The Jeffersonian Ideal: Liberal Arts and the Hope of Democratic Education in Rural America

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ABSTRACT

This thesis posits that neoliberal educational policies have damaged the democratic opportunities of students from marginalized communities. In order to counter the hierarchical structures brought on by neoliberalism, Thomas Jefferson's vision of the yeoman farmer provides the foundational rationale for how a Liberal Arts education is meant to destabilize the political, social, and economic structures that threaten democracy. Jefferson's yeoman represents the working class individual who engaged in intellectual pursuits in order to better understand who they are and their place in society. Through the yeoman farmer's ability to work, read, and think for themselves, Jefferson believed that this individual was uniquely placed to freely participate in society. Therefore, the call of the 21st Century educator is to challenge the alienating nature of educational policies that shift the focus to economic factors and inspire marginalized students to embrace the democratic hope of Jefferson's farmer. In order to fulfill this role, educators have to embody the wholistic visions of education set forth by Thomas Jefferson, W. E. B. Dubois, John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and a host of other voices who have promoted the American Liberal Arts tradition. Chapter One begins the argument with the importance of Jefferson's vision for a democratic educational system then diachronically examines competing ideologies within American discourse between the 18th and 20th centuries. Chapter Two analyzes the ways that neoliberalism is impacting the democratic opportunities of American students, with a particular focus on rural education. Chapter Three uses Emerson's *The American Scholar* to argue that humanities teachers need to develop a democratic pedagogy. Chapter Four proposes a framework for four major questions that I believe reflect the liberal arts tradition that was elevated by our forebears who were invested in how education serves as the foundation for liberal democracy.

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Despite common narratives within this country that project egalitarianism and democratic values, the idea of America is not monolithic. Often referred to as the American Experiment by historians and popular thinkers alike, there is a general understanding that there are competing ideals when it comes to what this country should be, and that the tension surrounding said struggle has the potential to pull the nation forward or asunder. As the United States moves rapidly through the 21st Century, the threats to democratic discourse and engagement are becoming increasingly clear; with some academics and social commentators questioning whether the American Experiment could fail in the near future. Few people in American history understood the precarious nature of American democracy better than Thomas Jefferson, and few issues localize this argument more than our views on education. Thomas Jefferson, despite some of his limited 18th Century provincial thinking, provides the foundational rationale for how education must function as the impetus for democratic engagement. As such, this chapter will explore how Jefferson's educational model has been carried throughout the centuries and how the abandonment of his views on democratic education have led to the further entrenchment of hierarchical structures that have fundamentally damaged the hopes of democracy for many Americans.

To begin, it must be noted that issues surrounding education are never going to be binary or static in nature; however, for the sake of the argument going forward, it will be noted that Jefferson's ideals are superior to someone like his sometimes adversary, John Adams, as a way to emphasize that Jefferson's views on education are better suited for promoting democratic thought and engagement in modern America. This does not mean that Adam's views hold no value, or that it is necessary to wholly adopt Jefferson's ideology and leave aside any of his

naysayers; rather, through the exploration of how Jefferson's ideas have existed and changed since the 18th Century, it will be important to note how - despite being advocated for by many prominent institutions and educational philosophers over time - democratic schooling practices have been shunted to the side in favor of neoliberal agendas that damage democracy. As such, the information provided throughout this chapter, as well as the rest of the thesis, will suggest, in generally binary terms, that Jefferson and his forebears are correct in their assumptions, with the understanding that there is room for nuance and multivariate approaches to education as a means to achieve a democratic future for students.

Additionally, Jefferson posits that liberal education is a necessary part of a truly democratic society. While the terms liberal and democracy are not entirely synonymous, the traditions of democratic and Liberal Arts movements are both attempting to build on a history of scholarly work that dates back to the Greeks and has strong roots within Western approaches to the education process. Being that the public education system, both in secondary and collegiate education, has largely moved from valuing this tradition, the argument for embracing Jefferson's educational vision is that training students to embrace a mindset grounded in the liberal arts tradition is a necessary component to providing a democratic opportunity for students - especially those who hail from marginalized communities.

Furthermore, conflict has always been a driving part of the discourse surrounding Liberal Arts education (Harpham 23), and this chapter will diachronically analyze the tension between Jefferson's educational model with competing ideologies. As briefly noted in the introduction, educational philosophies are generally representative of larger political and economic ideologies, and an analysis of the conflicting ideas found throughout key historical periods demonstrates why the Jeffersonian model goes beyond pastoral pining to become a critical argument for how

American schools must play an important role in preserving the democratic aims of the Founding Fathers. Thus, the appeal for embracing a Jeffersonian ideal of education will be more about using history as a means to look to the future of American education rather than becoming glued to some romantic view of an educational system that never truly served all citizens.

Many of the Founding Fathers saw that education was going to be a critical part of participating in the American experience. For them, education was largely viewed as the primary way to ward off government tyranny, which made it essential to be able to read, write, and think critically about what was being communicated by authority figures; and, more than anyone else during the beginning of the American experiment, Jefferson believed that a liberal education should be the vehicle through which hierarchies are challenged in order for the common man to experience the hope of individual freedom. Nowhere is his goal of individual freedom seen more clearly than his vision of who he believed should be viewed as the archetypal hero within his American democratic society: the yeoman farmer.

Jefferson's clearest outline of the importance he placed on the role of yeoman farmer to democracy came in his "Notes on the State of Virginia" (1787), when he argues that:

> Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth… Dependance begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. (Query XIX)

In this reflection on the value of the yeoman farmer, he expresses his belief that those who "labour in the earth" were made by God for "his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue," because, for Jefferson, it was impossible to disconnect farming from virtue (Query XIX).

Jefferson thought that the integrity of the American democratic experience belonged in the hands of those who were freely tending and holding land for themselves, a practice that enables economic freedom for the individual. It is, then, through the ability to remove oneself from the burden of oppressive economic structures - that Jefferson imagined his yeoman farmers to imbue their lives with the "sacred fire" that allowed them to counter a life of "subservience and venality" (Query XIX).

The notion of a "sacred fire" being available to independent agricultural work is a key factor for Jefferson's construction of his ideal American citizen. Jefferson argues that, due to the self reliance of the yeoman farmer, the hierarchical systems that foster corruption and servitude will not receive the required fodder needed to survive - thus, allowing the conditions for democracy to thrive. It is through the yeoman's relationship between the land and their personal independence that Jefferson believes that the fuel is found to keep the "sacred fire" of democracy lit. He, then, evokes the imagery of "those who labour in the earth" as a foil for the corruption that he sees within the hierarchies entrenched in cities by equating their effect on the government to what "sores do to the strength of the human body" (Query XIX). By establishing the juxtaposition between the virtue of those who tend the field versus the corrupt nature of the city, Jefferson is creating tension between individual freedom and the hierarchies found within society, and it is through this tension that Jefferson's farmer becomes the archetypal hero of the American story.

For Jefferson, it is impossible to divorce his commitment to individualism, and the freedom seen in the yeoman farmer, from his views on liberal education, because he believed that "only an informed citizenry would be able to see through the ruses used by governmental authorities" and that "exposure to the competition of ideas would allow citizens to judge who

could best represent their interests" (qtd in Roth 23). Jefferson's commitment to the Enlightenment enabled him to create for himself a picture of his ideal American: an educated farmer, who owned his own land and was able to critically engage with themselves, their neighbors, and those who governed over society. For the yeoman farmer to have access to education, then, was the foundational element for him to be able to "judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom" (qtd in Roth 24). In order for this goal to be accomplished, Jefferson insisted that all white, male students have the opportunity to be trained in the rhetoric and critical thinking skills that were birthed out of an Enlightenment understanding of Ancient Greece and Rome (Kimball 142).

Through a combination of education and independent agricultural work, Jefferson sought for the yeoman farmer to be the archetypal individual within American democracy. For Jefferson, this character would be economically and intellectually able to freely engage with democratic society as an autonomous person - not simply as a pawn in some arbitrarily created stratification. Thus, for the characterization of the yeoman farmer to be complete, this individual would be represented by someone who worked the fields during the day and read someone like Horace, one of Jefferson's favorite poets (Wilson 434), at night; and, while Jefferson clearly idealized this vision of a perfect farmer, his hope of an educated, free individual as a necessary part of democracy is partly grounded in the idyllic individual in Horace's Second Epode:

> A man is blessed who, free from any business deals,
>
> As were the mortal race of old,
>
> With his own oxen works among ancestral fields,
>
> Free from debts of any sort,
>
> He hears no martial trumpet calling him to war

Nor fears to face the angry sea,

And he avoids the forum and the haughty gates

Of influential citizens. (1-8)

Jefferson wanted the yeoman farmer to be able to read and see himself as the "blessed" individual who is able to freely participate in society through Horace's "Second Epode." Throughout the poem, there is an extended meditation on "the joys of country life" as well as "a satirical attack on the individual who is dissatisfied with his lot, yet unwilling to change" (Heyworth 74). Jefferson's Enlightenment beliefs caused him to elevate the individual who engaged in intellectual pursuits in order to better understand who they are and their place in society; so, for the yeoman farmer to be able to read the entirety of this poem, understand its satirical nature, and come to the conclusion to resist the singular, economic narrative of the poem's speaker (Heyworth 80), meant for Jefferson that said individual would be truly free to participate in democracy.

Jefferson was not alone in his Enlightenment views on education, though. Much like a majority of the Founding Fathers, both Jefferson and Adams "were caught up in the currents of the Enlightenment" (Wood 9); however, their individual perspectives varied widely in terms of how they imagined America's Enlightenment ideals would manifest for the future. Gordon S. Wood's book, *Friends Divided: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson*, explores the rift and distills part of their differences within the idea that:

> Jefferson rode these currents and was exhilarated by the experience, Adams often resisted them and questioned their direction. Jefferson had few doubts about the future; indeed, perhaps more than any other American, Jefferson came to personify the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. He always dreamed of a new and better world to

come; by contrast, Adams always had qualms and uncertainties about the future. (Wood 9)

Wood contends that this difference - between the pessimistic Adams and optimistic Jefferson - is one of the grounding epistemological reasons that Jefferson's hope for America is still more powerful than Adam's grounded realism, and it is this hope that gives Jefferson a more convincing argument for how to imagine public education.

Wood builds on this idea by describing Jefferson as a "moral idealist, a child of light," who was convinced in the inherently good, moral qualities of the individual (Wood 9). He stresses that, for Jefferson, it was "only when people's good nature was perverted by outside forces, especially by the power and privilege of monarchical government, did they become bad" (Wood 10). As such, when looking at their ideology through an educational lens, it is easy to see why Jefferson is regularly thought of as being one of the forebears of public education. At his core, he had a stronger belief in the capacity of the individual American citizen, a better vision of the ideals to which every American should aspire, and he knew that education needed to be an integral part of promoting this democratic spirit within the broader populace.

Despite Jefferson's strong idealization of the yeoman farmer, there are definitely criticisms to be lodged his way in regards to the scope and degree to which disenfranchised portions of society were denied education and basic human rights during the eighteenth century; nevertheless, his hope in the idea that a liberal arts education ought to be one of the primary cornerstones for a democratic society was not misplaced (Taylor 3). Although he was subjected to the limited viewpoint of the time, Jefferson's belief in a well-educated society was progressive for someone from his privileged position. He understood that an educated populace is the only way to encourage the necessary discourse that would push for the social and political reforms

needed to move the citizenry and government forward, and he believed that a truly democratic government needed to provide the educational opportunities to the voting public in order for them to be able to make informed changes for their futures (Taylor 162).

Arguably one of Jefferson's most succinct arguments for his beliefs on the important role that education plays within a fledgling democracy comes in the form of a legislative defense of a bill he sponsored between 1778 and 1780 known as "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge." His opening lines to the Virginia Legislator are as follows:

> And whereas it is generally true that the people will be happiest whose laws are best, and are best administered, and that laws will be wisely formed, and honestly administered, in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance; but the indigence of the greater number disabling them from so educating, at their own expence, those of their children whom nature hath fitly formed and disposed to become useful instruments for the public, it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expence of all, than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or the wicked. (Jefferson)

Throughout this speech, where Jefferson outlines that laws ought to be created and governed by those who are "wise" and "honest" for "promoting the publick happiness," it is evident that Jefferson had high hopes for the purpose of education in America, and he imagined that a

publicly funded "liberal education" is what was needed to keep rural and poorer students from suffering at the hands of a system that disproportionately favored the wealthy.

To fulfill his lofty goal of democratic education in Virginia, Jefferson proposed the creation of subdivisions of publicly funded educational wards that serviced each township (Taylor 162). Through the creation of these smaller school districts, Jefferson envisioned a three-tiered system that would help provide students - mostly white males - with the opportunity to receive enough schooling to be able to engage with the democratic process while also discovering whether or not any of the students possessed the natural ability to progress to an university (Taylor 163). While the lack of inclusivity is regressive from a modern perspective, what Jefferson was suggesting about the role of education was a major disruption to the systems of power that were already forming within the young nation's economic and political structures.

Jefferson's idea of promoting education among the masses was spurred on by his hope of disrupting what he refers to in his writings as the "unnatural aristocracy" (Roth 26). As one of our country's most staunch and hopeful defenders of democracy, Jefferson astutely uses the word aristocracy to demonstrate an understanding that we need to be critical of the economic, political, and social hierarchies that develop within societies - while not being entirely critical of the idea of hierarchies themselves. For Jefferson, he is all too keenly aware that aristocracies are not based on merit, so he is drawing attention to the fact that America will follow the aristocratic pull of Europe if educational opportunities are not provided to those who want them.

In stark contrast to Jefferson's hope of disrupting any sense of oligarchic rule already entrenched within American political and economic practices, John Adams was afraid of upsetting the social order and did not want to rush change (Wood 132). Adams's pessimism "assumed that American society would eventually mature and become less egalitarian, more

hierarchical, and more like the societies of Europe" (320 Wood); and, while Adams's prophecy about the future of America has largely remained grounded within a cynicism that has proven to be fairly accurate (Wood 431), there is nothing within his worldview that can reinvigorate the democratic hope of this country in the way that Jefferson's ideas still manage to do (Wood 429).

While Adams would arguably not recognize modern neoliberalism, the representation of market driven ideologies in our schools is not far from his vision of future American society and politics. Wood stresses that "Adams was preoccupied with the existence of inequality, not equality. He believed that aristocracies would inevitably emerge to dominate all societies, including that of the United States, and these aristocracies would not necessarily be based on talent and merit; ancestry and money, especially money, would be more important." (431) Although this concept will be delved into more in the next chapter, it must be noted that Adams had an eerily accurate premonition of what will ultimately matter in American society: money. For Adams, America was nothing unique and had the same flaws of all other societies (Wood 431), a belief that is vastly divergent from Jefferson's idea of what America was and had the potential to be.

As a result, it was Jefferson's belief that America was different and set apart from other countries that allowed him to be invested in the need to build up the education system in Virginia. Wood contends that, unlike Adams's cynical view of American political and social life, "Jefferson wanted no part of the hereditary aristocracies, gross social inequalities, bloated executives, oppressive debts, and the huge and expensive military establishments that characterized the traditional European monarchies." (Wood 320-321) While our government, society, and educational systems have not collectively lived up to Jefferson's high ideals, it is through his vision that we should aspire to challenge the floundering status quo of American

democratic identity, as he "offered Americans a set of beliefs that through the generations have supplied a bond that holds together the most diverse nation that history has ever known" (Wood 433).

For someone like Jefferson, then, the problem is not a ruling class; rather, he was concerned about the ways that limiting educational opportunities to only include the wealthy would create a society that was designed by those who did not earn the privilege to shape it. Although Jefferson's hope for education to disrupt the "unnatural aristocracy" (Roth 26) is democratic in theory, it must be stated that his desire for all to be educated did not extend to every facet of American society in his day. Jefferson, as an individual, represents the tension seen throughout many sectors of American life and the educational system over the course of time. Despite the fact that he desired political, social, educational, and personal freedom, he did not see a clear way that his ideas of freedom should be extended beyond white males; however, the strength of his vision lies in the fact that it has been able to be transferred beyond his 18th Century worldview, with many voices willing to champion the call to liberally educate the working class.

Two of the more prominent examples of the discourse on how to make education more democratic can be seen in the 19th Century educational philosophers: Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois. Both men, Washington and Dubois, are excellent examples of Jefferson's "natural aristocracy", as they excelled as influential educators and public thinkers - despite the fact that they were excluded from most of society's benefits for being African American. Both were committed to providing an educational vision to help achieve democratic aims for their fellow African Americans; however, the tension that existed in their differing ideas also mirrors much of the conversation surrounding 21st Century education as well.

Arguably, between the two, Booker T. Washington's pragmatic view of education goes against the broader liberal arts view and most closely resembles the ethos for much of modern education today. While Washington was not directly critical of the value of a liberal arts education, he wanted to emphasize the need for former slaves to be able to prioritize getting a job and financial security. As such, he found that the liberal arts tradition denied equitable economic opportunities to former slaves, because, from his perspective, the broader educational path of the liberal arts lacked the vocational foundation to warrant investing their time and energy. Washington found that "there were young men educated in foreign tongues, but few in carpentry or in mechanical or architectural drawing. Many were trained in Latin, but few as engineers and blacksmiths. Too many were taken from the farm and educated, but educated in everything but farming." (Roth 63)

Washington's words point to the idea that education is only democratic when it provides economic incentives that would allow his fellow African Americans to participate in society. Although I am sure that Mr. Washington was not the first to argue this point, his position that a practical education is what matters most for the disenfranchised is still a major part of educational discourse within higher education and parochial schools today. In fact, Washington's viewpoints can be seen in the following quote, from the founder of the Hampton Institute in 1868, Brigadier General Samuel Armstrong:

> The thing to be done was clear: to train selected Negro youth who should go out and teach and lead their people first by example, by getting land and homes; to give them root a dollar that they could earn for themselves; to teach respect for labor, to replace stupid drudgery with skilled hands, and in this way to build up an industrial system for the sake not only of self-support and intelligent labor, but

also for the sake of character.

By focusing on the broad concepts of "labor" and "character", the whole pedagogical bend of schools tends to elevate the practicality of employment and "the things of real life" (Hampton Institute) rather than the liberal arts, which was deemed to be superfluous to the educational process. Therefore, due to the prominence of Booker T. Washington and the Hampton Institute at this time, the conversation surrounding the real value of education - especially for marginalized communities - was starting to be framed, in the 19th Century, around the process of education primarily being a means to an end rather than a lifelong pursuit of being the engaged, informed citizen that Jefferson imagined being needed for a democratic society.

In contrast with Washington, W. E. B. Dubois was an ardent supporter of the liberal arts tradition from which he benefited. Dubois pushed back against Washington's views as missing the point on what education should focus: the individual learner. Dubois believed that education was not to "simply teach bread-winning, or to furnish teachers for the public schools, or to be a centre of polite society; it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization" (65). For him, education was not about obtaining mere knowledge or a skill to gain employment; rather, Dubois embodied the liberal arts ethos about the purpose of education being centered around the need to teach to the whole student, which will provide them with the opportunity to critically engage with themselves and the world around them.

In what was to arguably become his most seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk,* Dubois uttered many of the same ideas espoused by Jefferson and the notion of developing a form of education that upended hierarchies by promoting individualism. When thinking about the misguided nature of myopically thinking about education, he posited that:

> If these things are so, how foolish to ask what is the best education for one or seven or sixty million souls! Shall we teach them the trades, or train them in the liberal arts? Neither and both: teach the workers to work and the thinkers to think; make carpenters of carpenters, and philosophers of philosophers, and fops of fools. Nor can we pause here. We are training not isolated men but a living group of men, - nay, a group within a group. And the final product of our training must be neither a psychologist nor a brick mason, but a man. (67)

By stating that educators need to assess students for what they are capable of achieving, he is echoing much of Jefferson's hopes about education elevating the freedom of the individual; however, by the virtue of Dubois being an African American, he is broadening the idea of who can be included in the conversation on who gets educated, which essentially proves Jefferson's hope of meritocracy correct.

In this idea, we see that the goal for a liberal arts education is about providing students with the opportunity to decide for themselves what path to take, which is different from what Washington deemed as the best path. As such, from Dubois's argument, the hope is that the process of education is for the development of the individual rather than just another cog to be used in the economy. This is not to say that Dubois wished for all men to go to college. Rather, he was ultimately concerned with the idea of education becoming Washington's means to a particular end, as he expressed further in his essay, "The Talented Tenth":

> If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of schools - intelligence, broad sympathy,

> knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it - this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life. (203)

By focusing on what it means to be "men," Dubois is stating that being a human is more than just fulfilling a perfunctory role in society. He underscores the belief that many put in a liberal arts education that it is imperative to expose students to a broader contextual understanding of life in order to help support their individual efforts - regardless of whether or not they choose to attend university or go work in a factory.

To be fair to Washington, though, Dubois' view of education does not entirely do away with the need for technical education; however, he did believe that the only way to embrace Jefferson's ideals of an educated citizenry cannot be done if vocational training is the end goal. When comparing the two, Dubois has a better understanding of the disparities found within the educational system, and he sees that the only way forward is being able to equip all students with a similar ability to wrestle with the larger issues of life:

> The aim of the higher training of the college is the development of power, the training of a self whose balanced assertion will mean as much as possible for the great ends of civilization. The aim of technical training on the other hand is to enable the student to master the present methods of earning a living in some particular way… We must give our youth a training designed above all to make them men of power, of thought, of trained and cultivated taste; men who know whither civilization is tending and what it means. (qtd. In Roth 77)

Dubois cannot be any more correct when he says that the goal of education is the "development of power," a statement that predates many who will be engaging in 20th Century educational philosophy. As such, this complex idea is directly in contrast with Washington's notion of education as a means to gain employment, as that is frame of thinking will only reinforce traditional power structures; and, although Washington's vision for education has largely come true, Dubois shares the same hope as Jefferson that a populace that has been exposed to a liberal arts education is the best chance to promote a citizenry that is able to understand what is happening around them and why it might matter.

As educational philosophies moved from the 19th to the 20th Century, though, Dubois's notion of education being about the "development of power" (qtd. in Roth 77) became an increasingly important factor in how the discourse has shaped around the function of education in America, with the philosophies of John Dewey and Milton Friedman representing widely divergent - yet important - claims on what kind of power is exercised in the classroom: individual or hierarchical. Through an analysis of the juxtaposition represented within the ideas of these formative thinkers, it becomes clear how the Jeffersonian model has conceded territory in the classroom as well as within the American imagination; however, despite the ways in which Jefferson and Dewey's vision of education's role in American democracy is faltering in the 21st Century, the remainder of this chapter will be outlining why their hopes still represent the goal of the American educational system and why Friedman's neoliberal dream lays the foundation for the ways in which our models further marginalize disenfranchised students and harm democracy.

To begin, Friedman was one of the 20th Century's most prolific economic and political philosophers, and his philosophies represent the kind of hyper liberalization of the individual in a way that counters the idea that liberalism to meant "to champion personal autonomy and human

dignity, freedom of thought and belief, and reasoned debate as a means of progress" (Daniels 12). Rather than focusing on personal autonomy as a way of achieving personal and social progress, Friedman describes his brand of neoliberalism, in his 1955 essay "The Role of Education in Government":

> I shall assume a society that takes freedom of the individual, or more realistically the family, as its ultimate objective, and seeks to further this objective by relying primarily on voluntary exchange among individuals for the organization of economic activity. In such a free private enterprise exchange economy, government's primary role is to preserve the rules of the game by enforcing contracts, preventing coercion, and keeping markets free. (1)

In Friedman's neoliberalism, the liberal ideal of autonomy and human dignity is supplanted by the primacy of free markets and economic objectives - ultimately reducing the freedom and value of the individual to nothing more than their "economic activity" and ability to elevate "free private enterprise".

Friedman's reduction of the individual has further implications for the view he espoused on the role of education within a democratic society. To his credit, Friedman confesses that education is an important aspect of democracy, but his justification for the goals of education further demonstrate the degree to which neoliberal ideology lacks any hope for substantive democratic engagement. Friedman argues that:

> A stable and democratic society is impossible without widespread acceptance of some common set of values and without a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of most citizens. Education contributes to both. In consequence, the gain from the education of a child accrues not only to the child or to his parents but to other members of

> the society; the education of my child contributes to other people's welfare by promoting a stable and democratic society. (2)

Though Friedman's rhetoric about education mirrors aspects of a liberal democracy, his emphasis on the "minimum degree" of education underscores the real agenda of education being reduced to a transaction-based economic model. Rather than embracing Jefferson's vision of democratic education being about freedom for the individual, Friedman thought democracy is achieved through education when children, teachers, and educational models produce favorable products for the economy. As such, Friedman suggests that students - and the educational system at large - be considered as an extension of "human capital" (8) as a means to understand the relationship between the minimal amount invested to the economic product in the end. Within Friedman's worldview, then, the education of students is to be viewed to a similar degree that the ways in which "owners of buildings, and frequently of automobiles, are required to adhere to specified standards to protect the safety of others." (2)

In stark contrast to the reductive, market driven ideology promoted by Friedman, John Dewey represents the 20th Century fulfillment of the democratic vision that was set forth by Jefferson and Dubois. Michael Roth hails Dewey as being one of the "most significant philosophers" to focus on education and expresses the importance of the connection between Jefferson and Dewey lies in the fact that:

> Dewey rejected the modern forms of narrow vocationalism for the same reasons he rejected the traditional concentration on the Great Books: they were anti-democratic, and they set artificial boundaries on inquiry. His thinking about education and experience drew on Jefferson's pioneering pedagogical experiments, and Dewey reinvigorated the development of a broad, reflexive, and pragmatic version of liberal learning. (165)

Unlike Friedman, Dewey was concerned with a way of thinking about learning that, according to Roth, was "broad" and "reflexive," rather than the reductive thinking seen in the overview of Friedman's educational perspective (165).

For Dewey, it is imperative to embrace the same light that was seen by Jefferson rather than embrace the cynicism seen in Adams and Friedman. Like Jefferson, he understood that education is the spark that was going to keep the fires of democracy lit throughout future generations, which means that students and educational philosophies cannot be viewed simply within practical terms. Dewey expressed that, "democratic society is peculiarly dependent for its maintenance upon the use in forming a course of study of criteria which are broadly human. Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class" (87). Dewey's criticism of elevating utilitarian educational philosophies over those that are "broadly human" functions as a sharp rebuke for those who - like Friedman - imagine that democracy can function when education is limited to economic mindsets.

Dewey's notion of focusing on the supremacy of things that are "broadly human" does not mean that economics should have no influence over educational issues; rather, he just believed that pedagogical beliefs should be bent towards the individual within society rather than the other way around. In fact, Dewey evokes Jefferson to underscore the degree to which he saw economics influencing educational choices:

> Thomas Jefferson predicted evils that might come to man with the too-rapid development of manufacturing industries, because, as he saw it, the backbone of any democratic society was the farmer who owned and cultivated his own land. He saw the farmer as a

> man who could control his own economic destiny, a man who, therefore, could stand on his own feet and be really a free citizen of a free country. What he feared was what might happen when men lost the security of economic independence and became dependent upon others. (97)

Again, in continued opposition to the ideas espoused by those like Friedman, Dewey believes that the intersection between economics and education lies in the idea of independence for the individual, not in their responsibility and value to the marketplace.

So, while Friedman stressed that "the social gain from education is presumably greatest for the very lowest levels of education" (3) and questioned how literacy and higher education raises the "economic value of the student" (3), Dewey anticipated the forces that American economic pull might have on future generations and lodged a thoughtful rebuke on how limited and dangerous the scope economic philosophy would have on democratic schooling:

> The notion that the "essentials" of elementary education are the three R's mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals. Unconsciously it assumes that these ideals are unrealizable; it assumes that in the future, as in the past, getting a livelihood, "making a living," must signify for most men and women doing things which are not significant, freely chosen, and ennobling to those who do them; doing things which serve ends unrecognized by those engaged in them, carried on under the direction of others for the sake of pecuniary reward. (87-88)

Here, despite being written decades prior to Friedman's article, Dewey is pointing out the cynicism that is rooted in his ideological assumptions about what is good for the student: work devoid of meaning. He continues his attack on this narrow frame of thinking when he states that:

> They imply a somewhat parasitic cultivation bought at the expense of not having the

> enlightenment and discipline which come from concern with the deepest problems of common humanity. A curriculum which acknowledges the social responsibilities of education must present situations where problems are relevant to the problems of living together, and where observation and information are calculated to develop social insight and interest. (Dewey 87-88)

It is critical for Dewey that classrooms prioritize helping students make explicit connections between the work that they are doing and the "deepest problems of common humanity" (88). The classroom, then, must "present situations" where students are able to navigate their participation in society in order to help them find their personal and social bearings (88).

Providing opportunities for individual exploration and growth is important, because, for Dewey, it is impossible to separate the democratic, economic, and educational ideals that are constructed in the classroom from a student's identity. In a truly democratic society, education cannot be the vehicle through which work becomes divorced from meaning. Schools have to be places "to cultivate the idea of the supremacy of the method of intelligence, of understanding, the method of goodwill and of mutual sympathy over and above force" (Dewey 99) as well as places that serve to underscore a larger sense of humanity (Dewey 99). Like Jefferson, Dewey believed that it was incumbent upon the United States to be the leaders in demonstrating the ways that education operates to promote democratic thought and values:

> With our fortunate position in the world I think that if we used our resources, including our financial resources, to build up among ourselves a genuine, true and effective democratic society, we would find that we have a surer, a more enduring and a more powerful defense of democratic institutions both within ourselves and with relation to the rest of the world than the surrender to the belief in force, violence, and war can ever give.

> I know that our schools are doing a great deal to inculcate ideas of peace, but I sometimes wonder how far this goes beyond a certain sentimental attachment to a realization of what peace would actually mean in the world in the way of cooperation, goodwill, and mutual understanding. (99)

Unfortunately, despite the great voices and lofty ideals of Jefferson, Dubois, and Dewey, the current American educational landscape is not upholding Dewey's notion that "schools are doing a great deal to inculcate ideas of peace" (99); rather, now more than ever, the rhetoric surrounding education in America seems to be more hopeless and less democratic as we further adopt the neoliberal realism that was pushed in the 20th Century by Friedman and others.

As noted throughout this chapter, there has always been tension surrounding the various claims of what the purpose of education is in the country. Even Jefferson's various educational pleas were regularly foiled by his fellow politicians, despite his prominent political position, character, and wealth (Taylor 164).

The tension, though, is what should challenge those who care about democratic educational opportunities to continue to push to provide American students with the hopeful ideals that were spurred on by Jefferson, Dubois, Dewey, and a whole litany of others. There are a lot of traditions within the American experience that have been fueled by bigotry, misogyny, and ignorance, which are currently being rightly challenged throughout many facets of society; however, before moving to the exploration of how neoliberal ideology is the root of our current educational and democratic issues, it is important to note that the idealistic traditions of democratic liberalism within American society is something worth defending. John Dewey understood the threat to education, as well as the value of the traditions that helped him develop

his philosophy on education, and he expressed his commitment to the American experiment when he stated that:

> I hope I yield to none in appreciation of the great American tradition, for tradition is something that is capable of being transmitted as an emotion and as an idea from generation to generation. We have a great and precious heritage from the past, but to be realized, to be translated from an idea and an emotion, this tradition has to be embodied by active effort in the social relations which we as human beings bear to each other under present conditions. It is because the conditions of life change, that the problem of maintaining a democracy becomes new, and the burden that is put upon the school, upon the educational system is not that of stating merely the ideas of the men who made this country, their hopes and their intentions, but of teaching what a democratic society means under existing conditions. (Dewey 96)

In order to move forward as a liberal democratic society, then, Americans must understand the tensions that have always existed within our historical approaches to education while concomitantly elevating the liberal educational views of Jefferson, Dubois, and Dewey. The focus of the next chapter is on the ways in which we sacrifice democracy when schools lose sight of Jefferson's moral and political aims of what education can be in America, and there is clear evidence that neoliberalism has become the dominant ideological force within most public schools. Therefore, there is a desperate need to reinvigorate the discourse about what is best for marginalized students in order to provide the best educational experience possible and keep Jefferson's hope of the democratically engaged, educated individual alive.

Democracy Left Behind: Neoliberalism and America's Schools

The American dream has long supposed that hard work and determination is enough to grant every citizen the opportunity to live a successful life; yet, as we move through the 21st Century, the reality cannot be any more different. While America has not fully devolved into an oligarchy, economic and educational opportunities are being stripped from the working and poor classes, as wealthy families and communities continue to amass hegemonic control over economic resources and the hope afforded by educational opportunity. For most of the 20th Century, one of the promises of public education is that it is meant to be a great democratizing force within society; however, neoliberal, market-driven ideology has permeated schools and has further exacerbated the educational disparities for students from marginalized communities. Therefore, students who attend private schools, universities, or have been fortunate enough to be born in the right zip code, have an advantage over their peers that ultimately threatens democracy. This chapter will examine the impact of neoliberalism and demonstrate how shifting the onus of education to focus on economic factors and incentives further alienates marginalized students from participating in a democratic society.

To start, the concept of neoliberalism differs widely from classical liberalism. This distinction is important to note, especially since much of the last chapter was aimed at examining the tension between those who championed a more classical liberal arts approach to education with competing, more cynical educational philosophies. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, neoliberalism is defined as an "ideology and policy model that emphasizes the value of free market competition" ("Neoliberalism"). As that is somewhat of a broad definition, the authors of *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality* provide some analysis and state that the main goal of neoliberalism "is the allocation of power and who benefits from how

social goods are allocated. Since 1980, neoliberalism has been the prevailing ideology in American policy and politics, and the field of education has proven no exception." (Horsford et al. 22) As seen through the dichotomy between Dewey and Friedman, the question remains, though, as to what extent educators, students, and the various community stakeholders are impacted from an educational system that favors free market competition. To explore the impact neoliberalism has on education policy further, it is important to look at the connection between American economic and education policies, with the aim being to show that neoliberal education policies lead to growing class inequalities that ultimately damage the democratic opportunities for American students - and, arguably, democracy itself.

As noted in the previous chapter, many of the founding fathers and preeminent educational thinkers throughout American history hoped that public education would be the force to propel American citizens, from all economic backgrounds, into some sort of meritocratic society that allowed opportunities for all who were willing or able; yet, as American government and society has pressed on throughout the years, the 21st Century has found the average American citizen in a position that denies them the opportunity to fully engage in many levels of education that would allow them to enter into the meritocracy envisioned throughout the development of our country's public education system. Despite the fact that there has always been considerable debate about the goals of education, it is clear that, in the United States, "the economic goals have undeniably become front and center in the wake of the ascendency of neoliberalism with its emphasis on the individual as human capital and its promotion of the neoliberal State that has intensified competition among individuals" (Horsford et al. 31).

The economic incentive of education is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it does not matter if you go into a classroom, board meeting, administrator office, or attend a PTA meeting,

the purpose of education is almost always going to be the same: help students get jobs. While some students and superintendents will give lip service to the goals of a liberal arts education, the fact remains that most students - and definitely most administrators - are held within the confines of a narrow, neoliberal ideology that reduces students to the idea of being human capital. In so doing, the neoliberal argument tends to make arguments about what types of jobs the economy will need, which in turn shapes the educational policies that impact students (Horsford et al. 29).

While many can agree that the shift in how we currently teach can be traced back to neoliberal ideas between the 1950s through the 1980s, there is no denying that much of what is talked about in terms of education is linked to ideas about the U.S., and by proxy our students, being able to compete in an increasingly global economy (Horsford et al. 4).The fears surrounding our ability to compete with other nations, which is felt by governmental top brass as well as parents, has been common for decades. The authors of *The Politics of Education Policy in an Era of Inequality: Possibilities for Democratic Schooling* note that:

> the link between schooling and the economy, again, came to the fore when the U.S. economy was perceived as falling behind that of Japan and Germany in the late 1970s (NatCommonExinEd 1983). A 2007 report on the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, Tough Choices or Tough Times, makes a similar argument, replacing competition from Japan and Germany with competition from India and China. (Douglas Horsford et al. 29)

This decades-long fear of global competition has given the federal and state government the rhetoric needed to force wholesale changes to the 21st Century educational landscape in America.

While no president in recent memory can absolve themselves of a major role in undermining the human elements of educational policy, there was a definite precedent set for the federal government's involvement in education with the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act, Horsford argues:

> The federal role in education has seen a dramatic increase in influence, attention, and authority since the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act… In fact, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) marked a critical turning point in education policy given the significant power granted to the federal government and executive branch, in particular. NCLB also unleashed an increase in the private sector contracting through the requirement that schools in need of improvement provide supplementary educational services. It was also an opportunity to use the unfunded mandate as a strategy to get states to align policies to federal preferences in exchange for federal revenue. (71)

Although there is nothing wrong with holding school districts and teachers accountable, NCLB puts administration, teachers, and students within an ecosystem that values federal, economically-driven values at the core of who gets federal funding. For schools to receive the funds needed to help service students, all stakeholders must "align policies to federal preferences," which is code for districts that need financial support (i.e. poor public schools) have to buy into the theory that everyone is capital. On its own, this thought is problematic; however, being that not all schools are forced to buy into the same system, private schools are able to provide a different locus of pedagogy when it comes to the students who are fortunate enough to attend some of these institutions.

The shift in the purpose of educational attainment has drastically affected students from economically disenfranchised communities, as they have been the focal point of the conversation

surrounding what it means to be a student in our 21st Century economy. No longer is a student credited with the hope of being a future Jeffersonian farmer, where the onus is on them, as individuals, to engage with democracy through the education they were provided; rather, the "neoliberal economic model has become more dominant, humanistic goals for schools have receded in importance as neoliberalism has reduced the goals of public schooling to economic ones." (Horsford et al. 30) As such, the goals of public education, as examined in the last chapter, have ultimately been replaced by how students are able to fit themselves into the machinery of the free market. While the larger implications of this will be explored further in this chapter, it must be noted that the base assumption within neoliberal educational policy is that students must become producers first and people second, with the latter being assumed to be of little to no concern at all.

The hope, if not the selling point, of shifting educational focus is that students will be afforded some advantage in the long run. By turning students into capital, the idea is that "For the individual, this means economic upward social mobility, and for the U.S., it means producing human capital that will make us more competitive in the global economy" (Horsford et al. 30). While, in various instances, the idea of promoting a jobs-first mentality may be a true - and perhaps noble - cause for some students, the ultimate beneficiaries of lower income students being treated as capital are rarely the students themselves. Too often, for students who come from economically disadvantaged communities, "the ripple effect of this shift is pulling back from policies that benefit the common good, and toward policies that allow the middle and upper classes to cash in their relative advantage in economic, social, and cultural capital" (Douglas Horsford et al. 30).

By denying students who lack economic, social, and cultural capital an educational experience that extends beyond the scope of job preparedness, the vast majority of students from disadvantaged communities will remain in the cycles of poverty that are becoming increasingly calcified. Currently, the prospects for democratic schooling look bleak, as noted:

> Record levels of economic inequality and reduced social mobility amid widening and deepening class divides present tremendous challenges for school district leaders and education advocates committed to ensuring equality of educational opportunity for all students (Wilson & Horsford, 2013). In fact, the impact of rising economic inequality across the domains of health, social welfare, politics, and culture does not bode well for ending educational inequality, which continues to be fueled by resource and opportunity gaps." (Horsford et al. 1)

The research surrounding economic inequality and schooling suggests, then, that rather than education functioning as the vehicle through which poorer students are able to fully participate in the economy, the current education system is merely reinforcing the social and economic inequalities that we give lip service to wanting to disrupt.

Furthermore, despite there being strong, recent conversations about education needing to challenge the social status quo, the sad reality is that - progressive rhetoric aside - many public institutions still implicitly function as ways to reinforce whatever narrative the market is pushing at the time. Unfortunately, for far too long in America, the neoliberal educational agenda has allowed for students, as well as the communities in which they live, to be comfortable with the idea that:

> Trends and traditions have normalized race, gender, and class inequalities in ways that have likely convinced our children to believe such 'social inequality and social

> divisions are the natural order of things' (Carter…)There is a long-held belief in America that education has the potential to reduce inequality and expand opportunity in ways that advance the American Dream. But widening inequality in schools threatens not only America's opportunity narrative, which has relied heavily on education as 'the great equalizer', but also obstructs the pathway to its proverbial dream. (Horsford et al. 1)

For many students who live in rural and urban communities, the narrative about who gets to live the American Dream becomes about other kids rather than themselves, which makes it much more difficult for students with these backgrounds to see the value of their education.

When students look at their peers from different backgrounds than their own, they make judgments about the ways that the world around them works; and, for students from marginalized communities, it is hard not to agree with what can sometimes be a fairly pessimistic view of their educational and economic opportunities. This pessimistic view on educational impact transcends the students, too, with many stakeholders in districts willing to accept that:

> many instances of discrimination and inequalities in schools are not challenged because they are taken for granted or viewed as 'just the way things are.' Their existence comes to be viewed as common sense and thus beyond question. This break with previous behaviorist and pluralist notions of how power has shifted attention to more unobtrusive and cognitive modes of social control. (Horsford et al. 34)

The effect of our passive acceptance of educational inequalities leads to students who develop an apathetic or misinformed attitude toward democratic and civic responsibility. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than through the ways that the more cynical news media outlets have utilized the educational divide to fuel anger and resentment in this country. The narratives

created suggest that "These more cognitive notions of power have helped to explain the outcomes of conflict and political struggle (or lack thereof) in a postindustrial, Information Age in which the manipulation of public opinion has become a fine art" (Horsford et al. 34). While the ways in which neoliberal educational policies ultimately damage democracy will be explored further on in another chapter, it is critical to note that there is a solid connection between educational and economic outcomes that reinforce a worldview that further disenfranchises students and families from hope, which, in turn, tends to lead marginalized communities into valuing stories and worldviews that have been cynically crafted to further perpetuate divides within our democracy.

From the neoliberal perspective, it is not difficult to see how students, parents, and administrators construct the narratives that they do. American ideas about meritocracy remain firmly entrenched, allowing people to believe that they, too, can rise above their current status as long as they are able to work hard enough to do so, and there is nothing wrong with the belief in such a system. The problem with this narrative, though, is that neoliberalism provides subtle, yet equally convincing, counter narratives that we also hold to be self-evident:

> Once ideological positions are no longer seen as ideology but rather as common sense, then notions like the rich are the 'makers' and the poor are the 'takers' are difficult to challenge. These myths, which have become accepted as common sense, are often widely shared… Americans stand to use a frame that blames the poor for their situation in spite of the history of race, gender, and class-based discrimination that is copiously documented. (Horsford et al. 36)

Therefore, even though we all tend to generally believe in ideas surrounding meritocratic rewards, American society tends to also separate people into groups and accept wholesale

judgments of those who do not seem to warrant a change in station. When it comes to education, then, we tend to accept that schools in poorer communities perform worse than those in affluent ones and that the socioeconomic rewards make sense within the neoliberal narrative cycle.

This acceptance of the way things are only makes sense within the neoliberal context of economic rewards and punishments. As will be discussed in more detail further on, top performing schools tend to be rewarded with various things prized within the market system (i.e. more stable families, better performing students, nicer housing opportunities, etc.), with few people raising much criticism as this is the narrative to which we generally agree; however, in stark contrast, poorly performing districts tend to be told from the local, state, and federal levels that they need to be held accountable. While few can argue that schools need to have systems that hold them accountable, the striking reality about school accountability is that many of the "schools that are skilled at serving these more resource-intensive students are penalized in a market system. They are likely to have lower test scores and may not attract families who view the school as serving children unlike their own." (Horsford et al. 6) As such, an overly simplistic, market-driven view of holding schools accountable reinforces stereotypes about communities, teachers, and the types of students they serve as well as completely ignores the democratic imperative of holding the general public accountable.

Due to the unfurling sense of education being a matter of civic importance, there has been a "growing dissociation between the well-being of one's own and other people's children" (Horsford et al. 41) that fits well within the framework of the capital mindset of neoliberal ideology. While it would be overly romantic - and historically inaccurate - to insist that American identity was ever solely about the common good, the narrative surrounding education no longer needs to feign any altruistic bends anymore. Educational policy in the United States

has become all about the customer, with the notion that parents are buying a product rather than trying to promote or participate in the building of a democracy (Horsford et al. 57).

Private Schools

As was briefly explored in the last chapter, one of the more prominent neoliberal thinkers in the 20th Century was Milton Friedman. Friedman was fully committed to the idea that market driven thinking should govern much of American economic, political, and social life, when applied to education led him to be one of the early advocates for a school voucher system. Friedman believed that, for education to function the best within the economic framework through which he saw the world:

> Governments could require a minimum level of education which they could finance by giving parents vouchers redeemable for a specified maximum sum per child per year if spent on "approved" educational services. Parents would then be free to spend this sum and any additional sum on purchasing educational services from an "approved" institution of their own choice. The educational services could be rendered by private enterprises operated for profit, or by non-profit institutions of various kinds. (3)

While giving families the option of school choice seems democratic at first, there are many issues that arise within the private versus public debate - especially when the government is removing tax dollars from public institutions to fund private schools that meet the "minimum level of education."

Friedman's justification for this thinking, which he argues is democratic in scope and nature, is that the best schools will "spring up to meet the demand," which will, in turn, provide a higher standard of education for students (4). With the market in mind, then, he believes that families should have the right to send their student wherever they want, as school voutures

should be indiscriminately applied to any schools that meet the aforementioned minimum standards (Friedman 4). The core of his argument is that "competitive private enterprise is likely to be far more efficient in meeting consumer demands than either nationalized enterprises or enterprises run to serve other purposes" (Friedman 5). For Friedman, the issue lies within a deeply rooted difference in how he views democratic opportunity, with his vision being that markets create opportunities for individuals and not the other way around; and, while not every private institute is primarily funded with tax dollars, pulling funding from public institutions - or allowing families to opt out of supporting them - increases the inequality fostered in many private schools.

With Friedman in mind, one of the clearest indicators of seeing how neoliberalism functions within the educational system of the United States is to look at who benefits educationally from a system that values capital-driven market ideals. In her article in *The Atlantic*, "Private Schools Are Indefensible," Caitlin Flanagan explores the ways that the students who have been fortunate enough to attend elite schools in our country tend to be those who win in our educational system - especially as it pertains to entrance in top universities. As a former private school teacher at the prestigious Harvard-Westlake School in Los Angeles, California (before the Westlake was added), she critically examines the impact of elite, private institutions and the effect they have on the American educational landscape, with most of her more damning criticism being lodged at the parents who propagate the institutions that continue to fuel America's educational inequalities.

Throughout the article, she charts the various ways in which the parents, who fund these elitist institutions, reinforce the neoliberal bend of America's education system. For those who are fortunate enough to be able to send their children to elite private schools, they have a better

understanding that "their kids will be emerging into a bleaker landscape than they did. The brutal, winner-take-all economy won't come for them—they've been grandfathered in. But they fear that it's coming for their children, and that even a good education might not secure them a professional-class career." (Flanagan 54) Thus, many of the parents who have previously benefited from a system that favors nepotism and legacy traditions are also feeling the sting of the market, which further illustrates the impact that neoliberalism has on the American educational landscape.

This is not to say, however, that students from these various elite institutions do not have a strong advantage over their less fortunate counterparts from public institutions. Flanagan states that:

> These schools surround kids who have every possible advantage with a literal embarrassment of riches—and then their graduates hoover up spots in the best colleges. Less than 2 percent of the nation's students attend so-called independent schools. But 24 percent of Yale's class of 2024 attended an independent school. At Princeton, that figure is 25 percent. At Brown and Dartmouth, it is higher still: 29 percent. (52)

For those who care about even feigning over the idea of democratic opportunity in this country, these numbers should be alarming; however, if the largest indicator for how to measure success is the market, these numbers make perfect sense, and they go to fuel the passive acceptance of who gets to be the winners and losers in our educational systems.

The statistics above go to show that, in the market-driven educational system of America, being born into a wealthy family, who can afford to send you to an elite private school, almost guarantees future educational and economic success; this reality remains true for wealthy public schools, too. An article in *The Economist* states that the American education system "favors the

well-off more than anywhere else in the rich world. Thanks to hyperlocal funding, America is one of only three advanced countries where the government spends more on schools in rich areas than in poor ones" ("America's New Aristocracy"). Therefore, those who have already hit the jackpot in terms of family income, housing, and overall stability, are also those who are typically placed in the better school districts as well.

Flanagan comments further on this disparity as she states that the coding is clear as soon as you step foot into many of America's school buildings:

> Many schools for the richest American kids have gates and security guards; the message is you are precious to us. Many schools for the poorest kids have metal detectors and police officers; the message is you are a threat to us. (60)

This type of messaging, especially to our nation's most vulnerable students, is a direct attack on the meritocratic hope shared by so many of America's preeminent educational leaders; however, despite the rhetoric about about how we talk about education in this country, students from marginalized communities understand the reality every time they walk into their schools.

The Wealth Gap and Impact on Students

As the wealth gap continues to further divide, we have started to develop a more concrete narrative around who gets to be the beneficiaries of our hardening merit system. Matthew Stewart, in his article "The Birth of a New American Aristocracy," for *The Atlantic*, examines the ways in which the top 10% of American earners have created a hegemony of educational, social, and economic power that is harmful for American democracy. He states that, in order for the top 9.9% to be able to convince themselves that they belong where they are, they have to produce a counter-myth surrounding meritocracy:

> One way or the other, we tell ourselves, the rising education premium is a direct function

> of the rising value of meritorious people in a modern economy. That is, not only do the meritorious get ahead, but the rewards we receive are in direct proportion to our merit. (56)

So, from the perspective of those who benefit the most from our market-driven educational system, they are able to justify paying upwards of $50,000 a year for their child's education, because it helps them to gain entry into a class that bestows merit on them.

While viewing the idea of merit from the perspective of W.E.B. Dubois's "Talented Tenth," it is easy to see how talent and dedication will help foster a growing democracy; however, when justifying the use of merit through the lens of neoliberalism, it is just a way to employ the cognitive dissonance that enforces the belief that privilege is something that is divorced from wealth, race, gender, nationality, class, or sexual orientation. Stewart goes on to express the dangers of this type of thinking about merit when he states:

> Our delusions of merit now prevent us from recognizing the nature of the problem that our emergence as a class represents. We tend to think that the victims of our success are just the people excluded from the club. But history shows quite clearly that, in the kind of game we're playing, everybody loses badly in the end. (50)

Here, Stewart is pointing out the issue that when our ideas surrounding merit are decided by market factors, then the upper echelon of the American socioeconomic class are able to justify perpetuating a system that allows them to hoard educational resources and opportunities, which puts all notions of a critically engaged, democratic populace in jeopardy.

So, when neoliberal ideas of meritocracy form our understanding of who gets to succeed in our educational system, every decision one makes can dramatically affect their success and the

success of their family. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than looking at some of the data surrounding higher performing public schools in California:

> Public schools were born amid hopes of opportunity for all; the best of them have now been effectively reprivatized to better serve the upper classes. According to a widely used school-ranking service, out of more than 5,000 public elementary schools in California, the top 11 are located in Palo Alto. They're free and open to the public. All you have to do is move into a town where the median home value is $3,211,100. Scarsdale, New York, looks like a steal in comparison: The public high schools in that area funnel dozens of graduates to Ivy League colleges every year, and yet the median home value is a mere $1,403,600. (Stewart 59)

The shocking thing is that this is a trend seen throughout every single state in the country, which goes to show something that every student in America already knows: where you live matters.

What makes matters worse for students is that all of these social class markers, many of which start with their school, tend to be an early sign of what the rest of their lives will look like. Education, then, is far from being the great democratizer it is promised to be; rather, how successful you will be tends to reflect the stark reality that luck has more pull than merit. Stewart states that "In America today, the single best predictor of whether an individual will get married, stay married, pursue advanced education, live in a good neighborhood, have an extensive social network, and experience good health is the performance of his or her parents on those same metrics" (53). By most standards, everything that Stewart points out is the measure of what it looks like to have a good life; yet, this standard of living is denied to our most vulnerable communities, all while those who are permitted to succeed clamor on about their supposed merit.

Despite all of the pandering given by both Republican and Democratic politicians, it is important to understand that the wealth disparity in school districts is inherently a political issue that neither side is willing to resolve. Regardless of the amount of rhetoric from both camps, Republicans and Democrats are both fully committed to a neoliberal agenda for American students. While Republicans are more than happy to acknowledge their role in promoting the privatization of education (i.e. school choice, vouchers, charter schools, union busting, Christian schools, etc.), Democrats are also just as guilty through the usage of NIMBY ("Not in My Back Yard") rhetoric that reinforces market ideals:

> Given the social and cultural capital that flows through wealthy neighborhoods, is it any wonder that we can defend our turf in the zoning wars? We have lots of ways to make that sound public-spirited. It's all about saving the local environment, preserving the historic character of the neighborhood, and avoiding overcrowding. In reality, it's about hoarding power and opportunity inside the walls of our own castles. This is what aristocracies do. (Stewart 59)

These aristocratic means of control are in no way new to American politics or identity; however, what is perhaps most alarming is the ways in which we allow ourselves to be swayed by the rhetoric that enables us to deny equal opportunities to other people's children. Therefore, the only solution that makes sense is to think about students, and who gets to win and lose, as part of a larger marketplace that has limited space for human capital.

What should be alarming, when thinking about students in terms of human capital, is the grave notion that we have had periods in our history where people were literally treated as such. Stewart makes the grim connection between the growing economic disparity in our country and the slave trade when he states:

> In the first half of the 19th century, the largest single industry in the United States, measured in terms of both market capital and employment, was the enslavement (and the breeding for enslavement) of human beings. Over the course of the period, the industry became concentrated to the point where fewer than 4,000 families (roughly 0.1 percent of the households in the nation) owned about a quarter of this "human capital," and another 390,000 (call it the 9.9 percent, give or take a few points) owned all of the rest. (62)

While this statement is not to intentionally conflate slavery with the public school system in America, it does bring up the stark reality that there is a connection between economic, social, and political policies and how the upper echelon of this nation behaves in relation to human capital. Therefore, through reductive, neoliberal education policies, we are putting ourselves on a trajectory that further dehumanizes individuals - especially those from marginalized communities.

With the dehumanizing, long term effects of neoliberal education policy being all too clear on a socioeconomic level, there are other ways that the lack of parity plays out for the supposed losers in our system:

> Obesity, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, and liver disease are all two to three times more common in individuals who have a family income of less than $35,000 than in those who have a family income greater than $100,000. Among low-educated, middle-aged whites, the death rate in the United States—alone in the developed world—increased in the first decade and a half of the 21st century. Driving the trend is the rapid growth in what the Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton call "deaths of despair"—suicides and alcohol- and drug-related deaths. (Stewart 53)

When a society starts to view different sectors of class as winners and losers based on rigged

notions of merit, figures like these go further to justify who gets to have a larger piece of the economic pie. Inequality, as stated earlier, becomes something that is the natural order of things; yet, in a democratic society, there are serious questions that should be asked about whether being born into poverty should statistically be an educational and physical death sentence.

Rural Education and Beyond

Regardless of Jefferson's early championing of agricultural communities, one of the most marginalized and misunderstood subsets of this nation is rural America. Rarely the primary focus of discussion surrounding inequality within the educational system, rural America functions as an important marker for the ways in which democratic opportunities have been denied to rural students and communities. It is important to note, however, that there is no monolithic definition of what it means to be rural in the United States. In an article for the *National Association of State Boards of Education*, entitled "Challenges Facing Schools in Rural America," authors Mara Casey Tieken and MK Montgomery note the difficulty surrounding finding a working definition of rural:

> The federal government uses more than 15 definitions, and states have their own. These classifications are typically tied to land use, population size or density, or proximity to an urban area. Most rely on a core distinction between "urban" and "rural" or "metropolitan" and "nonmetropolitan," with "rural" or "nonmetropolitan" being the leftover category. The U.S. census, for example, classifies places outside of those with 2,500 or more residents as "rural." While most definitions put the rural or nonmetropolitan population at around 20 percent of the country's residents, depending on the definition used, the U.S. population swings from 17 to 49 percent rural. (7)

Beyond the implications for such a broad statistical gap, what is most striking about the government's attempt to create a working definition of being rural is the fact that they mention that the term rural functions as a "leftover category", which is a perfect metaphor for the way that rural education is considered at the state and federal level.

Being that "nearly one-third of public schools are rural, and about one-fifth of public school students—9.3 million children—are educated in these rural schools," (Tieken and Montgomery 8) it ought to be alarming how much rural education is shunted aside in American discourse. Jonathan Kozol, in his important work on the vast disparities of opportunity within public schools, *Savage Inequalities*, mentions rural schools only as an aside in order to emphasize that he wants to focus on how urban schools are more uniquely injured due to the type of racial and economic inequalities being enacted within those districts (90). While Kozol's book is an immensely important look at the disparate educational experiences of students within an urban setting, by classifying poor, rural districts as "poor and mainly white" (90), it is important to now how racial and regional diversity play a major role in rethinking what it means to be rural:

> Rural America stretches from the coast of Maine to the edges of Alaska, from the Mexican border to the boundary with Canada. It is flat and mountainous, arid and humid, just outside a city and a day's drive from a Walmart. Its communities are also diverse. Currently, people of color make up about 20 percent of the nation's rural population. Of these 10.3 million residents, about 40 percent are African American, 35 percent are Hispanic, and the remaining 25 percent are Native American, Asian, or Asian Pacific Islander or multi- racial.3 And rural places are growing even more diverse. From 2000 to 2010, the rural nonwhite population grew from 8.6 million to 10.3 million people, or by

> 19.8 percent, while the rural white population remained nearly flat. (Tieken and Montgomery 8)

In all fairness to Kozol, whose *Savage Inequalities* was published in 1991, the demographics of rural America are vastly changing; with that being said, though, there are arguably major assumptions about racial, economic, and political identities of rural America that allow the discourse surrounding rural education to become static and stale, which ultimately allows non-rural policy makers to neglect a significant portion of the population.

Another harmful area of neglect is the modern economy. Following a tumultuous campaign in 2016 that saw Donald Trump elected, there was an uptick in commentary surrounding working class, rural, white voters, as many political commentators and journalists did not understand how Trump could have been elected by a group of people so dissimilar from the former president; however, from a rural perspective, it is hard to divorce politics from an economy that has left many residents behind. Tieken and Montgomery note that the economic situation found in many communities is "perhaps the largest challenge facing rural America right now" (8), and they are feeling the pangs of how the economy seems to be shifting from under their feet:

> Historically, many rural economies were rigidly stratified: Factory owners and mill workers, coal executives and coal miners, planters and sharecroppers. Increasing automation, dwindling natural resources, and economic uncertainty have changed these industries, but they have not erased this underlying hierarchy. Today, it is CEOs of corporate farms and migrant farm workers or casino owners and hotel housekeepers. Low wages, high unemployment, and residential segregation further entrench inequality. Segregated poverty also lowers property wealth, which erodes educational funds and can

> compromise the quality of education a child receives. The effects of rural poverty, therefore, are devastating and enduring. (Tieken and Montgomery 8)

As one looks at how the rural economy has shifted from primarily union or farm-based jobs, to employment and economic models that are disconnected from local communities, it ought to be easier to empathize with people whose lives and economic outcomes are becoming increasingly precarious.

Being that jobs and economic opportunities have shifted away from rural Americans over the decades, the educational model for rural schools has had to shift as well. Due to the economic hardships within many of these communities, school districts are faced with the following grim statistics:

> Nearly one in four rural children lives in poverty, and 13 percent of rural children under the age of six experience deep poverty, which means a family income below half the poverty line. About 14 percent of rural students attend a school where more than three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This kind of deep, concentrated poverty is often associated with a greater need for additional resources, like social services or medical services—opportunities that cash-strapped rural districts can find hard to support. (Tieken and Montgomery 9)

Much like the need for adults within rural communities to know that they have access to a decent job or opportunities for personal and professional growth, students need to be able to come to school and know they will have access to food. As is true in every district that faces poverty, schools that need to focus on feeding their students and providing healthcare are at a massive disadvantage, when it comes to making educational choices, compared to more affluent districts.

Rural schools tend to be impacted by the restrictions of educational choice more than other marginalized communities, too, with Tieken and Montgomery noting that "the average rural school offers half as many advanced math classes as the average urban school, and while more than 90 percent of suburban and urban schools offer at least one Advanced Placement course, only 73 percent of rural schools do" (9). Here, the disparity between advanced classes offered is focused on different types of marginalized communities, which has nothing to say about private and affluent schools that offer myriad advanced courses; however, it does show that there is a pattern in how poverty can uniquely affect the educational opportunities for students in rural districts, yet there continue to be limited conversations about how to provide an equitable, democratic educational experience for students from rural communities.

One of the primary arguments for why rural schools are sometimes put in the position of neglect more than other school demographics is that state and federal policy makers are better equipped to address issues that reflect their own, limited experience (Arsen et al. 9). This issue particularly takes hold when neoliberal educational policies are implemented through "test-based accountability data and school choice", as both are generally geared to favor schools from urban districts (Arsen et al. 9). The authors of the article "Rural Communities Need Better Education Policies" gathered data from rural superintendents throughout Michigan and found that:

> the implementation of these strategies in urban settings (by way of charter schools, state takeovers, and efforts to narrow racial achievement gaps) has generated a great deal of attention and debate over the last two decades, policy makers in most states have largely ignored educational conditions in rural areas, even though these areas endure some of the country's highest poverty rates. As a result, policies that are meant to improve schools often exacerbate the problems rural schools face. (Arsen et al. 9)

The amount of neglect by those who make decisions at the state and federal level towards rural, public districts further demonstrates how market driven educational models have the capacity to marginalize subsets of already disenfranchised communities through lack of representation in policy discussions.

In order to better serve the democratic ends that have been idealized but never fully realized in our nation, there needs to be a push towards a better understanding of civic duty when it comes to public education being an equitable experience for all students. Stewart states that, "The defining challenge of our time is to renew the promise of American democracy by reversing the calcifying effects of accelerating inequality. As long as inequality rules, reason will be absent from our politics; without reason, none of our other issues can be solved. It's a world-historical problem" (63). By identifying the issue as one of global magnitude, Stewart understands the importance of having democratic balance in America. With the rise in violence, protests, and political division, it is becoming more imperative to challenge the neoliberal status quo and incorporate a more democratic approach to policies that favor education and reversing economic inequalities.

As important as this is on a federal, state, and local level, the reality is that change will not take place without people taking responsibility for the role they play in promoting the false meritocracy promoted through neoliberal ideals. Stewart recognizes the role that the new aristocracy plays in our current problems and states that, "we need to peel our eyes away from the mirror of our own success and think about what we can do in our everyday lives for the people who aren't our neighbors. We should be fighting for opportunities for other people's children as if the future of our own children depended on it. It probably does" (63). This is another area where education plays such an important role in the discussion of democracy.

Whether it is through the secondary or postsecondary levels, teachers can play a critical part in helping to challenge students, some of whom will be the beneficiaries of the current structure, about the nature and importance of a more civic, democratic education.

Neoliberalism and the Teaching Profession

The impact of neoliberalism does not stop with limiting the prospects for students. As we move through the 21st Century, the teaching profession has increasingly come under fire from federal, state, and local stakeholders - especially as market-driven language and ideas continue to bombard the classroom. Anyone who experiences a significant amount of time in a public school knows that "the new teacher and administrator are put in a position in which they must look to market - and test - based forms of accountability for direction rather than their professional instincts, trainings, associations, or unions" (Horsford et al. 152). The focus of the classroom - and arguably the school district at large - is no longer about providing an opportunity to democratically engage with educational opportunities; rather, what these "market and test-based forms" are code for is one of the primary linguistic markers of the neoliberal teaching era: data.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with teachers collecting data, as well-informed data can be a helpful tool to help teachers assess the growth of student achievement, the reality of the state of education, though, is that the collection of data has become a catch-all term for administrators and districts to further promote the neoliberal ideas surrounding education. In systems that heavily promote the collection of data, the emphasis is on results - for both the students and the teachers - with there being an understanding that data drives all decision making. Now, in most public districts, there have to be committees and professional development committed to the analysis of broad data and analysis, which does not have to be a bad thing; however, despite the potential for positive engagement that can be had within these

types of groups, oftentimes there is an understanding that "even where professional learning communities are in place, the data teachers are encouraged to analyze and the tasks they rehearse are typically not their own. In most cases, conception and execution have been successfully separated. This separation mimics proletarianization in which craft labor was fragmented and replaced by factory wage labor." (Horsford et al. 153) Thus, to be a successful teacher in the 21st Century, one is not trusted as being capable of doing work beyond the market-driven results of figure analysis that may or may not be relevant or accurate for the students they are meant to be serving.

One of the central focal points, in regards to considering data in education, is the perilous journey into state testing, which has become the lightning rod for anyone who has a stake in the surface-level success of local education: administrators, realtors, soccer moms, and even certain educators. So, despite the fact that certain, typically wealthier districts tend to do well with state tests, there are major questions about the ways in which state tests impact teachers:

> Teachers complain that there is too much lag time between the test and whey get the data - data that, they argue, is often unreliable. Perhaps more importantly, it reduces teaching and learning to a process of test-remediate, test-remediate, test-remediate which impoverishes teaching and provides little professional development or judgment for teachers. (Horsford et al. 142)

The emphasis on data collection, then, can minimize the important role that establishing a critical pedagogy or connecting with students has in learning. When there is outside pressure to have teachers endlessly collect data, there is little room left for some of the aspects of education that are arguably more important for the growth and development of students - especially those in marginalized districts.

With all of these increasing responsibilities for educators, teacher autonomy has become "more tightly coupled as high-stakes testing can breach the door and enter the classroom, in many cases, standardizing how and what teachers teach." (Horsford et al. 150) While there have to be metrics to ascertain teacher proficiency, data from high-stakes testing does more harm than good in the classroom, as teachers in poorly performing districts become the focal point of scrutiny and are open to an unwarranted level of criticism from those outside of the educational system:

> Teachers, on the other hand, have always worked largely within public or private bureaucracies, but the loosely coupled nature of educational systems buffered teachers from more direct forms of control, depending chiefly on internal forms of accountability… This meant that while the bureaucracy and principals exerted a certain level of hierarchical control, teachers exercised a great deal of autonomy in their classrooms. They were only under direct control when they were being observed by the principals or supervisors. (Horsford et al. 150)

As things have changed, however, the importance of data surrounding school district ratings has allowed for increasing scrutiny on teachers and administrators alike, with much of the pressure falling on Math, Science, and English teachers.

This additional pressure has been coupled with "a widening scope of teacher responsibilities, including heightened expectations of collaboration outside the classroom, strict adherence to new curricular and instructional requirements, and the collection and analysis of assessment data." (Horsford et al. 153) Additionally, on top of being asked to carry far more responsibilities in and out of the classroom, teachers are not being compensated in kind: "along with this new instability of work comes intensification of work leading to longer work hours and

greater levels of stress and anxiety. As unions were decimated (down from 35% unionized workers in the private sector to under 7% by 2018), wages also stagnated" (Douglas Horsford et al. 146). In short, teachers are being asked to do considerably more for less in the 21st Century, which is a trend that fits all too well within the neoliberal agenda for education. (Arsen et al. 11)

Ultimately, the effects of these facets of neoliberal pressures put teachers in the position of being unable to find value in themselves, their work, and their professional communities. Due to the increasingly fragmentary and precarious nature of the teaching profession, finding the ability and time to establish "authentic human ties" with peers and students is adding stress to an already challenging profession (Horsford et al. 146). Therefore, beyond the obvious disadvantage of working in a profession that is becoming devoid of meaning, there is the realization for many educators that in "today's neoliberal, risk society, there is an absence of any way to think strategically about one's life, one's sense of purpose, future goals, and economic security" (Horsford et al. 147). When taking these factors into account, neoliberal ideals are alienating teachers and making it difficult to have the opportunity to engage with their profession in a way that fulfills any sense of democratic meaning for them, which will ultimately harm the profession at large as well as their students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, all of the ways in which the modern American educational system is steeped in neoliberal ideology has perhaps damaged our collective concept of the hope of what education should be beyond repair. It is difficult to look at the current state of education and wonder what the future will hold - for students and teachers alike - without feeling pessimistic. Teachers, students, and poor, working class communities are increasingly being alienated from the opportunity to see education as something more than an exercise in futility. Neoliberal school

policies are not going away and will most likely become even more prevalent over time; however, while the outlook does indeed seem grim, there is value in being able to recognize the dangers that neoliberal policy has to the democratic opportunities of students. Throughout the American Experiment, Jefferson, Dubois, and Dewey all believed that education has the power to imbue students with the ability to break hierarchies and become individuals capable of realizing the democratic hope espoused in the founding of this country. In order to preserve the hope of democratic opportunities for all students, teachers need to realize the dangers that neoliberalism poses to democracy in order to challenge their students, districts, and communities to embrace a better vision of what education can be. American democracy depends on it.

Old Ideas for a New Type of Student: Emerson and 21st Century Democratic Pedagogy

In his famous speech to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard on August 31, 1837, Emerson brought The American Scholar into the world. Now a famous essay, in this speech, where Emerson is challenging some of the preconceived notions of what it means to be educated in America, he makes the claim that "the office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances" (95) - an especially poignant expression of what it means to be a humanities teacher in the 21st Century. In this speech, Emerson evokes the image of "One Man," (84) who I contend is the 18th Century realization of Jefferson's yeoman farmer, and the ideal of how educators ought to view scholarship as a means to combat the neoliberalism that is infecting every corner of modern education. By conflating Emerson's scholar with the idea of what teaching should look like in the 21st Century, it is clear that our interpretation of what it means to be a teacher has dramatically shifted over the past 180 years. Yet, if you asked many teachers in the humanities field what they would dream for their students and classrooms, I imagine that many of them would echo the sentiments Emerson bellowed out so many years ago. Emerson's ideas could not be any more of a prescient call to the need for humanities teachers to be energized than if it was written today. We all need guidance; arguably, though, our goal as educators is to challenge students to become better versions of themselves - regardless of whatever their academic prospects might be. Therefore, teachers need to recapture the spirit of Emerson's speech from *The American Scholar* in order to help challenge themselves to embody the democratic ideals that our country has always promised but never quite delivered.

While Emerson was definitely critical of American life and culture, it is impossible to read *The American Scholar* and not see his deep commitment to the idea of liberal democracy as being essential to American identity. Emerson presented his speech in 1837, at a time when America was on the eve of a Civil War as well as in the midst of experiencing the throes of an economic boom brought on by industrialization. Emerson's argument draws attention to the need for American society to be united under the banner of the wholeness of the individual, what he refers to as the "One Man" (84), as a way to counter the political, social, and economic upheaval of the mid-19th Century. Emerson was critical of the ways in which society was severing the individual from establishing an identity and transforming them into the "many things" that they represent politically, socially, or economically (84). Thus, like Jefferson, he feared that the concept of the individual was becoming a "victim of society," reduced to a "mere" abstraction of the function they serve within the increasingly dominant systems in America (85).

To counter the alienation he was witnessing in 19th Century America, Emerson created the image of "One Man" to elevate the importance of individuality as well as to challenge his Harvard educated audience to recommit to the ideals of democratic liberalism. Emerson's vision of his "One Man," then, functions as the fruition of the Jefferson's farmer, and he similarly argues that

> the planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered on by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work. (84-85)

For Emerson, the "One Man" is the individual farmer - or worker - who understands "the true dignity of his ministry" (84) and is not subject to the "distribution of functions" that fracture

work from intellectual pursuits (85). Much like Jefferson, Emerson was concerned that individuals who are unable to engage with life on a meaningful level will be subject to further alienation from themselves as well as their ability to fully participate in a liberal democracy (85).

Trying to inspire the 21st Century version of Jefferson's farmer or Emerson's "One Man," within a system that is bent towards reinforcing hierarchical structures, is at the heart of the humanities classroom. The remainder of this chapter uses Emerson, as well as a host of other authors, to dig into the current issues found within the teaching profession itself, with the goal of underscoring the importance of regaining what noted critical theorist, Henry Giroux, often refers to as a "Pedagogy of Hope". This is what the tension of liberal democracy is all about; and, this is the space where teachers need to be the ones who help students mediate content in a way that helps them become the next generation of people who are able to critically engage with themselves and society in a democratic way.

What it means for a country to be considered liberally democratic, then, is important to consider - especially as the terminology has roots within the 19th Century. The term liberal democracy was first written in English by Charles de Montalembert, who was a French aristocrat providing commentary on the ways in which the fallout from The American Civil War helped positively shape democratic chances for future nations (Daniels 10). Thus, the notion that America was first defined as a liberal democracy by a French aristocrat, following the Civil War, functions as a prescient reminder of what is at stake when democratic hopes are abandoned: a fight over what it means to be American. With the birth of the term "liberal democracy" coming after the Civil War, the educational arguments that follow are representative of the fact that there has always been a dialectical tension in America; however, unlike the Civil War, the argument has to be won through discourse and a commitment to Jefferson's vision of democracy, of which

Emerson is the main arbiter in this chapter, rather than the increased partisanship and demagoguery being shown in modern American political rhetoric.

The tension of liberal democracy is further found when analyzing the juxtaposition found within terms themselves. To start, the idea of democracy was founded in ancient Athens to promote "the will of the majority and the wisdom of the crowds" (Daniels 11); whereas, the term liberalism has come to be understood as a philosophy "to champion personal autonomy and human dignity, freedom of thought and belief, and reasoned debate as a means of progress" (Daniels 12). When looking at a surface definition of the two terms, the concept of individual freedom coexisting with majority rule is problematic, but that friction is where the strength of the American project lies. Ronald J. Daniels, president of Johns Hopkins University and author of *What Universities Owe Democracy*, argues that:

> The fusion of these two ideas binds the notion of a government responsive to popular will to the imperative to protect individual rights and preserve the rule of law. In fact, the push and pull between these structures can be regarded as one of its unique sources of strength. After all, liberal democracies don't have the dubious luxury of stagnation or complacency. They are dynamic and sometimes turbulent societies, always seeking and accommodating new generations of citizens to renew them. (Daniels 12)

Daniels's last statement, where he stresses the importance of "seeking and accommodating new generations of citizens to renew" the ideas of liberal democracy, is where the idea of education plays an imperative role in the discourse surrounding the direction of America.

The question remains, though, why have many educators - especially those in the field of the humanities - seemingly abandoned Jefferson and Emerson's lofty ideal of the dignity found in a liberal arts education. As explained thoroughly in the previous chapter, part of the problem

are the constraints of conforming to neoliberal policies that have fundamentally changed how the educational system and society view the teaching profession, which is also a key argument of noted critical theorist, Henry Giroux. Giroux argues that, rather than giving teachers the dignity of being viewed within the professional realm with other jobs, there has been a "proletarianization of teacher work" where teachers are reduced to the role of "specialized technicians" (190). By reducing the role of teachers, Giroux argues that the primary role for teachers in many instances is that of "managing and implementing curricula programs rather than developing a critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns" (190). As such, the role of teacher becomes little more than someone who is in the classroom to perform perfunctory tasks to help students meet benchmarks set by school districts and the state.

Giroux claims that the crisis in education is due to the commodification of teacher and student work as a response to neoliberal ideals that ask schools to emphasize performance over critical engagement (153). In Giroux's assessment, public education becomes a factory that promises students future economic rewards for their willingness to play the game of going to school. Whereas teachers, who are rarely promised economic incentives, are made to teach to the test and punish students who are unable or unwilling to conform to the goals of the district. Thus, teachers, many of whom are well-intentioned and want the best for their students, opt to sacrifice Emerson's idea of the dignity of education for the opportunity to continue to provide students with an education that might lead to economic betterment in their futures.

It is not hard to imagine, then, why so many educators fail at creating any sense of an educational spark for their students and lack a sense of efficacy. If the office of teaching has been reduced to performing a task that mirrors the functionality and coldness of the business world, then it is nearly impossible for most to engage in the way that W. E. B. DuBois described

teachers needing "to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which firms the secret of civilization." (Roth 66). As such, the humanities classrooms are reduced to the role of providing technical skills that are aimed at dedicating significant amounts of time teaching kids how to communicate for future employers rather than how to explore the ways that their education "enables him to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance" (Dewey 7-8).

Although some of Giroux's ideas were being championed almost a century before by brilliant educators like Dubois and Dewey, his dire assessment of modern education is highlighted by his claim that "one of the major threats facing prospective and existing teachers within the public schools is the increasing developments of instructional ideologies that emphasize a technocratic approach to both teacher preparation and classroom pedagogy" (191). While technical proficiency is definitely not a bad thing and should be addressed in teacher preparation and pedagogy, there is much more to teaching than aligning ideologies that seek the "standardization of school knowledge in the interest of managing and controlling it" (Giroux 191). In order to do this effectively, though, teachers have to be willing to understand what ideals matter most to them; and, for humanities teachers at least, Giroux would argue that it is imperative to make schools a place of "maintaining and developing a critical democracy" (190) rather than a building where students and teachers are reduced to data.

In order for teachers to combat the push to view themselves solely as participants in a data-driven neoliberal machine, we need to have a better sense of who we are while always challenging the notions of why we started to teach in the first place. Before a teacher is able to ascertain who they are within their profession, though, they are going to have to wrestle with the nature of their own identity, which is rife with multiple layers of philosophical, religious, and

social underpinnings; however, regardless of the nebulous definitions that can be attached to the identity, the struggle to understand oneself is a concept with which many can relate. Thus, for the sake of the argument going forward, the simple definition, as provided by Heidi L. Hallman, is contextually rooted in the field of education as "teachers mediate their stories of self with the cultural and institutional expectations of what it means to be a teacher… teachers must locate their process of 'becoming' within a specific context, time, and place, and negotiate this identity within multiple learning spaces" (3). Within this broad framework, it is important to underscore that teacher identity is fueled by context, and it has a direct impact on the ways that pedagogy, language, methodology, and student engagement is driven.

The question remains, though, as to why we ought to discuss the nature of identity as it pertains to teachers. According to John Gray and Tom Morton, one of the primary reasons that teacher identity is so important is due to their reasoning that

> it has considerable explanatory power in enabling us to shed light on the complex process of becoming an English language teacher and the ongoing experience of working as one; and second, because it has the potential to provide teachers with a much-needed resource for becoming more agentive in strategizing for change. (19)

Through this two-part explanation as to why researchers need to engage with teacher identity, Gray and Morton suggest that teachers bear the brunt of the "ontological upheaval" (20) experienced from the pressures of society as well as their school districts, which suggests that teachers who are more firmly grounded within their specific context will be able to better understand themselves as well as educate the students under their purview. Additionally, teachers who have a stronger sense of their ontological grounding will be better equipped to handle conflict that will inevitably arise in today's educational environment.

As an extension to the importance of ontologically knowing oneself, Giroux argues that we should interpret our role and identity as educators through that of being intellectuals, which might be a task of varying difficulty depending on the context of the school district. Despite the issues he sees within the education system, he believes that "by viewing teachers as intellectuals those persons concerned with education can begin to rethink and reform the traditions and conditions that have prevented schools and teachers from assuming their full potential as active, reflective scholars, and practitioners" (194). Through making the claim to be intellectuals, Giroux calls for teachers to have more autonomy in what they teach as well as make every attempt to participate in the democratization of their school districts (194).

In order to learn how to embrace Giroux's ideal, though, one of the best solutions forward is learning how to navigate the myriad ways that the voices of the past can speak to modern concerns. We, then, as scholars and teachers, need to embrace this calling and start to think more holistically about who we are, who we want to be, and how we choose to interpret our vocation. William James, prominent 19th Century educational philosopher, stated that "education, enlarging as it does our horizon and perspective, is a means of multiplying our ideals, of bringing new ones into view" (qtd. in Roth 92); however, the business of understanding how to incorporate James' ideas of education being a tool of enlightenment is a messy and complicated task that requires teachers to be able to simultaneously provide support for students while disrupting their current modes of thinking.

Additionally, if teachers are going to make the claim to be intellectuals, they need to be actively involved in their schools in order to provide a foundation to the title. Giroux claims that the role of the teacher as intellectual must be interpreted in a way that is transformative for students and the school districts in which they teach. He states:

> In the broadest sense, teachers as intellectuals have to be seen in terms of the ideological and political interests that structure the nature of the discourse, classroom social relations and values that they legitimate in their teaching… teachers should become transformative intellectuals if they are to subscribe to a view of pedagogy that believes in educating students to be active, critical students (195).

The goal, then, is for teachers to embody the role of being an intellectual in such a way that it transforms their relationship to their students, peers, and district so much so that it challenges the previous notions of who they are as teachers and individuals. Again, this is a call to ontological transformation of the identity of the teacher. Giroux does not believe that teaching is a normal profession; rather, he challenges teachers to understand that they need to become "transformative intellectuals" themselves, if they want to see change in their students and school districts.

Through envisioning the potential of an educator fully embracing this path, Giroux is echoing Emerson's ideas about teachers being "One Man" to students, suggesting that this ideal be transferred to them, and attempting to make a democratic education reverberate throughout our school buildings. Instead, Giroux and Emerson's ideal exists in stark contrast to the tracking and placement of students in many school systems across the country. In most cases, students are tracked based on their aptitude as measured by state tests and potential to attend university. While on some level, this seems like a pragmatic solution for how to deal with students, the stark reality is that it informs - typically at a young age - students about what their possibilities are in life before they have even begun to learn about how to navigate their potential options for life.

Emerson's "One Man" theory, then, should be the rallying cry for how to understand our calling as teachers to be Giroux's public intellectual as well as real, tangibly engaged human beings in our classrooms. This idea of being called to be real human beings, who teach others

who are looking for real possibilities for their lives, is what Emerson means when he says that "Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all" (84). Too often, when we have to regularly engage in the minutiae of tracking students in accordance with state standards, we forget who we are as people and start to view our jobs as being something divorced from who we are. Despite the fact that Emerson was not dealing with issues of tracking the data of students, he is telling his audience - and by extension, us - that the unification of the person is essential to assuming any ideas about the democratic possibility of education.

This fracturing, then, of what it means to be a teacher into the myriad roles involved in modern education leads to the extreme difficulty in assuming Emerson's charge of being united under the banner of being an American scholar. Through this fracturing, Emerson saw that "the divided or social state" would lead to an "amputation" of individuals from their social duty and tasks (84). As was noted extensively in the previous chapter, schools tend to reflect the inequalities of societies at large, so it is not surprising when teachers and their classrooms suffer due to our unwitting cooperation in a system that separates teachers and their students from the dignity of searching for Emerson's idea of wholeness.

Emerson's concept of education as being the chief vehicle for providing this idea of wholeness should be the rallying cry for all humanities teachers; instead, we far too often get wrapped up in the multitude of perfunctory tasks leveled at us from society and school districts and forget the dignity ascribed to those who are able to be like Emerson's planter who remembers "the true dignity of his ministry" (85). What is most unfortunate about this lack of focus is that, in doing so, we reduce our role in society and the classroom. When students leave the classroom, they do not remember the teacher who helped them pass their state tests; however, students, who are a part of society, do remember teachers who challenge them to better

understand the dignity of whatever their ministry will be beyond their classrooms. So, to better understand the role of what Emerson means about how to frame our call as teachers, we need to remember that standardized tests are important, but there is nothing more important than helping students make tangible connections between who they are as people and the dignity that they can take with them from the classroom into society.

Additionally, when teachers do not view their vocation holistically, we inevitably view students in a way that enforces undemocratic ideas about who they are as a people based upon their aptitude, academic performance, behavior, opinions from our peers and administration, etc. By divorcing ourselves from our call to understand who we are as teachers, we indirectly contribute to the dehumanization of students, which limits their potential in the classroom as well as beyond. Emerson saw the effect that limitations had on individuals when he said that:

> The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship (85).

Here, we are witness to an early example of the tracking system, with Emerson describing people and society viewing individuals as what they do rather than who they are. In a modern, tracking context, then, this is applicable when teachers view their students solely through the lens of being college preparatory, advanced placement, vocational center, or special education. While some of these designations can be helpful when deciding curriculum, the dangerous truth is that these labels become reality for students and teachers alike when it comes to considering potential outcomes for kids; and, as Ann Jurecic claims in her article "Teaching Post-Truth", "if students focus exclusively on job training, they will be less likely to change their circumstances" (215). Circumstances, context, and helping students make better connections, then, should be

something we use to help challenge all students. Rather than merely helping them to learn how to be better mechanics, we need to be challenging the vocational and college bound students alike to consider all realities that may help them become Emerson's "One Man", though this can only be achieved when teachers assume the role themselves first. Then, they are able to model this unity for their students and potentially challenge the vocational student to go to college or the kid who feels pressured into college to become a plumber. There's dignity in every pursuit.

While many educators have limited power in changing their school's tracking procedures, all teachers are able to change the way they view their students by embracing Emerson's idea that there is dignity in all avenues of life, which is especially true when considering the future opportunities for students. Thus, as Emerson expressed, it is imperative to remember that

> There is virtue yet in the hoe and the spade, for learned as well as unlearned hands. And labor is everywhere welcome; always we are invited to work; only be this limitation observed, that a man shall not for the sake of wider activity sacrifice any opinion to the popular judgments and modes of action (95).

As such, for those of us who are fortunate enough to work with students who might not be on the college-bound track, we are duty bound to challenge the status quo that puts students into any box that does not elevate their ability to embrace the virtue of whatever their calling may be - college or otherwise.

If, as Emerson states, that "labor is everywhere welcome" (95), then there must be an accounting for what we want our students to be doing after high school. For years, the most common answer from many teachers would be that they want students to attend college or technical school. While this answer is probably the most common response from high school teachers, and with due cause, the question remains as to why that is the best path for most

students. Outside of Emerson's sly contention that the "soul is subject to dollars" (85), there is no reason for sending every student to college if they are receiving a democratic, liberal education in their primary years. College is important for many career paths, yes; however, Emerson claims that "colleges and books only copy the language which the field and work-yard made" (94), which is a sharp repudiation to his Harvard educated audience. If college can be something that is superfluous for many students, then the pressure to earn a college degree is more aligned with the neoliberal promise of equating educational attainment to economic incentives rather than the value of bettering oneself and learning how to participate in a liberal democracy.

Again, Emerson anticipates this issue, as he was someone who was reared in an academically minded family and attended Harvard himself. Much like society reduces mechanics to being mere machines, Emerson states that teachers and scholars have, too, been relegated to being seen as the "delegated intellect" (85), which is not to be conflated with Giroux's idea of teachers being intellectuals. Unlike Giroux's intellectual, who is critically engaged with themself and society, Emerson sees educators and scholars taking a diminished role in society by becoming "the victim of society" where he "tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking" (85). This vision stands in sharp contrast with what Giroux espouses and what Emerson calls "Man Thinking" (85), and helps to elucidate why many teachers develop the habit of echoing the broader culture. Rather than being able to challenge the status quo of culture and their school's tracking system, many teachers end up repeating to students phrases about college and future potential that have been reverberating in schools for years; and, while college is a fantastic option for many students, the idea of college should never be championed as something that is divorced from disrupting normative modes of thinking about what it means to be successful beyond primary school.

When teachers become merely mirrors that reflect society, then their classrooms are going to be echo chambers that tell students exactly what the culture has been telling them throughout their lives about what it means to be successful - or, perhaps more discouragingly, who gets to be successful. Teachers need to recognize, then, when their "office is contained" in order not to forego the privilege of being able to engage with students in a way that will prove to be meaningful for their lives (Emerson 85). Thus, one of the chief questions that teachers must ask themselves: "is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof" (Emerson 85)? In this question, Emerson is challenging his audience to reframe how they view their role in education. If we are all students, and everything exists for our benefit, then the paradoxical role of the educator as the person who channels authority and societal pressures on students must come into question. In this complex understanding of the role of teaching, it does not explicitly seem beneficial to be a teacher, who happens to be a student; or, conversely, the student might not always want to fulfill their duty as the sometimes-teacher.

Emerson's answer to this confusion is quite simple, he suggests that, in order for teachers to assume this role of being the type of "One Man" that inspires others to follow suit, teachers need to be "free and brave" (97) enough to embody the juxtaposition of being a teacher and a student at the same time. The simplicity of this suggestion, though, hides the more challenging reality that it is difficult to be free and brave; or, to even to assume the posture of a student in a system that generally demands conformity and performance amongst the profession, is an act that might be considered subversive in some districts. The implications of how we are hamstrung as teachers, whether it is through our own volition or from outside forces, are far reaching in the ways that we deal with our students and broader educational communities. If we do not act with

a sense of bravery and freedom, we cannot expect our students to be brave and free enough to engage with themselves or the world in any meaningful manner.

While freedom is a word that is co-opted for many different reasons, teachers need to embrace pedagogical and scholarly freedom in order to make Emerson and Giroux's ideals a reality for the classroom, and I believe that humanities teachers are especially well-suited to embrace Emerson's call for the need to be free. Emerson continues to venture his definition of what it means to be free by suggesting that teachers need to be "free even to the definition of freedom" (97), which suggests an epistemological tension about how we even define ourselves as teachers. Naturally, there are rules and laws that we must all follow; however, teachers need to be willing to confront the definitions that are placed upon us from districts, students, and society in order to embrace the freedom needed to transform our students and classrooms. As such, to follow in Emerson's footsteps, we need to be continuing to ask questions about how we define ourselves as teachers and what it looks like to model success to our students and communities.

To be free, it takes massive amounts of bravery to be willing to challenge any authority from the school district as well as society at large. Bravery in the face of pressure is no new concept, as Emerson himself was well aware. He states that bravery is needed because "fear is the thing which a scholar by his very function puts behind him" (97), which unfortunately does not sound like many teachers in America today, and there are many things that warrant this fear. Emerson's call to be an American Scholar, though, as well as Giroux's idea of teachers embracing the call to be intellectuals, requires brave teachers who are willing to embody the freedom that is required to rescue education from increasingly becoming factories of inequality. Thus, teachers need the bravery to do whatever is right for their students, and what students need are teachers who are free and brave enough to embody Emerson's "One Man" ideal.

Instead of the current, frightful, ignorant plight we regularly witness on television and social media, teaching ought to be about equipping students to go into the world with the necessary critical thinking tools to help build a more democratic society. Emerson paints a lovely picture about those who are able to inspire this sort of change as being:

> The kings of the world who give the color of their present though to all nature and all art, and persuade men by the cheerful serenity of their carrying the matter, that this thing which they do is the apple which the ages have desired to pluck, now at last ripe, and inviting nations to the harvest. The great man makes the great thing (98).

While this is definitely an idealistic portrait of the hope of the democratic function of education, teachers need to be brave - and even free - enough to embrace the hopeful aspirations of what a liberal arts education is meant to do. It will take bravery and dedication, though, because, as Emerson notes, it takes an element of persuasion to get people to buy into this egalitarian idea of society. As is all too easily seen in broader society today, it is easy to revert to name-calling and division, but the call towards Emerson's more democratic view of education should enlighten us to the hope that we are pushing towards helping students learn how to create a better world for themselves. We all deserve dignity, but this takes diligent personal and pedagogical commitment to honing our craft to embody these ideals - especially being that they are not on a standardized test or largely a concern for any school district.

Being that these societal issues are not new in any practical sense, however more amplified they may seem, Emerson also saw that systems and men "very naturally seek money or power"; however, he knew that, if teachers were able to challenge the status quo, they could "wake them and they shall quit the false good" of chasing the lure of work being a means to an end (99). Life, for Emerson, was not about making money or becoming someone who is useful

for society, his ideas shout that, in order for you to become someone useful for society, you must chase after something about which you are passionate. The arguments set forth by Emerson should make teachers ask if that is what the teaching profession is for them, because, if not, his logic follows that you might be doing more harm than good.

Rather than being stale, static figures who promulgate the status quo of education, Emerson asks that we understand that "the main enterprise of the world for splendor, for extent, is the upbuilding of man" (99). This is what we are meant to do: build up humanity - not so they need to rely on us but, rather, so they are able to go out and live for themselves. The continued hope of being Emerson's "One Man" is that we are constantly modeling what it looks like to be a teacher and student who is never content with things as they are, with the goal of becoming a lifelong learner. Emerson continues this idea of the value of education when he states that "each philosopher, each bard, each actor has only done for me, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for myself" (100). Thus, our job as humanities teachers is to help students make the connections between content, context, and the reasons why education has intrinsic value to the lives of our students. Emerson got that it is not about making students more employable or teaching them how to communicate better, which are both wonderful skills and traits to have; teaching and learning need to be rooted in those foundational democratic ideals espoused by Jefferson about life, love, and the pursuit of happiness.

No longer are we trying to embody Jefferson or Emerson's ideas about the democratic ideals of the classroom. From talking to fellow educators, I know that it is easy to become discouraged when thinking about the current state of our educational system in America - especially for those of us who teach in rural and inner city communities; however, in order to stave off the impulse to cave to the immense pressures that are placed on teachers, educators

need to remember that “this time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it” (Emerson 101). Thus, despite appearances, for the educator who is committed to creating a classroom that is forged around democratic ideals, there ought to be an understanding that there is always a way to embrace the dignity of being an educator, and it starts with the students. In order to move forward and challenge the current status quo in the educational system, we have to embody Emerson’s idea that, “The scholar is the man who must take up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future.” (103)

The Humanities Cookbook: How to Create the 21st Century Jeffersonian Farmer

Education in America is facing a crisis. Following the suspension of normal classroom activity from Covid-19, there was a quiet hope within small sectors of the educational field that the disruption to traditional learning might yield a positive reconsideration of educational practice in America (Popa 2); however, as the dust has started to settle from the pandemic, that hope proves to have been fleeting. Now, more than ever, the discourse surrounding education is even more bent towards the distillation and commodification of learning, with the classroom being representative of nothing more than a shell game of increasingly menial achievements. As was highlighted in previous chapters, America has never fully lived up to the ideals of Jefferson, Dubois, Emerson, and Dewey; however, 21st Century school policies are increasingly being divorced from any semblance of democratic pedagogy, and the prospects of this changing appear grim. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to provide a framework for four major questions that I believe reflect the liberal arts tradition that was elevated by our forebears who were invested in how education serves as the foundation for liberal democracy. Thus, through a combination of critical research and personal reflection, I will provide the basis for how a curriculum shaped around these central questions will provide marginalized students, who are being alienated from a democratically charged education due to neoliberal policies, with an ability to use the classroom as a way to fulfill Jefferson's ideal of becoming individuals who are able to critically engage with themselves and the world around them in a more democratic way.

The expectation is that the following questions will enable our classrooms to embrace what David Foster Wallace refers to as "the true value of a liberal arts education," which is the ability to know how to think in order to develop the attention, awareness, and discipline needed to care about other people ("This is Water"). While it is true that disciplines outside of the

humanities are able to foster conversations that will help make students better people, humanities classrooms are uniquely positioned to use the questions provided in this chapter to fulfill the hopes Ralph Ellison had when he wrote the following in the introduction to *Invisible Man*:

> Here it would seem that the interests or art and democracy converge, the development of conscious, articulate citizens being an established goal of this democratic society, and the creation of conscious articulate characters being indispensable to the creation of resonant compositional centers through which an organic consistency can be achieved in the fashioning of fictional forms. (XX)

The goal of the questions proposed in this chapter, then, is to use them frequently enough that students develop a discipline of engaging with the idea of how to become what Ellison refers to as "conscious articulate characters" (XX) who are able to embody the

> fictional vision of an ideal democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things in which the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white, the northerner and the southerner, the native-born and the immigrant are combined to tell us of transcendent truths and possibilities such as those discovered when Mark Twain set Huck and Jim afloat on the raft. (XX)

By evoking Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as a vision for democracy, Ellison echoes the hope seen in Jefferson, Dubois, Emerson, and Dewey, which is also the hope of this thesis: that the following questions will give students the awareness to actively participate in their stories as well as those told about America. To employ these questions effectively, students need to study literature, history, cinema, language, and music in order to see how the their education leads them to be "a collectivity of politically astute citizens" who are able to participate in the narratives that will help shape themselves and the future of American democracy (Ellison XXI).

Who Are You?

As highlighted throughout the previous chapters, one of the primary goals of a liberal arts education is to get students to better understand their place in the world. While the notion of having students better know themselves cannot be the sole goal of education, knowledge of oneself is a critical component for establishing a foundation on which to build the democratic ideals Jefferson, Emerson, Dubois, Dewey, and many other educational voices have rallied towards throughout American democratic traditions. Unfortunately, though, throughout the 21st Century, understanding oneself is becoming an increasingly fragmented idea, with the rise of selfie culture, social media, and the sublimation of identity found in modern consumer culture. For those who are able and willing to look, it is not difficult to see that we arguably pay more attention to ourselves than any generation previous to this one; thus, with all this focus on self-promotion in the digital realm, there is a lack of intentionality that allows people to be critical about who they actually are as individuals in real life.

Despite the general rise in the quality of life for people since the time of Jefferson, modern day America is not a reflection of the political, economic, and intellectual individualism that he imagined with his yeoman farmer. As highlighted throughout the previous chapters, Jefferson's vision of public schools as vehicles for democratic liberalism has lost out to the idea that education is primarily about the economic incentives it provides. While there are no issues with understanding that there is a correlation between educational attainment and wages, to reiterate the problems previous highlighted, this epistemological shift from Jefferson's vision comes at a cost: democracy suffers when we lose sense of who we are as individuals.

In order to provide a democratic education for all students, it is imperative that curriculum choices be constructed around questions that deal with who they are as individuals.

While many educators, administrators, and districts will all claim that they instruct students to regularly reflect on what they are learning, the focus of said reflection is almost always going to be the same: the demonstration of some level of proficiency in a task or content area. This type of reflection is good and necessary to the educational process, and I argue that it is imperative that students are given the time and space to reflect on the content they are being taught; however, when this is the sole aim of instruction, with no larger connections being made available for the students about who they are as developing human beings, many students will suffer for it, resulting in them being further alienated from the work they are doing.

At the high school level, all students question - whether explicitly or implicitly - why they are being taught the things they are; however, in many instances, the neoliberal rhetoric that educational systems have bought into trains teachers to handle these questions by connecting content to the economic incentives of education - something arguably more true for students from disenfranchised communities. For instance, it is not uncommon to hear in a secondary Language Arts classroom that the purpose of learning how to write well is so students will be able to “communicate better with future employers" or “to prepare them for college.” Again, neither of these skills are inherently bad, as good communication skills are a worthy pursuit; however, for kids who cannot envision themselves attending college or having a job that requires email correspondence, there has to be a better way to connect them to the meaning of the idea that English classrooms ought to be “where the desire for knowledge braids most intimately with the hunger for experience, the longing for self-understanding, and the wish to connect oneself with something larger or other than oneself.” (Harpham 110)

Therefore, the practice of connecting students with questions that challenge their ontological and epistemological grounding is especially vital for students who have been

primarily exposed to educational warrants that rest on perfunctory tasks. The elevation of the importance of the individual is echoed by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, former director of the *National Humanities Center* and current senior fellow at Duke University's Kenan Institute for Ethics. In his book *The Humanities and the Dream of America*, he stresses that getting students to question who they are as individuals helps to create "a liberation from the confines of the mundane self through an immersion in the lives and thoughts of others, a loss of bearings" (Harpham 39), and it is through this loss of bearings - or ontological and epistemological upheaval - that students are able to face important questions about who they are as individuals.

As a secondary English teacher in a rural school district, I am all too familiar with the anxieties, self-doubt, and questions that students bring into my senior English classroom. For the vast majority of them, we have never worked together before, so I start the year off by getting them to reflect on their previous experiences in English classrooms. Within the first week, I come to find that English is usually their least favorite subject, and, on average, approximately half of the students admit to having never fully read a book cover-to-cover. After they tell me how much they have despised previous English classes, I empathetically listen to their horror stories about failed experiences with journaling, Shakespeare, and writing essays; however, once they recount all of the ways in which they believe English class is not for them, I always shift the questions at the end to focus on who they believe they are and why they think that the content has yet to connect with them as individuals. I have yet to get a response that adequately captures their beliefs on why English class has no bearings on their futures.

I use the first week, then, with the expressed intent to establish what Elizabeth Ellsworth refers to in her book, *Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address*, as a specific "mode of address" that allows me to build a relationship with my students that will give

them the space and time to engage with ideas about their identity (4). From there, I start our first serious lesson on the philosophical concepts of free will and hard determinism, where we deconstruct some of the larger ideas and dialogic tension that was created the first week. We spend the rest of the first quarter of the year explicating their concepts of self in order to create one of the foundational ideas that we will draw from for the rest of the year: understanding who they are matters for the type of person they will become.

By starting off the year with getting my students to understand and confront the various constraints for identity construction, I am having them engage with the liminal tension that is necessary for becoming individuals, who are capable of fulfilling the democratic ideals of Jefferson, as well as allowing them to see that education is about more than writing emails to bosses. As Harpham expresses, it is important for students to understand that they are humans engaging in a classrooms where:

> Humanists operate on a human scale; they treat their subjects not as organisms, cells, or atoms, not as specks of animate matter in the vast universe—nor, for that matter, do they treat them as clients, patients, customers, or cases—but as self-aware individuals conscious of their existence. Humanistic knowledge is centered in texts (in the broadest sense of the term) produced by human beings engaged in the process of reflecting on their lives. At the core of the humanities is the distinctly human capacity to imagine, to interpret, and to represent the human experience. (29)

My classroom, then, is all about helping students navigate and explore all of the ways an English education helps them become more self-aware individuals. By helping them dig into ideas surrounding what makes them uniquely human throughout the year, my hope is that they are able

to take their knowledge of self-discovery beyond their high school experience into whatever areas of life they choose to pursue.

Where Are We?

Another critical question that needs to be built into any curriculum decisions for the humanities is centered around the importance of place. While I believe that all students ought to be exposed to studies about their local cultures, communities, and history, I think that the importance of this concept for students from marginalized communities cannot be overstated. Unlike many private schools, where words like tradition and institution are major selling points for students and parents alike, schools in rural and urban areas are confronted with a negative stigma about being from their community - especially as said stigma relates to educational identity.

According to *The National Center for Education Statistics* (NCES), our district's median income is $55,783, which is approximately $12,000 less than the national average ("United States Census Bureau"). We also possess a smaller number of adults who possess a bachelor's degree or higher, so the vast majority of parents in our community are working class (NCES). While we are not the poorest district in the state, an analysis of the median adjusted gross income of every school district in Ohio has us ranked firmly in the middle of the pack (Exner). Poverty is an issue in our district, but it is not the thing that shapes student identity in our community.

Despite having few hills and many corn fields, our school district is considered to be rural Appalachian (Children's Defense Fund: Ohio 7), and one of the most important things that I do all year is to get my students to grapple with their ideas about what it means to be from a rural Appalachian community. To have the students engage with what it means to be a student in our district, an early lesson that a co-teacher and I use has them deconstruct what rural Appalachia

means to them through a photography project. By only using landscape photos, students have to create images that define the importance of place for them. Then, we share our presentations with students from disparate backgrounds around the country. Although students generally come into this project with a broad idea about being from a rural community, the opportunity to see how students around the country choose to represent their communities allows our students to better ask questions about the context surrounding what it means to be from our particular place.

One of the primary voices talking about the connection between pedagogy and place is David A. Gruenewald. In his article, "Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education," he makes the argument that an understanding of "place" is paramount for all stakeholders in an education system; and, while this is true for administration and teachers, there always has to be a particular focus on what it means for students. As such, especially when considering the fragmented nature of many of our nation's most at-risk schools, Gruenewald argues that, "Educational treatments of place must be attentive to the life of the margin. Conventional educational thinking and policy claim that enforcing uniform standards everywhere is a social justice issue, that it will empower marginalized groups and individuals and move them into the center of mainstream society." (632)

As was highlighted in the second chapter, the lack of attention to the educational needs of rural communities further exacerbates economic and educational inequalities, which damages the democratic opportunities for students and their communities. The goal for developing pedagogy that emphasizes place is to help subvert the neoliberal educational and economic models that are increasingly "removed from the places where we live and the places that our living affects" (Gruenewald 641). Through this subversion, Gruenewald imagines that pedagogy that is rooted in place will allow for students and teachers to see that "we live in a world where human-human,

and human-world relationships are poorly understood and increasingly strained. It is in "places" that these relationships are experienced and where they can, potentially, be examined and shaped through the process of education." (641)

The goal for educators, then, must be to help students better understand where they are from and how it can help contribute to becoming more engaged individuals in our democracy. Taking considerable amounts of time to allow students to better engage with where they are from is no easy task, though - especially not in many educational systems that myopically push towards the hegemonic goals of the state or school district. As noted previously, it is wholly good and appropriate to have high standards and accountability; however, the goals of the education system are not always aligned with what students need in order to become more engaged participants in a democracy. Gruenewald notes the disparity between the pedagogy of place and the neoliberal school agenda when he draws attention to the notion that school administrations will almost always seek to promote the homogeneity of standardized forms of knowledge at the expense of local, place-based pedagogy (620), which further exacerbates the already sinuous relationship between neoliberal educational models and the disenfranchised communities where students live and learn.

Ultimately, the goal of developing a place-based pedagogy is to realize the Jeffersonian-inspired hope to "fulfill the long-broken democratic promise of more equitable educational outcomes" (Gruenewald 642). By getting students to better connect with where they are from, it gives educators the ability to

> reframe the discourse of democracy and accountability so that the character and quality of places, and our relationship to them, figure significantly in the purpose, process, and assessment of education. To what are we really accountable, now and in the long run? If

> places are to matter to schooling, then accountability and purpose must be conceived in a way that appreciates the value of places as a primary context for experience, as a pathway to authentic democratic participation, and as the living legacy of human engagement with the world. (Gruenewald 645)

Rather than forcing all students into a one-size-fits-all education, teachers need to be thinking about how to better engage students about the significance of being situated within a particular place in order to make the educational process meaningful for students and teachers alike. Gruenewald emphasizes the need to shape pedagogy around the "lived experiences of students and teachers" as a means of creating an environment that tangibly reflects the lives of those who are sharing a classroom together, with the ultimate goal being "to work against the isolation of schooling's discourses and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling" (620).

Understanding the importance of developing a pedagogy of place subverts the alienation of neoliberalism by putting the emphasis on the idea that "places produce and teach particular ways of thinking about and being in the world. They tell us the way things are, even when they operate pedagogically beneath a conscious level." (Gruenewald 627) In order to help students better engage with the Jeffersonian notion of becoming democratically infused and active citizens, they need to make clear connections between their educational experiences and the world in which they live. This starts in the classroom. As educators, we need to make sure that we are providing students with the understanding that the spaces in which we live are "alive, pulsing with the beliefs, thoughts, actions that shape who we are as people. From this viewpoint, space place--or, more precisely, the geographical relationship between people places-becomes the focus of critical social analysis" (628).

In order to foster these ideals in students, it is imperative that teachers help students "explore the interdependent economic, political, ideological, and ecological relationships between place near and far." (Gruenewald 630) How students are marked and shaped by the intersection of economic, political, ideological, and ecological forces, in a specific time and place, needs to be made evident in any humanities - or perhaps every - classroom. As noted above, getting students from wealthier districts of private institutions to connect with place is not typically difficult, as the tradition of being from a place is generally built into their education system; however, students from marginalized communities need to be able to understand that - despite many factors arguably pointing to a different conclusion - where they are from matters, too.

In my classroom, I typically spend a significant amount of time getting students to engage with the myriad ways that we understand rural identity. After parsing out what it means to be from a rural, Appalachian district, and all that entails, the students are able to start to construct a shared sense of terroir around what it means to be a part of their community. When students are able to pause, think, and reflect about the reality that they are from a specific place, they are able to start to put words to what this means to them. What typically follows these connections, then, is that students develop a new sense of the classroom being a vehicle for doing what Harpham describes as the opportunity to "confront not just our ancestors but also our own capacity for determining who our ancestors were, and thus determining who we are or might become" (Harpham 35).

Once students start to better engage with the fact that they exist in a specific place that is driven by a particular context and history, they are more likely to be invested in who they are as well as their role in the participation of what their communities look like. It is from this

foundation that it is necessary to always help students make broader connections about what they are learning in the classroom; and, although the connections do not always have to be explicitly sold to the students, it is important that students are able to engage with the content being taught in a way that extends beyond standardized tests and economic incentives. In order for classrooms to be places that mediate democratic hope, students need to be able to make connections between content, community, and who they believe they are.

What Are We Learning?

When thinking about the nature of how to choose content for a humanities classroom, then, it is important to start with an understanding of our knowledge of the students and the places where we teach. As is true for the rest of this chapter, the primary focus of the discussion on content is geared for a humanities classroom; however, the underlying pedagogical arguments still apply for anyone who has the option to choose the ways in which they shape their particular content areas. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that not every district provides much autonomy to classroom teachers, which means that the ability to be invested in district guided content choices might be difficult - especially if said choices are problematic. With that being said, I think that forced curriculum choices puts us in the same position as many of our students, which I hope provides the opportunity to democratically mindful educators to be more inspired to create engaging ways for students to use content as a vehicle for connecting with themselves, their communities, and the world at large.

For Harpham, thinking about the content we teach in the humanities is one of the most critical aspects of the job. He summarizes the goal of the humanities as: “the scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we may better understand ourselves.” (Harpham 5-6) While he

spends considerable time unpacking this concept, he emphasizes that the goal of the humanities is clear in that, for those who teach, content choices have to be about providing students with the opportunities to better understand themselves through "the scholarly study of documents and artifacts" (Harpham 5). He claims that these documents and artifacts need to have depth to them, because "a deep object is a meaningful object; and it is in the process of examining the object, probing its depth and constructing the mass of intentions behind it, that we discover depth and meaning in ourselves" (Harpham 35). Our charge as educators is to choose what these objects are and decide the myriad ways we help students make connections between the object, themselves, and their communities.

Therefore, having a pedagogy that is centered around helping students participate in the discovery of meaning for their education and lives is more than just developing a curriculum that allows students to see what are often referred to as real world connections. Emphasizing meaning provides students with something that goes beyond attaching the titles of "job readiness" or "college preparatory":

> It is a source of resilience and it provides a sense of meaning and a source of motivation, and contributes to one's identity. Additionally, when students see purpose in their education or how their education supports their own sense of purpose, they will be more invested in learning. In this way, students will be better equipped to overcome barriers to their success. (Krzesni 174)

This construction of meaning and identity is especially important for students from marginalized communities. As explored in the Second Chapter, the educational system too often disenfranchises students from rural and urban backgrounds, which leaves many students with classroom experiences that are bereft of meaning. This lack of meaningful connection between

their identity and any sort of educational pursuit is extremely detrimental to their becoming democratically engaged citizens; as a result, if nothing else happens, the educational system just furthers the neoliberal assumption that education is just a stepping stone to some future - probably assumed to be unattainable for most - where imagination is not rewarded and dollar signs rule the day.

When student lives beyond the classroom are called into question, it is easy to see how neoliberal rhetoric takes hold in school systems. There is little doubt that the administrators and teachers who buy into the neoliberal promise of education want the best thing for students, so it makes sense when teachers continuously press the rhetorical button of "this will help you get a job after you graduate;" however, for students who are already alienated from their educational experience, it is nearly impossible for them to become lifelong learners after meaningful, purpose-driven connections are stripped from the curriculum. Purpose is imperative to life beyond the classroom, because "when students find meaning and purpose, regardless of what that meaning and purpose is, they engage with life in a way that is constructive and creative rather than destructive and they contribute to the project of restoration rather than degradation" (Krzesni 175)

This notion of being constructive and creative is paramount to being able to attempt to realize the Jeffersonian ideal of students developing into individuals, and the choices surrounding how we deal with content can enliven students to these possibilities. It is important that what we teach gives students the ability to have the requisite educational skills to function within a democracy, but a basic knowledge of how to read and write will not create the type of individual dreamed about by Jefferson and Emerson (Daniels 93). Content needs to go beyond basic skills in order to be one of the primary ways we equip students with a deeper understanding

of how to be citizens within a democracy. Daniels lists these skills as entailing the ability to employ "critical reasoning and bridging skills" and the application of how to "discern true from false and also to translate ideas into collective action" (93).

Citizenship in democracy, then, should be one of the core goals of how we employ curriculum in our classrooms - regardless of if we get to specifically choose what we teach or not. Content is so important to this mission because our students, who we want to become the independently-minded and free individuals that Jefferson envisioned, are "at the heart of the democratic project, but the capacities of good citizenship are not innate. These capabilities must be cultivated and instilled through a carefully prescribed education" (Daniels 89). As such, in order to create the scenarios that foster this idea, the "carefully prescribed education" that Daniels suggests needs to be built around our understanding that content functions as one of the primary vehicles through which students have the opportunity to engage with "the democratic project" (89).

For poorer students, who usually are denied the opportunity to experience the world outside of their immediate communities, the things we teach have the opportunity to expose them to lives and communities that would otherwise be made inaccessible (Daniels 194).
The study of literature, rhetoric, movies, music, history, and foreign languages all have the ability to create the liminal spaces that students need to move beyond their current understanding into a place of democratically grounded empathy; and, even if empathy is not necessarily attained, the tension created through exposure to other voices, ideas, and cultures allows students the opportunity to reflect further on who they are and their ideas about place. In order to perceive what content will challenge them, knowledge of students and the district are an essential aspect of understanding what curriculum will spark the necessary dialogue and tension to create an

impact for their lives. This means that teachers need to be invested in the communities where they teach, and that the students are able to see teachers as being invested co-learners not adversaries.

To make impactful content choices, then, requires teachers to be vulnerable and willing to take risks. It is not enough for us to expect students to simply engage with what is being taught, without any chances being taken on our part. Educators need to be willing to "test one's own assumptions accordingly," participate in conversations, and facilitate the dialogic tension of the classroom to promote healthy, democratically charged discourse (Daniels 227). Students desperately need to see that their teachers are able to "focus their energies on modeling for students how to consider and respond to perspectives or statements that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable and, in so doing, how to be responsible citizen-participants in that marketplace of ideas" (Daniels 232).

As noted above, the only way that conversations like these are fostered is through an educator's ability to choose content that will provide the necessary fodder for engagement. While understanding one's role to create curriculum that is shaped around state and district standards is important, it is never enough to simply focus on the reductive purpose of connecting those standards to what we are to be doing in the classroom. As the leaders of a classroom, everything that we choose to teach must be driven by its ability to "cultivate in students a pride in the ideals of liberal democracy, a sober and clear-eyed recognition of its incompleteness and its failures, and a competence in the practices necessary to improve it" (Daniels 94), because they need to be able to take the content from the lessons beyond the classroom.

So, as important as content is for providing the spark, the things that we teach are only truly important if the spark generated in our classroom is able to be lit into a fire that students can carry far beyond our walls. Daniels stresses that, when it comes to content:

> These lessons learned do not disappear after graduation, either: one study examining the relationship between the acquisition of particular verbal skills necessary for citizenship - reading, writing, speaking, listening, and debating - and political preparation showed that verbal aptitude corresponded with higher rates of voting and volunteering over time. The implications of this research are clear—civic education is neither an illusion nor an exercise in futility. We can teach the art and science of democratic citizenship. (91)

What Daniels is explicating is that content matters only so much as it connects students to having a better understanding of how they can be democratic agents in their communities and the world at large. As humanities teachers, it is easy to get caught up in teaching things that resonate with us; however, we are generally approaching our subjects from the perspective of being specialists - albeit limited - in our fields; however, it does not matter how much we like a particular author, composer, painter, or historical era. We need to teach what is being asked by our state and districts, but Shakespeare is only as valuable as his works are able to transform our students into individuals who are more engaged with themselves and the world.

Why Does It Matter?

By getting students to reflect on content, themselves, and their place in the community, teachers address to students why a place in the classroom matters. This question is really where students need to have the space, time, and language to articulate why we do what we do, and this question is the thread that holds everything else together. It is the fundamental thread where students find the ontological and epistemological groundings needed to critically engage with the

democratic process; because, if they are unable to construct a reason why education matters, and we are unable to provide them with one, they will not learn. This reality is true for virtually every student, but students from marginalized communities tend to be sold a different "why" than their more fortunate peers. Therefore, it is our job as educators to challenge the competing ideas about the purpose of education that have been proposed by neoliberal educational policies; then, in order for our students to have the opportunity to become individuals who are capable of promoting democratic ideals, we have to provide counter-narratives that challenge our students to participate in democracy in a way that fulfills the call from Jefferson, Dubois, Emerson, and Dewey.

Despite writing the majority of his educational philosophy in the first half of the 20th Century, John Dewey was acutely aware of the problems that public education faced in this country. Writing on the eve of WWII in 1939, Dewey expresses his concern for the educational system in this country as being:

> deeper, it is more acute, it is infinitely more difficult because it has to face all of the problems of the modern world. Recently we have been reading in some quarters about the necessity of coalition, whether in arms or not, at least some kind of a coalition of democratic nations, formed to oppose and resist the advance of Fascist, totalitarian, authoritarian states. I am not going to discuss that issue, but I do want to ask a few questions. What do we mean when we assume that we, in common with certain other nations, are really democratic, that we have already so accomplished the ends and purposes of democracy that all we have to do is to stand up and resist the encroachments of non-democratic states? (98)

As highlighted throughout the first chapter, it is clear that Dewey recognized the importance of democracy; however, it is worth noting that he lived during a time where he was witnessing a spike in "fascist, totalitarian, authoritarian states" (98), and he was not certain that the American educational system was providing - or would choose to provide - anything more than a narrative that says we are democratic. Dewey understood that there is a difference between stating you're a democracy and actively being one. As 21st Century Americans, we do not currently have a Hitler-level existential threat to our democracy, but authoritarian, fascist, and totalitarian rhetoric and actions are on the rise in America, which means that it is time to join Dewey and push towards an educational system that promotes democratic engagement.

Dewey knew that democracy in America is established in a hope not a promise, and that this hope needs to be constantly recharged by our educational systems; following the attack on the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, his focus on this issue proved to be prescient and extremely warranted. To avoid the very possible scenario of our democratic institutions failing, it is critical that our classrooms connect students to the hope of a better future for themselves and the country. This will take imagination, because, as stated by George Packer in his article for *The Atlantic* entitled "Are We Doomed?", "Nothing has aided Donald Trump more than Americans' failure of imagination. It's essential to picture an unprecedented future so that what may seem impossible doesn't become inevitable" (18).

Students' imaginations need to be constantly energized by the connections being made in the classroom to counter the "widespread cynicism" (Packer 18) that is becoming rampant in America - especially in communities who feel like they lack a voice. Giving a voice to marginalized students, then, allows them to explore and express themselves in a way that provides an outlet for future democratic activity; however, in order to do this effectively, it is

important that the why's explored in class are better than the cynical opinions that are so easy to adopt: "all leaders lie, all voting is rigged, all media are bought, corruption is normal, and any appeal to higher values such as freedom and equality is either fraudulent or naive." (Packer 18) When students and their families lack a voice in the democratic process, it is easy for them to believe that the entire system is working against them, because, in many ways, it is. What I see in my community and the surrounding districts is that, on a whole:

> The loss of democracy turns out not to matter all that much. The hollowed core of civic life brings a kind of relief. Citizens indulge themselves in self-care and the metaverse, where politics turns into a private game and algorithms drive Americans into ever more extreme views that have little relation to reality or relevance to those in power. There's enough wealth to keep the population content. America's transformation into Russia is complete. (Packer 18)

Packer's point about politics turning into a game is especially important when considering the negative impact that social media has on our democratic imaginations. Although there is no denying that the levels of sophistication being employed by tech conglomerates makes it easy to feel like an impossible fight, the issue for democratic education lies with the fact that the general user reflects little to no critical consciousness when it comes to their daily usage of social media. As teachers, then, one of our major tools to combat this lack of awareness is providing narratives that subvert those being propagated through social media.

One of the more important lessons that I use at the beginning of the year is about how social media obfuscates our ability to know the truth. I ask students to try to define truth, and I tend to hear the same answers every year about people living their truths and the value of subjective experience. Then, the students respond to various writing prompts and discussions that

are designed to draw attention to the ways that social media disrupts our democracy as we study the logical fallacies, rhetoric, and the impact of conspiracy theories. While not explicitly stated to my students as a study in epistemology, the lesson is grounded in the recurring question of how can we know the truth, and it begins with asking the question of whether or not the Holocaust happened. After we trace many of the rhetorical devises used by Nazi Germany, we compare and contrast the data we know about the Holocaust with the claims and rhetorical choices employed by Holocaust deniers. I, then, ask students about whether or not the Holocaust happened, how do we know that it did, and why they think it matters, with the vast majority of students being able to come to a solid understanding that this is an important discussion about truth.

After we write and discuss the importance of this at length, we turn our attention to conspiracy theories, why claims about truth matter for 21st Century Americans, and how social media distorts our ability to understand the truth. This is the space where I ask students to start making more explicit connections between their lives and what we discussed and studied around the Holocaust. We discuss what conspiracy theories they think are funny and which ones they think are true; then, I ask them to pick a conspiracy theory from a list and create a presentation that either proves or disproves the theory; and, through the lens of how we disproved Holocaust denier rhetoric and logic, they almost always end up disproving the conspiracy they chose. Once they are done with their presentation, they have to defend why it mattered to the class; and, while very few students ever launch on a diatribe about the importance of defending democracy, they all usually say something about truth being important and that we need to defend it. Their ability to wrestle with why truth matters is arguably one of the most important takeaways when considering the constant epistemological threat students face daily.

One of the primary champions of the discourse surrounding the importance of democracy to the educational system is John Hopkins University's President, Robert Daniels. In his book, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, Daniels presents a convincing argument that traces the roots of the democratic process to university practice as well as underscores why the university is an integral part of reversing the threats we are seeing to democracies around the world. While it is difficult to find much fault in his argument or line of reasoning, it must be said that there is a fundamental flaw in his thesis that universities need to be the center of the conversation on the defense of our democratic ideals: not everyone goes to college. As noted earlier, the number of people in my school district's community with a bachelor's degree or higher (28.5%) is less than the average of college graduates who live in the entire county ("National Center for Education Statistics"). So, as important as it is to reinforce democratic ideals in the collegiate setting, it is paramount for all students - regardless of their seemingly disparate backgrounds - to be provided with the opportunity to engage in democratic thought and practice, no matter if they plan on attending college or not.

Coincidentally enough, Daniels somewhat makes the argument for the need to provide democratic education before college within his book. After discussing free speech with the students at a seminar class at Johns Hopkins University, he expressed his shock at the lack of exposure most students had to one of the core democratic values:

> After we held this session for the first time, we surveyed the students to gauge their reaction. I was worried that the panel might be too rudimentary… Many confessed that until that moment, they-who uniformly stood in the top 10 percent of their high school classes, who had SAT scores far above the national average, and who hailed from every state in the union-had never been exposed to the case for free speech in their high school

> studies. We were gobsmacked. This most foundational of American ideals, this cornerstone of citizenship, was somehow overlooked (or, more perplexingly, expunged) from our students' high school education. (88)

Here, it is striking to note that Daniels is not discussing students who hail from backgrounds that look like the typical student from a rural background. He is talking about the fact that some of the best students in the country do not know how to engage in democratic thought and discourse.

This is important because it demonstrates how far behind we are when it comes to adequately training our students - no matter their background - to engage in democratic thought and practice. Daniels laments the fact that he has not seen much of a change over his tenure at John Hopkins:

> In the years since, I have become more and more desolate about the civic literacy of students entering our universities. The fact is that our students, who show such remarkable sophistication and mastery across so many different fields upon entering university, are woefully undereducated in democracy's core precepts. Given the perilous state of our democracy, this is an astonishing state of affairs. It's also a problem about which universities cannot simply wring their hands, lamenting the state of the nation and beseeching someone else to solve. It's something they themselves have the capacity and responsibility to address. (88)

What is most telling about this passage is that Daniels is discussing the difficulties being faced by university professors and administrators, not public school teachers. While universities should further their commitment to advancing democratic discourse and education, the front lines of democratic activity need to be in the public school classroom. This way, students who go to college are able to deepen their appreciation of the democratic experience in their post-secondary

coursework, while students, who have no intention of attending university, are also able to have the ability to engage in the depth of democratic experience.

As is stated directly in the title of his book, much of Daniels's argument is that universities need to be the primary vehicles through which the ideals of Western democracy are saved. He points to the fact that:

> Economists have even now demonstrated through empirical study that - historically, at least - higher levels of college education have made democracies more likely to endure and autocracies more likely to democratize. The fates of higher education and liberal democracy are deeply, inextricably intertwined. With strongmen either in power or waiting in the wings and democracy in question, now is a time at which universities must purposefully and self-consciously embrace their role as one of the stewards of the liberal democratic experiment. (Daniels 20)

While there is no debating that educational attainment has a direct correlation with democracy, his argument about higher education also underscores the need to promote democratic education before university. The argument should never be about whether or not students should go to college, because many students - perhaps the majority - will benefit greatly from a college education; however, if students just see college as a way to perpetuate the neoliberal promise of education equating to more money, then they will be further alienated from using their education as a vehicle to positively impact the democratic process, and college is not going to fix that.

Not every student is going to attend university, but every student needs to be challenged to see their lives beyond the statistics of what their community or families look like. Teachers, then, need to push all of their students to engage in bigger questions about their lives and what they want to do outside of school. These questions should be governed through engagement with

individualism rather than the dogmatic assumption that they need your content area to be successful. They need opportunities to see that social mobility was a "cornerstone of the American experience" (Daniels 31), because belief in a better life is a critical part of the hope of American democracy:

> More than a century later, prominent sociologists like Peter Blau and Otis Duncan argued that mobility contributed to the stability of democratic societies by enabling citizens to project future versions of themselves into classes other than the one they were born into, thus explaining their political sympathies beyond the bounds of their present circumstance. Now, in the twenty-first century, scholars and commentators of all stripes and creeds remain keenly focused on the ways mobility might still restore trust in the liberal democratic institutions and combat the alienation that can be so corrosive to the democratic experiment. (Daniels 32)

Although it is true that social mobility is becoming stagnant in the United States, we need to challenge students to envision a world where they are able to disrupt the hierarchical structures that perpetuate socioeconomic and cultural inequalities. As noted by Daniels, they need to see themselves beyond their current circumstances in order to challenge them to become individual agents participating in a democracy.

One of the ways that I reinforce the ideas of social mobility in my senior English class is through a comparative analysis of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* with the film *Good Will Hunting*, which was directed by Gus Van Sant and written by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Through this unit, we use concepts and questions from earlier units about the nature of free will, determinism, and the importance of place to explore the ways that the characters are impacted by these larger ideas. Then, we chart all of the ways in which the characters in these representative

texts are free to make the decisions that they do - what makes them round or flat; and, if someone is inhibited from making a decision, we have to generate questions about why that character might considered flat rather than round. Beyond presenting them with characters that are relatable, I use this lesson as a way for students to think about their future selves and their ability to engage with democracy through the lens of the American Dream. Most of my students are implicitly aware that the American Dream is not necessarily accessible to them in the same way it is for others; however, through this lesson, we are able to write, reflect, and discuss larger issues about what it means to be free to pursue this idea.

It is always interesting to see what students tend to come up with in their responses to this unit. While the answers can widely vary, many of the students tend to make the claim that Miller's Willy Loman and *Good Will Hunting*'s Will are unable to imagine a future for themselves, which is generally one of the responses that I hope to see. From there, we are able to bridge the conversation to talking about themselves and the types of futures they want to imagine. We discuss the sorts of things that help make these characters round and how they are able to make decisions based on their free will, plus the myriad conflicts that could have gotten in the way. At the end of the unit, we highlight the questions that are important for becoming the main characters in our own stories, which are generally distilled down to the following: Who am I? Where are we? What am I doing? Why does it matter?

Conclusion

It is through these questions that I get students to engage with the democratic process on a weekly basis; however, I tend to think that being a teacher is a lot like democracy: it is about having a strong commitment to the ideal that, when people know better, they will choose to do the right thing. At the end of the day, democracy is not about us teachers; rather, the work of

democracy is always about engaging with who you are as an individual, in a particular time in place, so that we are able to inspire the next generation of democratic citizenship. American democracy is under threat due to hegemonic political, economic, and social forces that want to blur the lines of truth in order to keep their arbitrary hierarchies entrenched in power. Neoliberal ideologies help to reinforce these structures by telling students and society that this is simply the way things are. I propose that it is our job as educators to instill in our students the types of questions and counter narratives that challenge these presumptions in order for them to become the types of individuals that Jefferson dreamed of at the founding of this nation. Individuals who are equipped to challenge the litany of lies that undermine our ability to trust in reality; individuals who are able to defend the freedom of those with whom they disagree; and, individuals who are able to able to uphold the democratic values that are being threatened by authoritarianism in American discourse and politics. The classroom has to be the place where this starts.

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