It is not only a universal “human law”; it is also a law that makes humans and determines how humans are recognized as such. Moreover, what is considered a contribution to “well-being” and what constitutes a “proper reward” are based on white hegemonic values and subject to change. One loses personhood if one becomes unable to contribute to society, especially since “continued” offerings are required and becoming a subject is a processual endeavor.

The difficulty of postulating economic participation as a prerequisite to black humanity comes to the fore in Washington’s position on civil rights. He believes “that the time will come when the Negro in the South will be accorded all the political rights which his ability, character, and material possessions entitle him to.” “Material possessions” constitute one-third of Washington’s rationale for equal rights. The most glaring inequity here is that Washington considers black people “entitled” to political rights on the basis of “ability, character, and material possessions,” while whites already enjoy these natural rights on the basis of race and, of course, gender. Washington later explains that he believes in universal suffrage, but advocates for the equal application of an educational test, or a property test, or both, in order to vote. If political rights are pegged to economic development, this poses a significant problem for African Americans in a society where economic opportunity is unevenly distributed.
The description of the “Negro Building” at the Atlanta Exposition reveals Washington’s unease about a humanity that depends on such material demonstrations. This building is “devoted wholly to showing the progress of the Negro since freedom. It was further decided to have a building designed and directed wholly by Negro mechanics….In design, beauty, and general finish the Negro Building was equal to the others on the grounds.” The need to insist that the quality of the Negro Building is on par with the others belies Washington’s confidence in the material’s ability to speak unequivocally for itself. He endeavors to teach the transformational value of work in his writing, yet he concedes that “There is still doubt….as to the ability of the Negro unguided, unsupported, to hew his own path and put into visible, tangible, indisputable form, products and signs of civilization. This doubt cannot be much affected by abstract arguments….we must re-enforce argument with results.” Words alone are insufficient, and the burden of proof falls upon African Americans to generate outward and visible “products and signs of civilization.”

If the “products of civilization” are the results of material labor, then the “signs” are a matter of one’s orientation toward labor. Washington’s experience at the Hampton Institute leads him to reject the belief that education means freedom from work, and to view it as a means to dignify labor. He insists that the value of work is not purely financial, and yet the sense of “independence and self-reliance” that it brings is still ultimately rooted in economic necessity, in one’s “ability to do something which the world wants done.” The problem with measuring subjectivity by use value is that it turns laborers into commodities and resembles objectification — that is, unless usefulness is contextualized in a moral economy. Washington does exactly this when he defines “a life of unselfishness” as one that strives “to make others useful and happy,” yoking usefulness to happiness. He views himself as a missionary of industrial education, and his discussions of uplift evoke the moral and spiritual dimensions of enlightenment through education, self-help, and altruism: “how often I have wanted to say to white students that they lift themselves up in proportion as they help to lift others, and the more unfortunate the race, and the lower in the scale of civilization, the more does one raise one’s self by giving the assistance.” From Washington’s perspective, slavery degrades both master and salve just as uplift elevates every race. He puts himself in the convenient position of outperforming whites in his work of uplifting African Americans, including himself. If giving of oneself in the name of uplift were measurable — and Washington does attempt to make it so by invoking “proportion” — then he might surpass even Armstrong. Indeed, what could be more useful than helping others to be so?

Taken to an extreme, however, altruism also poses a threat to the self. Washington describes how Rev. Robert C. Bedford wore himself down as if doing so were the ultimate expression of commitment to one’s values. As a white trustee of the school, Bedford “has bore the school upon his heart night and day, and is never so happy as when he is performing some service, no matter how humble, for it. He completely obliterates himself in everything, and looks only for permission to serve where service is most disagreeable, and others would not be attracted. In all my relations with him he seemed to me to approach as nearly to the spirit of the Master as almost any man I ever met.” Washington presents Bedford as physically and materially self-negating, as if the man has been displaced by the purity of his values. This is an untenable model, and yet Washington’s most salient examples of those who have made the largest contributions to the education movement for African Americans have all engaged in self-abnegation. Bedford’s status as Reverend normalizes the ethos of self-sacrifice that Washington promotes and contributes to the belief that there is no such thing as success without it: “In order
to be successful in any kind of undertaking, I think the main thing is for one to grow to the point where he completely forgets himself; that is, to lose himself in a great cause. In proportion as one loses himself in this way, and the same degree does he get the highest happiness out of his work. Uplift goes beyond helping oneself; it also entails giving and accepting aid. However, one of the negative consequences of total engagement in uplift is that a lifetime spent lifting up others quashes one’s own life. Measuring success according to how much one “forgets himself” in the act of assisting others ultimately negates the self. Basing self-worth on the tangible products of one’s labor creates a need to produce ever greater results until the point of death. In other words, one risks working to death, as Olivia Davidson does.

The initial account of Davidson reads like a martyr’s résumé, and Washington mentions only in passing that she “became my wife.” He first meets her as a fellow teacher at Tuskegee, yet he emphasizes her caretaking skills rather than her academic training and instruction. Later, he writes of her tireless work raising funds throughout the country and relates how Davidson fell asleep due to exhaustion while waiting for an appointment. Washington attributes her death to the intensity of her work: “She literally wore herself out in her never ceasing efforts in behalf of the work that she so dearly loved.” Emphasizing Davidson’s devotion to the school at the expense of her own well-being is intended as the highest praise. Even as martyrdom mortifies the body, it also radically asserts sovereignty. Choosing to work oneself to death is a privilege equally accessible to Bedford and Davidson, and sacrificing one’s life asseverates complete ownership of one’s body. In Marxist terms, the unbounded labor power these martyr figures give to their cause would make them slaves to it, but because they work voluntarily and this labor is not sold to another, it actually affirms autonomy. For black advocates of racial uplift in particular, martyrdom prioritizes the non-material self and sacrifices the body in a backlash against slavery’s insistence that blacks are nothing but bodies. Becoming a martyr turns the body’s debasement into consecration in the name of the higher cause of uplift.

As much as Washington prioritizes his cause, he also recognizes that self-preservation is necessary to sustain the uplift movement: “I have a strong feeling that every individual owes it to himself, and to the cause which he is serving, to keep a vigorous, healthy body, with the nerves steady and strong.” Washington’s remark is consistent with his investment in hygiene, but appears to contradict his approval of Davidson’s self-abnegating behavior. He notes that Davidson often worked so intensely at raising funds for Tuskegee that “she would be so exhausted that she could not undress herself.” Her inability to undress alludes to Washington’s earlier confinement to the flax shirt as a slave; he is not permitted to wear anything else because he is a slave, and Davidson is unable to because she has chosen to serve the interests of racial uplift over and above those of her physical welfare. Both are instances of subordination, but Davidson’s simultaneously demonstrates agency. Her self-negation also asserts her subjectivity and sense of autonomy. Regarding his own work habits, Washington specifies that “I make it a rule never to let my work drive me, but to so master it, and keep it in such complete control…that I will be master instead of the servant. There is a physical and mental and spiritual enjoyment that comes from a consciousness of being the absolute master of one’s work.” Mobilizing the rhetoric of slavery reminds readers that martyrs of uplift are both slaves to their work and self-determined because they choose how they engage with this work. Washington and Davidson remain, after all, “the absolute masters” of their respective work.
Washington champions industrial education for African-Americans as a means to change their economic role from commodity to agent. In turn, a new economic role would gradually lead to a change in sociopolitical status. Western social contract theory contend that the market economy is part of the political state, and full engagement with it signifies one’s membership in civil society. This leaves slaves in a commodified, non-human position that classical social contract theory cannot explain, but which Charles Mills’ Racial Contract can. Mills explains that, whereas the social contract transforms “natural” man in a pre-political state into “civil/political” man, the Racial Contract separates people into “white” and “nonwhite.” In this racial paradigm, the “state of nature” refers to a “nonpolitical state”: “The establishment of society thus implies the denial that a society already existed; the creation of society requires the intervention of white men, who are thereby positioned as already sociopolitical beings.”

Classic contractarianism, as Mills calls it, would posit that whites participate in the market economy when they have transformed into sociopolitical beings, while the Racial Contract shows that their participation is a marker of their already sociopolitical status. The domain of the paternalistic, civilizing white master subsumes a free market economy, and excluding nonwhite people from full participation is justified under the pretense that they are not part of civil society. Washington’s case for black sociopolitical legibility based on economic agency exposes these internal contradictions at the heart of classic contractarianism.

The content of *Up from Slavery* acknowledges the limits of racial uplift, but narratively enacts uplift far beyond Washington’s apparent concessions to white superiority. The content of his Atlanta Compromise address assures whites that social equality is not part of his agenda and that his goal is to encourage self-help through labor and learning, but his rhetoric suggests otherwise. He presents uplift as an economic endeavor, a matter of changing one’s economic functions, and refers to the “Southern problem” rather than the “Negro problem.” Washington shifts the focus onto the economic interests of all Southerners to make a case for racial equality via an argument for greater equality of economic opportunity. He argues that education for all parties is the key to Southern economic reform because it transforms slaves into economic agents and engenders mutual recognition of humanity. Former slaves need industrial education in order to change their relationship with their own bodies and their labor, and former beneficiaries of slavery must acknowledge that they owe their financial success — past, present, and future — to black workers. They need to change the way they engage with these workers in order to recover any kind of stability in the post-war Southern economy, and any progress resembling greater racial equality conveniently appears as an incidental byproduct of responsible economic development.

Despite Washington’s explicit disavowal of social equality, his writing positions him as equal, if not superior, to his white audience and models his textual success for others to follow. Responding to subsequent invitations to speak, he refuses to lecture “for mere commercial gain,” repudiating purely economic interests. He insists that his primary motive is to educate and convert his audience to his view by giving “the most effective medicine...in the form of a story.” His narrative is the most authentic example of educational uplift. Ideology is inescapable, but between epistemic shifts, fissures emerge that offer opportunities for change, and the transition from slavery to emancipation is one such historical moment. Slaves are doubly subordinated because they are subject to capitalism and to their white masters. Washington’s victory ironically consists of a capitulation to subordination under capitalism instead of under slavery. He remarks that Tuskegee graduates “are exhibiting a degree of common sense and self-
control which is causing better relations to exist between the races, and is causing the Southern white man to learn to believe in the value of educating the men and women of my race." In a deft role reversal, Washington’s narrative makes white audience members objects of conversion, marking them as their own oppressors burdened with the responsibility of changing themselves.

Notes


6 Althusser, 158.

7 ISAs find their counterpart in Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), which use force in the public domain to create the conditions under which ISAs may function.

8 V. N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (Seminar Press, 1973).


10 Washington, Up from Slavery, 28.

11 Washington, Up from Slavery, 28.

12 Washington, Up from Slavery, 36.


14 Bourdieu, 79.


17 Washington, Up From Slavery, 107.

18 Washington, Up From Slavery, 108.

19 Marx, 337.

21 Booker T. Washington, *Working with the Hands; Being a Sequel to “Up from Slavery,”* Covering the Author’s Experiences in Industrial Training at Tuskegee (London: A. Morning, 1904), 9.


23 See Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* for a feminist critique of classic social contract theories. Pateman’s work preceded and inspired Mills’ racial analysis.


31 Bourdieu, 82.


The Council of Chalcedon 451 pronounced the definition of one Christ in terms of common divinity and humanity.

Chapter Two

The Achievement of Subjection in *Hunger of Memory*

I have taken Caliban’s advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle.

Once upon a time, I was a ‘socially disadvantaged’ child. An enchantedly happy child. Mine was a childhood of intense family closeness. And extreme public alienation.

Thirty years later I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated.¹

In the face of structural inequality that manifests both materially and non-materially, Booker T. Washington’s economic approach is more practicable. It is both measurable and necessary, a precursor to subsequent work focused on the less tangible barriers to socioeconomic equality. Whereas Washington advocates for industrial education as a means of converting former slaves from owned objects into subjects who own their labor, Richard Rodriguez seeks a form of subjectivity validated by more than economic parity. The battle for civil rights since 1865 leaves Rodriguez wanting more: it is no longer enough to have a “seat at the table,” so to speak; one hopes to belong at that table and have a say in its form and structure. By 1982, the year Rodriguez publishes his autobiographical *Hunger of Memory*, his status as an economic subject is uncontested. The challenge for those excluded from the dominant in-group of white, able-bodied, heterosexual men is to resist and reject their out-group status as objects of knowledge, and to stake a claim for themselves as knowers, even owners, of Western European culture. The new frontier of the ever-receding horizon of subjectivity lies not in economic but cultural ownership.

Cultural ownership emerges as a theme in the first lines of *Hunger of Memory*. The three brief paragraphs quoted above summarize Rodriguez’s conversion narrative of educational uplift: following the advice of Caliban, the colonized slave in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Rodriguez has “stolen their books” — knowledge belonging to the ruling class — in order to “have some run of” the society in which he lives. Prior to acquiring this knowledge, Rodriguez was “socially disadvantaged” because he had not yet mastered the practices of public discourse. By the end of his educational journey, Rodriguez’s intellectual and cultural ownership are so unequivocal that he not only possesses these “books,” but he has also authored the one the reader holds. His command of Western culture has become so thorough that he now produces it. Rodriguez does, however, pay a price for his gains. He succeeds in becoming “a middle-class American man,” but as he consumes Western culture, he is also “assimilated” or absorbed into that culture. Following the dichotomy Rodriguez constructs, a lack of education would have caused him to remain “socially disadvantaged” but “enchantedly happy,” free to enjoy familial intimacy even as he experiences public alienation. On the other hand, pursuing education has given him access to public discourse, social advantage, and a sense of public belonging at the expense of private, familial inclusion.

Rodriguez presents himself as a Caliban figure who succeeds in “stealing” knowledge that belongs to those in power, implicitly Western Europeans. Representing this knowledge as
“books” emphasizes its status as property, something that must be guarded — indeed hoarded — in order to limit access to its transformative powers. Those who own such knowledge have “run of this isle;” that is, they have the sociopolitical power to influence the functions of society. Shakespeare literalizes Prospero’s source of power over Caliban as inhering within Prospero’s books, and the magic they contain stands in as a figure for Prospero’s mastery over the discursive practices of the dominant race/class — a simple matter for him, since he is the dominant race/class. That this knowledge must be “stolen” indicates that it is not intended for the likes of Caliban or Rodriguez, and reinforces the connection between property ownership and the means of cultural production. Rodriguez suggests that any control he may have in or over his environment can be attributed to his ilicit ownership of the books, founts of cultural knowledge and production to which he has no rightful claim.

Like Caliban, Rodriguez encounters a dominant class epistemic authority that imposes object status upon him. He finds himself jarringly recontextualized as an object of curiosity at upscale dinner parties, where he self-consciously apprehends other guests’ perception of him as “exotic in a tuxedo. My face is drawn to severe Indian features which would pass notice on the page of a National Geographic, but at a cocktail party in Bel Air somebody wonders: ‘Have you ever thought of doing any high-fashion modeling? Take this card.’ (In Beverly Hills will this monster make a man.)” Rodriguez concludes that someone in the modeling industry scouts him not because he is extraordinarily attractive in a conventional sense, but rather, because he looks unconventional as a person of color in the context of an upper-class (read: white) party. His presence is unexpected, and he only appears “exotic in a tuxedo” — without the moneyed context of the tuxedo, he would not seem so novel.

This passage connects Rodriguez’s objectification to Caliban’s, alluding to the jester Trinculo’s assessment of Caliban. Trinculo declares: “Were we in England now…and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There will this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian.” Caliban and Rodriguez both encounter people who perceive in them an opportunity to profit from their physical difference. Even a painting of Caliban would fetch Trinculo a handsome sum, as Rodriguez’s photograph promises to do the same. And yet, in Beverly Hills and in England “will this monster make a man.” As Judith Butler has observed, subjectivation — the process by which one becomes a subject — results in the simultaneous privilege of agency and the burden of subordination to another authority. For Caliban and Rodriguez, the tradeoff for being recognized as men is their abuse.

The double-edged sword of subjectivation cuts both ways for any subject, but one side is considerably sharper for people of color. It is the modeling scout and the jester who are enriched and “made men,” while Rodriguez and Caliban remain monsters and serve as the constitutive other that defines the category of “man.” Like Caliban, whom Trinculo describes as “a strange fish,” Rodriguez becomes the potential subject for a freak show whose appeal lies in the contrast between himself and ruling class expectations. Whereas the “lame beggar” is common enough in England, the “dead Indian” presents a curio, and Rodriguez’s own “Indian features” render him similarly vulnerable to exploitation. His discomfort reveals his nagging suspicion that he has become an object of entertainment as he fields polite questions from other dinner guests attempting to make sense of his presence there.
The external white appraisal of Rodriguez’s value as an exotic object demonstrates how a raced epistemological framework situates people of color as objects — objects of control, consumption, colonization, and study. Trinculo sees himself as an expert at capitalizing on a “beast” like Caliban. In a sense, he knows more about Caliban than Caliban does because he understands how to market Caliban’s difference to the white imagination, and the same principle applies to Rodriguez’s modeling scout. Trinculo and the modeling agent represent fields of “official knowledge” that generate the objects of their inquiry. Rodriguez approaches Western culture as an object of academic study, but in order to acquire and understand Western knowledge, he must take on the same epistemology that subverts his status as a subject. Instead of exoticizing or marking Western culture as “other” from the perspective of an observing subject, he internalizes its values and contextualizes himself as “other.”

The Knowing Subject

The legitimacy of white knowledge is fundamentally an effect of the epistemological position of power that whiteness occupies. If we consider whiteness as property — as Cheryl Harris has in her examination of juridical protections extended to public and private forms of white privilege — then attempts to claim official white knowledge are also attempts to appropriate the privileges that attend whiteness. Approaching white knowledge as property makes it possible for people of color to “steal” some of it through education, as Rodriguez does. Education has been the primary way for people of color to acquire white intellectual and cultural property, and thereby gain a share of the privilege it confers. Chief among these privileges is a sense of full personhood. Although full personhood and subjectivity are ideals impossible to achieve, white epistemology entertains the notion that it is reserved exclusively for whites. People of color, like Rodriguez, who achieve facility with official knowledge are better equipped to navigate racialized institutions and discourses and able to move closer towards the idealized state of full subjectivity. To affirm white cultural knowledge in these contexts is to invoke white epistemic authority and assert oneself as a knowing subject instead of an object to be known.

Through education, subpersons/objects acquire official forms of knowledge authorized by hegemony, which ostensibly transforms them into full persons/subjects. Educational uplift holds out the promise of full subjectivity for students of color willing to study, master, and reproduce white cultural knowledge and ways of knowing. In Hunger of Memory, uplift involves an epistemological conversion, changing Rodriguez by altering both what he knows and how he knows it. Education transforms students through knowledge, not only by inculcating content knowledge, but also by immersing students in discursive practices of the ruling class and by changing how they know the world. In this way, subpersons also acquire a way of being in the world that official institutions endorse.

For Rodriguez, becoming an educated and therefore knowing subject is synonymous with claiming a public identity. The benefits of whiteness that a student of color may gain from education, such as the ability to advocate for oneself in the public sphere, depend upon familiarity with the linguistic and discursive practices of the ruling class/master race. Rodriguez characterizes such familiarity as proceeding from one’s public identity and demonstrates how schooling cultivates in students a sense of a public self. He describes his own conversational moment as one in which he realizes he has a public identity:
Again and again in the days following, increasingly angry, I was obliged to hear my mother and father: ‘Speak to us en ingles.’ (Speak.) Only then did I determine to learn classroom English. Weeks after, it happened: One day in school I raised my hand to volunteer an answer. I spoke out in a loud voice. And I did not think it remarkable when the entire class understood. That day, I moved very far from the disadvantaged child I had been only days earlier. The belief, the calming assurance that I belonged in public, had at last taken hold.\(^8\)

In response to a teacher’s interpellative question, Rodriguez asserts his status as a student — a knowing subject — and demonstrates his mastery of official knowledge by speaking the official language. His classmates corroborate his ability to communicate legibly, and Rodriguez identifies his own expectation that they would as the tipping point of his conversion. In the moment he feels assured that he can make himself publicly understood, he no longer considers himself “disadvantaged.”

Without this conversion to a public identity, Rodriguez would not have been able to speak so confidently in class, or perhaps at all. He explains the difference between his position of educated privilege and that of Mexican day laborers, whom he refers to as los pobres (“the poor”), in terms of communicative agency:

> If tomorrow I worked at some kind of factory, it would go differently for me. My long education would favor me. I could act as a public person — able to defend my interests, to unionize, to petition, to speak up — to challenge and demand. (I will never know what real work is.) … The wages those Mexicans received for their labor were only a measure of their disadvantaged condition. Their silence is more telling. They lack a public identity. They remain profoundly alien. Persons apart.\(^9\)

According to Rodriguez, the lack of public identity and the powers associated with it marks disadvantage: the laborers’ poverty proceeds from their social subjugation, not the other way around. He attributes their oppressed condition to their lack of formal (and formative) education and dearth of experience with institutional discursive practices, primarily English. Without these experiences, los pobres cannot claim a public identity or exercise the privileges that accompany it, and the fact that Rodriguez can separates him from them.

Rodriguez’s anxiety about the way his education has distanced him from his Mexican heritage leads him to project a racialized pastoral fantasy onto los braceros and the manual labor they perform. The summer after he graduates college, Rodriguez works a construction job alongside those he expects to be los pobres and los braceros, the working poor whose trade is physical labor and whose skin has been darkened by hours toiling in the sun. He longs to experience work the way they do, to fly in the face of his mother’s admonitions to stay in the shade lest he darken, and “take off my shirt to the sun. And at last grasp desired sensation.”\(^10\) Seeing that Rodriguez is unaccustomed to physical labor, others try to teach him how best to work, but he secretly enjoys the deeply embodied experience of his own inefficiency, the sweat and strain of muscles. The more distinct the work is from his academic activity, the better. The pleasure Rodriguez finds in difficult labor — a joy that one bound to manual work out of necessity would be unlikely feel — leads him to understand that he would never know “what my father had meant by ‘real work.’”\(^11\) His effort to recover a lost part of his Mexican identity, or
more accurately, to attain an idealized version of it, fails. He realizes “that there was no single type of worker. I am embarrassed to say I had not expected such diversity.” Many of his fellow workers are middle-class college graduates, perhaps seeking to fulfill the same desires and fantasies.

Twice during the summer, however, a group of men Rodriguez refers to as “Mexican aliens” and “anonymous men” join the construction work. They arrive without introductions to the other workers and keep to themselves, intent on doing their jobs and nothing more. The contractor enlists Rodriguez as a translator, and for a moment the “old fear that I would be unable to pronounce the Spanish words” returns as “the dark sweating faces turned toward me,” as if the scenario were a test of his Mexican authenticity. He feels an impulse to signal his connection with them: “I thought for a moment to ask them where in Mexico they were from. Something like that. And maybe I wanted to tell them (a lie, if need be) that my parents were from the same part of Mexico.” So desperate is he to establish affinity with the men that he is willing to lie about his family’s origins. And yet he does not. Their continued silence towards Rodriguez indicates his fundamental separation from them.

While los pobres remain “persons apart” from (white) public society, Rodriguez in turn remains apart from “those Mexicans” because of his inclusion in public discourse. Implicit throughout the account of Rodriguez’s construction work is a correlation between dark skin and menial labor. The fallacy of race-based unity comes to the fore when Rodriguez finds that racial affinity cannot overcome the linguistic and cultural change that education has wrought in him in order to make him into a subject. Indeed, his own subjectivation hinges upon the exclusionary power relations that differentiate him from los braceros. The social, cultural, and economic mechanisms by which Rodriguez has become a subject also ensure that los braceros are excluded from that category. His “long education” enabled him to gain mastery of English in school, precisely the kind of institutional setting that consists of discursive practices as much as it demands their observance.

Years of schooling have endowed Rodriguez with a set of skills to which los pobres have no access, yet his separation from them has less to do with his activities and more to do with his epistemological state. By the end of the summer, Rodriguez is as dark as the other workers, “but I was not one of los pobres. What made me different from them was an attitude of mind, my imagination of myself.” The essential difference between them, according to Rodriguez, is the latter’s epistemological position, which simultaneously makes him aware of and negates his disadvantaged state. He conceives of himself as a sociopolitical being, existing in a context that is as specific in detail as it is abstract in concept. His education taught him to think of himself as a public, sociopolitical self in order to overcome his initial sense of “extreme public alienation.” That Rodriguez comes to perceive himself as a public person means he has successfully claimed subjectivity. When he declares “I became a man by becoming a public man,” he implies that the man who remains private is no man at all. That is, the public man is a full person or subject because the master race that constitutes “the public” recognizes him as such, while the private man remains a subperson because his subjectivity is recognized only by other subpersons in the same oppressive predicament.

Also problematic is Rodriguez’s gendered rhetoric: if one must “become a public man” in order to be a man at all, then what does becoming a woman (or other non-male gender) demand?
This question is especially fraught in light of the gender politics of public and private spheres. Rodriguez’s sense of a public identity is focalized through the perspective of both patriarchy and whiteness. He sees himself as sociopolitical because he imagines that other sociopolitical beings whose status as such is unequivocal (i.e.: white men) see him this way.

Subpersons, like los pobres, “remain profoundly alien” because they are excluded from public discourse on the basis of both race and class. Educational uplift presents itself as a path towards a public identity and subject status, but it cannot entirely efface the emphasis on subjugation attached to color. That Rodriguez uses los pobres and los braceros interchangeably underscores his view of class as deeply racialized. Whiteness, which is inseparable from its economic power, constructs the notion of public identity and regulates access to it. Whiteness is not a mere player on the political stage; it actively produces that stage. It determines what counts as political, and who signifies as a sociopolitical individual. Mills explains that the Racial Contract assigns a permanently nonpolitical “state of nature” to nonwhite peoples and spaces. If whites enter such “nonpolitical” spaces in order to bring about civil society, then “the establishment of society thus implies the denial that a society already existed; the creation of society requires the intervention of white men, who are thereby positioned as already sociopolitical beings.” By this logic, whiteness is the stuff of civil society, or at least of the only society that counts as such, and people of color can only hope to approximate membership through the auspices of whiteness. Public identity in a tacitly white public is likewise limited, and los pobres find themselves categorically shut out of the public sphere. They carry within themselves an abiding foreignness tied to their race.

White sociopolitical intervention takes many forms, but it functions most conspicuously through educational institutions. Contemporary debates about English-only education, academic tracking, charter schools, and many other issues often invoke a common theme of white educators coming to the aid of students of color. However, this phenomenon is not new. From their inception, American schools aimed to preserve “civilization” amongst white settlers and convert the Native population to their culture, as if the phrase “Indian culture” were an oxymoron. Nineteenth-century Indian boarding schools were vehicles for systematically assimilating Natives into “civilized” white culture. Their nonpolitical status meant that they existed entirely outside of the public/private dichotomy — they were neither private nor public, but something more like animals, objects in a landscape.

Richard H. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, advocated what he considered humane treatment of Native Americans when he sought to purge their “savagery” through education. He viewed this approach as the only way for Natives to become American citizens, and he frames his injunction to “Kill the Indian…and save the man” as a humanitarian plea. The “man” within the Native has the capacity to become civilized, but the Indian part endangers him, and it is the moral responsibility of whites to intervene and “save the man.” The process involved separating Native children from their communities and forcing assimilation, or more precisely, deculturalization. Native “savagery” had to be eradicated, chiefly through schooling, in order for the civilizing influence of white culture to take hold. Only then could Native Americans assume something like public identity and become eligible for citizenship.
Language and Subjectivation

Much of culture inheres in language, and a key strategy in the fight to “save the [white] man” within the Indian required displacing Native American languages with English. The Indian Peace Commission report of 1868 advances this method, stating that “through sameness of language is produced sameness of sentiment and thought; customs and habits are molded and assimilated in the same way, and thus in process of time the differences producing trouble would have been gradually obliterated.” The report names cultural “difference” as the source of “trouble,” and imposing linguistic uniformity as the solution. Since English is the official language of American whiteness, it is also the language of public discourse, and teaching Natives to use it was an ostensibly charitable gesture. Granting them access to English was supposed to open the door to a civilized way of life. It was a linguistic pathway for their conversion to citizenship and subjectivity.

English language education ostensibly made subjectivity available to it students. However, enforcing “sameness of language” meant subordinating and prohibiting the use of Native languages, and colonized students suffered punishment for speaking them. Mary Crow Dog describes the culture shock she and others experienced in an Indian boarding school, where any hint of Native habits incited abuse. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o gives a similar account of his childhood in a Kenyan school, where students caught speaking Gikũyũ were beaten or “made to carry metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY.” Institutional colonial authority degrades native culture; it reduces Gikũyũ to inhuman sounds issued from a donkey, something one cannot even call a language, much less “civilized.” English is the language of the public sphere, but native languages are not simply assigned to the private sphere: they are entirely non-languages. Just as people of color are considered nonsociopolitical under the Racial Contract, colonized cultures are not cultures at all, and neither do their languages qualify as linguistic.

English-only movements have been active in the United States since the late-nineteenth century and continue into the present day. Like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Mary Crow Dog, Gloria Anzaldúa recalls systematic deculturalization in her formal education. She writes, “I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess — that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for ‘talking back’ to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. ‘If you want to be American, speak “American.” If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.’” The hegemony of English in the US imposes an American accent as standard, such that it considers itself non-accented in the same way that whiteness presents itself as neutral and unracialized. Not even the Mexican pronunciation of a Mexican name can challenge this standard in the face of sanctioned violence against nonconforming students and juridical enforcement: in 1918, for example, Texas legislation criminalized the use of any non-English language in schools.

Ironically, the impact of deculturalization measures and segregated schooling were reduced by a lack of enforcement of compulsory education laws for Mexican students. These students were only spared some of the violence of programmatic deculturalizing education because those in power declined to ensure their attendance at school.

Before Rodriguez begins his formal schooling, Spanish provides a safe harbor for developing ethnic identity within his family. When he ventures out into his English-speaking
neighborhood, he feels his separateness in “the sounds of the gringo — foreign to me — reminding me that in this world so big, I was a foreigner.” Although the “world so big” that he encounters is limited to his English-speaking neighborhood, whiteness pervades the world at large, and its cultural imperatives in an American context insist that Rodriguez understand and speak English. Upon returning home, Rodriguez purposefully lingers outside the open door to savor the sound of his mother speaking Spanish and waits for her to call to him in their home language: “Is that you, Richard?” All the while her sounds would assure me: You are home now; come closer; inside. With us. ‘Si,’ I’d reply. Once more inside the house I would resume (assume) my place in the family.” The welcome home in Spanish affirms Rodriguez’s identity because only intimates would understand the invitation that inheres in the sound of his mother’s voice. These sounds also prompt him to confirm his membership in the family. In response to his mother’s question, Rodriguez voices his own inclusion. The scene is a ritual of interpellation in which Rodriguez anticipates the pleasure of reaffirming a subjectivity conferred by parental authority. This instance of familial interpellation presents a question and an affirmative response. In contrast, Rodriguez’s teacher renders him a quasi-object as she declares “in a friendly but oddly impersonal voice, ‘Boys and girls, this is Richard Rodriguez.‘” She hails the “boys and girls,” but not Rodriguez. His tenuous subject status depends upon the teacher’s authoritative recognition, but her acknowledgement of his subjectivity is conspicuously indirect. Instead of addressing Rodriguez, she places the onus on the “boys and girls” to confer subjectivity, emphasizing the “impersonal” and diffused quality of subjectivation in a public context. She introduces him as “Rich-heard Road-ree-guess,” drawing out his name in an anglicized pronunciation foreign to his ear that makes him a stranger to himself. His teacher notes his name in her book, incorporating and contextualizing him in his new institutional role as a both a subject and object of educational transformation, yet also as an individual capable of subjectivity, given the proper education. He becomes a socially legible, civil man as a result of his willingness “to believe that my name, indeed, is Rich-heard Road-ree-guess” and to inhabit this identity. He declares, “I celebrate the day I acquired my new name” as if commemorating a baptism into American public life, but this belief encounters internal resistance as it competes with the preexisting belief that he is Ricardo Rodriguez. The institutional force behind the teacher’s utterance of Rodriguez’s name not only racially interpellates Rodriguez, but it also suppresses his mother’s subjectivating authority. Immediately after the teacher names Rodriguez in English, he experiences a maternal loss: “Quickly I turned to see my mother’s face dissolve in a watery blur behind the pebbled glass door.” The English introduction spoken to Rodriguez’s white classmates is met with his turn away from them, back towards his mother, the former authority who had ritualistically validated his subjectivity until this moment. The classroom door obscures her as it comes between them and blurs their views of each other. She disappears and her “face dissolves” into the mystery of an unknown and unreachable identity. Like the slave cabin door in Up from Slavery, the classroom door here serves as a threshold between publicly and privately recognized subjectivity. Although Rodriguez’s interpellation at an English-language school is indirect, it marks the beginning of his sense of public identity at the expense of a distorted perception of and disconnection from his parents.
The fracture between Rodriguez’s family and the public world reveals itself even in moments of joyful intimacy. Affirming one’s subjectivity through filial inclusion has its costs. Rodriguez hints at his family’s isolation from others as he describes evenings reveling in the sounds of Spanish: “Our laughing (so deep was the pleasure!) became screaming. Like others who know the pain of public alienation, we transformed the knowledge of our public separateness and made it consoling — the reminder of intimacy. Excited, we joined our voices in the celebration of sounds. We are speaking now the way we never speak out in public. We are alone — together, voices sounded, surrounded to tell me.”

In the midst of their togetherness and “celebration of sounds,” Rodriguez acknowledges “we are alone.” As much as their pleasure is genuine, it is also a compensatory response to the pain of exclusion from public discourse. To lessen the sting of rejection, they find happiness in their own exclusive family circle. Rodriguez attributes the family’s closeness to their shared linguistic alienation from the English world — the public world — and describes Spanish as a refuge. Once Rodriguez begins to learn English and excel at the language, this burden of alienation is no longer equally shared, and the most galvanizing basis for family intimacy begins to dissolve.

Outside of the safety of Spanish, Rodriguez witnesses the frightening effect English has on his parents in an exchange with a teenaged gas station attendant:

At one point his words slid together to form one word — sounds as confused as the threads of blue and green oil in the puddle next to my shoes. His voice rushed through what he had left to say. And, toward the end, reached falsetto notes, appealing to his listener’s understanding… I tried not to hear anymore. But I heard only too well the calm, easy tones in the attendant replied. Shortly afterward, walking toward home with my father, I shivered when he put his hand on my shoulder. The very first chance I got, I evaded his grasp and ran on ahead into the dark, skipping with feigned boyish exuberance.

English provokes unfamiliar sounds from Rodriguez’s father, turning him into someone unrecognizable, someone not of their family. His rushed confusion and “falsetto notes,” juxtaposed with the attendant’s “calm, easy tones,” reveal the extent to which English compromises his role as a confident, capable, protective parent in Rodriguez’s eyes. When Rodriguez’s parents speak English, he suddenly sees them the way los gringos do: as “socially disadvantaged” because of their lack of fluency in public language. At home, his parents are powerful, full of intimacy, special knowledge, and fun. They command respect at home, but less so (or not at all) in public when confronted with English. The recollection is a “(blaring white memory)” distorted by whiteness into its current meaning, one that causes such trauma to Rodriguez that the thought of it must be parenthetically quarantined.

Rodriguez perceives his parents’ transformation from all-powerful to “socially disadvantaged,” but it is not his parents who have changed. It is Rodriguez’s perspective that has shifted as a result of seeing his parents as individuals with both strengths and weaknesses, measured according to the standards for English he learned at school. He admits that it was…troubling for me to hear my parents speak in public: their high-whining vowels and guttural consonants; their sentences that got stuck with ‘eh’ and ‘ah’ sounds; the confused syntax; the hesitant rhythm of sounds so different from the way gringos
spoke….it was unsettling to hear my parents struggle with English. Hearing them, I’d grown nervous, my clutching trust in their protection and power weakened.\(^{33}\)

Rodriguez’s description juxtaposes his parents’ “confused syntax” and “hesitant rhythm” with his own hyper-articulate and often lyrical prose. Their speech patterns cannot measure up to Rodriguez’s gold (that is, white) standard for what sounds like proper English, “the way gringos spoke.” Instead, their awkward, halting sounds evoke the stigma of foreignness that white institutional authority also attributed to Gĩkũyũ in a colonial context. After hearing his father attempt to speak English, Rodriguez “shivered” at his touch and “evaded his grasp,” as if his father were a stranger who might contaminate Rodriguez with the linguistic desperation he had expressed. Rodriguez’s trust in his parents has been broken, and he cannot tell them this. English draws a curtain between him and his family, and he resorts to “skipping with feigned boyish exuberance” to hide his shame and distrust.

The divide between Rodriguez’s two worlds — one English and public, one Spanish and intimate — collapses when three nuns from his Catholic school enter his home and ask his parents to encourage their children to speak English there:

I noted the incongruity — the clash of two worlds, the faces and voices of school intruding upon the familiar setting of home. I overheard one voice gently wondering, ‘Do your children speak only Spanish at home, Mr. Rodriguez?’ While another voice added, ‘That Richard especially seems so timid and shy.’

That Rich-heard!?\(^{34}\)

The teachers’ intrusion goes beyond the spatial and touches upon language, the heart of the family’s bond. One teacher’s question implies that speaking “only Spanish” is insufficient. Another immediately identifies Rodriguez’s timidity as a fault connected to the lack of English in his home. The observation is far from neutral, especially in the context of the teachers’ educational imperative, the motive behind the visit.

Rodriguez the narrator registers his indignation to readers in his exclamatory response: “That Rich-heard!” but as a character says nothing to challenge his teachers. They leverage their position as the “caring gender” to maintain and reproduce race relations in the home, both their own and those of their students, and at school, the home-away-from-home.\(^{35}\) Their concern for Rodriguez’s well-being manifests as a racist indictment of his home culture and an insistence that he conform to the standards of whiteness. As nuns, the teachers have the authority of both school and church behind them. Their request takes on a spiritual exigency that amplifies its pedagogical aims, and their discussion of Rodriguez’s lack of social engagement at school is simultaneously a comment on his lack of involvement in its Catholic community. They attribute Rodriguez’s reluctance to participate in public society to his inadequate English skills, and the reference to “that Richard” reveals the nuns’ perception of him as an object in need of reform through language.

The teachers enforce English as an authoritative language and demonstrate the normative powers of state institutions, including the church. They can enter Rodriguez’s home and bring English into it, but Rodriguez cannot bring Spanish to school with anything comparable to the
teachers’ authority. We see the power differential between the two languages and the uneven power that they wield. When Rodríguez’s parents comply with the teachers’ demand and decide to speak only English at home, this choice indicates to Rodríguez that both his teachers and his parents value English over Spanish. The teachers frame their imperative as questions, but it is clear that they already know the answer. They ask Rodríguez’s parents:

‘Is it possible for you and your husband to encourage your children to practice their English when they are home?’ Of course my parents complied. What would they not do for their children? And how could they have questioned the Church’s authority which those women represented? In an instant, they agreed to give up the language (the sounds) that had revealed and accentuated our family’s closeness. The moment after the visitors left, the change was observed. ‘Ahora, speak to us en inglés,’ my father and mother united to tell us.36

The subjunctive mood of these questions turns the nuns’ interpellation into a choice: if Rodríguez’s parents reject these injunctions, then they forfeit both the school and the church’s recognition of their subjectivity. This combined institutional authority peremptorily convinces Rodríguez’s parents to mandate English at home, and they do so as a “united” aggregate of parental authority. In this way, the authority of the church undergirds the authority of the school, which in turn undermines the cohesion of the family unit by pitting the parents against the children on the issue of language. The parents “united to tell us,” the children, to “speak to us,” the parents, in English (emphases mine). Yet even this decree is spoken half in Spanish. The children must abstain from Spanish, though the parents do not have the ability to do so.

As the linguistic divide between parents and children widen, Rodríguez’s parents’ private identities recede from his ability to know or even perceive them. Enshrouded in Spanish, they occupy a linguistic space from which he has excluded himself in order to join public society.

After English became my primary language, I no longer knew what words to use in addressing my parents. The old Spanish words (those tender accents of sound) I had used earlier — mamá and papá — I couldn’t use anymore. They would have been too painful reminders of how much had changed in my life. On the other hand, the words I heard neighborhood kids call their parents seemed equally unsatisfactory. Mother and Father; Ma, Papa, Pa, Dad, Pop (how I hated the all-American sound of that last word especially) — all these terms I felt were unsuitable, not really terms of address for my parents.37

Rodríguez cannot recover the cultural nuance of Spanish forms of parental address, but he cannot bring himself to impose anglicized interpellations upon his parents either. The superlatively “all-American” and implicitly public Pop in particular would be an affront to the intimate nature of Rodríguez’s relationship with his parents. And yet, it is the loss of intimacy in this relationship that creates a crisis of interpellation. Rodríguez attributes intimacy to Spanish because his break from his parents coincides with learning English, and his fallacious correlation distorts his perspective on language. Instead of sparking the joys of private communication, Spanish words have become “painful reminders of how much has changed in my life.” The inability to call his parents “mamá and papá” results from his transition into a public self outside the family, a shift that demands a change in language and thus ascribes to English the trauma of coming of age.
Rodriguez includes Spanish words and phrases in *Hunger of Memory*, but he acknowledges his discomfort with his native tongue, and his discomfort with his own ambivalence about the matter. His struggle to reconcile his home culture with the culture he encounters at school manifests linguistically. He experiences English as the “official” language of state institutions and associates Spanish with intimacy. He dichotomizes English and Spanish and assigns each a particular set of functions in order to explain what appears to be mutual exclusion: Spanish is spoken between family members, while English resides at school and other places of official business. Rodriguez refers to his own name in Spanish for the first time in his description of how he feels when addressed in “private” language:

> A family member would say something to me and I would feel myself specially recognized. My parents would say something to me and I would feel embraced by the sounds of their words. Those words said: I am speaking with ease in Spanish. I am addressing you in words I never use with los gringos. I recognize you as someone special, close, like no one outside. You belong with us. In the family.

*(Ricardo.)*

The full meaning of his parents’ words is far more than a matter of content; it inheres in their sonic expression of intimacy and in the context of their relationship with “Ricardo.” The parentheses surrounding “(Ricardo)” typographically embrace his Spanish name the way his parents’ sounds enfold him within the family and validate his inclusion. At the same time, however, his filial inclusion involves public exclusion, and the parentheses that lovingly encircle “Ricardo” also separate him from the non-Spanish-speaking world of “los gringos.” This separation reinforces the sense of intimacy and leads Rodriguez to believe that such closeness is a function of the language itself. Only later does he come to apprehend intimacy as a function of social context and the particular uses of language.

As a child, Rodriguez plays with an English-speaking friend when his grandmother calls out to him in Spanish, and his friend asks for a translation. Rodriguez explains that “though I knew how to translate exactly what she had told me, I realized that any translation would distort the deepest meaning of her message: It had been directed only to me. This message of intimacy could never be translated because it was not in the words she had used the past through them.”

For Rodriguez, the meaning embedded in his grandmother’s speech has everything to do with its context, including its utterance in Spanish by a matriarch. The challenge for multilingual students such as Rodriguez is that they experience their home language as private, and English as public. Rodriguez’s gendered representation of private language creates circumstances under which “becoming a man” requires him to outgrow his “mother tongue.” His coming of age is framed as a process of setting aside the discourses of the feminized home and adopting the discourses of a masculinized public.

Rodriguez’s view of Spanish as limited to the private sphere results in part from the dearth of opportunities to engage with their home language outside the home, to observe the language’s versatility as it is used for various purposes in a range of contexts. For monolingual English speakers, private and public language are one and the same. They can more easily grasp the different uses of English based on context and audience because they witness these every day. For English language learners, it appears that their home language has no public use and
must therefore belong to the intimate sphere of one’s family. This generates a false dichotomy between one’s first and second languages. When Rodriguez loses the intimacy he enjoyed with his family, the loss correlates with his newfound ability to speak English with ease and his decreased skill with Spanish. He attributes the loss to his own linguistic assimilation because his home culture is discontinuous with the dominant culture he finds at school. The two cultures appear opposed and mutually exclusive.

Over time, Rodriguez discovers that language alone is not the primary factor for intimacy. He realizes that intimacy is not a matter of linguistics, but rather a matter of relationships between people. In an instance in which Rodriguez is hailed by “the other,” implicitly an English-speaking white person who addresses only him, Rodriguez reflects upon this revelation: “it was a stunning event: to be able to break through his words, to be able to hear this voice of the other, to realize that it was directed only to me.” This is remarkable because Rodriguez thoroughly understands that the hail was intended for him alone. He has already been interpellated by his teachers at school, but this moment goes beyond interpellation and generates a sense of intimacy — something that Rodriguez had believed was possible only in Spanish until now. He learns that social context, not language, confers intimacy.

As he develops an ear for perceiving intimacy in the “public language” of English, he recovers intimacy at home. He finds that there are public and private languages, but they do not correspond to linguistic differences. The defining characteristic of private language is its use between family members and close friends. Likewise, public language is defined by its use with general or public audiences. Rodriguez is able to enjoy intimacy within his family once again, even in English, once he realizes that “intimacy is not created by a particular language; it is created by intimates. The great change in my life was not linguistic but social. If, after becoming a successful student, I no longer heard intimate voices as often as I had earlier, it was not because they spoke English rather than Spanish. It was because I used public language for most of the day. I moved easily at last, a citizen in a crowded city of words.” There is nothing inherently public about English, and one’s ability to use the same language for public and private purposes proves that relational contexts determine the degree of intimacy in communication. Monolingual English speakers learn to transition from using English in intimate contexts to using the same language in the public sphere, and it is obvious that intimacy does not reside within the language itself.

Public Identity: The Aim of Schooling

As painful as this break from Spanish may be, Rodriguez understands it as part of his induction into the public world. Teaching students that they have a public identity is one of the primary purposes of schooling, and the lesson itself forms that public identity. He refers to “the great lesson of school, that I had a public identity” as the primary purpose of education — to “learn the language of public society” in order to become a public person capable of full participation in American society and culture. The ostensible purpose of schooling is to acculturate students to public life, to inculcate a sense of empowerment within dominant discourses by teaching, implicitly and explicitly, those discursive practices that mark one as either inside or outside of public society. The way into this public identity is through the acquisition of English, a language used in the public sphere and acquired in educational
institutions. It is not only the acquisition of English that changes Rodriguez; it is also his conception of the desire to learn English as a defense against the humiliations that he sees his parents suffer.

Over time, Rodriguez comes to see the nuns’ intervention as an inevitable linguistic rupture between him and his parents. The repeated sound of Rodriguez’s anglicized name insistently marks his sense of public identity as rooted in English, and he sees this change in name association as necessary.

I…needed my teachers to keep my attention from straying in class by calling out, Rich-heard — their English voices slowly prying loose my ties to my other name, its three notes, Ri-car-do. Most of all I needed to hear my mother and father speak to me in a moment of seriousness in broken — suddenly heart-breaking — English. The scene was inevitable: One Saturday morning I entered the kitchen where my parents were talking in Spanish. I did not realize that they were talking in Spanish however until, at the moment they saw me, I heard their voices change to speak English. Those gringo sounds they uttered startled me. Pushed me away. In that moment of trivial misunderstanding and profound insight, I felt my throat twisted by unsounded grief. I turned quickly and left the room. But I had no place to escape to with Spanish. (The spell was broken.) My brother and sisters were speaking English in another part of the house.

The teachers gradually dislodge Rodriguez’s attachment to his Spanish name and replace it with “Rich-heard,” his public name. Rodriguez expects to be addressed in English at school, but is “startled” to hear his parents suddenly switch to it at home. When he hears his parents switch from Spanish to English upon seeing him enter the room, he suddenly perceives his exclusion. Instead of offering a welcoming embrace, as Rodriguez’s mother had when she called out, “Is that you, Richard?” in Spanish, his parents now “pushed me away” by reserving Spanish for themselves. In Rodriguez’s home, being a racial and linguistic minority in America is part of what defines his inclusion in the family. The sense of shared alienation as Spanish speakers in an English world now falls squarely upon the parents, and Rodriguez experiences this shift as an alienation from his own family. Their refusal to engage with Rodriguez in their home language deprives him of the opportunity to assert his inclusion in the family. He apprehends his status as a public person even within his private home, and his parents’ shift in language indicates to him that the public and private are mutually exclusive categories. He describes his parents’ English as “suddenly heart-breaking,” transfiguring the commonplace “broken English” from an act of linguistic violence into an emotional one. The English language has not been broken. Instead, Rodriguez’s heart and “the spell” that Spanish had cast have been broken by the presence of English in their home. Knowing that his parents will speak only English to him, he feels his “throat twisted by unsounded grief,” a mourning for the loss of his mother tongue and the enchanted, euphonious Spanish “spell” it had cast upon his childhood. His grief cannot find expression in any language because he is forbidden to articulate it to his parents in Spanish and they would not be able to understand it in English.

Rodriguez’s argument that school bears responsibility for cultivating public identity informs his position against bilingual education. While he acknowledges that it is possible to achieve intimate communication in either an official public language or a private one, he maintains that learning English threatens one’s private individuality, a term he uses in reference
to ethnic or otherwise marginalized identity. In response to bilingual educators who insist that assimilation into public society means losing a sense of individuality, Rodriguez contends that there are two kinds of individuality. Assimilation compromises private individuality, and this is a necessary tradeoff that secures the benefits of public individuality — that is, participation in civil society. He explains the paradox of public individuality as predicated upon “being one in a crowd”:

The bilingualists insist that a student should be reminded of his difference from others in mass society, his heritage. But they equate mere separateness with individuality. The fact is that only in private — with intimates — is separateness from the crowd a prerequisite for individuality. (An intimate draws me apart, tells me that I am unique, unlike all others.) In public, by contrast, full individuality is achieved, paradoxically, by those who are able to consider themselves members of the crowd. Thus it happened for me: Only when I was able to think of myself as an American, no longer an alien in gringo society, could I seek the rights and opportunities necessary for full public individuality. The social and political advantages I enjoy as a man result from the day that I came to believe that my name, indeed, is Rich-heard Road-ree-guess… despite the anonymity of the crowd and despite the fact that the individuality I achieve in public is often tenuous — because it depends on my being one in a crowd — I celebrate the day I acquired my new name.

Maintaining separation — as Rodriguez’s family does through language during his childhood — ensures private individuality (cohesive ethnic/marginalized identity) within their circle. However, private individuality, like the subjectivity of subpersons, goes unrecognized in the public sphere. Private individuals like los pobres, the Mexican workers Rodriguez observes, remain outsiders because their subjectivity is only confirmed amongst themselves, meaningful in itself but not in a public context. Attenuating private identity is necessary if one wishes to enjoy fully the privileges that attend public identity. As Gayatri Spivak has shown, to renounce public identity is to embrace one’s status as a subperson, or what she refers to as “subaltern.” The lack of a public identity amounts to cultural (and possibly linguistic) illegibility in the public world.

Speaking English opens up possibilities for a kind of subjectivity that the dominant culture recognizes, but what is the value of a subjectivity predicated upon the delegitimization of one’s ethnic identity? Advocates of assimilation promise social acceptance, but the identity-altering conditions of such acceptance vitiate its meaning. If one must change in order to be accepted, one is not accepted at all, as Anzaldúa explains:

If you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity — I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.”

Linguistic subordination cuts to the quick of one’s identity: rejection of a language(s) is also a rejection of the ethnic identity connected to it, and Rodriguez struggles to hold onto the latter as
his school compels him to give up the former. If, as Anzaldúa contends, changing himself is necessary in order for Rodriguez's speech to be understood, then that speech is as compromised as the identity from which it proceeds. Any legitimate expression demands the freedom to use one’s own languages. Instead of accommodating the colonialist impulses that compel the use of dominant languages, Anzaldúa asserts the legitimacy of her own ethnic identity and her languages by writing in them. She defends and expresses her subjectivity precisely by rejecting the oppressive linguistic standards that would delegitimate her identity and status as a subject.

According to Rodriguez, bilingualists hold out the empty promise that one can have it “both ways,” can acquire a public identity while keeping ethnic identity intact:

They propose bilingual schooling as a way of helping students acquire the skills of the classroom crucial for public success. But they likewise insist that bilingual instruction will give students a sense of their identity apart from the public. Behind this screen there gleams an astonishing promise: One can become a public person while still remaining a private person. At the very same time one can be both! There need be no tension between the self in the crowd and the self apart from the crowd! Who would not want to believe such an idea? Who can be surprised that the scheme has won the support of many middle-class Americans? If the barrio or ghetto child can retain his separateness even while being publicly educated, then it is almost possible to believe that there is no private cost to be paid for public success.

The assumption that one can sustain a private identity while cultivating a public identity would suggest that a person of color does not need to compromise herself in order to participate in public discourse. Her participation in the public sphere will remain “authentic” in the sense that it comes from a person of color who maintains the sociocultural qualities and experiences that make her black, Latina, Asian, etc. The challenge of speaking from one’s perspective as a subaltern, as Spivak argues, is that the moment the subaltern “speaks” or becomes articulate and intelligible to non-subalterns, she has entered into dominant discourses of knowledge and is therefore no longer subaltern except in terms of her racialized body. That is, she will no longer have the subperson epistemology that Rodriguez believes bilingual educators prize.

The tension between public and private identities presents certain challenges to bilingual students, especially students of color. Education seeks to cultivate a public identity via public language, and white monolingual speakers of standard English experience a smoother linguistic transition into public life because there is less contradiction between their public and private languages. They may speak variants of English more or less formally, but no teachers visit their families to change the language they use in their homes and the cultural practices associated with it. Because the external world affirms their language as the norm, their sense of identity — to the extent that it is linked to language — has the privilege of consistency.

Meanwhile, a public identity not coterminous with a private self due to cultural or linguistic differences results in cognitive dissonance. Rodriguez is taught that English is more useful, important, and desirable than his native Spanish, and that the institutionally recognized cultural practices at school take precedence over those at home. His teachers take the unquestioned liberty of entering his home to insist, however gently, that his parents displace Spanish with English. Meanwhile, his parents cannot demand that his school teach in Spanish.
instead of English, nor could they urge teachers to leverage the family’s knowledge base as a pedagogical advantage, as Ferreiro, Moll and González suggest they ought. Like so many other bilingual students, Rodriguez learns that what he already knows does not count as knowledge according to its institutional arbiters. As a result of this differentiated valorization of public vs. home cultures, Rodriguez concludes that “What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right — and the obligation — to speak the public language of los gringos… What I did not believe was that I could speak a single public language.” He struggles to feel comfortable claiming a language that his education constantly reminds him does not belong to him, yet which he is required to master.

Finding himself an outsider in American public spaces and discourses, Rodriguez attempts to alleviate his sense of alienation by claiming intellectual ownership over Western culture. White Westerners need not assert ownership because it is already assumed to belong to them. Rodriguez does so in order to signal his membership in Western culture, yet the fact that he needs to do so belies his place in it. He proclaims ownership regarding the literary texts he studies: “Consider me, if you choose, a comic victim of two cultures. This is my situation: writing these pages, surrounded in the room I am in by volumes of Montaigne and Shakespeare and Lawrence. They are mine now.” Rodriguez is a “comic victim” not of Mexican and American cultures, but rather a victim of the fraught ambivalence resulting from straddling the two, as in double consciousness. He finds himself conflicted in his ownership, “surrounded” in the British Library by Western books that stand in for a culture that contextually defines and limits what and how he signifies as an individual. He proclaims that these canonical volumes “are mine now,” but subjectivity is a two-way street. Even as he flexes his agency as a subject by pronouncing ownership of these texts, Rodriguez is also subordinate to them. That is, he now belongs to Western culture to at least the same extent that Western culture belongs to him.

This analysis mirrors Rodriguez’s own dissatisfaction and disillusioned. In appropriating and reproducing this cultural knowledge, however, Rodriguez also turns it against itself. He demonstrates that it is possible for people of color to not only claim Western European cultural knowledge, but also to resist colonialisit narratives about what counts as knowledge and who has it. He cannot achieve the ideal of full subjectivity because it is unattainable for anyone. However, in following the prescribed educational path towards this racially organized ideal, he reveals the intrinsic flaws of both the path and its putative destination. He finds himself what Edward Said calls an “intellectual exile,” an outsider in a “state of never being fully adjusted” to any identity: “You can’t go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.” Rodriguez has enough critical distance to oppose exclusionary identity politics and provide a counter to the racial underpinnings of educational uplift. He may not have achieved his initial goal, but his efforts to achieve it and his narrative retelling of his journey is itself an act of dissent against whiteness and its myths.

Subjectivation in the context of one’s own culture is itself a privilege — one among many for white people. To be a subject in white Western culture is simultaneously to be subordinate to that culture, and this experience is different for people of color than it is for whites. One of the primary responsibilities of the white subject is reproducing white culture, a process with which people of color are also complicit. The mere attempt to master white cultural knowledge as a student of color constitutes a form of cultural production because it reproduces the notion that
this kind of knowledge is authoritative, desirable, and attainable. In an effort to improve their socioeconomic status, students of color may pursue forms of knowledge that whiteness structures as correct, especially in educational institutions and through educational uplift. They seek to position themselves as knowing subjects instead of as objects to be known, but because the knowing subject is white, their actions reproduce whiteness and their own subordination to it.

In his pursuit of full subjectivity, Rodriguez seeks externally validated knowledge in order to legitimize himself as a knowing subject. He admits “I lacked a point of view when I read. Rather, I read in order to acquire a point of view. I vacuumed books for epigrams, scraps of information, ideas, themes — anything to fill the hollow within me and make me feel educated.” Following Caliban’s advice, he has successfully “stolen their books.” However, instead of taking a stance on what he read or generating new ideas, he “vacuumed,” indiscriminately consuming cultural artifacts of the West to position himself within it. The “hollow” within is the space formerly occupied by Rodriguez’s sense of private self and the lively pleasure he once found in linguistic experimentation with his family: “at dinner, we invented new words. (Ours sounded Spanish, but made sense only to us.) We pieced together new words by taking, say, an English word and giving it Spanish endings.” While his Catholic school teachers insist that he memorize the catechism without question, with his family he is free to play with language itself, to form new words based on shared experiences. The family’s knowledge base is generative and vital in a way that the silent volumes of Western literature that surround Rodriguez in the British Library are not. The playfulness and sense of adventure in his family’s oral home culture encourages learning is not what produces his insecure need to “feel educated.” What makes him feel uneducated is his teachers’ categorical dismissal of his education at home. This void is propagated by the same institution that seeks to fill it, inducing his ambition to change, to fill himself with knowledge in the hope that it will make him into a different self.

He describes in religious terms his belief that teachers could transform him: “I came to idolize my grammar school teachers. I began by imitating their accents, using their diction, trusting their every direction. The very first facts they dispensed, I grasped with awe. Any book they told me to read, I read — then waited for them to tell me which books I enjoyed. Their every casual opinion I came to adopt and to trumpet when I returned home.” Using religious terms to describe his education — at a Catholic school, no less — reveals Rodriguez’s conception of education as a conversion process. He “idolizes” his teachers, who happen to be nuns, and he becomes their committed disciple, forming himself in the mold they cast that would “make me an educated man” by virtue of their institutional role. He unconditionally accepts their perspectives as correct and valuable, as if the nuns were a source of both spiritual and intellectual salvation.

The allure of becoming an institutionally recognized knowing subject proves irresistible to Rodriguez. As a high school student, he plans to become a teacher because he secretly “wanted to be like my teachers, to possess their knowledge, to assume their authority, their confidence, even to assume a teacher’s persona.” It is not enough to access the teachers’ special knowledge; Rodriguez longs to become so deeply initiated as to be able to initiate others. Rodriguez positions himself out-colonize the colonizers, both to assert superior knowledge of white European culture and to police its borders. Nothing would so mark his inclusion in a group as the ability to function as its gatekeeper, and the less distinguishable he is from his teachers, the more legitimate his position.
As Rodriguez grows ever more skilled in English language and American culture, the gulf between Rodriguez and his family widens. This elicits a deep sense of guilt, likely compounded by his Catholic faith, but which in fact reinforces his bid for subjectivity. To imagine oneself as sinful and experience guilt requires self-awareness, which indicates subject status. Since the individual becomes a subject in the act of turning to acknowledge the authority’s interpellingating hail, Butler interprets this turn as a result of the individual’s guilty conscience, which is a fundamental attribute of the subject.  

Having been interpellated by his teachers and ordered to learn English, Rodriguez describes the guilt associated with his own compliance:

I felt that I had somehow committed a sin of betrayal by learning English… I felt that I had betrayed my immediate family. I knew that my parents had encouraged me to learn English. I knew that I had turned to English only with angry reluctance. But once I spoke English with ease, I came to feel guilty. (This guilt defied logic.) I felt that I had shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close. This original sin against my family told whenever anyone addressed me in Spanish and I responded, confounded.

Christian doctrine has it that one inherits original sin at birth from Adam as a result of his disobedient consumption of fruit from the tree of knowledge. The fact of one’s existence is cause for bearing original sin, and Rodriguez’s characterization of learning English as “original sin” shows that he cannot imagine a world in which speaking English is not absolutely necessary. To him, English is always already the key to inhabiting a public identity, just as original sin, a precondition for existence, precedes an individual’s birth into a state of subjectivity. For Adam and Eve, gaining consciousness of their nakedness produces their naked state as an epistemological condition. This change marks a shift into a state of subjectivity: they are now self-conscious and capable of seeing themselves from others’ perspectives, cognizant of a world beyond themselves.

The knowledge Rodriguez gains is English. He eats from the tree of hegemonic, ruling-class knowledge at the behest of his parents and teachers, and gains awareness of his “socially disadvantaged” position as a working-class minority through his acquisition of English. Learning the dominant language generates his consciousness of his disadvantage and creates his state of disadvantage. At the same time, his newfound English skills mitigate that disadvantage and enable him to recognize the unambiguously disadvantaged position of those such as los pobres. The various pressures Rodriguez feels to learn English, and the backhanded “advantage” he gains from doing so, are characteristic of subjectivation.

The Privileged “Scholarship Boy”

In his desperation to fill the distressing void left by the absence of Spanish, Rodriguez finds recourse in a new commitment “to learn classroom English” — the form of English specifically spoken in school and other public settings. While setting Spanish aside provokes uncertainty that he belongs with his family, acquiring English engendered in him the “belief, the calming assurance that I belonged in public.” He learns more than the sounds and structures of Standard English; he also learns the mode of discourse necessary for academic success, the how of language use and practice in public contexts. Learning English resolves Rodriguez’s unease in
public, but abandoning Spanish in his private life generates another kind of anxiety. He has traded one type of alienation for another.

Equipped with official “classroom English,” Rodriguez has new tools with which to explain to himself his estrangement from his parents. His studies lead him to Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, in which Rodriguez “found, in his description of the scholarship boy, myself.” In his autobiography, Rodriguez describes himself as a scholarship boy in the third person present, as if sketching an ethnographic account of an anthropological curiosity. His description initially affirms the narrative arc of educational uplift, but soon shifts to a critique of its often unacknowledged consequences. The scholarship boy is a “working class child struggling for academic success” whose achievements impress teachers, benefactors, and the public: “his progress is featured in a newspaper article. Many people seem happy for him. They marvel. “How did you manage so fast?’ From all sides, there is lavish praise and encouragement.” Public accolades for his achievements emphasize how far the scholarship boy has come relative to where he began, yet he “cannot afford to admire his parents.” He feels “embarrassed by their lack of education,” and this embarrassment is necessary for his academic success. If he continues to admire his parents, he would have to depreciate the importance of English-language and literary education in his life, and doing so would jeopardize his chances for success at school and in public life.

The uplift narrative in which the scholarship boy finds himself is part of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o refers to as the colonialist “culture bomb” that derogates one’s native culture. He explains:

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples’ languages rather than their own… Amidst this wasteland which it has created, imperialism presents itself as the cure and demands that the dependent sing hymns of praise.

In the wake of the cultural bomb, colonized peoples view their own origins as a “wasteland.” Robbed of “belief” in their native culture and history, they are vulnerable to the colonizer’s evangelism and seek to recover self-worth by converting to the culture of the imperial power, recalling education’s religious overtones. Losing access to the cultural context that Rodriguez’s family had provided is precisely what paves the way for his conversion to the “scholarship boy” identity. In order “to evade nostalgia for the life he has lost, he concentrates on the benefits education will bestow upon him” in the hope that the trade will be worthwhile. Rather than glamorize the scholarship boy’s moxie and commitment to self-improvement in the face of hardship, Rodriguez characterizes him as taking the path of least resistance. He does not pursue the benefits of education, but passively awaits their bestowal.

Even Rodriguez’s engagement in formal education lacks the strength of intent. He notes that, “without the support of old certainties and consolations, almost mechanically, he assumes the procedures and doctrines of the classroom. The kind of allegiance the young student might
have given his mother and father only days earlier, he transfers to the teacher, the new figure of authority. Participating, even if mechanically, in the material practices of the classroom inculcates his belief in the ideology that supports education and diminishes his parents’ authority. Over time, he regards his teachers with a reverence formerly reserved for his parents. Culturally and linguistically alienated from his home, Rodriguez turns to the classroom for comfort and belonging and embraces the scholarship boy identity.

Reading Hoggart enables Rodriguez to feel a sense of belonging with other scholarship boys who share his experience. “For the first time,” he writes, “I realized that there were other students like me, and so I was able to frame the meaning of my academic success, its consequent price — the loss.” Discovering the alternative identity of “scholarship boy” helps Rodriguez conceive of himself as one of a group of publicly successful students within a larger world, instead of as wholly outside of any world. They are alienated from their families due to their education, and from academic peers because of their backgrounds. Although one of the key characteristics of scholarship boys is their sense of alienation, they nevertheless share this discomfort with each other and find an affinity that Rodriguez had previously encountered only within a family that feels its separation from the public world. With this brotherhood of scholarship boys, Rodriguez is finally able to claim a new identity couched in a set of conditions known and shared with others.

As an academic, Hoggart is one of the educative authority figures who displaces Rodriguez’s parents. His authority is threefold: in addition to being white, he is also an academic who has elevated himself far above his working-class origins. He enjoys a position of privilege, and his personal knowledge of working-class culture legitimates his scholarly investigation of it. He has both the authority of an academic and the insider perspective of a “scholarship boy” himself. In this sense, Hoggart does know Rodriguez better than Rodriguez knows himself because Rodriguez’s status is the product of whiteness. Much like the Orientalist who knows the Orient better than the “Oriental” does, Hoggart functions as the knowing white intellectual who explains Rodriguez to himself. Rodriguez’s experience of his own identity is an effect of racialized power relations, and Hoggart is the knowing white subject who can perceive the effects of whiteness and obscure its functions. Accordingly, Hoggart explains Rodriguez to himself, but not fully, since doing so would compromise Hoggart’s privileged position.

To become a scholarship boy is to convert to a position of epistemological privilege through education. Rodriguez’s conversion enables him to see that he has a public identity and that his family is separate from the public sphere because of their socioeconomic and racial status. He both recognizes and transcends his past identity as a “disadvantaged child,” and neither process would have been possible without his extensive education. Rodriguez argues that academics’ critical distance allows them insight into “lower-class culture” that members of those groups lack because they “have neither the inclination nor the skill to imagine their lives so abstractly.” An ethnographer could, for example, perceive elements of a culture invisible to its inhabitants and contextualize them within a broader field of inquiry. The scholar’s distance is his greatest advantage, yet many academic institutions seek to suppress this difference. Rodriguez cites ethnic studies departments and associated “community action” programs as examples of this impulse: “Too often…activists encouraged [ethnic studies] students to believe that they were in league with the poor when, in actuality, any academic who works with the socially disadvantaged is able to be of benefit to them only because he is culturally different from
them.” If academics were truly like the poor, they would be consigned to the same oppressive conditions. They would be denied access to the discourses and resources to help others, much less themselves.

Academics are necessarily privileged, and Rodriguez attempts to explain this to a group of Hispanic students who ask him to teach a ‘minority literature’ course at a community center, presumably because he is a Mexican academic. He mentions Roots by Alex Haley and points out that the “book tells us more about his [Haley’s] difference from his illiterate, tribal ancestors than it does about his link to them… The child who learns to read about his nonliterate ancestors necessarily separates himself from their way of life.” The object of study is separate from the observer, even if he or she identifies it as a point of origin. This is the epistemological dilemma of becoming a scholar of color who studies one’s own identity group: the education that makes one an intellectual authority on it also removes one from it. Rodriguez acknowledges that he does “not give voice to my parents by writing about their lives. I distinguish myself from them by writing about the life we once shared. Even when I quote them accurately, I profoundly distort my parents’ words. (They were never intended to be read by the public.)” Like Haley’s text, Rodriguez’s representation of his home culture underscores the author’s current distance from it because he is able to represent it at all. Meaning inheres in context, and the act of representation re-contextualizes its object in a way that inevitably alters its significance.

The subaltern capable of representing himself or being represented by another is, as Spivak has argued, no longer subaltern. Rodriguez uses similar logic to contend that a “disadvantaged” student of color who has experienced educational uplift is no longer disadvantaged and does not experience race the same way. The conversion metaphor so ubiquitous in educational uplift insists that nonwhite students must change and leave behind that which makes them “minorities” in order to take up the mantle of middle-class cultural hegemony, even if the extent to which they can is limited. Like the subaltern who speaks the language of dominant discourses, Rodriguez feels himself irrevocably changed by his learning. He explains that he “was not — in a cultural sense — a minority, an alien from public life… The truth was summarized in the sense of irony I’d feel at hearing myself called a minority student: The reason I was no longer a minority was because I had become a student.” Becoming educated means leaving behind the part of oneself that excludes one from dominant discourses, the part that makes one a minority in the public eye. Success according to dominant standards means achieving privileges associated with middle-class whiteness. According to Rodriguez, it is not possible to remain a minority once one attains the privileges that belong to the majority.

Rodriguez considers himself a member of the majority to such an extent that he has been culturally disowned by his Mexican parents. He meditates upon his capitulation to the anglicized mispronunciation of his own name: “Rodriguez. The name on the door. The name on my passport. The name I carry from my parents — who are no longer my parents, in a cultural sense. This is how I pronounce it: Rich-heard Road-ree-guess. This is how I hear it most often. The voice through a microphone says, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, it is with pleasure that I introduce Mr. Richard Rodriguez.’” Rodriguez refers to his name as it appears in three different contexts, in order of relevance. “The name on the door” appears first, suggesting his primary self-identification as a professor whose authority is inscribed upon the gateway to education, the liminal threshold that recalls Booker T. Washington’s schoolhouse door.
Next comes “the name on my passport,” another specifically textual example and artifact of literate knowledge. The passport’s authority derives from the state and demonstrates both Rodriguez’s national identity and the privilege of geographic and cultural mobility granted him as an American citizen. Lastly, it is “the name I carry from my parents.” Here the name is neither written nor spoken; it simply is. The name is a familial artifact given to him by his parents that he carries everywhere, and yet his parents “are no longer my parents, in a cultural sense.” The official names on the door and on the passport have ruptured the filial connection between Rodriguez and his Spanish name such that he has adopted its most common American mispronunciation. The impersonal “voice through a microphone” is a public one that speaks his name with greater authority than the parents who gave it to him. His anglicized name finds its fullest public expression in publication: “I remember seeing my by-line in print for the first time, and dwelling on the printing press letters with fascination: Richard Rodriguez. The letters furnished evidence of a vast public identity writing made possible.” The world knows him as “Richard Rodriguez,” and it might not ever have heard of him if he had remained “Ricardo.”

Rodriguez’s acquiescence to using an anglicized version of his name demonstrates education’s capacity to deform as much as it reforms students. As he grows more confident speaking English, Rodriguez finds himself losing his ability to speak Spanish. His identity is intimately connected to language, which means his experience with language acquisition as a zero-sum game has a proportionate impact on his sense of self. He cannot strike a balance as Mexican-American; he feels pressure to become American and views his Mexican identity as a loss that manifests linguistically. When called upon by relatives and family friends to speak Spanish, Rodriguez falters: “Everything I said seemed to me horribly anglicized…. Pocho then they called me. Sometimes playfully, teasingly, using the tender diminutive — mi pochito. Sometimes not so playfully, mockingly, Pocho. (A Spanish dictionary defines that word as an adjective meaning ‘colorless’ or ‘bland.’ But I heard it as a noun, naming, the Mexican-American who, in becoming American, forgets his native society.)”

Anzaldúa explains that “pocho is an anglicized Mexican or American of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish with an accent characteristic of North Americans and who distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English.” Rodriguez frames his loss of Spanish as a kind of whitewashing of his identity. He has become “colorless;” that is, no longer a person of color. He does not explain to readers the alternative meaning of pocho — “withered” or “overripe” — but his anxiety about compromising his identity suggests a fear that his American education has spoiled some essential part of him.

Asymptotic Subjectivation

Rodriguez may be too American for his family, but he is still not American enough to be fully accepted in white society. The majority of Rodriguez’s account of the scholarship boy departs from the uplift script and details his own experience of the unexpected fallout of success. He describes how he “makes students around him uneasy” in grammar school, and “detects annoyance on the faces of some students and even some teachers who watch him” in college. This sense of others’ discomfort with his achievement reaches its apex in graduate school:

At last he feels that he belongs in the classroom, and this is exactly the source of the dissatisfaction he causes. To many persons around him, he appears too much the
academic. There may be some things about him that recall his beginnings — his shabby clothes; his persistent poverty; or his dark skin (in those cases when it symbolizes his parents’ disadvantaged condition) — but they only make clear how far he has moved from his past. He has used education to remake himself.

It bothers his fellow academics to face this. They will not say why exactly. (They sneer.) But their expectations become obvious when they are disappointed. They expect — they want — a student less changed by his schooling. If the scholarship boy, from a past so distant from the classroom, could remain in some basic way unchanged, he would be able to prove that it is possible for anyone to become educated without basically changing from the person one was.

Here is no fabulous hero, no idealized scholar-worker. The scholarship boy does not straddle, cannot reconcile, the two great opposing cultures of his life. His success is unromantic and plain. He sits in the classroom and offers those sitting beside him no calming reassurance about their own lives. He sits in the seminar room — a man with brown skin, the son of working-class Mexican immigrant parents. (Addressing the professor at the head of the table, his voice catches with nervousness.) There is no trace of his parents’ accent in his speech. Instead he approximates the accents of teachers and classmates. Coming from him those sounds seem suddenly odd. Odd too is the effect produced when he uses academic jargon… All his ideas are clearly borrowed. He seems to have no thought of his own. He chatters while his listeners smile — their look one of disdain.

The aftermath of Rodriguez’s successful uplift involves profound alienation from both his family and from the new society he has worked so hard to join. One might expect that he has proven himself more than worthy of inclusion after years of study, but he remains an outsider precisely because his efforts to achieve subjectivity have been so conspicuous. Other academics expect and want Rodriguez to be “less changed by his schooling,” a subaltern academic who could prove that postcolonial reconciliation of “the two great opposing cultures of his life” through education is possible. If Rodriguez could preserve some essential “otherness,” then he could show that educational uplift is a viable non-colonialist remedy for inequality, and the problem would cease to demand alternative solutions. He would also conveniently preserve the exclusionary power relations that protect white supremacy and give his classmates “calming reassurance about their own lives.” Then they could return to their scholarly pursuits without having to concern themselves with who their fellow academics are or from whence they come.

Instead, Rodriguez reminds his classmates of their own anxious pursuit of subject status. Since subjectivity is something to achieve (and therefore achievable), it cannot belong exclusively to anyone. Rodriguez decouples subjectivity from race by performing whiteness, revealing the false unity of racial identity in the way that Judith Butler has demonstrated the incoherence of gender identity. Butler invokes drag as a “subversive bodily act” that exposes gender as the performance of a set of practices rather than a fixed identity. She explains that “as much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’…it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative nature of gender itself — as well as its contingency.” The parodic effect of drag reveals how...
even those who are anatomically female perform the category of “woman,” and that all such performances are imitations of an ideal identity that does not exist corporeally except in the form of imitation. That is, these imitations are not of any original identity, but of each other. Together, they “construct the illusion of the primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction.” For those whose anatomical sex aligns with their gender performance, these imitations work in concert to create the false impression of a stable, interior self from which gender identity proceeds. In the case of drag, they lay bare the illusion through parody. Drag reveals the difference between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance the way that the scholarship boy of color draws attention to the distinction between skin pigmentation, racial identity, ethnic identity, and racial performance. These categories have been naturalized under the rubrics of gender and race, respectively, but the incongruity between them and their parodies makes their construction visible.

The scholarship boy of color is a parody of the white academic. Rodriguez describes himself as “the bleached academic — more white than the anglo professors. In my classes several students glared at me, clearly seeing in me the person they feared ever becoming.” His uncanny mimicry of the white scholar trumps that of his professors and exposes their cultural authority as performance, provoking his classmates’ fear that they might become parodies of themselves. Rodriguez imitates whiteness when he “approximates…accents,” but the dissonance between his dark skin and his “white” educated manner underscores the unnaturalness of yoking whiteness to academic success. He explains that

His [the scholarship boy’s] story makes clear that education is a long, and glamorous, even demeaning process — a nurturing never natural to the person one was before one entered the classroom. At once different from most other students, the scholarship boy is also the archetypal ‘good student.’ He exaggerates the difficulty of being a student, but is exaggeration reveals a general particular. Others are changed by their schooling as much as he. They too must re-form themselves… Finally, although he may be laughable — a blinkered pony — the boy will not let his critics forget their own change. He ends up too much like them. When he speaks, they hear themselves echoed. In his pedantry, they trace their own.

Rodriguez’s success lays bare the mechanisms that constitute whiteness and the educational processes that “re-form” individuals into white individuals. White privilege generally accrues invisibly to whites, and as long as they remain less than fully conscious of how they came to be so privileged, then they need not take responsibility for perpetuating the unequal distribution and exercise of these privileges. When a scholarship boy of color gains access to the same privileges, whites have no choice but to acknowledge the sociocultural mechanisms by which students of color acquire them. Rodriguez’s academic achievement and subsequent presence in public discourse forces his white classmates to confront the fact that their own privilege is non-natural (that is, culturally inculcated and naturalized). Having gained access to the modes through which white power operates and having made this process visible, Rodriguez’s experience compels his colleagues to face their own complicity as products and producers of hegemonic white power.

The scholarship boy’s imitation of white Western culture also demonstrates how all academics are, to use Rodriguez’s term, “mimics.” This is not to say that academics are incapable of original thought, but that the autonomous aspect of their subject status obscures its
Rodriguez’s classmates and colleagues would rather ignore their own subordination to Western culture and focus instead on their empowering capacity as creators of culture. Rodriguez’s presence reminds them of their subjection. His imitation, only ever an “approximation” of the ideal white Western intellectual, reveals to his classmates that their scholarly practices and behaviors are also imitations without an origin. The extremity of Rodriguez’s transformation and his protracted discussion of loss emphasizes his subordination over the benefits of subjectivation, and this challenges both educational uplift and those invested in its fiction.

Rodriguez is irrevocably changed by his schooling, as all successful students are, but he pays a higher price for it than his white, monolingual classmates do. His is “the story of the scholarship boy who returns home one summer from college to discover bewildering silence, facing his parents. This is my story. An American story.” His double consciousness makes him see his parents the way whites see them, and he suddenly finds in them an overwhelming sense of otherness, a “bewildering silence” where once there was laughter and joy in bilingual wordplay. He knows too well that “education requires radical self-reformation,” and though the distance he has covered is great, it will never be enough. A return to one’s pre-culturally-bombed-out conditions is not possible, so one can only hope for greater assimilation: “the scholarship boy compensates for the loss of his former private identity by embracing education — since what has been lost cannot be recovered, he gains what he can out of the bargain.” The alternative is to remain alienated from both worlds. Rejecting the notion that “ghetto schools ‘oppress’ students by trying to mold them, stifling native characteristics,” Rodriguez argues “just the reverse: not that schools change ghetto students too much, but that while they might promote the occasional scholarship student, they change most students barely at all.”

Towards the end of his educational journey, Rodriguez finds that even a scholarship student like himself will never change enough to satisfy the conditions for a subjectivity couched in whiteness. Rodriguez’s process of becoming a subject through education is asymptotic because he can only own white knowledge, not white epistemology. Becoming a public individual — a sociopolitical being — means becoming “one in a crowd,” part of a universal civil society defined by a lack of distinction between its members. Public individuality is about membership in an implicitly white (and therefore civil) society, yet the ideology of whiteness has made itself invisible as a universal, neutral standard. Initiation into this society of anonymous individuals is epistemological, which means Rodriguez’s inclusion is never complete. In order to progress further along the continuum of subjectivity, he would have to become unconscious of white privilege, achieve ignorance of the real dysfunctions that racialization creates. In this sense, students of color know too much. Students like Rodriguez cannot attain the same degree of subjectivity as their white counterparts because it demands an unattainable epistemological position. He cannot achieve a state of ignorance about the privileges he does enjoy; they have been too hard won. Not only must one mistake the dysfunctions of whiteness as functional, but students of color can never eradicate their own consciousness of racialized experience.
Although the epistemology of white ignorance remains closed to him, Rodriguez does gain criticality. Washington may have been successful in claiming ownership of the body and its labor power, but Rodriguez shows us that this is not enough to achieve full subjectivity. The next step is for the colonized to exercise their capacity to make meaning, and Rodriguez attempts to do so through his re-imagined version of educational uplift. In the face of what Fanon calls a “racial epidermal schema” that structures a world and value system which Rodriguez did not create, he responds by both generating meaning in his autobiography and interrogating the meaning that others have made for him. What Rodriguez gains from education is a public identity and mastery over discursive practices that enable him to participate in cultural production. Ironically, Rodriguez’s formal education begins with a struggle to speak English and ends with his silence: “The boy who first entered a classroom barely able to speak English, twenty years later concluded his studies in the stately quiet of the reading room in the British Museum.” What starts as an effort to articulate himself in English turns into an exercise of silent reception. Yet Rodriguez has also exchanged his sonic voice for a written one. The spoken word lends itself to intimacy because, unless recorded, it does not persist beyond the moment of utterance. The written word, on the other hand, can be disseminated far more easily and contained in books. Rodriguez has exchanged one power for another. His autobiography represents a colonized individual who has acquired the tools of the colonizers to rework their master narrative and reveal its false promises of a pathway to membership in the ruling class.

Notes


2 Rodriguez, 1.


8 Rodriguez, 21.

9 Rodriguez, 148-149.

10 Rodriguez, 141.

11 Rodriguez, 143.

12 Rodriguez, 143.
13 Rodriguez, 144.
14 Rodriguez, 145.
15 Rodriguez, 145.
16 Rodriguez, 148.
17 Rodriguez, 1.
18 Rodriguez, 6.
27 Rodriguez, 15.
28 Rodriguez, 16.
29 Rodriguez, 9.
30 Rodriguez, 9.
31 Rodriguez, 16-17.
32 Rodriguez, 14.
33 Rodriguez, 13.
34 Rodriguez, 19.
36 Rodriguez, 20.
My discussion of Rodriguez’s perspective on bilingual education is not intended to evaluate the merits of his views, but to analyze his relationship to language and understand how his educational experience, specifically his engagement with formal education, has shaped his perspective.


Anzaldúa, 81.


61 Rodriguez, 21.

62 Hoggart’s treatment of the scholarship boy is in the context of a broader study of working-class literacy in 1930s Britain, but an examination of class issues necessarily touches upon race. He does not address race, and the impact he has on Rodriguez may account for the latter’s emphasis on class.

63 Rodriguez, 48.

64 Rodriguez, 69.

65 Rodriguez, 51.

66 Ngũgĩ, 3.

67 Rodriguez, 51.

68 Rodriguez, 52.

69 Rodriguez, 48.


71 Rodriguez, 170.

72 Rodriguez, 173.

73 Rodriguez, 202.

74 Rodriguez, 157.

75 Rodriguez, 2.

76 Rodriguez, 196.

77 Rodriguez, 28-29.

78 Anzaldúa, 78.

79 Rodriguez, 69.

80 Rodriguez, 70-71.

81 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), 175.

82 Butler, Gender Trouble, 176.

83 Rodriguez, 174.

84 Rodriguez, 73.

85 Rodriguez, 4.

86 Rodriguez, 73.

87 Rodriguez, 51.
88 Rodriguez, 72-73.


91 Rodriguez, 47.
Chapter Three

Narrating Subjects in The Freedom Writers Diary

In many ways, *The Freedom Writers Diary* (1999) exemplifies the principles that inform educational uplift. The *Diary* consists of entries written by a racially diverse group of remedial English students at Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California and their teacher, Erin Gruwell, in the wake of the Rodney King beating and subsequent riots. The students, who proclaimed themselves “Freedom Writers,” experienced remarkable educational transformations and came to reject the deeply traumatic racialized violence in which they were embroiled. Their diaries present an account of their conversion to academic success and a color-blind sense of humanity. The students achieve significant positive changes in their lives in spite of structural inequalities, and yet the teleology of the narrative insists upon an individualist perspective that the only way to improve one’s lot is to change oneself, rather than change the way the lottery works. This focus on empowered individual action deemphasizes the structural challenges that impede some populations more than others. Bearing such inequities in mind even as we celebrate hard-won academic achievements such as those of the Freedom Writers is critical, lest we fail to address the deeper causes of educational inequality.¹

Washington achieved subjectivity through economic conversion, and Rodriguez did so through cultural and linguistic transformation. For the Freedom Writers, the path to subjectivity lies in embedding themselves within the master narrative of educational uplift itself. Both Washington and Rodriguez also consciously constructed their respective narratives, but the Freedom Writers focus on narrative itself as the primary means of constituting subjectivity. They approach narrative control as an extension of cultural ownership beyond learning dominant cultural and linguistic practices. Rodriguez showed readers the limitations of the latter strategy, and the Freedom Writers push further by demonstrating subjectivity through ownership of the master narrative of educational uplift. To be a subject is to narrate one’s way into conversion — that is, narrating one’s conversion reifies it. For the Freedom Writers, the key to subjectivity is internalizing the uplift plot line and then bring others to do the same. While Rodriguez identified with and took on the role of the “scholarship boy,” he did not play the role of the “uplifted,” nor did he attempt to inspire others to pursue the same path he had taken. The Freedom Writers, on the other hand, wholeheartedly embed themselves within uplift. They cease being the objects of educational conversion by narrating themselves as successfully transformed and uplifted, and then framing themselves as uplifters for others. In the act of authoring their diaries, the Freedom Writers become narrators of their own lives instead of objects of others’ narration.

Following the path of educational uplift towards subjectivity requires that one acknowledge the authority of that path. In order to make a bid for subjectivity based on educational uplift, the Freedom Writers must uphold its principles, however flawed and oppressive they might be in practice. Even Rodriguez, arguably the most academically successful figure, struggles with a deep sense of alienation from his ethnic identity due to his conversion to a public identity through education. He writes his own narrative, and yet he feels he has stolen it and the means of producing it, as if he were Shakespeare’s Caliban with Prospero’s purloined books. One might expect that Rodriguez’s experience as a “scholarship boy” — a working-class student who achieves academic success only to find himself alienated from both his home culture.
and the academic world — would reappear in *The Freedom Writers Diary*. Many of the Freedom Writers have backgrounds that similarly conflict with institutional educational culture. And yet they only discuss minimally their unease about leaving behind prior affiliations, such as gangs and sororities, and they do not evince any anxiety about the distance their educational paths will put between themselves and their friends and families. They do not express doubts about the value of education or the unique sacrifices that becoming educated demands of low-socioeconomic-status students of color. This is not to say they have no such doubts, but rather they do not articulate these concerns in the published diaries. They refrain from discussing the negative aspects of educational uplift because doing so would undermine the authority of the narrative that grants them subjectivity. The students are in a double bind: if, like Rodriguez, they lay bare the dark side of uplift, then they also forfeit some of the benefit they derive from it. By preserving educational uplift, they submit to its oppressive functions but also continue to enjoy the subject status it confers.

As an English teacher, Gruwell uses literacy to push her students towards valuing education and advocating for racial tolerance. She encourages students to imagine themselves in a race war narrative, as well as its subsequent revision into a tale of uplift, by prompting them to identify with literary figures, beginning with Anne Frank. One of her students writes:

Our junior year was when we truly started to discredit all of the stereotypes. We decided to make a promise to ourselves that education and tolerance were going to be first. We tore into books that were designated for advanced placement classes. Holden’s thoughts in *The Catcher in the Rye* were becoming clearer as we were going through the same things in our own lives, and Celie’s pain in *The Color Purple* became very familiar. The most important thing that happened that year was during our second semester. It was when we were baptized the Freedom Writers; a name that will forever stay with us, as individuals, and as a movement.

Reading Anne Frank’s diary and recognizing her as a teenager involved in a race war helped students make sense of their own lives and facilitated their adoption of tolerance as a creed. Subsequently, they reverse their approach to literature and work to understand the feelings and contexts of fictional characters by looking for commonality in their own experiences. In other words, they began by looking for what a literary figure had in common with them, and later progressed to searching within themselves in order to understand a character on his or her own terms. This bi-directional literary identification is key to leveraging literature as a resource for recognizing alterity, and for generating alternative choices for oneself, even if extant power structures limit one’s immediate options.

The Freedom Writers’ promise to choose an alternative, to choose tolerance, is made not to Gruwell, but to the students themselves, demonstrating an internalized commitment to the values she has worked to inspire. As in most conversion stories, authentic change must be self-motivated in the last instance, even if a third party prompts or encourages it. In an act of defiance that echoes Protestant bible-reading in the face of Catholic proscription, students “tore into books that were designated for advanced placement classes,” reading literature that had been set aside for an elite group because it was considered too difficult or inappropriate for students in a remedial class. Students find spiritual sustenance in J.D. Salinger and Alice Walker, gaining
greater self-awareness as they identify feelings they might not have been able to articulate if they had not encountered such emotions in Holden and Celie.

Educational uplift also has other advantages that Rodriguez and Washington do not articulate, namely opportunities for introspection through literary engagement. To help the Freedom Writers’ further embed themselves in uplift, they are taught to perceive aspects of themselves in class texts. Literature plays an enormous role as transitional objects — it engenders self-awareness that gradually induces the students to become activists. Students show deep, internalized commitment to the Freedom Writers/Riders cause, and although this commitment may have been prompted by an external source (such as a school assignment), its effect is nonetheless real. Psychoanalyst Winnicott explains that a “transitional object…represents the infant’s transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate.”4 The transitional object — a teddy bear, or a work of literature, for example — serves as a bridge and border between the child’s sense of self and sense of an external world, a world that includes the mother. This object assists the child in developing a sense of self-awareness by bringing forth and giving form to unconscious states that exist within. A transitional literary object, for example, familiarizes readers with parts of themselves about which they had not been fully conscious, and renders those parts legible and therefore accessible for change.5 Moreover, any transitional object, literary or otherwise, introduces new ways of being, new states or moods that incite change. As Cristina Vischer Bruns observes, transitional objects enable self-formation and self-reformation by making the self and the other available to one’s consciousness.6 In this way, literature creates some of the conditions for conversion and facilitate students’ “baptism” as “Freedom Writers.”

Gabriele Schwab explains that this process of literary transference, transferring feelings to and from literary characters, results in a transformative reading experience capable of reifying and articulating to oneself moods and states that had once been inchoate. Schwab writes:

It is as if some unconscious recollection attaches itself to the borrowed shapes of literature in order to transform into something that is truly experienced. When I think of certain of my moods, for example, the best way to characterize them would be to say that they feel like Beckett’s The Lost Ones. And it is only since discovering Beckett’s text that I am able more freely to move in and out of these moods and that they have become a familiar part of myself. The Lost Ones, in other words, forms a transitional space between the “undifferentiated zone in myself” and an intersubjectively recognizable form for the figuration of such zones.7

Reading The Lost Ones enabled Schwab to occupy a transitional space as she moved between her own moods and those of Beckett’s characters, renegotiating the boundary between “me-and-not-me.” Such an experience allowed Schwab not only to access a heretofore indistinct, “undifferentiated” part of herself, but also to gain a degree of critical self-consciousness and self-reflection. She realizes these moods within herself by experiencing and recognizing them in/through Beckett, and subsequently develops command over them, such that she is able to “move in and out of these moods” at will. Similarly, Anne Frank’s diary serves as a transitional space in which Gruwell’s students are able to transform ineffable experiences into articulate ones. The diary’s function as a literary model for the Freedom Writers is secondary to its role as a
transitional object; the students’ reading of Frank is a necessary precursor to writing their own war diaries.

Gruwell’s students achieve greater self-awareness by engaging with literature, and this self-awareness enables them to read and write themselves out of trauma. Reading presents opportunities for detraumatization because it features narrative as an instrument that brings internal and unconscious problems to light and permits readers to address them. Hayden White discusses the psychotherapeutic capacity of *reemplotment*, likening over-employment to a situation in which a psychoanalytic “patient has overexploited…events, has charged them with a meaning so intense that…they continue to shape both his perceptions and his responses to the world.”

White explains that the problem is to get the [psychoanalytic] patient to ‘reemplot’ his whole life history in such a way as to change the meaning of those events for him and their significance for the economy of the whole set of events that make up his life. As thus envisaged, the therapeutic process is an exercise in the refamiliarization of events that have been defamiliarized, rendered alienated from the patient’s life-history, by virtue of their overdetermination as causal forces …. The events are detraumatized by being removed from the plot structure in which they have a dominant place and inserted in another in which they have a subordinate or simply ordinary function as elements of a life shared with all other men.

Insisting upon a causal reading of events endows them with a power that seems insuperable. Embedding those events within an alternative plot shifts emphasis away from them, allowing one to perceive their ordinariness. Through a change in narrative, one has the opportunity to re-signify key events and also to exercise a degree of control over the meaning of these experiences. The Freedom Writers not only write themselves into a narrative of educational uplift; they also write themselves out of traumatic storylines by reemplotting their experiences.

**Educational Uplift as Narrative Oppression**

White is concerned with the literary constructions of historical narrative, and he acknowledges that these are necessarily culturally specific. However, his assumptions about the commonplace status of “elements of a life shared with all other men” is not only culturally specific; it is exclusionary. The phrase reveals the colonial resonance of a universality based on male whiteness, which alters the relevance of certain plot lines for those who are not white men. The Western cultural heritage that gives rise to the literary genres that White delineates also structures the means by which they are evaluated. Positivism undergirds plot structures as much as it affirms the legitimacy and appropriateness of these plots. What happens when the interpretive community, to use Stanley Fish’s term, is not one of Romanticists or modernists, but one that comprises the entirety of white Western culture? Such an interpretive community is experienced as universal by white male Westerners, and in the context of hegemonic power structures, it becomes the universal standard for everyone.

Nevertheless, reemplotment opens up the possibility of developing counterstories that empower marginalized out-groups. Such stories challenge normative, dominant emplotments and
can be used as tools for liberation and self-preservation. However, at school, which is regulated by majoritarian stories, students have few opportunities to interact with alternative counterstories upon which they might model their own life narratives. Moreover, students’ authorial agency is questionable when diary entries are written specifically for a school assignment with a teacher as the intended audience. Although the Freedom Writers’ narratives do help them build solidarity within their group, their stories are motivated by and produced in the context of two hegemonic ideological apparatuses: school and educational uplift. While, as Althusser argues, the church was the dominant ideological state apparatus during the Middle Ages, its functions have since transferred to the educational ideological apparatus. In other words, education reproduces a racialized dominant ideology. Students resort to the emplotment of educational uplift in order to make themselves legible not only to themselves, but also to their white teacher. The plot structures available in institutional settings, such as schools, are those sanctioned by the interests of the dominant in-group; that is, white people.

Literature and literacy curricula are ideal avenues for reproducing dominant plot structures and the discursive practices that shape them. As a vehicle of discursive practices, literacy is the means by which students are taught to recognize such practices. Different readings of the same text manifest in distinct ways depending on one’s experiences and background. Sociocultural theories about literacy contend that one acquires a particular way of reading and apprehending a specific type of text only when one is surrounded by social practices that support such views. Literacy instruction — the systematic and repeated process of teaching students how to read — is an effective method for inculcating discursive practices because it presents itself as communicating a neutral, essential life skill. Moreover, in learning how to read literature, students learn how to interpret their own experiences in particular ways. Gruwell reaches into the inner lives of students via diary entries for the pedagogical purpose of helping students connect literature to their own lives. However, the representational function of the Freedom Writers book holds unintended significance, especially in its colonial resonances.

The colonial overtones in the 1996 film Dangerous Minds, for example, have elicited criticism. The movie is a story of educational uplift based on the autobiographical My Posse Don’t Do Homework (1992) by LouAnne Johnson, a former Marine who taught English to mostly black and Latino students at Carlmont High School in Belmont, California. In the film adaptation, another white female teacher exerts narrative control in order to improve low-socioeconomic-status students’ circumstances. Henry Giroux observes that minority students in the film are constructed as “objects of fear and subjects in need of discipline and control” from a white authority figure, and that “racial conflict…is resolved through a colonial model in which white paternalism and missionary zeal provide the inspiration for kids from deprived backgrounds to improve their character and sense of responsibility.” Johnson’s task is to convert her students into more civilized beings capable of self-regulation according to standards set by white hegemony. Giroux remarks on Johnson’s “role…to affirm or gently ‘correct’ how they narrate their beliefs, experiences, and values. LouAnne takes for granted that she has de facto an unquestioning right to ‘save them’; or run their lives.” The way to “save” the students is not to change the material conditions of their daily existence, or even to teach them a set of academic skills. Rather, the path to salvation is narrative. The white teacher cannot access the discourses of her students, so she seeks to assimilate them into hers.
Johnson has responded to these criticisms of the film, declaring that she “had very little input to the movie and much of it is fiction, at times so far removed from fact as to be ridiculous.” She acknowledges that the film may have inspired students to stay in school or to become teachers, but she asks readers to “view the movie as a movie and not as a reflection of my personality, teaching techniques, teaching philosophy, and definitely not as a reflection of my attitude toward students.” In other words, she encourages its viewers to keep in mind the movie’s production as a form of representation. Although Johnson emphasizes the film’s departures from her text, its widespread popularity likely prompted Giroux to examine how it engages with racial discourse. Johnson’s authorial intent is beside the point: the film’s effects — and the effects of her book — are beyond her control.

Just as Giroux’s critique concerns the filmic representation of Johnson’s story and not her actual experience, my analysis of Freedom Writers as a narrative representation seeks only to comment upon the book’s narrative functions as they relate to broader ideological issues in education. Gruwell’s influence and leadership undoubtedly generated much positive change in her students’ lives. The textual representation of their journey is, however, distinct from the events that comprise that journey. The Freedom Writers emplot discrete experiences into a narrative whole, creating a legible artifact that stands in for students’ transformation. The narrative has taken on a life of its own in the public imagination, inspiring a movie adaptation that can only be yet further removed from students’ direct experiences of actual events.

In Freedom Writers, controlling how students narrate their experiences — their self-emplotment — appropriates their figural selves. Shaping a familiar story out of events demands choices: exclusions, emphases, and subordinations that organize the narrative. The most notable exclusion in Freedom Writers is the racial identity of each diarist, a strategy necessary for emphasizing the story of tolerance and equal-opportunity uplift both explicit in the book’s message and implicit in its structure. The narrative is a colonial one, under the guise of color-blindness. Emplotment conforms lived experience to a preconceived structure, and because this particular structure is distinctly hegemonic and Western, it constitutes a form of colonization. Such a colonizing “of the mind,” as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o calls it, results from knowledges imposed upon the colonized that shape their epistemology. Writing within the plot lines of master narratives is especially dangerous because oppressed populations speak through discourses and languages that do not belong to them. Anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes that “writing can…be dangerous because we reinforce and maintain a style of discourse which is never innocent…sometimes we reveal ourselves in ways which get misappropriated and used against us.” Instead of speaking authentically for themselves, as they believe they do, students speak for Gruwell’s pedagogical agenda of tolerance, which forecloses open discussions about race. The teacher orchestrates students’ emplotment into a color-blind master narrative that champions individualist exceptionalism, and unconsciously recruits students into the service of white hegemony.

During her first month of teaching, for example, Gruwell intercepts a drawing of a student named Sharaud, a junior disciplinary transfer who enters the classroom bouncing a basketball. Gruwell writes that “a classmate got tired of Sharaud’s antics and drew a racial caricature of him with huge, exaggerated lips.” She explains that another student’s exasperation with Sharaud’s disruptive behavior motivates the drawing, but such frustration is conspicuously expressed through racialized aggression. Gruwell’s explanation reveals her own sense of the
drawing’s punitive and disciplinary functions, and although she frames these as directed towards Sharaud’s conduct, they manifest racially. The drawing clearly expresses racist attitudes, but Gruwell descriptively calls it a “racial caricature,” rhetorically blunting the violence committed by the artist and those who circulated the drawing (italics mine). Gruwell never states Sharaud’s race nor that of the artist, but on that same page, earlier in her entry, she remarks that “African Americans, Latinos, and Asians now make up the majority of the student body” and that she “wanted to see past color and culture.” Readers also know that there is only one white student in her class, and his diary communicates his discomfort about that fact.\(^{21}\) Gruwell includes a reproduction of the picture in the book, and readers are meant to infer that Sharaud is black; given the composition of the student body, the artist is likely also a minority. Though Gruwell contextualizes her inclusion of the reproduced caricature as a teachable moment, it also serves to clarify Sharaud’s race and offer a counterpoint to Gruwell’s ethos of tolerance.

Gruwell reproduces the caricature both graphically and narratively. When she introduces Sharaud, he appears as what E. M. Forster calls a “flat” character: a “type” or “caricature…constructed round a single idea or quality.”\(^{22}\) Gruwell’s description of her student features a host of stereotypes about underachieving black boys:

As a student teacher last year, I was pretty naïve. I wanted to see past color and culture, but I was immediately confronted by it when the first bell rang and a student named Sharaud sauntered in bouncing a basketball. He was a junior, a disciplinary transfer from Wilson’s crosstown rival, and his reputation preceded him. Word was that he had threatened his previous English teacher with a gun (which I later found out was only a plastic water gun, but it had all the makings of a dramatic showdown). In those first few minutes, he made it brutally clear that he hated Wilson, he hated English, and he hated me. His sole purpose was to make his ‘preppy’ student teacher cry. Little did he know that within a month, he’d be the one crying.

Sharaud became the butt of a bad joke.\(^{23}\)

Gruwell is passively “confronted by…color and culture” at school, as if they were not part of her daily experience as a white Western woman. She views herself as a neutral, non-raced, non-culture-specific party betrays her position within the epistemology of whiteness, which purposefully disowns racial knowledge in order to maintain white hegemony. This confrontation with “color and culture” occurs not at the moment when she intercepts the drawing — an instance of racial aggression — but when “Sharaud sauntered in bouncing a basketball”; that is, when a black body enters the ostensibly neutral but implicitly white space of the classroom. From Gruwell’s perspective, Sharaud embodies “color and culture” through his casual, “sauntering” late arrival, his recognizably African-American name, and his athleticism, as the basketball signals. Highlighting his delinquency and downplaying his race, Gruwell builds a caricature of Sharaud that invokes coded racial stereotypes without ever naming race.

Sharaud’s description presents just enough detail for him to appear realistic, yet its particulars hinge upon Gruwell’s position of unconscious epistemological privilege. Sharaud is not only a subperson under the Racial Contract, but his diegetic subordination to Gruwell also makes him what I call a subcharacter. He begins as a decidedly flat character and only achieves a degree of roundness when Gruwell confers it upon him, reminiscent of the Orientalists’
narratives Edward Said has examined. Round characters, according to E.M. Forster, are “capable of surprising in a convincing way” and have the capacity to change in complex ways, while flat characters remain static. Readers might find it surprising that Sharaud threatened his teacher with a water gun instead of a lethal weapon, given the expectations Gruwell has set up for Sharaud’s flat “type.” Even so, Gruwell herself supplies this bit of knowledge parenthetically, almost incidentally, and our view of Sharaud is both limited by her representation of him as a flat character and expanded by her intervention. Her narrative control over Sharaud circumscribes him as a subcharacter incapable of change or any demonstrations of interiority without her mediation.

Gruwell flexes her narrative authority by presenting readers with another surprise: “His sole purpose was to make his ‘preppy’ student teacher cry.” In a single sentence, she anticipates Sharaud’s perception of her as a “preppy” type and consigns Sharaud to flatness as a character whose “sole purpose” is to bring his teacher to tears. There is no mention of his purpose as a student with deeply personal, perhaps private aspirations, or a purpose beyond his antagonistic relationship to his white teacher. The next sentence lets the reader in on a secret: “Little did he know that within a month, he’d be the one crying.” As a narrator, Gruwell has advance knowledge about events to come, and she shares this information with the reader, but not with her student. Within the first three pages of the book, “Sharaud became the butt of a bad joke” and is objectified three times: he is caricatured by his classmate, then by his teacher in her narrative of the incident, and finally by the graphic reproduction of the drawing in the text. Representing Sharaud as a subcharacter compromises readers’ sense of his subjectivity.

Marginalized populations are particularly susceptible to the subcharacterization that Gruwell imposes upon Sharaud. They are “underrepresented” not only in education and politics, but also in literature. As Toni Morrison observes in Playing in the Dark, representations of blackness have long been subjugated in American literature. Unless otherwise noted, authors imply and readers assume that a given character is white, as if a generalized universal subjectivity is necessarily white. Meanwhile, black characters are specifically marked as such. The politics of racial literary representation underscores the subordinate position of people of color in a manner similar to the assumption that a non-gender specific character is necessarily male relegates the identities of other genders to secondary status. Morrison’s analysis reveals that subjectivity itself is normatively represented as white in American literature.

Freedom Writers draws attention to the convention Morrison criticizes. The book’s premise makes it clear that the students are nonwhite, and of all those featured, only two are racially identified: one is white, and one is black. The only white student in Gruwell’s class — and in the book — feels out of place because of his race, and feels the need to declare his whiteness, lest he be mistaken for a student of color. He begins his diary entry thus:

What the hell am I doing in here? I’m the only white person in this English class! I’m sitting in the corner of this classroom (if that’s what you want to call this chaos), looking at my schedule and thinking, “Is this really where I’m supposed to be?” Okay, I know in high school I’m supposed to meet all kinds of different people, but this isn’t exactly what I had in mind. Just my luck, I’m stuck a classroom full of troubled kids who are bused in from bad neighborhoods. I feel really uncomfortable in here with all these rejects.
One positive effect of foregrounding his whiteness is that the student has to name it in order for readers to locate him within the racial matrix of Gruwell’s class. This move turns readers’ expectations for the universal white subject on its head. Instead of assuming that a literary character is white unless otherwise noted, here one would assume that the character is nonwhite. Naming “white” as a racial category that informs one’s narrative signification and lived experience also rejects the notion that whiteness is neutral or non-raced.

Nevertheless, the student’s whiteness becomes visible only when he finds himself in a context that renders him a minority, and he wants to distance himself from his classmates. The language he uses to describe them is as racially coded as Gurwell’s in her description of Sharaud: these are “rejects,” “troubled kids who are bused in from bad neighborhoods.” He expresses a willingness to meet “different people,” but that disposition has its limits, and the limit appears to be when he is racially outnumbered, a situation that “isn’t exactly what I had in mind.” What he does have in mind is being placed in a class with people who are different, but not too (read: racially) different, from himself. In order to get out of Gruwell’s class, he plans to invoke his whiteness and tell his counselor that his placement is the result of a “computer error” and that he belongs in a more advanced class despite his learning disability.27 He states, “I know she’ll believe me ’cause I’m white.”

The problem with the Freedom Writers treatment of his experience is that his racial discomfort is not differentiated from those of non-white students. He knows what it feels like to be a racial minority in a limited context, but he does not know what it feels like to be a person of color, and the text treats the two as if there were no difference. Thanks to his race, he has the opportunity and the means to move into or out of white spaces. He can, or at least expects he can, leave the class or stay in it, but his classmates of color cannot. This passage powerfully reveals the extent of the student’s white racial knowledge. He acknowledges his privilege and willingness to leverage it without shame, possibly because he has not yet internalized colorblindness.

As subcharacters, Sharaud and the other Freedom Writers have the capacity to change only under the aegis of Gruwell’s character or her narration. Just as the Racial Contract transforms people into subpersons, its literary iteration in Freedom Writers represents the students as subcharacters. Educational uplift is touted as the means by which a subperson/subcharacter can achieve full personhood or interiority, and the promise of full literary self-representation is especially provocative because it is possible to learn how to communicate interiority or roundness of character. However, the capacity for self-representation is not commensurate with opportunities to do so, and this becomes evident in Gruwell’s exercise of narrative control over student diary entries.

Subcharacterization is a literary expression of the limits placed upon nonwhite self-representation. The richness of individually inflected choice is a privilege reserved for whites. Subpersons, on the other hand, are often viewed as representatives of their respective identity groups, and an individual cannot speak solely for him or herself. An instance of this phenomenon appears in the diary of Joyce Roberts. She is the only Freedom Writer whose racial identity is stated, aside from the white student discussed above, and she begins her entry thus: “When I was
born, the doctor must have stamped ‘National Spokesperson for the Plight of Black People’ on my forehead; a stamp visible only to my teachers. The majority of my teachers treat me as if I, and I alone, hold the answers to the mysterious creatures that African Americans are, like I’m the Rosetta Stone of black people.\textsuperscript{29} The first words of her text, “when I was born,” allude to slave narratives. Her “enslavement” is figurative: she is a beholden to the white cultural assumption that she speaks on behalf of all black people, as if nonwhite racial groups were monoliths. She bears a stamp that only her teachers could see because they apply it by projecting their racial expectations upon her.

Gruwell seems to challenge these expectations. Joyce describes Gruwell as the teacher who “had the eraser that took ‘National Spokesperson for the Plight of Black People’ off my forehead. She replaced it with ‘Spokesperson for Joyce Roberts’.”\textsuperscript{30} This figurative change in labeling advances Joyce’s status as a subject. She is endowed with agency by an external authority, as is the condition of all subjects, and yet the subjectivation of people of color in particular is consistently a function of a white authority. Joyce’s individuality signifies as such only thanks to Gruwell’s intervention. Certainly the new “label” is an improvement over the old one, but Shannon Sullivan points out that extending individuality to people of color “can operate as a form of assimilation of nonwhite people to white ontological standards.”\textsuperscript{31} These unilateral standards are universalized and applied to everyone — Gruwell would like Joyce to be her own “spokesperson” the way that Gruwell is for herself, and the two of them are the only authors named in the text (aside from Zlata Filipovic in her Foreword). Meanwhile, supporting Joyce’s sense of individuality does not threaten Gruwell’s. Her individuality is beyond question: others’ actions have no bearing upon her character, and neither do her choices reflect upon all middle-class white people. Conferring individuality upon people of color does not serve anti-racism, but rather expands a racialized ontology. Since individuality is itself so deeply racialized, Sullivan suggests bringing the logic of racial inheritance to bear upon white people. This way, whites would be held accountable for their conscious and unconscious legacy of racial domination.

The Problem with Color-blindness in a Racialized World

As the pillar of the Freedom Writers’ belief system, color-blind tolerance demands that students reconstitute their identities based on this newly adopted ideology. A “Freedom Writer” must prioritize not only the writing life and the attendant introspection, but also tolerance, and this means subordinating other potentially divisive — or solidary — affinities. Just as gang or sorority initiates convert themselves into “soldiers” or “sisters,” students also convert to “Freedom Writers” and embrace that identity as a way of being. The problem is that \textit{Freedom Writers} overstates color-blindness and actually hypostasizes race by insisting on race neutrality.\textsuperscript{32} The book presents the class as an ebullient post-racial, decolonized utopia, wherein students practice radical acceptance of each other and prioritize their identity as Freedom Writers. The effects of racialization dehumanize everyone, albeit in different ways, and the text pushes this point by locating the Freedom Writers Project in the traditions of civil rights activism and survival narratives, and by foregrounding students’ racialized experiences instead of broadcasting their racial identity. However, the authors’ conspicuous refusal to name race even as they denounce the impact of racialization actively suppresses the language of race such that racial concerns cannot be addressed. The positive ideal of color-blindness cannot overcome the negative consequences of adopting color-blindness in a racially charged society. Gruwell and the
Freedom Writers’ effort to de-racialize educational failure and success results in diaries that anonymously demonstrate the effects of race without overtly naming race or denouncing racism.

Gruwell’s highly racialized narrative control poses a similar problem. It presents itself as functioning in the service of tolerance, but actually thwarts precise discussions about how to achieve race neutrality. Below the drawing of Sharaud, for example, Gruwell declares that she “immediately decided to throw out my meticulously planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum.”^33^ The episode galvanizes her to change her pedagogical priorities, emphasizing the fact that tolerance would not otherwise have been the focal point of schoolwork. She does not reveal the race of the student responsible for the drawing, and the omission silently bolsters her insistence that all iterations of intolerance carry equal weight, regardless of origin. Her perspective overlooks the distinction between what Zeus Leonardo calls “inter-minoritarian politics,” “minority-to-majority attitudes,” and “white supremacy.” Anti-racist scholars and educators often define racism as “prejudice plus power,”^34^ and Leonardo explains that disparities in power inform each of these categories differently. For example, “although Latinos may harbor hostilities towards whites based on race, Latinos do not own the apparatuses of power to enforce these feelings.”^35^ White people, on the other hand, have the power to act systemically upon their prejudice against people of color. Gruwell does not recognize this when she likens the caricature of Sharaud to Nazi propaganda, as if racism were an equal-opportunity enterprise.

*Freedom Writers* levels these different categories of racial prejudice under the rubric of generalized intolerance and does not at any point introduce a more nuanced vocabulary for discussing racial issues. The dearth of a lexicon for such issues makes it all the more difficult to address them directly. *Freedom Writers* accomplishes what only whiteness could: it manages to talk about race without actually talking about race, and this reinforces the power of whiteness to suppress racial knowledge.

Neglecting race while enacting it is one of the hallmarks of the epistemology of whiteness. The Freedom Writers omit racial specification as if it were possible for readers to derive the full meaning of their narratives without this information, as if evaluation, and indeed judgment, based entirely on individual action and character, were possible. On one hand, this utopian gesture posits a hope that one day race will not be a focal point. However, the known premise of the book undermines this purpose because individuality is itself a standard of whiteness, and the issue of race is so prominent — race is ostensibly on the cover of the book, which features a white teacher with five of her students of color.

Race is such a central concern in the text that withholding students’ racial identities compels readers to fill in those “blanks.” Eliding the Freedom Writers’ racial identities elicits readerly discomfort, particularly for readers of color — readers who are of color and who necessarily read into color. Such readers cannot bear not to know the race of each student because we know they are not white, especially when we know that their non-whiteness figures so prominently in the meaning of the text. Readers who endeavor to resist perpetuating racialization cannot help but do so as they try to understand the text. They find themselves co-constructing a racialized narrative, complicit in foregrounding race as narratively and culturally significant, which negates the Freedom Writers’ ethos of color-blindness.
What the text does well is draw attention to the absence and conscious suppression of racialization. This suppression is not successful in the sense that the racialized identities of many students are easily discerned, but it may make readers notice their own desire and need to have this information. It prompts readers to notice the heretofore unconscious inclination to interpret literary characters as white unless otherwise specified.

Color-blindness, like meritocracy, is itself a privilege of whiteness. People of color have no choice but to grapple with race. As Mills puts it, race is “both everywhere and nowhere, structuring their lives but not formally recognized in political/moral theory” because most political/moral theorists have developed their ideas from within an epistemology of whiteness. He continues:

in a racially structured polity, the only people who can find it psychologically possible to deny the centrality of race are those who are racially privileged, for whom race is invisible precisely because the world is structured around them, whiteness as the ground against which the figures of other races — those who, unlike us, are raced — appear.

She intends to confer the benefits of education upon her students, and one of these is the privilege of color-blindness, as if denying the importance of race were the best means to combat the real effects of racialization. Instead of striving to understand how whiteness animates conflicts between people of color in order to distract from the machinations of whiteness, she teaches students to embrace a denial of race because it has served her so well.

Gruwell recognizes the centrality of race in her students’ lives, but her epistemological limits obscure the importance of race in her pedagogical choices. She assigns autobiographies by Anne Frank and Zlata Filipovic to teach students racial tolerance, and yet these authors, Gruwell’s emblems of tolerance, would likely qualify as white in the context of 1990s America. David Roediger has shown how Jewish-, Italian-, and Polish-American ethnic groups came to be accepted as white, and beneath the problematic principle of color-blindness is the positive message that the structure of the racial formation is not permanent. The flexibility of racial categories means that those not presently considered “white” may find themselves welcome into the ranks of whiteness at some point in the future. The danger is that one might rationalize membership in the white race as the goal, instead of dismantling whiteness and the racial hierarchy it maintains.

For those who are racially marginalized, subscribing to color-blindness means an inability to articulate or examine one’s own racialized experiences. Without discourses that acknowledge the importance of race, alternative counterstories lack a platform for development, leaving us with familiar but ultimately ineffective emplotments for achieving social equality. One Freedom Writer proudly remarks that the entire class, including Gruwell, had proven themselves to all the naysayers who doubted their ability to succeed. “We managed to make it past all the superficial labels like ‘at risk,’ or ‘below average’; even the ones that were put on Ms. Gruwell, like ‘too young and too white.’” These categories are not merely “superficial” — contingent as they are, they comprise the structural inequalities that have made it particularly difficult for minorities and working-class students to achieve academic success, more so than for the “average” student. Empirical studies of academic tracking have shown how the ostensibly neutral, meritocratic placement of students based on ability is patterned along racial and class
lines more often than not, and generally reinforces unequal educational outcomes. The Freedom Writers’ wholesale rejection of “superficial labels” undermines the potential for critical examination of their own positions.

Closer critical inspection of “superficial labels” reveal that, given the pervasiveness of whiteness, “average” is no neutral term and implicitly signifies a white student. Applying the principles of Mills’ Racial Contract to the normative functions of statistical rhetoric, we find that, in a social structure in which whiteness determines what counts as ideal and human, whiteness also represents that universal “average.” Meanwhile, non-whites (subpersons) occupy the lower category, “below average.” In Gruwell’s case, marginalization arises from the accusation that she is “too young, and too white.” Students find commonality with her as one maligned by stereotyping and view her as a comrade in the struggle for validation: “She wasn’t supposed to make it; we weren’t supposed to make it.” Yet her burdens are not especially oppressive. To be “too young” is temporary and extrinsic, and to be “too white” is hardly a lasting indictment in a world of white privilege.

The student who reflects on the negative effects of academic tracking inadvertently undermines that critique by celebrating the Freedom Writers’ exceptionalism. They succeeded “even though the educational system desperately tried to hold us down. By labeling us at an early age, they were almost able to affect our school record for life…. if only given the opportunity, we could rise to the occasion; and rise to the occasion we have.” While this student presciently notes the structural barriers erected by the education system, he or she personifies it in a manner that misplaces agency. The system itself does not “desperately try” to oppress anyone. Rather, it functions because of the dominant in-group’s conscious and unconscious work to preserve its status at the expense of out-groups. The students’ struggles against the education system happen within that system and tacitly legitimize its functions. Moreover, the threat to students’ self-actualization is not limited to marred school records. The challenges these students face are not bounded by the education system; the racial and class components of tracking are manifestations of broader social conflicts, and leaving school does not leave those conflicts behind.

Having “made it” is a point of pride for the Freedom Writers, but the exceptionalist thrust of educational uplift rests upon individualism and underplays the persistence of structural disadvantages, elevating individualism once again. Rejecting “superficial labels” shows the student’s acceptance of the putatively neutral individualist model of achievement, a feature of normative standards of whiteness. As Peggy McIntosh has observed, white privilege accrues invisibly to those who enjoy it: “I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will…whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow ‘them’ to be more like ‘us.’” Leonardo has addressed the “myth of white ignorance” and its expression in McIntosh’s passive voice as she recounts the manner in which she acquired white racial knowledge, as if “white racist thoughts are disembodied, omnipresent but belonging to no one,” an inherited racial legacy that has been “done or passed on to a white subject, unbeknownst to him.” The source of these racist thoughts is as indeterminate as the source of the caricature of Sharaud, at once everywhere and nowhere.
Anti-racist education requires a reemplacement of the master narratives associated with education. One might consider detraumatization as a recovery through alternative narratives, and *Freedom Writers* and other narratives of educational uplift attempt such recovery, but generally do not go far enough. The conversion metaphor equips the oppressed with the tools necessary for extricating themselves from immediate threats, but only perpetuates hegemonic structural inequalities in the long run. The tendency of racially empowered groups to emplot narratives of educational uplift as normatively exceptionalist instead of structurally racist is problematic. Leonardo observes the difficulties that arise when racial patterns become personalized:

> In order to maintain their previous knowledge of race, whites may disrupt radical discussions of racism with exceptions-to-the-rule in efforts to redirect race discourse from an institutional knowledge base to a personal one... Rather than speak of patterns, [white racial knowledge] would speak of exceptions. Thus, it fails to understand the racist and pervasive underpinnings of white society.47

To say the Freedom Writers excelled by dint of hard work and strong character subordinates the larger, far more pervasive pattern of failure as incidental rather than causal. Ascribing their success to exceptional individualism emplots the racialization of human potential as specifically non-racial in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Neither Gruwell nor her students are likely to agree that their activism colludes to reinforce the racial power dynamics they protest, and there is indeed room for students to resignify the chronicles of their lives. Once the Freedom Writers begin to conceive of their lives as lived stories, they can find a way to change that story from a tragedy to something else — say, an epic or romance. Gruwell’s narrative control is considerable, but it is by no means absolute, and as students translate their experiences into narrative, revision becomes possible. However, the same mechanism that makes detraumatization through reemplacement feasible also lends itself to maintaining extant master narratives.

The publisher of Gruwell’s subsequent book *The Freedom Writers Diary Teacher’s Guide* provides this description:

> Designed for educators by the teacher who nurtured and created the Freedom Writers, this standards-based teachers’ guide includes innovative teaching techniques that will engage, empower, and enlighten…. In an easy-to-use format with black-and-white illustrations, this teachers’ guide will become the essential go-to manual for teachers who want to make a difference in their pupils’ lives and create students who will make a difference.

The blurb specifically refers to Gruwell as a “nurturer,” invoking the feminine and maternal connotations of affective learning as well as the paternalistic associations with colonialist conversion. Not one, but twice, Gruwell is called a “creator” of students, a move that divests students of narrative agency as authors of their own life stories. The Freedom Writers Method is not only a pedagogical technique; it is also an ideology, a system of belief. Gruwell is part of a tradition of white women teachers whose care for students of color takes on religious resonances, much like the missionary nuns who sought to educate and convert Native American students.
The double edge of educational uplift means that the Freedom Writers’ aspirations for academic achievement bolster American values of hard work and rugged individualism, and also obscure their endorsement of the very power structures that marginalized them in the first place. A more positive reading would conclude that they seek to leverage forms of knowledge that have greatest currency in order to subvert those structures. Gruwell’s and her students’ accomplishments are undeniably extraordinary, and therein lies the danger of publicizing their victories. These students exemplify exceptionalism, and their stories risk being appropriated to justify permitting extant inequities to continue. If these remedial students were able to overcome their circumstances, why not expect others to do the same? And if what such students need is a strong, ambitious, caring teacher like Gruwell, why not train teachers to be so? The blurb for Gruwell’s teaching guide reduces her nuanced and highly personal work to a set of techniques for other teachers to replicate. This is not to say her teaching strategies do not warrant emulation, but rather, those aspects of her teaching most worthy of imitation are inimitable. There is only one Erin Gruwell, and denying her exceptionalism is another way to rationalize the inequity of American education in the name of meritocracy. If only more teachers would be like Gruwell, and more students like the Freedom Writers, then our education system would be well on its way to rectifying various social ills. Gruwell proved herself an extraordinary and charismatic leader whose singularity is perhaps the downfall of attempts to replicate the results she produced in her classroom.

Notes


7 Schwab, 109.


9 White, 1717-1718.

10 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
See Richard Delgado’s “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative” and Derrick Bell’s And We Are Not Saved.


Giroux, 49.


The Freedom Writers, 2.

The Freedom Writers, 8. Note that the text does not specify the student’s gender. I refer to the student as male because the film adaptation features a male actor in this role.


The Freedom Writers, 2.


Said, 78.

The Freedom Writers, 8.

Although other students acknowledge disability as a category of difference about which the Freedom Writers must be “tolerant,” the student’s own diary focuses on racial difference. The overall emphasis of Freedom Writers is on race, and the student himself narratively minimizes the impact of his learning disability.

The Freedom Writers, 9.

The Freedom Writers, 112.

The Freedom Writers, 114.

Anna Stubblefiled contends that the term “color-blind” is itself problematic. She uses “color-evasiveness” to avoid ableist language and more accurately describe the repression of white consciousness about race and the benefits of whiteness in *Ethics Along the Color Line*. She also argues for “white protection” instead of “white privilege” in her review of Shannon Sullivan’s *Revealing Whiteness*.

33 The Freedom Writers, 3.


37 Mills, 76.

38 David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (Verso, 1994).

39 The Freedom Writers, 269.

40 For more on the contingencies of identity, see Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

41 Jeannie Oakes’ 2005 study, *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, examines the effects of tracking in California public high schools. She found that, once assigned a level, students tended to stay there. Of the schools Oakes studied, “no school administrator estimated more than a 30 percent change” in subsequent placements, which means that actual placement mobility was typically far less than that figure (see p. 51).

42 The Freedom Writers, 268.

43 The Freedom Writers, 269.

44 Zeus Leonardo explains in *Race, Education, and Whiteness* the ways in which white supremacy functions and persists, particularly through education policy.


46 Leonardo, 82.

47 Leonardo, 117.
Chapter Four

Reforming Education: Waiting for “Superman” and Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Educational institutions have historically been perceived as a way to rehabilitate individuals and prepare them to enter or re-enter society as productive members. The society for which they were being prepared was considered external to them, a locus of activity from which they would be excluded so long as they remained unequipped to participate. The purpose of schooling was to ready them for society, to inculcate shared values and norms. Its goal was to change individuals in order to fit them into a pre-existing social system. They were never intended to transform this society, but rather to adapt to it.

Mainstream uplift presents educational conversion, a quasi-religious experience, as a process of changing the individual in order to fit into extant or aspirational social conditions. To approach the individual as in need of reform, as American public schools have historically done, is to imply that students must conform to a particular set of dominant values, and self-regulate accordingly, in order to participate in society. Uplift focuses on changing marginalized peoples’ consciousness instead of changing oppressive circumstances because compelling individuals to adapt to their situations renders them more easily dominated. By championing the individual who succeeds through hard work, mainstream uplift conceals structural inequalities under a meritocratic facade and sustains inequities instead of subverting them. The individual’s transformation into a functional, contributing member of society is still beholden to terms set by those in power. Even when alleviating inequality is an explicit goal, the means to achieve this is posited as residing within the individual’s capacity to adapt to prevailing social expectations for what constitutes success. Those who reach these pre-defined goals arrive at the dubious achievement of fitting themselves into an unfit, unequal society. Despite the structural inequalities that encumber individual success, educational uplift insists on the possibility of transcending them and establishes exceptionalism as normative. Failure becomes a matter of respectability, character, and even morality, rather than a consequence of historicity.

Educational uplift makes a promise to individuals that it cannot keep and holds them accountable for its own deficiencies. It promises meritocratic access to the American Dream — building oneself up from humble beginnings. Implicitly, it promises that anyone can become a full subject through education and hard work, but, as previous chapters have shown, that is not reality. Educational uplift represents an ideal, not a descriptive roadmap for how to achieve subjectivity, and part of the problem is that the narrative is disseminated as if it were a “how-to” when it is more of an ideal “if-only.” Whereas narratives of educational uplift present themselves as descriptive of how to achieve success on an individual level, uplift through reform is more a matter of changing society. Education reform declares the more commonplace goal of closing the “achievement gap” between middle-class white students and poor nonwhite students. It seeks to narrow the “dream gap” between reality and egalitarian ideals. After all, reform movements attempt to put ideals into action.

Like narratives about individual educative experience, education reform movements themselves subscribe to metanarratives. Reform is often categorized as “a triumphal upward march to a utopian future” or the “[arrest of] a devastating backward slide,” a form of “progress”
or “regress” that “gave coherence and force to educational reform.”³ Such hyperbolic language animates Horace Mann’s argument when he portends that “the common school…may become the most effective and benignant of all the forces of civilization,”⁴ especially in its capacity to shape moral citizens and preserve the republic. Progress towards a more unified and just society likewise characterized the desegregation movement’s advocacy of inclusive education. In contrast, the school standards movement that began in the 1980s viewed itself as an intervention to save a “nation at risk” of falling behind others in a competitive global marketplace.⁵

Today’s free-market education reform movement addresses the same concerns about American students’ readiness for a global economy. Instead of approaching failing schools themselves as at-risk delinquents, however, free-market reformers approach them as mismanaged companies and use strategies and rhetoric borrowed from corporate contexts.⁶ Privately managed charter schools are a touchstone of free-market education reform, but far from providing a solution to the education crisis, as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top legislation maintained, charter schools have produced mixed results and no measurable difference in performance compared to non-charter public schools.⁷ Despite the lack of results, corporate reformers insist that we need to transform public education itself and change our idea of what schools do and how they do it in order to “save our schools.”

In majoritarian narratives about education reform, the principles of uplift apply to individual schools and to the public education system itself. The goal is to change schools and educators to satisfy the expectations and demands of the dominant class. Wealthy philanthropists like Bill Gates have a vested interest in education because their businesses depend on the availability of a well-trained workforce. Gates acknowledges that “companies like Microsoft increasingly need highly skilled and well-educated workers in order to remain strong and grow. America must ensure that our young people are well positioned for these jobs.”⁸ In other words, if America fails to prepare its young people for such jobs, then those jobs will go to foreigners.

The humanistic ideal of educating students so that they may engage in activities that fulfill them both personally and financially gives way to the corporate logic of ensuring a reliable supply of trained workers. Gates’ self-interested rationale for his involvement in public education disguises itself as philanthropy. This fact is not lost on activist Sam Anderson, a retired professor of mathematics and black history, affiliated with Black New Yorkers for Educational Excellence, the Coalition for Public Education, and other grassroots education reform organizations. He describes Harlem Children’s Zone, a charter school program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as “a petty bourgeois cloning factory for the world of corporate work.”⁹ Critical pedagogists such as Anderson understand that the primary responsibility of the dominant class is to reproduce itself and the conditions that preserve its dominance. Educational uplift is a convenient way to package such compulsory social adjustment as an unequivocal social good.

Waiting for Superman Reinforces the Status Quo

Different reform movements have varying approaches to repairing education, and although they present themselves as liberating and humanizing, they are not unproblematic. Each movement has its own perspective on what it means to be human, and seeks to confer these qualities or circumstances upon those who, according to the standards of the dominant class, lack
humanity or whose humanity is endangered. Colonial education, for example, sought to instill humanity in “savages” and preserve it in European settlers by teaching Western behaviors and attitudes. Part of the common school movement was the belief that republicanism is a core component of humanity, at least in an American context. The standards movement is part of a general shift towards quantification and accountability measures. It began in the 1980s when “A Nation at Risk” sparked a panic over the low rank of our education system relative to those of other first-world nations. The report prompted education reformers to attempt to raise our national “grade,” and this required a system of quantifiable measurement. Subsequent psychometric assessments supply a wealth of data capable of clarifying — and obfuscating, through manipulation — our understanding of the education system.

Numbers provide another way to illustrate how and/or explain why members of the dominant class outperform marginalized populations. While a racial hierarchy along the lines of the Great Chain of Being no longer carries social weight, the world rankings of national education levels is symptomatic of a new kind of hierarchy based on educational attainment. In the coded language of demography, becoming “just another statistic” sums up an entire narrative of failed educational uplift. The standards reform movement strives to raise the positive statistics that ought to indicate greater humanization, yet the metrics themselves turn students into flattened representations in the form of data.

Waiting for “Superman” (2011) attempts to bridge the gap between numbers and narrative to personalize education reform. As a documentary, “Superman” invokes claims to legitimacy using exposition, interviews, voice-overs, and archival footage. Personal, localized stories are crucial to understanding the discursive formation of education reform, but they are insufficient if presented alone. In order to locate the film within the discourse of education reform, director Davis Guggenheim also includes statistical data, historical references, and perspectives of those working in the field. The force and authority of personal narratives derive from their context and relationship to the juridical components of public education, and vice versa.

In order to bring these two parts together, Guggenheim began by making two movies, each of which stood alone as a separate, fully edited film. One told the story of individual children and families as they navigated the education system, and he referred to it as Other People’s Children. The other, which he called The Folly of the Adults, depicted the education crisis from the perspective of educational institutions and apparatuses. After he had completed these two story lines, Guggenheim combined them to produce what he calls “collision” cuts that appose large-scale movements in education policy with their consequences in the lives of specific individuals. By way of example, he cites a scene depicting a child walking past his zoned high school, a “dropout factory,” while the next scene features D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee acknowledging that “most of the kids in my city are getting a crappy education.” Guggenheim anticipates that “through that juxtaposition, the personal story of Anthony is immediately amplified into a picture of an entire system, and even an entire society, in crisis.”

These cuts allow Guggenheim to offer two forms of knowledge: the “official” knowledge of hard data and experts in the field, and the “unofficial” knowledge derived from families’ experiences and interactions with the education system. Together, they articulate a relationship between education policymakers and the effects of their decisions in what appears as a simple
matter of cause-and-effect, and audience members unfamiliar with education reform debates might receive the film as a complete, unified representation of the discourse.

Guggenheim strives to deliver what appears as an even-handed approach, but he privileges the official knowledge of the reformers and subordinates the unofficial knowledge of those most impacted by education reforms. As he reflected upon The First Year, his previous documentary about a group of Teach for America educators and students, he concluded that these perspectives have been well-represented in recent movies and that his next “film needed to have a stronger voice and a stronger point of view” than the implicitly weaker view that students and teachers hold. Based on the views presented in “Superman”, this “stronger view” refers to that of reformers and policymakers — those who leverage the greatest power within the discourse of education reform.

While the precarity of Anthony’s life as a black third-grader living in poverty is at least in part the result of our education system, “Superman” suggests that education alone can rescue him from the failures of both his private home life and his life in public school. Guggenheim’s biographical representations of students like Anthony appropriate their stories into the discourse of education reform with effects that they may not fully comprehend, or of which they may not even be aware. They enter into the discourse marked as “other” and are celebrated for it because they serve as illustrations of the effects of poor educational policy. Presenting these students in a nonfictional exposé reifies their position outside of that discourse, effectively turning them into objects of the education reform discourse rather than subjects participating in it.

The documentary teaches audiences about the failures of the public education system, and about their roles in the narrative of educational uplift. Showing how the discursive space of education reform works (and how it does not) teaches viewers how to enter that discourse as either empowered participants or as passive objects. There are, in fact, three parties in this discourse: the education reformers, the students and their families, and audience members. “Superman” regulates the representations of all three, and actively recruits audiences to participate in surveilling, examining, and judging the families portrayed in the film. After the lotteries, cameras accompany each family on its way home. A scene with Anthony and his grandmother driving home cuts to a clip from a black-and-white Superman film featuring a runaway school bus careening down a hill, stopped by the superhero. The message is clear: poor children, particularly children of color, are positioned as relatively passive bystanders subject to a crumbling education system. The movie eschews bureaucratic bloat while extolling charismatic leaders like Geoffrey Canada and Michelle Rhee, modern-day heroes in the world of education reform. Responsibility for a child’s education repeatedly falls at the feet of parents, but the burden of responsibility is not limited to students’ families — it extends to the moral obligations of audience members who have the resources to advocate on behalf of low-socioeconomic-status students. Meanwhile, less privileged audience members also learn their role. Instead of encouraging them to become activists, the film teaches low-socioeconomic-status audiences that they are strivers for uplift who ultimately lack the ability to gain access to educational opportunity by any means other than luck.

The closing credits incorporate a series of imperatives intended to galvanize viewers into reformative action. The last lines of text fade in:
The problem is complex but the steps are simple. It starts with teachers becoming the very best leaders, removing the barriers to change, neighbors committed to their school, you willing to act. Go to waitingforsuperman.com. Share this film. Tell everyone you know to pledge to join the movement. Text “POSSIBLE” to 77177.

For every Daisy, Anthony, Bianca, Emily, [and] Francisco there are millions of others waiting. Great schools won’t come from winning the lottery. They won’t come from “Superman.” They will come from You

These phrases appear sequentially on the screen, timed for dramatic effect so that a pregnant pause comes just before the final line calls the viewer to action with “You.” These words offer viewers the immediate gratification of asserting commitment to a new cause as well as a privileged position of knowledge. Having viewed a one hundred and ten-minute film, audiences are now sufficiently apprised of both private families’ struggles with the education system and the crisis that threatens it. Not only do they know that “the problem is complex but the steps are simple,” but they also have access to the resources necessary for taking some of those steps. Viewers learn from the film how to become education reformers and activists; they learn their place of empowerment within the larger metanarrative of educational uplift and in the discourse of reform.

Teaching audiences their roles is part of the “hidden curriculum” of “Superman.” Curriculum, in the narrowest sense, refers to a plan for a particular course of study. Broadly speaking, curriculum is “everything that transpires in the course of planning, teaching, and learning in an educational institution.” Yet neither conception includes explicitly didactic texts like “Superman”, which often function outside of educational institutions. Instead of trying to change students in or through schools, “Superman” aims to move audiences towards activism. It educates dominant in-group viewers on how out-group members struggle to achieve educational uplift in the hope that audiences will join the reform movement. The companion book, Waiting for “Superman”: How We Can Save America’s Public Schools, designates “we” as an in-group pronoun for self-identified education activists. This set of texts forms a curriculum for would-be activists and a packaged remedy to cure what ails subjugated out-groups relatively divested of agency. The film unfolds a well-intentioned narrative presumably about improving the lot of the dispossessed while focusing on the education of their activist saviors. It is supposed to do for audiences what Michelle Rhee attempted to do for the D.C. public school system: discipline viewers into caring about educational inequality and taking action to reform the education system on behalf of those who cannot do it for themselves. “Superman” prompts a reconsideration of its curriculum not as a consciously authoritative and juridical plan, but rather as a discursive strategy — a set of power relations the rules of which constitute that curriculum. The film’s representation of reform does more to reinforce and even extend extant inequities rather than ameliorate them.

The film’s companion book further develops audience engagement once the film is over. The cover of the “Superman” companion book advertises a fifteen-dollar DonorsChoose.org gift card that offers readers the opportunity to exercise their activist impulses on an economic register while fulfilling the desire for a consumer choice that reflects one’s individuality and personal
values. Not only do readers make a donation, but they also select a project from teacher proposals. The subsequent report from the teacher and students who benefit from the contribution completes the affective circle and functions as a form of accountability. Through this consumerist form of philanthropy, the reader’s participation in the education system mimics on a smaller scale that of the wealthy private donors represented as saviors in the film. The audience’s curriculum consists largely of free-market values applied to public education, and the movie’s companion book constitutes “homework” to bolster the lesson, though it might be more accurate to call it “extra credit” in light of how it confers a sense of altruistic generosity. Privileged audience members can conspicuously consume “Superman” and demonstrate their sensitivity and responsiveness to the plight of marginalized families. Their identities as activists are effects of their discursive engagement with the film, which extends beyond the confines of the theater.

The movie champions charter schools as the only means of escape from poverty and/or mediocrity and disciplines viewers into conspicuous activism for the cause. Watching the children and their families yearn for a seat at a charter school generates desire for charters in viewers, especially when Guggenheim focalizes the narrative through Emily, the only white student featured. If she were to attend her zoned school, the danger is academic mediocrity — not the life of drugs, teenaged motherhood, or incarceration that threaten the other children. She represents the implicitly white “nation at risk” and reminds white middle-class audiences that the education system’s failures can touch them directly too. And yet, the fact that she is the only student who wins a seat at her chosen school also reassures them that there is hope, and demonstrably more of it for them. The odds are literally in Emily’s favor: her chances of winning a spot at her preferred school are significantly higher than those of the other students featured in the film.

The documentary’s theatrical treatment of the lottery amplifies the suspense of an already dramatic scenario in which the future lives of children hang in the balance. The lottery sequence provokes audience participation through affective response, making viewers complicit in one of the “public rituals of dismay and promise” so common in education reform. The movie presents charter schools as a panacea capable of rectifying challenges to academic success — like poverty and absentee parents — and warding off future ones. The film provides such a one-sided “solution” to the education crisis that viewers who dare to contradict its conclusions risk being perceived as antagonistic towards the children in the film. The film appeals to audiences on the level of affect, and this strategy of power both exploits and obscures its own political dimensions.

The movie’s neoliberal agenda manages the audience’s affective responses by openly acknowledging certain barriers to entry. In order to legitimize free-market education reform as a solution, Guggenheim must convince viewers that the documentary has a realistic perspective on the problem and public perception of it. He describes the need to devise a way to “speak to the darker voices in people’s heads” that suggest “those kids simply can’t learn” when driving past “public schools in run-down neighborhoods.” These references are not-so-subtle and coded ways of referring to poor urban schools that primarily serve children of color and acknowledging white middle-class viewers’ nagging suspicion that such students are innately deficient. He adds that “there are a lot of shots in the movie about ‘driving by’ failed schools” on his way to his children’s private school. He frames his engagement as minimal and passive, yet as a director,
his “drive-by shots” betray an underlying representational violence in the aggressive gaze of his camera. He goes on to describe these scenes as “a metaphor for what we all do” — knowing that “there’s a problem with American schools, and we feel bad about it, but we drive by and try to ignore it because we think it’s unfixable.”\textsuperscript{16} The rhetorical force behind the word we marks Guggenheim’s own intersectional position as a liberal middle-class white filmmaker addressing an audience similar to himself.

Although Guggenheim’s approach to representing students and their families is problematic, his “collision” cuts do offer audiences opportunities to critique the film’s perceptible gaps in perspective, which reproduce a microcosm of the larger discursive spaces of education reform. “Superman” elides race out of deference to the supposedly race-neutral logic of free-market education reform. The film conspicuously omits race as a factor in educational opportunity even though all but one of the five children it features are of color, including Anthony. Guggenheim’s reflections on the juxtaposition between Anthony and Michelle Rhee fail to acknowledge the racial power differential between them. As Michael Dumas has observed, the film represents black subjects as responsible for their own lack of educational achievement and endorses neoliberal policies as a way to address racism.\textsuperscript{17} His analysis gestures towards the persistent discursive effects of the 1965 Moynihan report,\textsuperscript{18} which pathologized black poverty. “Superman” makes no reference to the Moynihan report, yet its effects are perceptibly reproduced in Guggenheim’s representation of black children and their families. Anthony is portrayed as a victim of both the education system and the circumstances of his home life (his grandmother’s educationally indifferent caretaking and his parents’ absence). What these two forces have in common is their mutual inability to fully compensate for the shortcomings of the other, yet education reform is touted as the primary solution for all manner of social ills.

The gaps between Guggenheim’s rhetoric and his professed commitments reveal some of the representational mechanisms by which power operates in the discourse of education reform. Guggenheim alludes to an unspoken but thoroughly present “rule” governing the representation of educational reform: racial and social economic privilege. He acknowledges that “My kids have won the lottery. By the nature of who my family is. And this is not America, the idea that one kid could have a great education and one kid can’t. There are winners and losers. We as a country have to get together and have a conversation like this and say how do we let every kid win?”\textsuperscript{19} Guggenheim considers his children winning the lottery as a function of “the nature of who my family is” when it is a matter of race and class, neither of which has anything to do with “who” anyone is in any substantive sense, and even less to do with “nature.” The assertion that the idea of unequal circumstances for children “is not America” may ring true, but it contradicts the capitalistic mechanisms that produce relations of power in terms of winners and losers. The representational pressure on the school lotteries simultaneously reveals the fissures in educational uplift and perpetuates uplift’s racist subtext. The emphasis on the lotteries belies meritocracy, makes plain how arbitrary privilege is as a function of circumstances at birth, and reproduces the perception that impoverished families gamble their children’s futures. The families who apply for seats at an excellent charter school are self-selecting: these families and children are predisposed to academic success because they already value it enough to seek an alternative to their local zoned public schools.

What is most frightening about the lottery is not that a specific child’s future hinges upon the luck of the draw. Rather, it is that the success of the system of social control we call
education depends upon chance. “Superman” and the free-market education reform it champions are first and foremost about disciplining the education system itself. The film’s goal is to reform public education to conform to the expectation that it will indeed function as a strategy of social control. In it, Newsweek senior editor Jonathan Alter sums up the problem with public education: “This whole collection of people, which is sometimes called ‘the Blob,’ like out of some horror movie, has been an impediment to reform. No individual is necessarily to blame but collectively they are the Goliath of the system.” To call the people who run our education system “the Blob” underscores the lack of structure and control within the system itself, pathologized as a monster that threatens the economic viability of our nation and conveniently serves as the villain in the documentary.

Those in charge of educating American children are themselves portrayed as failures in need of intervention from a clear-eyed, seemingly ordinary citizen such as Michelle Rhee. She acknowledges that she has only two years of teaching experience when she becomes Schools Chancellor in Washington, D.C., and her status as a well-intentioned newcomer resonates with the audiences’ own lack of experience with the ins and outs of “the Blob.” The emphasis on Rhee’s relative status as an outsider to the education system (though not to the classroom) foregrounds a subtle shift in power relations. Rhee was not an elected official — in 2007, the D.C. Council granted the mayor control of the school system, and Mayor Adrian Fenty offered Rhee the chancellorship. The role might well have fallen to someone well-established in the field of education, and placing Rhee in this role was a visible way to move the locus of power outside the fundamentally “broken” system. The film suggests that her no-nonsense, hard-headed, pragmatic approach is possible only thanks to her lack of prolonged contact with the education system. She has not yet been contaminated by this monstrously inefficient, ineffective, and negligent bureaucracy, and is portrayed as an agent of correction and hygiene. The cover of Time magazine featured an image of Rhee holding a broom in a classroom, ready to clean house.

In the film, we see her advancing through what appears to be an old warehouse filled with boxes labeled “school supplies,” expressing impatience at the vast resources wasted. Ironically, the education system is framed as deficient because it does not adequately fulfill the promise of universal education on equitable terms. Yet the system actually does what Americans most want it to do. The paradox of public education results from conflicting private and public interests: Americans want education to be a universally accessible public good, but we also want it to function as a private good when we seek out the absolute best for our own children. The families who pursue charter school placement for their children know that, if they succeed, other families will not, but this knowledge does not stop them from trying. Reform efforts fail because society’s vision of public education is as internally conflicted as its cultural values. The education system satisfies the desire for personal advantage through upward expansion: increases in educational access are tempered by subsequent increases in possibilities for educational advantage. Education may not be an effective way to solve social problems, but it is a remarkably effective way to express contradictory cultural values and personal aspirations.

Superman” teaches viewers about the lived experiences of, as Guggenheim puts it, “other people’s children” Yet these experiences are channeled through the director’s perspective and, at least in one case, even staged for dramatic effect. Guggenheim included footage of Francisco’s mother, Maria, touring a charter school as if her son were a prospective student, but the scene was recorded after he had lost the lottery and after Maria had already visited the school on a prior
occasion. It is not unusual for filmmakers to shoot out of chronological order or reenact certain scenes, but experts in documentary film were “uncomfortable” with Guggenheim’s characterization of Maria’s context as anticipatory, which “fundamentally alters the interpretation” of her experience. The special knowledge “Superman” offers partly consists of the personal narratives of students affected by the education crisis and their families. Misrepresenting that knowledge undermines the film’s authority to speak on behalf of its disempowered subjects. Moreover, doing so diminishes the authority of these subjects to speak for themselves and reduces them to objects of editorial manipulation.

Guggenheim attempts to represent the discursive formation that constitutes education reform and the debates surrounding it, but he can represent the discourse only up to the limits of his own epistemological boundaries. After initially declining the project, Guggenheim confesses that “I heard the dark voices speaking — inside my own head.” It is, indeed, a dark thought that others far less fortunate than oneself are suffering; it is also literally the “dark voices” of people of color to which Guggenheim attends in his documentary. He acknowledges that “The story of public education has been told many times over the past forty years,” and yet “most people feel it’s a static and hopeless story.” He refers to “the story of public education” as if it were a single monolithic unit lacking the nuance of a heteroglossic narrative system. He also asserts knowledge of how “most people feel” about it, when it would be more accurate to say that he knows how he and others who occupy his intersectional position feel about it. He goes on to posit what the “dark voices” say to everyone: “Why open my heart to a problem that is confusing and never seems to get any better?” Or, “We’ve heard all the sob stories before, and all we’ve accomplished is to get depressed and feel guilty.”

Guggenheim anticipates here a reaction of liberal middle-class white guilt from an imagined audience member and projects his own conscience — the “dark voices” — into viewers’ heads. He approaches his documentary subjects as objects of representation and not as reciprocally attentive audiences for his own film. Surely none of the families in the film would find it difficult to “open their hearts to the problem” or think of their own experiences as “sob stories.” As a filmmaker, Guggenheim undertakes to represent them in a way they cannot represent themselves, but in objectifying them, he impedes their reading themselves and their position of subjugation in the context of his movie. His intended audience is more like him than like the families in the film.

A panel discussion on “Superman” featuring Guggenheim and John Legend further reveals the epistemological divide between the director and the subjects of his film:

GUGGENHEIM: …Everyone in this room is feeling something powerful tonight. We’re feeling a real sense of commitment. No one can go home and stick their head in the sand. There’s a lot of people in this country that aren’t feeling what we feel…all of us have to move off a position of self-interest like I do with my own kids, sending them to private school, like the unions do, I think, preserving the status quo. We all have to move off self-interest.

SCARBOROUGH: All right.

GUGGENHEIM: And fight for these kids.

SCARBOROUGH: John Legend, final thoughts?

LEGEND: My last thing I would say, we have to realize that these kids are our kids. We have to take ownership. These are our communities. This is our country. And that means get involved. That means politically get involved.
Guggenheim emphasizes his affective engagement with issues facing other people’s children and the importance of stepping out of a position of self-interest. He refers to the “fight for these kids,” kids who are not his own, and he structures his commitment as fundamentally altruistic.

Legend reminds him and viewers that “we have to realize that these kids are our kids,” emphasizing the communal interest in the welfare of all the children in America, and aligning the cause of education reform with self-interest instead of in opposition to it. For Legend, “getting involved” is a matter of self-preservation, not philanthropy. His commitment to education as a person of color is every bit as personal as Guggenheim’s commitment as a member of the white ruling class. The difference is that Guggenheim denies his self-interest. By claiming neutrality, he obfuscates how his agenda actually perpetuates the status quo: educational inequality in favor of white middle-class students.

Educational Uplift is Oppressive

Widely acknowledged as a principal founder of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire observes that such alleged neutrality is an effective way to conceal one’s political investments. Critical pedagogy challenges the supposed neutrality of educational uplift, reform movements, and their representations in documentaries like Waiting for “Superman.” It pursues social change by raising critical consciousness, building equitable power relations, and honoring different forms of knowledge, particularly those of learners. It is first and foremost an attempt to find a “language of possibility” to imagine, express, and realize a more humane society. In order to achieve these goals, one must recognize that no pedagogical endeavor is ever neutral. Every field of study is necessarily social and historical; it is not possible “just to teach biology” or any other discipline. An educator must articulate his or her choice of politics as a choice, and do so without imposing that choice upon students. Guggenheim takes a clear stance in favor of free-market education reform, but he frames this position as neutral and unequivocally beneficial for students. The film includes no opposing viewpoint to counterbalance corporate reformers’ claims. Instead of opening up a discussion about various possibilities for how to improve our education system, Guggenheim delivers a prepackaged solution that actually suppresses a “language of possibility.”

Critical pedagogist Myles Horton explains that neutrality is “a code word for the existing system” and necessarily constitutes “an immoral act” because it reinforces the status quo, even when that standard is unethical. Neutrality is “a refusal to oppose injustice.” The more an agenda insists upon its own neutrality, and does so convincingly, the more likely it reinforces dominant ideological systems.

Freire’s critical pedagogy embraces a radically non-neutral position in order to reveal and confront the oppressive character of the dominant ideology it opposes. The polemical title of his most influential work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, purposefully invokes an “oppressor.” The term is intended to shock neoliberal sensibilities. If Freire had used euphemisms for the “oppressed” and called his book Pedagogy of the Underprivileged, or the Disadvantaged, or the Disenfranchised, then the title would have obscured the agent responsible for these circumstances. In his Introduction to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Donald Macedo reminds us that a title like Pedagogy of the Disenfranchised “leaves the ground wide open for blaming the victim of disenfranchisement for his or her own disenfranchisement. This example is a clear case in which the object of oppression can also be understood as the subject of oppression.” Such language “distorts reality,” as Macedo puts it, and also makes it possible to blame the victims of
oppression for creating their own oppressed state. In naming his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire acknowledges the existence of oppressors and validates the experiences of the oppressed, both of whom are locked into the political condition of oppression.

The polemical title abandons all pretense of neutrality when it comes to education. Being an educator *is* taking an ideological stance. Freire explains that “the educator must know in favor of whom and in favor of what he or she wants. That means to know against whom and against what we are working as educators.” Those who support reforms based on allegedly “class-neutral” and “race-neutral” free-market principles refuse to recognize that a state of oppression exists in order to avoid compromising their own positions of power, which are dependent upon these principles. As Freire observes, “the education that the dominant classes offer to the working class necessarily is the education that reproduces the working class as such.”

Corporate reformers advocate for education policies that consolidate their own privilege, which means these policies also perpetuate the subjugation of the working class. The educator’s responsibility, according the Freire, is to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and against oppressive conditions in order to change them.

As a dominant and dominating narrative, uplift conditions marginalized peoples to adapt to exclusionary power structures instead of challenging them, all in the name of assisting them. If education is an institution that rehabilitates and prepares people for social integration, then it also serves to quarantine those unfit to participate in society. Uplift “cures” and pathologizes low socioeconomic status at the same time: “The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these ‘incompetent and lazy’ folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be ‘integrated,’ ‘incorporated’ into the healthy society that they have ‘forsaken.’” Following this logic,

“the educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better ‘fit’ for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well-suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.”

Oppressors might argue that domestication “civilizes” oppressed individuals and makes them *more* human, but this is one of the ways in which oppressors preserve their dominance. What oppressors frame as humanizing is actually the opposite: oppression “domesticates” the people and diverts them away from manifesting their humanity through critical engagement with the world. Uplift is one of many instruments of oppression that impose change upon objectified students in order to fit them into an outwardly static and necrophiliac world. It asserts that reality is unchangeable, and accepting this notion maintains oppression.

Neoliberal social reformers, such as those featured in *Superman*, endorse this positivist view of reality, which calls for similarly positivist solutions. They rationalize the application of free-market principles to areas beyond the economic because these principles have served them so well economically. Just as whiteness has been conceived as a form of property, so has the concept of humanity. Oppressors think of themselves as possessors of humanity tasked with conferring it upon marginalized people who have earned the distinction through their investment in oppressor myths like educational uplift. Freire explains that “the dominators try to present themselves as saviors of the women and men they dehumanize and divide. This messianism,
however, cannot conceal their true intention: to save themselves...They want to save their riches, their power, their way of life: the things that enable them to subjugate others.”

Neoliberal philanthropy permits donors the perverse privilege of considering themselves “humanitarians” while their actions bolster their own positions of dominance and fuel unequal power relations.

Although gestures of generosity reinforce dominance, a well-intentioned social reformer may be at once both dominator and dominated. Oppressive social structures form the basis for cultural institutions like family and education and permeate them with myths that reproduce domination. Authoritarian relationships with parents or caretakers inculcate in children oppressive dominant values that persist into adulthood, and these individuals may perpetuate the cycle. If, however, they begin to move towards perceiving their own complicity in oppression, they must choose between repudiating these myths or renewing their belief in them. Such an individual is so invested in the myths of meritocracy and achievement that “to recognize his situation as objectively unfavorable seems to hinder his own possibilities of success.”

Acknowledging one’s own position as both oppressor and oppressed threatens one’s identity, and this threat inhibits one’s ability to come to consciousness with the oppressed. The fear of freedom is one of the mechanisms by which oppressors manipulate people, including themselves, into the service of domination. Meanwhile, uplift provides a convenient alibi for preserving the privileges of domination while participating in what appears as liberating activity.

One of the most effective ways oppressors thwart solidarity is by favoring certain members of oppressed populations. Oppressed individuals who demonstrate leadership endanger the status quo and become targets of either favoritism or punishment, both of which divide potential leaders from their communities. In the case of racial oppression, embracing certain people of color as “representatives” of the oppressed only divides their common interest in opposing whiteness. Similarly, white people who experience oppression as members of the working class are isolated from working-class people of color when they take refuge in white privilege. The benefits and “wages of whiteness” sustain their complacency with respect to their economic oppression. This differentiated privilege is also used as a form of social control in charter school lotteries that create conditions under which some members of the oppressed community are given the perceived advantage of attending a charter and others are not. The families compete with each other and spend their energy on seeking out the dubious privilege of enrolling their children in charter schools instead of working together to identify and take action against the causes behind their shared oppressive situation. Without critical examination, they take the illusion of assistance at face value. Advocates of free-market reform would have them believe that the lotteries are their only recourse and that changing the education system itself to be equitable is impossible.

Oppressed individuals who believe in educational uplift discover that it presents a well-established route to success few are able to pursue. Those who follow it reap the rewards the oppressors have left dangling, but these never include communion with other oppressed people, which undermines opportunities for solidarity. By investing in uplift, they internalize an oppressor narrative and adopt, to an extent, oppressor values and consciousness as their own. Freire identifies the problem with directing the oppressed towards dominant values: “the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or ‘sub-oppressors’... Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity.” Oppressors define self-affirmation on their own terms and provide a
model of success to which the oppressed aspire. If the oppressed internalize these messages, then they “house” the oppressor within themselves, and this results in a dual or ambiguous identity. In exchange for the illusory empowerment that successful educational uplift provides, the “uplifted” individuals find themselves alienated from both their own communities and from dominant in-groups whose power inheres in exclusionary practices.

Educational institutions are key sites of power where dominant discourses proliferate. These discourses, including uplift, are not necessarily deliberately or even consciously constructed by any one person or group of individuals, and they manifest through a constantly shifting and amorphous set of power relations that re-assert dominant class desires. The challenge, as Michel Foucault puts it, is “to imagine and to bring into being new schemas of politicisation” without resorting to “ready-made choices and institutions” that reinforce extant and oppressive power relations. Normativizing activism so that those who care about a particular issue address it in circumscribed ways effectively regulates and maintains existing socioeconomic conditions, but does not change them. Attempts to address educational inequality from using of dominant systems of thought necessarily stymie creative approaches to changing those systems because educational inequality is itself the product and (re)producer of dominant ideology.

The current reform debate revolves around the positivist assertion that free-market principles are effective when applied to education, and rejecting this application contradicts society’s commonsense acquiescence to capitalism itself. However, significant and lasting change can be achieved only through careful interrogation of the contingencies and mechanisms of power that led to the current state of public education. This means our society must examine the possibility, for example, that capitalism and educational equality are incompatible. Only then will new forms of thought and knowledge — and new solutions — become possible.

Critical Pedagogy Challenges Educational Uplift

A brave new world with no need for educational uplift as we know it demands a more radical vision of uplift that inverts the order of conversion. Mainstream educational uplift promotes reform on an individual level, and although education reform policies attempt to change the system, they ultimately approach individual students as the objects of change. That is, both individual and systemic reform focus on turning students — the objects of schooling — into subjects. Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, aims to change the world not through mainstream dominant discourses such as educational legislation, but through collective praxis. Instead of trying to “turn” individuals into subjects in the manner of mainstream educational uplift, Freire advocates for education as a revolutionary combination of theory and practice in which oppressed peoples come together and reflect critically on their world in order to transform it. Horton concurs with Freire on this point: “It’s the structures of society that we’ve got to change. We don’t change men’s hearts… It doesn’t make a great deal of difference what the people are; if they’re in the system, they’re going to function like the system dictates that they function.” It is not the oppressed who change in order to become human, but rather, it is society that must shift to conceive of humanity differently and recognize actions that challenge oppression as humanizing. The goal is to transform oppressive social and economic structures, not the oppressed.
Although we cannot de-racialize subjectivation because the idea of the subject is itself coextensive with whiteness, we can acknowledge that the present standard for what counts as human is a subjectivity rooted in whiteness. Freire does not discuss subjectivation per se, but his discussion of humanization is fundamentally a theory of subjectivation that, unlike Althusser’s, is not implicitly dependent upon whiteness. Freire re-conceptualizes the subject as a humanized agent, using the term to refer not to a state of being, but to a function of praxis — that is, action combined with reflection — which necessarily humanizes. Subjectivity does not depend upon an external authority, but rather manifests through critical communication between people. The subject is always becoming through critical reflection, which itself is an action that transforms the world. Freire offers an alternative to subjectivation through mainstream educational uplift. In his model, the subject comes into being when he or she combines action with critical reflection. While mainstream educational uplift delineates pathways to an implicitly racialized subjectivity that subordinates people of color, critical pedagogy aims to humanize through a process-oriented concept of subjectivity.

Humanization (or subjectivation) as praxis is necessarily located in the world. It hinges on the particularities of historical context. One of the problems with educational uplift is that the plot line invokes principles that appear transhistorical, such as the value of hard work, perseverance, and strength of character that enable people to “pull themselves up by the bootstraps.” Fundamental to educational uplift and its enduring relevance is its positivist conception of reality — and the aforementioned principles — as fixed. What uplift fails to represent, however, are the structural challenges of living according to these principles when one is oppressed. Not everyone can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps”; some people have shorter straps, and some have no boots. Insisting that everyone has the same “boots” reveals a fragmented perception of reality. The reality to which free-market education reformers subscribe is likewise fragmented. Their approach assumes that reality is as mechanistic as the market and can be manipulated according to the same well-defined economic principles without addressing the problem of false consciousness in themselves or in others. These omissions mean that uplift and reform present fragmented realities as if they were whole.

The form that instruction takes further reinforces this fragmentation of reality. Freire inveighs against the “banking” model of education in which authoritative teachers “deposit” positivist knowledge into passive students. This model delimits education as a form of property acquisition instead of a process of inquiry, and it projects “absolute ignorance” onto student as objects of educative change. It subjugates the knowledges of marginalized students and turns them into repositories for official knowledge:

The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor did the students practice any active cognition, since the object with which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students. In educational uplift, as in the banking model, there is only memorization — of the pathways to success demarcated by dominant oppressors, of discursive practices acceptable to extent power structures, and of the habits of mind that subjugate non-dominant knowledges. Taking educational uplift narratives as a blueprint for success means accepting it as a “deposit” without critically questioning or challenging its legitimacy. The picture of reality that uplift and the
banking model impart is not only incomplete, but it also creates the illusion of completeness that prevents critical consciousness for both teacher and student.

Taking a fragmented representation of reality as complete cannot generate transformative action. The conceit in *Waiting for “Superman”*, for example, is that the families change their situations by researching their options and applying to charter schools. However, their actions are fragmentary in that these individuals do not come together to act in solidarity to question why their children are at such a disadvantage. Instead of considering how their oppressed state results from structural inequality and seeking ways to combat it, they see a limited set of available actions, all of which address only the proximate causes of their oppressed state.

*Waiting for “Superman”* not only presents a fragmented reality that leads to non-solidary individual action; it also perpetuates the myth that the families are not capable of praxis. Free market reform implements technocratic science as a purportedly neutral way to analyze student performance. However, treating people as data turns them into objects of analysis, while the conclusions that education reformers might draw from these data result in prescriptions for behavior. Such an approach bolsters the oppressive myth of absolute ignorance. Those who subscribe to this myth and define themselves as knowers impose their views upon others, whom they define as irredeemably ignorant. If we consider these definitions in terms of racialized exclusionary power relations, it becomes clear that whitenesses perpetuates the myth that only whites possess knowledge. In a colonial context, this myth makes it impossible for the subaltern to speak, since the colonizer defines intelligible speech as that which colonizers understand. Educational uplift sustains the myth and preserves colonialist power dynamics by defining success on behalf of the oppressed, and by narrowing that definition such that those who do not achieve it are considered failures. The falseness of the myth reveals itself to oppressed people who pursue uplift on its own terms and strive to acquire “official knowledge” only to find that their own ignorance remains absolute in the eyes of dominant beholders regardless of effort.

The oppressors mythicize the world and present it as a fixed entity to which the oppressed must adapt. If the oppressed accept this myth, then oppressors are able to keep them passive and prevent them from critically examining their own situations. As oppressive forms of education, banking and uplift propagate dominant ideologies as unequivocal truths about a fixed reality. Such incomplete, positivist assertions about reality obscure its historicity and capacity to change. Part of the project of preserving dominance entails teaching oppressed people to accept their exclusion from creating the world in which they live. The banking model “fail[s] to acknowledge men and women as historical beings” who give rise to and shape their own contexts. It not only “fails to acknowledge” individuals as creators of their own history, but it also actively suppresses, as Freire puts it, their history-making drive, their impulse to “name the world.”

A critical approach to educational uplift encourages the oppressed to reject it as a de facto, reified formula for individual success, and instead study it as an object in the world that mediates their experience. Most importantly, this object itself can be changed. Uplift narratives are not monolithic, unchangeable facts of life. They are precisely the opposite: they are historically, geographically, and politically contingent objects that function as instruments of domination, and they are not permanent. Human consciousness and self-awareness make it possible to see the world as an object separate from oneself. Moreover, humans are able to reflect upon our own actions and ourselves. This consciousness makes it possible to perceive concrete
historical situations that limit freedom, or “limit-situations,” not as immovable obstacles, but as invitations for transformative action. Challenges to these limit-situations constitute “limit-acts” that move beyond a fatalistic perception of reality as fixed, and towards a worldview in which such situations are actually opportunities for changing reality and thereby becoming more human.48

Freire’s model for humanization is about becoming a historical subject — that is, a subject that intervenes in the world to shape it. To be fully human is to have a sense of historicity, a sense that one can be an agent of history instead of an object subordinate to its whims, or worse, an object trapped in an unchangeable present. When the oppressed emerge out of their reality in order to perceive it objectively, they see that history consists of their own critically reflective actions. Oppressive myths and power structures, such as educational uplift, treat the oppressed as objects, and in doing so may also convince them that they are objects. To recover their humanity, the oppressed “must cease to be things and fight as men and women…They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings.”49 It is not possible to separate subjectivity from the struggle to make history because “consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it.”50 Only subjects engage in history- and world-making, and this praxis is itself an expression of humanity.

Transforming the world requires dialogue, which Freire defines as “the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.”51 Dialogue is a form of communication that recognizes the legitimacy of knowledges that oppressors subjugate. Privileging the heretofore subjugated knowledges of the oppressed confirms their status as knowers, rather than as passive objects only to be known. No one bears the burden of absolute ignorance nor complete knowledge; instead, all participants strive together for greater consciousness:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher ceased to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers…. no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher.52

Dialogue resolves the teacher-student dialectic and enables people to teach each other and work together as equals to realize a more egalitarian world. It supports a problem-posing pedagogy in which “people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves: they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, and transformation.”53 Once people see oppressive situations as problems they must solve together, they also begin to apprehend the world not as an object belonging to authoritative “knowers,” but rather as a medium for the critical action and reflection of humanized subjects.

As crucial as dialogue is to liberation, Freire notes that antidialogue is essential to preserving oppression. Educational uplift and reforms aligned with its values qualify as antidialogue because they attempt to change the world on behalf of the oppressed. Their advocates support the banking model of education and assume that they know more and better than the oppressed about their own situations. Waiting for Superman suppresses dialogue because it norms the conspicuous expression of “correct” attitudes and perspectives on education, as
determined by dominators, and its antidialogical positivism belies its self-declared liberating agenda. Free-market education reformers see fit to shut down public schools that do not meet the performance standards they set. They apply the same market principles that would close an underperforming business. However, public education is not a private venture. Its stakeholders are students and their families, yet they are the least empowered to advocate for themselves until they perceive public education as a problem that is theirs to solve.

_The Inconvenient Truth About Waiting for Superman_, a grassroots activist film created in response to Guggenheim’s, attempts to reclaim public education. Released one year after “Superman” and produced by educators and parents who act in solidarity with their communities, _Inconvenient Truth_ alludes to Guggenheim’s earlier documentary on Al Gore’s campaign against the “inconvenient truth” of global warming. It challenges the key claims set forth in “Superman” and champions “real reform,” including “equitable funding for ALL schools,” “anti-racist education policies,” “culturally relevant curriculum,” and “democratic and social justice unionism.” Each film takes an opposing side in the education reform debate; the difference is that _Inconvenient Truth_ openly acknowledges its political agenda and does not pretend to be neutral, while “Superman” makes pretensions to neutrality. “Superman” presents the perspective of the dominant ideology and imposes it on the audience’s understanding of and approach to the more personal narratives involving individual students and their families. _Inconvenient Truth_, on the other hand, shifts the focus away from policymakers and “corporate reformers” and includes many voices from the communities most impacted by these reforms instead of focusing on policymakers.

While “Superman” represents the interests of the ruling class, _Inconvenient Truth_ engages in Freirean problem-posing pedagogy and critiques the other film’s endorsement of free-market educational solutions. In order to see “Superman”, one needed to pay for a ticket at the box office or buy or rent the DVD. The companion book is also for sale. In contrast, _Inconvenient Truth_ has always been available free of charge, along with its supplementary materials. The eleven-page “House Party and Screening Guide” available for download from the _Inconvenient Truth_ website provides a summary of key points, answers to frequently asked questions about how to host a screening, links to more information, and, most importantly, sample discussion questions. While the “Superman” companion book tells readers what to do and how to become activists, the _Inconvenient Truth_ discussion questions promote critical thinking about the issues at hand. These questions refrain from imposing a particular interpretation of the film despite the movie’s clear political position. The first question asks, “What issues in the film are relevant to what is happening in your school or community?” In keeping with the principles of critical pedagogy, this initial question takes the people’s own knowledge and reading of reality as the starting point. The film’s creators respect the fact that they do not know the answer to this question, and that only viewers know what is happening in their own communities. Moreover, the assumption behind the question is that this specific form of knowledge is deeply contextual and valuable.

One of the most salient differences between “Superman” and _Inconvenient Truth_ is the latter’s emphasis on building a movement from within oppressed communities. Another discussion question encourages viewers to articulate what they learned from watching the film that they did not know before. This moves participants towards metacognition of their learning and a deeper form of their prior knowledge by drawing connections between the movie and their
own experiences. To further these connections, a subsequent question asks: “What do you think will improve education in your community? In our country?” This question approaches viewers as individuals with unique experiences, knowledges, and roles in their respective communities. It does not ask what position the film advocates, but rather poses the problem directly to those most affected by it and prompts them to articulate solutions. In response to Geoffrey Canada’s anecdote about waiting for Superman to save children from educational inequality, which Guggenheim used as a framing device for the film, *Inconvenient Truth* insists in its theme song that “The Hero is You.” Its website and video thumbnail feature the powerful image of over a dozen students wearing red capes. Each student is a “Superman,” but with a twist: the double “R”s on their capes stand for “Real Reformer.” The activist film recasts them as solidarity fighters for social justice rather than passive, isolated victims of injustice waiting for someone else to save them.

The questions at the end of the list prompt critical reflection and action, or praxis. They ask, “What is the role of parents in improving public education? How can parents become more involved?” and “What is the role of teachers’ unions in creating/protecting good public education?” Many viewers are likely parents and educators, and these questions probe how they envision their roles and how these visions might have changed as a result of watching the film. These questions initiate a dialogue between parents and educators, giving them an opportunity to create and re-create their roles by speaking them. The structure and sequence of the discussion questions indicate that participants are expected to learn from and respect each others’ knowledges, whether as educators, parents, students, members of the community, or a combination thereof.

As *Inconvenient Truth* suggests, deciding what counts as a school belongs to its community. A school is of the world and is therefore a medium for praxis, which means it should be subordinate to the people it serves. Such a shift in thinking and practice is possible if we approach education as a project to be directly organized by the oppressed instead of as an institution that can only change through legislation. Freire notes that “the domination implicit in dialogue is that of the world by the dialoguers; it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind.” Instead of targeting students or any other people, the object of domination ought to be the world itself. Educational projects encourage people to engage in a critical, “problem-posing,” process-oriented pedagogy grounded in concrete, historically specific and contextualized situations that are themselves tools for and objects of change. One way to assert subjectivity is to objectify something external to the self. This is dehumanizing when the subjectivation of certain individuals entails the objectification of others, but Freire’s model appropriately objectifies the world in a dialectical relationship with subjects. Through our recursive and dialogic naming of the world, we transform it as well as ourselves.

Freire’s approach attempts to account for existing unideal circumstances and alleviate concrete forms of oppression. His pedagogy engages students with their reality, not an ideal concept of humanization that is unreachable because it sets out a scheme for how people can be “born human” and stay that way. In this sense, he is not an idealist, as Charles Mills characterizes the “classic contractarian” social theorists (Kant, Hobbes, etc.). Freire favors a realistic approach to immediate oppressive conditions. He explains, “I don't believe in the kind of education that works in favor of humanity. That is, it does not exist in ‘humanity.’ It is an abstraction. Humanity for me is Mary, Peter, John, very concrete.” For Freire, humanization is a matter of
concrete action informed and motivated by critical reflection, and these are rooted in people. He rejects the notion of “humanity” as an abstract theory in the way that the “subject” is an abstraction for classic contractarians. Such abstractions move too far away from tangible reality towards ideals that are not realistic or actionable. He prioritizes praxis by staying close to actual people and their lived reality.

Liberating Transformation Begins with the Oppressed

Problem-solving pedagogy does not offer a straightforward solution to oppression, but it does provide a means to work towards a more just and egalitarian society. The oppressed achieve critical consciousness by approaching concrete instances of oppression as problems to be solved through reflection and action. Critical consciousness demands that the oppressed simultaneously perceive the reality of their own dehumanizing situation and act upon it. Because one cannot intervene in a reality that one perceives as continuous with the self, the oppressed must separate themselves from these situations in order to see these circumstances as objects of change. That is, in order to transform the world, the oppressed must be able to see reality as external to themselves and changeable through their own praxis.

Apprehending reality is easier said than done. Any perception of reality that does not result in critical intervention is necessarily a false perception. Freire explains that such a “purely subjectivist perception… forsakes objective reality and creates a false substitute.” One type of false perception is the oppressed people’s misperception of reality as static and unchangeable, and a misperception of themselves as either incapable of or uninterested in a critical intervention to change reality. The second form of false perception arises when the perceiver’s critical intervention would contradict self-interest, as is the case for oppressors who rationalize their subjective positions and advance them as neutral and objective.

Narratives of educational uplift, for example, present themselves as liberating, but they actually compound oppression by representing false substitutes for reality. Colorblind meritocracy is one such false substitute because it denies the lived reality people of color experience. It insists that success is based solely on merit, while people of color live in an objective reality that limits the kinds of success they can achieve through education. More broadly, signatories of what Charles Mills theorizes as the Racial Contract upholds the concept that only whites count as people; this is their false substitute for the objective reality in which they are oppressors who deny the humanity of people of color. False substitutes are essential for oppressors: if those in power admitted that the system which helped them achieve success is not meritocratic and rational, then they would have to acknowledge the existence of structural inequality and the ways in which they benefit from these inequalities. It would mean acknowledging that rugged individualism is illusory and accepting responsibility for perpetuating exclusionary power relations in their favor.

Another kind of false substitute Freire identifies is cynicism — what Peter Sloterdijk calls “enlightened false consciousness,” or the “partial penetration” of reality that Paul Willis describes. These outlooks result from incomplete perceptions that recognize oppressive conditions but fail to see that changing them is possible. Lacking the will or the ability to put into practice the lessons of enlightenment, false consciousness and other abstract discussions about
oppression constitute theory without action, or verbalism. It is also possible to engage in activism, or action without reflection. Waiting for “Superman” promotes such activity, which thwarts critical consciousness because it inhibits reflection. The film encourages viewers to take action without asking questions; it does not prompt audiences to ask why educational inequality is a problem or probe its ultimate causes, nor does it explore the racial or economic dimensions of the achievement gap. Instead of starting a dialogue in which oppressed people might begin to grapple with these issues through problem-posing pedagogy, “Superman” offers a supposedly rational, pre-packaged solution in the form of “neutral” free-market principles that come from business experts.

Waiting for “Superman” champions a specific set of reforms on behalf of oppressed families, and that is part of the problem. The task of transforming the world falls to the oppressed because only they, and those in solidarity with (not for) them, are capable of perceiving concrete instances of oppression as such. By definition, oppressors cannot access this knowledge; they develop false perceptions and rationalize their perspectives when changing reality would threaten their individual or group interests. Even if an oppressor were able to perceive objective reality, he or she could not liberate the oppressed; this work must be undertaken in full partnership with the oppressed and requires trust in their abilities and knowledges. Freire explains that “attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building.”

Guggenheim tries to play the role of Superman by bringing attention to and providing solutions for the education crisis, but leveraging power from oppressive quarters — including his own dominance as a middle-class white man — further objectifies the oppressed as passive victims in need of rescue from their own incapacity. He evinces the distrust that neoliberal education reformers have towards the people they say they want to help and dismisses subjugated knowledges as irrelevant or, worse yet, as not constitutive of knowledge at all.

The film’s pedagogy, like any pedagogy that originates in “the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression.” Directing an activist film permits Guggenheim to display his humanitarianism and assuage his middle-class white guilt even as he drives past three public schools to drop his kids off at private school, a daily ritual to which he confesses at the start of the film. His false generosity is as conspicuous as it is uncritical, yet it is only conspicuously uncritical from the perspective of critically conscious oppressed people. He does not save anyone from a burning building, but rather adds fuel to the flames.

The impetus for change in “Superman” does not come from the oppressed, but from extraordinarily privileged oppressors who accrue even greater wealth through their allegedly philanthropic activism. The film presents free-market reform, and charter schools in particular, as unequivocally beneficial for everyone even though they primarily serve the interests of their supporters, not students, and certainly not students of low-socioeconomic status. Popular corporate concepts like “accountability,” “performance incentives,” and “consumer choice” have been grafted onto education and have started to change one of American society’s most prized democratic public institutions into something that resembles a business. This approach, to use Freire’s language, “attempt[s] to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication.” Here Freire’s Marxism comes to the fore: in the class struggle between the proletariat and the
bourgeoisie, tactics that originate in the capitalist system cannot bring about a proletarian revolution. That is, the oppressors cannot use the same mechanisms of power that reinforce their dominance to liberate the oppressed.

The free-market reform movement is driven by some of the most privileged people in our society, and the funding and distribution channels for “Superman” belie its humanitarian mission. 65 Paramount Advantage and Participant Media backed the film as a profitable venture, and it grossed nearly $6.5 million at the box office. 66 Paramount Advantage is owned by Viacom, which partnered with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to start the nonprofit Get Schooled project. 67 Jim Berk, Participant Media’s CEO from 2006-2015, was formerly the CEO of Gryphon Colleges Corporation, which operates for-profit secondary schools. 68 Unsurprisingly, The Gates Foundation figures prominently and favorably in ‘Superman’, as does the market-based approach to education reform that other moneyed stakeholders endorse. 69 When CNBC anchors ask, “If you could buy…one type of asset in real estate, what would it be?” Entertainment Properties Trust President and CEO David Brain responds, “the charter school business…it’s our highest growth and most appealing sector…of the portfolio.” Brain explains that charter schools are “very stable, recession-resistant business” because the return on investment come from public state treasuries. 70 He characterizes charter schools as “a very solid business” and demonstrates interest as a savvy capitalist, not as a student or parent. Corporate reformers of education can declare without irony that they are “invested in public education,” yet the nature of their investment differs radically from those of the oppressed. Follow the money, and this activism reveals itself as a profit-making venture for the benefit of the most privileged at the expense of some of our society’s most vulnerable populations.

In contrast, Inconvenient Truth, the grassroots rebuke to “Superman”, was never meant to turn a profit. It has been freely distributed online, along with literature to support discussions after public and private screenings. The same title card at the beginning and end states that it “was produced by parents and teachers in response to the film Waiting for Superman.” The people featured in it are the true stakeholders of education, and they are represented as socially conscious subjects engaged in dialogue, not as objects of dramatic manipulation.

Subjectivation — or, humanization, as Freire calls it — through dialogue means claiming ownership of representational existence. Such a claim depends on a division of the self such that one is capable of self-representation; that is, one must be able to think of oneself as a being simultaneously in the external world and a being in an internal world. This division makes one capable of perceiving oneself as an individual who operates in an external world, and it constitutes the productive alienation or estrangement Kelly Oliver identifies as a privilege attached to subjectivity. 71 Productive alienation, according to Oliver, makes possible self-reflection and a sense of historicity with respect to the self. While animals cannot represent themselves because they are “beings in themselves” and objects continuous with the world, the oppressed experience “being for others” — that is, being defined and represented by others in order to serve as their constitutive other. 72 Being human and a subject means representing oneself as a “being for oneself.” This involves full ownership of one’s body and the products of its labor, ownership of the culture it produces, ownership of its epistemology, and in the end, ownership of its resulting humanity.
Narrating one’s own story asserts subjectivity, but adhering to and reproducing the master narrative of educational uplift can claim only a subjectivity that is subordinate to uplift’s oppressive positivism. Educational uplift aims to change individuals so they fit more neatly into extant structures of oppression and dominant standards for subjectivity. *Waiting for “Superman”* humanizes the education crisis by lending students’ faces and stories to the cause, but does so at the expense of actual students’ sense of humanity. Guggenheim engages in representational colonialism when he appropriates others’ narratives, and bell hooks describes this alienating process:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will talk back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Rewriting you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the centre of my talk.73

Oppressors go beyond subjugating knowledges of marginalized people; they claim such knowledge as property of their own and re-articulate deformed versions of it. They go so far as to re-present this knowledge back to the oppressed as if they alone can be the arbiters of what constitutes knowledge. Nonfictional narratives of educational uplift, such as *The Freedom Writers Diary*, have a similar effect: representing individuals as generic characters in the service of mainstream uplift renders them one-dimensional figures embodying dominant ideological values and not the fully realized humans they are. Moreover, uplift’s cultural script holds out a false promise of subjectivation that does not unfold predictably even for those who follow it closely. Its oppressive functions mean that embedding oneself in the plot line and articulating an empowered position within it is contradictory and cannot lead to authentic liberation.

The uplift narrative derives its power over American society’s cultural imagination primarily from the way it has been ritualized as a subjectivating process. Uplift narratives are ritualistic in the sense that articulating oneself as uplifted is part of the culturally legible process that makes an individual into a subject. Writing or talking about one’s educative experience as uplifting is itself a ritual. The educative conversion ritual that one experiences through schooling works in tandem with the ritual of representing (emplotting and describing) the conversion in an uplift narrative. These two rituals are part of the larger subjectivating ritual of institutional education. In rituals of schooling, students regularly engage in the discursive practices that characterize their social roles.

Conversion metaphors may yet have a place in liberating education. Conversional language is necessary in order to generate transformation, a turn to something new. However, conversion would have to be re-articulated as a component of social change that is not tethered to its hierarchical and religious resonances. We cannot expect to change the structure of an ideological state apparatus such as education by resorting to the rhetoric of the church. Moreover, if we keep the conversional language along with its religious resonances, we inevitably privilege initiates as masters of the narrative. That is, Christian-oriented language cannot help but defer to a higher authority, the ultimate subject who, for our purposes, would represent an originary interpellator. If we are to move towards a new paradigm in which subjects
recognize each other and co-constitute each other’s subjectivities, we must also move away from a model of interpellation that elevates one subject above others.

We need an alternative to educational uplift, but replacing it with another narrative to represent a new teleological standard cannot resolve the contradictions intrinsic to master narratives. There can be no viable alternative narrative because it would necessarily refer back to uplift as its dialogic counterpart and belong to a generic category dependent on uplift for its signification.74 Uplift would remain necessary for the new narrative that displaces it to mean what it does as a substitute. This is why no single counter-narrative can sufficiently displace educational uplift.

Instead of promoting an alternative narrative, I propose moving away from master narratives altogether and embracing dialogue as the means for humanization. Instead of a monolithic master narrative to which the oppressed must subordinate themselves in order to be recognized as subjects, individuals can assert subjectivity by engaging in a dialogue in which they have a distinct and respected voice of their own. Dialogue circumvents Althusser’s subjectivizing hail: entering into a dialogue means that all parties understand from the beginning that their exchange is on equal footing. No participant has authority over another, and all knowledges are valid. Unlike narrative, there are no stock characters in dialogic communication. There is no predetermined answer, no telos to fulfill. Dialogue is necessarily open-ended and, to some extent, improvisational. Participants in dialogue instead of a master narrative would be liberated from emplotments and be able to speak directly (instead of indirectly) to those in power. Master narratives reproduce the conditions and culture of oppressors; dialogue, on the other hand, has the potential to disrupt cultural reproduction that favors the dominators.

Although critical pedagogy and mainstream educational uplift appear to have the same goal of humanization, critical pedagogy challenges uplift’s fundamental assumptions. Whereas uplift considers subpersons deficient and in need of repair or reform through education in order to become more complete subjects, Freire’s critical pedagogy reveals that their deficits have been imposed upon them by oppressors. Uplift seeks to change individuals and “lift” them up out of their state of oppression through education, as if they were responsible for both their oppressed state and transcending it. The primary emphasis is on individual autonomy, not the structural dimensions of inequality that circumscribe autonomy.

Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, aims to mobilize oppressed peoples in solidarity to achieve critical consciousness of their present forms of existence and change oppressive sociopolitical structures. Instead of approaching oppressed individuals as objects of study or reform, critical pedagogy advocates for their position as agents of change engaged with each other in studying and problem-solving “the concrete situation which begets oppression.”75 In doing so, they necessarily transform themselves, but not in compliance with the generic demands of uplift. Freire’s narrative is one of transformation, a form of uplift that posits itself as an alternative but is still couched in the metaphor of conversion. The difference is that he aims to transform the world in such a solidary and continuous manner that praxis would be an everyday matter. Rather than laud the few extraordinary oppressed individuals who manage to achieve the goals their oppressors set out for them, Freire envisions an era of radical humanization in which becoming more human is the norm and not the exception.
The contradictions we apprehend in Freire’s argument reflect the problems and contradictions in our own education system. For example, it is not yet possible to resolve the student-teacher dialectic because we operate within a deeply entrenched system that structurally dichotomizes students and teachers and suppresses the dialectic. Education reform has not made visible the contradictory dichotomy of separating the roles of teacher and student, and this would have to be one of the steps toward a Freirean pedagogy of the oppressed in an American context. Freire argues for the necessity of historicizing one’s situation and context, and by his own logic, it would be ineffective to implement his pedagogy in the United States without modifying it to meet the needs of Americans. Oppression manifests in the United States differently from the way it does in Brazil, or anywhere else.

Current tactics for education reform are focused not on liberation, but on a false liberation that reinforces education as a zero-sum game in which certain players win at the expense of others. The “accountability” that free-market reformers invoke reflects their preoccupation with accountability to oppressors, not to the oppressed. They are not focused on any journey or process; rather, they are fixated on measurable outcomes that serve as proxies for improvement in education without appreciably supporting egalitarianism. Educational uplift is part of a metanarrative about the role of education in the United States. Reform — changing anything for the better — is possible only if emplotment does not pre-determine experience. So long as educational uplift is the only way our society can imagine educative experience, then our capacity to change the education system will likewise be limited.

The aim of liberating education is to humanize, not subjectivate. Subjectivity is a proximate goal; the ultimate objective is to resolve the human versus nonhuman dialectic that informs racialized social hierarchies. This dialectic also takes the form of a person versus subperson or an agent versus subordinate opposition. Freire hopes to generate a radically humanizing synthesis and move towards creating a world free of oppression. Critical pedagogy does not theorize an abstract, humanized, utopic state that is fully liberated from oppression and can remain so indefinitely. It is not intended to put into place a perfect world, but rather to facilitate the work that people must do to strive for a just society. This striving, this movement towards freedom humanizes. A putatively perfect world fixed in a faultless state would be necrophiliac and dehumanizing in its incapacity to change. Humanity consists of reflexive praxis and is not a transitive property conferred upon passive objects. Liberation is a process, not a destination, and in the act of “naming the world,” one simultaneously changes it and oneself. The work of liberating education is never complete, but must be ongoing. This work proceeds in a spiral rather than a cycle because it enters new territory and discovers new knowledges. What humanizes is the active and reflective pursuit of a more just and humane world.

Notes


6 See Deborah Owens’ *The Origins of the Common Core: How the Free Market Became Public Education Policy* for a historical analysis of how free-market principles came to be viewed as the key to education reform.


12 Guggenheim, 32.


14 Anthony does not win the lottery but gets a place at his chosen school by moving off of a waitlist.

15 Tyack and Cuban, 10.

16 Guggenheim, 41.


22 Guggenheim, 37.


24 Guggenheim, 28.

25 Guggenheim, 28.


29 Bell, 102.


31 Bell, 100.

32 Bell, 213.

33 Freire, 74.

34 Freire, 76.


36 Freire, 145-146.

37 Freire, 157.


39 Freire, 45.

40 Freire, 48, 166-167.


42 Bell, 103.
A subject contains within itself the agent/subordinate dialectic, and Freire envisions the resolution of that dialectic into the human. His theory of humanization changes what it means to be a subject such that it might be more appropriate to refer to humanization as a synthesis of autonomy and subordination.

Freire, 80.

Freire, 134.


Freire, 84.

Freire, 99.

Freire, 68.

Freire, 81.

Freire, 88.

Freire, 80.

Freire, 83.

Freire, 84.

Freire, 89.

Bell, 100-101.

Freire, 52.


Freire, 52.

Freire, 65.

Freire, 83.

Barbara Miner has explored the conspicuous wealth behind “Superman” and the convergence of “digital billionaires” and right-wing conservatives in support of free-market reform in “Ultimate Superpower: Supersized Dollars Drive “Waiting for Superman” Agenda.”

Based on the biographies of the Get Schooled staff, it appears that none of its employees have actual teaching experience or qualifications, though they are well-versed in social media and “education advocacy,” primarily through work for the Gates Foundation.


This would be similar to eradicating whiteness without also eliminating its constitutive other, non-whiteness.

Freire, 50.
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