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Left Behind: The High Stakes of (il)Literacy in the 21st Century

The more we learn about standardized testing, particularly in its high-stakes incarnation, the more likely we are to be appalled. And the more we are appalled, the more likely we will be to do what is necessary to protect our children from this monster in the schools.

Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*

An Idea Running Amok

EDUCATOR AND ANTI-TESTING ACTIVIST ALFIE KOHN SAYS THERE IS A monster in our schools: the reform efforts of the Standards Movement have breathed unholy life into the idea of accountability, an idea now incarnate, with the face of a monster and a name that is everywhere on the lips of Americans—high-stakes testing. And Kohn not only wants us to collectively inquire into what he describes as today's sudden and increasingly fierce demands for accountability, but he also wants to provoke action, to "energize and encourage those who have resigned themselves to the tests," by showing us the dangers we face by believing in monsters (1).

Without question, Kohn's case against high-stakes testing policies has successfully energized those who also judge the tests to be, as he flatly puts it, "bad for kids" (54). A growing number of educators and parents are organizing their efforts to fight the testing monster, rallying around a kind of grassroots "just say no" campaign that has importantly gained national support over the past decade or so (see www.fairtest.org). As someone who taught high school English in the public schools for ten years, a teacher who remembers vividly both the genesis and the gradual ascension of the State of Ohio's high-stakes testing mandate, I am convinced of the right-mindedness of Kohn's case, in particular, and of the social and political significance of the anti-testing movement, in general. That is to say that I am, like the vast majority of my former colleagues—experienced teachers who as yet persevere in a public school system overrun and overwrought by continually shifting and increasingly stringent state and federal testing legislation—already persuaded to the truths Kohn's arguments imply; namely, that the best thing for us to believe is that high-stakes tests are "bad for kids" and that, given this belief, the best thing for us to do is to "just say no."

That said, I am troubled by the practical advice Kohn offers teachers in his final chapter, "Fighting the Tests." Following closely on the heels of his alarming depictions of the testing monster at work in the schools, Kohn matter-of-factly advises teachers to "do whatever is necessary to prepare kids to pass the test and then . . . get back to the real learning. Never forget the difference between these two objectives" (51). A fundamental problem with Kohn's advice, as I see it, is that it misconceives acting "practically" as mere gesture, as perfunctory, rote or token action that has been somehow emptied of all belief. But even our merest gesturing to the testing monster, I would argue, necessarily forwards one or another of our ideas about literacy—beliefs about what literacy is and beliefs about what literacy can do for an individual, a group, or a nation. Put plainly, there is no such thing as "mere" gesture, no such thing as acting without belief. Like the ancients who buried their dead with a gold coin to pay Charon's fare and a honey cake to slake Cerberus' hunger, any complicity with the tests has a way of sustaining the bad-for-kids high-stakes testing policies we genuinely aim to undermine. Rather than just doing "whatever is necessary" to get kids to pass what we know is bad for them, we ought to instead inquire into the beliefs about literacy that underwrite the tests, beliefs that may in fact be working to keep us from just saying no to the monster in the meantime.

"no such thing as 'mere' gesture, no such thing as acting without belief"

Of course, every age has its "monsters," ideas soaked through with human needs, interests and desires, which by our beliefs and our actions are embodied, empowered, and then unleashed into the world to run amok. And on the whole, I like Kohn's deliberate use of the word "incarnation" in the opening lines of his book; for, it importantly reminds me that any large-scale, legislatively mandated testing policy is, at bottom, the embodiment of an idea. An idea *realized*, that is "made real," within particular political, institutional, and historical contexts and in sure relation to the varying needs, interests, values, and beliefs of a given society. What's missing from Kohn's case is a theoretical framework that would help us interrogate the implications of his own provocative phrasing: how do our ideas, for good or for ill, become incarnate or made real? By what means are ideas animated, circulated, upheld or overthrown, and to what possible ends might they lead? Such questions were being asked by pragmatist philosophers like Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and Oliver Wendell Holmes at the turn of the 20th century. Their answer—that the meaning of any one of our ideas can be made clear by following its outcomes, by granting an idea its tentative truth and then asking ourselves forward-looking questions like, "What conceivable effects

of a practical kind would result if a particular idea were acted upon?"—helped establish a tradition of intellectual inquiry that informs my thinking about the effects of today's high-stakes testing policies and practices.

The connection between ideas and outcomes, between our theories about the world and our actions in the world we theorize, was a shared concern for these first-generation pragmatists. How these connections matter to our broader determinations of meaning and truth, (e.g., which of our ideas about the world are "true" ideas, and what is our process for knowing?), was of particular interest to William James and his student Horace Kallen, whose standpoints figure prominently here in my investigation of the high stakes of (il)literacy in the 21st century. The question of what literacy means, both for a nation's success and for an individual's ability to successfully access the rights and privileges extended to its citizens—including his/her ability to access the social, economic and legal institutions that make those rights and privileges possible—is a question long debated in this country. And it is this same question that once again takes on increased social and political import today, in the wake of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and the context of high-stakes testing mandates.

Broadly stated, this article advances a pragmatic re-reading of the meaning, use, and consequences of high-stakes literacy testing for today's test-takers in an effort to reestablish the critical connection between ideas and actions, between what we believe about literacy as a sociopolitical imperative and the real-world work being accomplished by the tests in service of that belief. Beginning with a brief historical example that establishes the theoretical framework for my analysis, the article moves to examine the various beliefs about language use, society and schooling that have shaped our contemporary understanding of literacy and work to underwrite our nation's current faith in the tests. In the end, I argue that contrary to the expectation that high-stakes literacy testing will help close the achievement gap, such policies and practices are instead complicit in remaking the ideological truth of the Great Divide, a way to both determine and explain which of our students will gain access to society by virtue of their passing a test and which will instead be "left behind."

An Idea Fulfilled: Meaning, Context, and the Making of Truth

> *The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything. Truth independent; truth that we 'find' merely; truth no longer malleable to human need; truth incorrigible, in a word; such truth exists indeed superabundantly, but then it means only the dead heart of a living tree . . . grown stiff with years of veteran service and petrified in men's regard by sheer antiquity. But how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are has been vividly shown in our day by transformations of*

> *logical and mathematical ideas. The ancient formulas are reinterpreted as special expressions of much wider principles, principles our ancestors never got a glimpse of in their present shape and formulation.*
>
> William James, *Pragmatism*

America's most "ancient formula" is also its most radical pronouncement of truth, conceived in 1776 by those who sought to reconcile the realities of war with the ideas of a new nation: *We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*. As one of America's oldest truths, the doctrine of natural rights has indeed "grown stiff with years of veteran service"; and yet, despite its petrification and in the ways that James suggests, no other truth has been, over the course of our history, so sharply debated or so frequently reinterpreted. When it comes to the nature of truth, self-evidence inevitably proves a most tenuous claim.

As a former student of William James, Horace Kallen knew well the pragmatists' view on the instability of truth. As a descendent of German Jews living in the US at the turn of the 20th century, Kallen's experiences likewise led him to understand well that the influx of southeastern European immigrants was making American nativists restless, and that, in their restlessness, many were reformulating the doctrinaire assumptions grounding the Declaration to better accord with their beliefs about the deleterious social, political, and economic effects of Second Wave immigration. In his 1915 essay, "Democracy versus the Melting-Pot," Kallen calls attention to what he considers a frank, not to mention dangerous, reversal of truth. "To-day," Kallen writes,

> the descendents of the colonists appear to be reformulating a Declaration of Independence. The danger comes, once more, from a force across the water, but the force is this time regarded not as superior, but as inferior. To conserve the inalienable rights of the colonists in 1776, it was necessary to declare all men equal; to conserve the inalienable rights of their descendents in the 20th century, it becomes necessary to declare all men *un*equal. (69, emphasis in original)

To clarify and counter the nativist logic funding this reversal of truth, Kallen offers a pragmatic re-reading of the historic event, reminding us that "to [the Signatories], the Declaration was neither a pronouncement of abstract principles nor an exercise in formal logic [but] was an instrument in a political and economic conflict, a weapon of offense and defense" (68). And here Kallen re-establishes the critical connection between meaning and context, between a set of ideas and the actions they inspire. That is, for Kallen, the meaning of the Declaration is held in its function—what it did—which was to afford the colonists sanction for refusing British authority. By rejecting the notion that there can be any final separa-

tion between the ideas expressed in the doctrine of natural rights and the actions it made possible, Kallen repositions its "truth" as a consequence, as an "idea fulfilled," verified in the colonists' experience, made true by what it accomplished, i.e., the actual, practical, meaningful conservation of their inalienable rights. Like all ideas, the doctrine was born of human necessity; and like all ideas, its truth was consequent to human belief and action. And while Kallen's opening arguments focus on an historic event, the remainder of his essay makes clear that his concern is for the future. For, just as the "truth" of the older proposition that all men are created equal is a truth made and not given, so too, Kallen reasons, the nativists' reformulated proposition that all men are created unequal will be *just as true* if it accomplishes its work in the world, if it becomes an "idea fulfilled."

Kallen's remarks are instructive: his refusal to separate ideas from actions, his conviction that what we believe matters to what we do. Likewise, Kallen's point in suggesting that the nativists' troubled proposition of inequality, a proposition rooted in racist beliefs about the inherent inferiority of southeastern Europeans, has the same revolutionary potential for truth as the Signatories' proposition of equality should not be missed. Even "false" beliefs or "bad" ideas have real effects, that is, they work, as James explained a century ago, just as perniciously in the long run as our true beliefs or good ideas work beneficially (520). If we are to better understand the meaning of high-stakes literacy testing for the 21st century, we must turn our attention there—to the real-world work being accomplished by the tests, to the consequences of our ideas about literacy.

"Which of our ideas about literacy do the tests work to make true?"

Which of our ideas about literacy do the tests work to make true? What actions are made possible by our having the "truth" about literacy? These are the kinds of questions that frame my inquiry into today's high-stakes testing practices and policies. James' observation that "the trail of the human serpent is thus over everything" underscores the humanist impulse that guides all pragmatic inquiries including this one, an impulse that refuses the easy split between theory and practice, between our ways of believing about the world and our ways of acting in it. All of our theories about the world, pragmatism insists, cannot help but add something to the world we theorize. The question we are thus obliged to ask ourselves, perhaps especially as college-level teachers and researchers invested in promoting "best practices" in literacy instruction and assessment, is whether or not our additions are worthwhile, that is, whether or not the world our ideas lead to is in fact a world worth having.

Choosing Literacy: Ideological Constraints and (Un)Marked Meanings

The idea and image of a public school system carelessly or, worse, deliberately leaving its students behind has clearly captured the nation's attention, and has a gone a long way to justify the use of high-stakes tests. "The quality of our public schools directly affects us all," former President Bush writes in his prefatory comments to the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act,

> [y]et too many children in America are segregated by low expectations, illiteracy, and self-doubt. In a constantly changing world that is demanding increasingly complex skills from its workforce, children are literally being left behind. . . . We have a genuine national crisis. More and more, we are divided into two nations. One that reads, and one that doesn't. One that dreams, and one that doesn't. (2)

Pronouncements like these cannot help but give us pause, and perhaps should give pause. Not because Bush's lament is necessarily a reliable or "true" assessment of our 21st century reality, but because such a reality *if true* suggests something larger about how our conceptions of literacy work in the world.

What if we read Bush's pronouncement of truth—that we are a nation divided, with one half reading and dreaming and the other half mired in illiteracy and self-doubt—as a truth made, not found, as an indication that our ideas about literacy are accomplishing their work in the world, becoming ideas fulfilled? The idea that "illiterates" (read: those who fail to acquire the skills of written literacy) will somehow find themselves "left behind" is of course not a new idea. Such a possibility or, better put, such inevitability was posited decades ago by the Great Divide theorists, who hypothesized a causal connection between the advent of written literacy in 5th century BCE Greece and the actual restructuring of basic human thought processes (see especially Goody & Watt, 1963/1988; Ong, 1982). Like Bush, these theorists invested literacy with the power to, among other things, split the world in two. The strict literate/nonliterate dichotomy upon which the Great Divide model of literacy rests established contrastive grounds that both cut off certain probabilities for nonliterate societies (e.g., logic and abstract thought are withheld from primarily oral cultures) as they necessarily set up other probabilities for literate societies (e.g., history, consciousness, and democracy itself are the undisputed domains of literate cultures). And like the logic driving today's high-stakes testing policies, the logic of the Great Divide works to position the acquisition of literacy as finally a matter of individual choice, as the only reasonable thing to do. Take, for just a brief example, Walter Ong's interpretation of A.R. Luria's early fieldwork with illiterate peasants in Uzbekistan, where the ability to define, classify, and explain natural phenomena—hallmarks of abstract thinking—was regarded as "impossible without reading and writ-

ing" and so supplied evidence of an individual's literate relationship with the world (8). In Ong's memorable recounting of the scene, Luria asks: "'Try to explain what a tree is.' 'Why should I? Everyone knows what a tree is, they don't need me telling them,' replied one illiterate peasant, aged 22. Basically, the peasant was right," Ong concludes, "There is no way to refute the world of primary orality. All you can do is walk away from it into literacy" (53).

To be fair, the Great Divide theorists were not concerned with the literacy/illiteracy antonymic pairing that is at the heart of Bush's lament and fuels today's debate over high-stakes testing, but rather with resurrecting an even older debate about the primacy of written literacy over orality and, by extension, the success of literate cultures over their nonliterate counterparts. Still, the literate/nonliterate dichotomy asserted by the Great Divide theorists is undoubtedly a "truth" that accommodates the literacy/illiteracy pairing. From the ancient Greeks' original "stupefying leap" into written literacy, to use Goody & Watt's phrasing (9), an entire system of other conceptual leaps is made possible. And while it is one thing to be an illiterate peasant in Uzbekistan somehow "stuck" in a culture that could not quite make the leap from orality into literacy, it is quite another to be an individual who, while living in a culture already saturated with literate practices, is yet somehow unable to make the leap from illiteracy into literacy. To be sure, there are profound problems associated with both scenarios—the first arrogantly draws our pity; the second dangerously draws our suspicion and too often our contempt.

What I am suggesting is this: today's idea and image of "no child left behind" is best viewed in James' terms, as a reformulation of the older idea and image of the Great Divide, a "reinterpretation of the wider principle" that literacy actually, meaningfully defines a society's or a community's or an individual's relationship with and in the world. After all, it is precisely the idea that such a divide exists that makes our leaving someone behind even possible. High-stakes literacy testing is merely the most recent expression of this wider principle and logic that has long funded the Great Divide model, simultaneously presenting the "illiterate" with a choice to "walk away" and, at least in my view, ultimately justifying our choice to walk away from those who either can't—or won't—make the leap into literacy.

Marking Meaning

Part of the real-world work being done by high-stakes literacy testing is ideological, an accommodation of a much broader historical and cultural process I am calling the "unmarking" of literacy's meaning, a process by which literacy, defined as "the ability to read and write," has attained its present non-ideological or neutral status within a modern US society that values its acquisition and institutionalizes it uses. My interest in focusing on the ways in which meaning is "marked" in the literacy/illiteracy pairing as a means to investigate the conse-

quences of today's high-stakes tests for students, their teachers, and the field of postsecondary literacy research at large, is provoked by a claim literacy theorist David Barton makes in his book, *Literacy: An Introduction to the Ecology of Written Language*. "Illiteracy," Barton asserts, "a fairly pejorative term, is the natural or unmarked term [in the pairing] and literacy comes from it" (21).

Barton supports his assertion with evidence gathered through a careful survey and review of twenty English language dictionaries published during the 19th and 20th centuries for the appearance of four related words: literate, illiterate, literacy, and illiteracy. His findings are striking. According to Barton, the word "illiterate" is the oldest and most frequently used of the four terms, dating back to the mid-1500s, found in Shakespearean plays, and appearing in Samuel Johnson's *First Dictionary of English* (1755) and *Barclay's Dictionary* (1820) to the exclusion of the other three words. The word "illiteracy" first appears in Walker's *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1839), with the caveat that it is an "uncommon word," although Barton notes that its limited usage can be traced back to as early as the mid-1600s (20). The term "literate," Barton explains, which was originally defined as "educated or learned," is found in dictionaries only after 1894, and it is not until 1924 that the word "literacy," for the first time defined as "the ability to read and write," is cited with any regularity (20). From his research, then, Barton concludes that while "'illiteracy' dates from 1660, it is more than 200 years until 'literacy' appears . . . Its origin is given as being from the word 'illiteracy'" (20, emphasis added).

To be sure, Barton's claim that "illiteracy," and not "literacy," is the older and unmarked word in the pair strikes those of us living in the modern era as surprising, even counterintuitive. Linguists, of course, have long theorized the notion of linguistic markedness and the ways in which marking conveys extralinguistic or "social" meaning through language. All spoken languages, in fact, include the formal option for marking some linguistic forms and not others, typically as a way to alert language users that a semantic shift has occurred. In English, for instance, the singular case of (most) nouns is unmarked and the plural case is marked, e.g., cat/cats. Robin Lakoff explains that, in general, the unmarked forms in a given language "tend to be both semantically and morphologically simpler than their marked counterparts" and thus to practiced language users, extra morphology implies extra meaning (44). Markedness is also a characteristic feature of certain antonyms, most notably the male/female forms of words, like the classic prince/princess pairing where the male form, "prince," functions as the unmarked term (i.e., the default term, neutral, universal) and the female form, "princess," with its extra morphology, functions as the marked term (i.e., the "other" term, non-neutral, exotic). For decades, feminist linguists (see Cameron, 1993; Lakoff, 2000; Romaine, 2000) have employed markedness theory to interrogate the hid-

den gender bias encoded by the unmarking and marking of male/female terms, arguing that these common linguistic constructions encourage us to see their equally constructed meanings as somehow inevitable and correct, as actually reflective of social reality. And it is because of markedness theory's ability to unmask or make clear the extralinguistic or social meanings of even our most ordinary words, like literacy or illiteracy, that I am suggesting Barton's unconventional, even counterintuitive, claim warrants further consideration.

Since the unmarked form is the one that, by definition, does not contain the derivational morpheme, we might reasonably expect the word "literacy" to be the older and unmarked term in the pair and the word "illiteracy" to be its derivational, marked counterpart. Barton's claim to the contrary reads counterintuitively, I think, because it points up a disconnect from the usual ways in which we discern the meaning of literacy, i.e., our modern tendency to assign "literacy" to the unmarked or default category, the universal condition toward which all progressive or modern societies must move. And while we might say that there are always exceptions to our language rules and simply leave it at that, I suggest that this particular exception opens a space for inquiry into the meaning of literacy as it has been traditionally authorized by the schools and is now currently ratified by today's tests. Doing so, however, requires that we proceed pragmatically, granting Barton's claim its tentative truth and then following its outcomes by asking ourselves forward-looking questions. How is it that literacy, a word that originates as the marked term in the pairing, has come to be regarded in modern times as the unmarked term? What beliefs about literacy in its relationship to society have participated with the redefinition of literacy's meaning as unmarked? What difference does this reversal in literacy's meaning make in the world and, more importantly, what difference does it make in the actual lives of today's test-takers?

From Margin to Center: Redefining Literacy as a Sociopolitical Necessity

Linguist Anne Freadman defines "definition" as "the tracing of boundaries rather than the discovery of an essence" (54). In other words, definitions impose lines between meanings, locating and stabilizing the semantic space where one meaning meets another. It is this stabilizing effect of our definitional boundaries that helps us conventionalize meaning, and it is this shared sense of meaning—of our word and our worlds—that helps to create what we conceptualize as the "real." However, even as our definitional boundaries stabilize meaning, they nevertheless remain open to the possibility of destabilization and re-stabilization, to the possibility of a shift in meaning.

According to Barton's research, the definition of literacy had noticeably shifted by 1924, signaling the transformation of its former meaning as "educated" or "learned" into its

modern meaning as "the ability to read and write." It is no mere coincidence that the redefinition of literacy's meaning emerged alongside the rise of US mass public education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period of monumental reorganizational efforts waged on multiple fronts—economic, political, social, and institutional. The semantic line of demarcation implied by the former definition of literacy as "educated" was simply outmoded or destabilized in a society where compulsory education laws ensured that all school-aged children—rich or poor, immigrant or native-born, willing or unwilling—were equally afforded the opportunity for a basic education. Consequently, the new semantic line of demarcation will re-stabilize the meaning of literacy squarely on the backs of the students: being "literate" signifies an individual's successful acquisition of reading and writing skills and being "illiterate" signifies his/her failure.

The 1924 redefinition of literacy's meaning is important in that it both represents and works to authorize a radical reorganization of the term's originally marked status. Long conceived as a sociopolitical necessity, as a way to chart and guarantee the forward progress of the nation, literacy and its standardization became a centralizing influence for the formation of the public schools at the turn of the 20th century. As one anonymous 19th century reformer put it: "Unity of speech is essential to the unity of a people. . . . nations of one speech, however formerly separated by differences of creed or of political organization, are essentially one in culture, one in tendency, one in influence" (as cited in Yarbrough, 122). Embedded within this late 19th-century perspective is a still-familiar claim: all matters of disunity—political, economic, and social—can be overcome through linguistic unification. And this belief, that sociopolitical unification will emerge as a direct result of the standardization of our language and literacy practices, has been a regular and powerful influence for the unmarking of literacy's meaning in the modern era.

Education historian David Tyack characterizes the 19th century as the "'Age of Institutionalization,' when agencies separated the insane into asylums, the poor into almshouses, the criminal into prisons. Fear of disorder, of contamination, of the crumbling of familiar social reforms such as the family, prompted reformers to create institutions which could bring order into the lives of

> "the quintessential model of order, where uniformity, punctuality, discipline, and industry were conceptualized as necessary for both survival and success"

deviant persons, and perchance, heal society itself by force of example" (72). The nation's strong impulse toward the standardization of literacy during this time period is itself a response to a generalized perception that the English language was being degraded and in need of rehabilitation. In turn, the public schools came to be viewed as the quintessential model of order, where uniformity, punctuality, discipline, and industry were conceptualized as necessary for both survival and success in the newly modernized nation. And as the schools became an increasingly powerful public institution, Tyack notes, the overriding curricular goal of "obedience to bureaucratic norms" was to be inculcated "overtly and with zest" (49, emphasis in original). It is therefore not surprising that literacy instruction, rigidly standardized in accordance with the current-traditional textbooks that were readily available to the schools, accounted for nearly 45% of the average school day and emphasized the "basic" skills of literacy—reading, writing, spelling, grammar and oral recitation (Tyack 49).

"The school itself," social historian Harvey Graff remarks, "took on new meaning" in this complex and rapidly changing late 19th century context, "and with it, literacy acquired new significance" (261). Literacy's "new significance" lies, of course, in its presumed ability to promote standardized linguistic unity and thereby erase, at least on the surface where visible and audible differences in language use exist, the vestiges of disunity brought about by an increasingly diverse and disorderly society. I would add, however, that what is erased along with any surface linguistic variation is the very markedness of the meaning of literacy itself.

UnMarking the Meaning of Literacy

My argument in brief is that literacy has attained its modern unmarked status because it has successfully avoided being named, becoming over the course of the last hundred years or so what literary theorist Roland Barthes calls an "exnominated fact." Barthes forwards his theory of exnomination to explain the ideological process by which certain groups of people—and their ideas—are rendered invisible. "The bourgeoisie," Barthes writes, "has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation. It makes its status undergo a real exnominating operation [and thus is] defined as *the social class which does not want to be named*" (138, emphasis in original). In other words, exnomination is an ideological process of unmarking. By avoiding being named (read: marked, made visible), exnominated groups can assume an apolitical, non-ideological status. They become *the* norm, and as such can remain "out of the field of interrogation and off the agenda for change" (Fiske, as cited in Lakoff, 54). In Barthes' example, the bourgeoisie, as the exnominated group, has no need to account for its beliefs, values or practices because these are already recognized as the normal, the neutral, the universal (i.e., the unmarked) standards by which all other beliefs, values, and practices are measured. This is ideology: the process by which the contradictions between material prac-

tices and their authorized social meanings are obscured, or smoothed over, and ultimately rendered invisible. While Barthes' term, in this example, is applied specifically to the ideological process by which groups of people avoid being "named," the theory itself is useful as a way to explain the ideological process by which the meaning of literacy has likewise managed to remain "out of the field of interrogation" and "off the agenda for change;" in my view, the ideological effect of a double exnomination. And while space obviously precludes a detailed account of the nation's 100-year march toward today's high-stakes literacy testing practices, a brief sketch of the two exnominations that have been instrumental in leading us here will prove useful. Underwriting both exnominations is our long-standing belief that literacy is the sociopolitical necessity as I have just described it, as the necessary means for and indictor of the general health and well-being of a modern nation.

In her book *The Language War*, Robin Lakoff suggests that, "The standard dialect itself is an exnomination. As long as you are speaking it, your choice is invisible, 'normal'" (77). In addition, the built-in ambiguity of the word "standard" further aids in its exnomination. In common usage, "standard" means both a measure of excellence (e.g., Her record time set the new Olympic *standard*) and the normal or average model or type (e.g., These are our company's *standard* hiring practices). Applied to a non-regional (read: neutral) dialect of English, Standard American English (SAE) arguably carries both meanings simultaneously. The exnomination of the standard dialect thus works to erase the inherent contradictions between these two meanings: SAE is imagined as both the dominant or "prestige" dialect *and* as normal or typical. And of course, such erasure necessarily works in the opposite direction as well: nonstandard dialects are imagined as both marginal and abnormal or atypical. The social authorization of the normalcy of the dominant dialect is the effect of its exnomination, whereby "normal" and "neutral" become mutually explanatory terms and any (real) class distinctions virtually disappear.

Linguistic theory also reminds us that all standard dialects are idealizations. Thus it follows that Standard English, as an idealized dialect, can never be anyone's "primary" language, i.e., no one is "born into" SAE. Instead, Standard English is an always-acquired "secondary" language, a school dialect, i.e., we learn SAE, its rules and its uses, through formal instruction. Coupled with its already exnominated status in society, the standard dialect can then be conceptualized paradoxically by the schools: Standard English "belongs" *originally* to no one and yet "belongs" *potentially* to everyone *at the same time*. A student can claim her right to "own" the standard dialect, of course, by becoming "literate," by choosing to learn the basic skills necessary for its acquisition—reading and writing—as these are apolitically and uniformly offered by the schools.

And here is where I am suggesting the second exnomination of literacy's meaning

takes place; for, the inherent neutrality ascribed to the standard dialect promotes the conceptualization of its acquisition as an ideologically transparent process as well. That is, becoming literate is viewed as an equally available option for all who exercise their educational “choice” to learn the basic skills of literacy. And since the acquisition of literacy has been so persistently, so ideologically, equated with securing access to the *status quo* and obtaining the social, political, and economic opportunities therein—an enactment of that which Harvey Graff has famously called the “literacy myth,”—the very choice to acquire literacy thus becomes both “invisible” and “normal;” that is, exnominated, a virtual *non-choice* for any who wish to remain unnoticed in the unmarked space of authorized, standardized language practices. Put simply, choosing to become literate in the 21st century *means* choosing to become unmarked—normal, typical, invisible. It is, after all, the condition of illiteracy in the modern era that “marks” an individual as occupying that marginalized space outside the norm, as needing to repeatedly account for her visibility or explain his atypical or abnormal language habits. And as Ong so pointedly reminds us, it is finally the “illiterate” who must choose to either “walk away” from her presumably deficient condition “into literacy” or, by implication, face the certain prospect that we will instead, and with all proper justification, walk straight away from her.

> “occupying that marginalized space outside the norm, as needing to repeatedly account for her visibility or explain his atypical or abnormal language habits”

The real-world work being accomplished by today’s high-stakes literacy testing policies boils down to just this: they facilitate the unmarking of literacy’s meaning and thus keep the idea of literacy itself safe—narrowly defined as the "ability to read and write" and tightly linked to the standard dialect, outside the field of inquiry and, in turn, predictably off the national agenda for change. Turning our attention away from any sustained, politicized interrogation of the meaning of literacy and toward an equally politicized interrogation of those individuals who do not possess it, the tests not only ensure that the “non-proficient,” the “illiterate,” and the “marginal” will be seen, but also ensure that the idea of literacy itself will continue to circulate invisible and unseen, avoiding its name and evading its status as an ideological fact. In this way, today’s high-stakes literacy tests also work to undermine the wealth of New Litera-

cy Studies scholarship that has debunked the old ideas about literacy championed by the Great Divide theorists (e.g., that literacy is separate from any context, a measurable psychological variable dependent on the acquisition of a set of discrete skills) so to reconceive literacy as a social practice inextricably linked to the values, interests, and needs of a given culture. And by forwarding the old ideas about literacy the tests are likewise implicated in (re)making the "truth" of the Great Divide itself, actively participating in the construction of a 21st-century reality that gives credence to Bush's lament by perpetuating our belief in a world where the readers "dream" and the non-readers "doubt," a society where literacy actually makes the difference, draws the line, divides the nation, and/or otherwise determines and explains which of our students will gain access to society by virtue of their passing a test and which ones will, instead and of course, be "left behind."

If we want proof that the system is working, proof that the old ideas about literacy are accomplishing their work in the world, *becoming ideas fulfilled*, we need look no further than the very youngest test-takers themselves. Benito Hernandez Garcia, a 10-year-old fourth-grader at a suburban school in Cincinnati who was interviewed on the eve of what is now known as "testing week" in Ohio, had this to say about his prospects on the tests and his position in US culture at large: "I feel confident [and] I understand more how to do math problems than other problems. But yes," Benito adds tellingly, troublingly, as if to confirm what the nation believes it already knows about the fate of those students who can't pass the test, "I feel left behind" (Amos and Kranz).

Perfect Worlds and Solving Names: Keeping the Quest for Educational Access Open

In August 2006, a *Houston Chronicle* headline read: "Official: No Child Left Behind Act Nearly Perfect." Echoing the sentiment of the Bush administration, former Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced to reporters her belief that the 2001 Act is "close to perfect," adding that "I talk about No Child Left Behind like Ivory soap: It's 99.9 percent pure. There's not much needed in the way of change" (Feller). And while Spellings admits that it would be "foolhardy" to suggest that "we're not going to react to anything that we're learning over time," when pressed by the media about whether or not she meant that the law is truly 99.9 percent close to working properly, she replied "I think it is that close" (Feller).

A "perfect" law—or one that is nearly so—flawless and complete, without defect or omission. In other words, a law that works as hard at leaving nothing to chance as it reportedly does at leaving no one behind. A perfect system then, really, one grounded in a kind of classic *a priori* logic that seeks to guarantee an outcome by certifying its origins. And anyone involved at any level of public education these days likely finds this logic perfectly familiar.

It is the logic underwriting the Standards Movement and the rhetoric of accountability, the logic funding the tests, and a line of reasoning that many find compelling: the way to secure a bright future for the nation and its children is to define, once and for all, the "basics" of education and then, of course, just get "back" there. Close the gaps. Secure the future.

The problem is not that we shouldn't want to create a better, even a more perfect, world. Instead, the problem lies in the *a priori* logic being employed in service of that goal. A logic that by definition forgets "context" and the role human experience plays in the determination of the truth or falsity of any one of our ideas, and thus a logic that ignores the meaningfulness of Benito's self-revelation that he already feels "left behind," in all ways an expression of his experience with the tests. In our belief that national unity can best be achieved through linguistic unification and standardization, our belief that language variation represents a dangerous aberration of the norm rather than being the norm itself, we have installed a law that instead effects division and separation, marking some for the margins and others for full participation in society. But it is in our failure to account for experience—or, more precisely, our preference to abstract or "think apart" our ideas about literacy from the actual, practical, and meaningful difference they make in the lives of people—that we may find our greatest distraction to the radical proposition of truth implied by the title of the law itself. For, a law that is already believed by lawmakers to be "close to perfect" and "99.9% pure" leaves little room for serious and engaged conversation about what it is we might actually be "learning over time," despite former Secretary Spellings' comments to the contrary.

The pragmatists were concerned with the ways in which certain words or phrases foreclose debate about our lived experiences with a given idea or proposition of truth, and instead work to justify our theories about how the world just "is." James writes:

> You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part in magic words have always played. If you have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's principle, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. “God,” “Matter,” “'Reason,” . . . are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. (509, emphasis in original)

Certainly Kallen was concerned that the nativists' reformulation of the doctrine of natural rights was more than just clever word-play, but instead had the potential to become *the* Truth of the American experience by serving as a kind of "solving name," a way to "close

the quest" for ensuring equal access to the inalienable rights attending a democratic society by naming the antecedent principle that ultimately works to keep us from it: according to the nativists, some people—presumably the white, middle-class, English-speaking descendents of Northwestern Europeans—are simply more equal than others. In ways similar, Kohn's campaign to encourage educators who have resigned themselves to the tests to inquire again into their effects suggests his concern that the national debate has been all but foreclosed, and that the "truth" implied by a single set of tests now has the potential to become *the* Truth of the American educational experience. With Kohn, we might well wonder whether today's high-stakes tests are becoming a kind of 21st-century "solving name," a way to "close the quest" for ensuring educational access by naming the antecedent principle that likewise works to keep us from it: only students who use the standard dialect in institutionally authorized ways will be granted a high school diploma, the long-standing measure of a "level" US playing field and the means necessary to access higher education and/or a living wage.

If educational reform under the auspices of NCLB is going to serve democratic purposes, that is, if the idea of increasing access and opportunity for students who are being "left behind" is to become an *idea fulfilled*, then we must more fully square the beliefs about literacy we hold today—that literacy is a situated social practice (see Street), that literacy empowers when it connects our ways of reading "the word" with our ways of reading "the world" (see Freire and Macedo), that the wide range of literacy practices we see in our classrooms suggests difference not deficit (see Heath; Rose)—with our actions about literacy. In other words, closing the "achievement gap" begins with closing this critical gap between the theory and practice of our ideas about literacy—not just in the classroom but also on the federal and State senate floors. The implications of our nation's continued faith in high-stakes literacy tests are clear: nonstandard literacy practices not only "mark" and make visible the students who use them but also, and in so doing, render their needs invisible. What we do about this particular real-world effect matters both pedagogically, in our efforts to innovate approaches that build on our students' knowledge of the spoken and written uses of language in order to meet the literacy demands of a university education, and politically, as a way to disrupt the prevailing assumption that an individual's acquisition of SAE is the modern universal pre-condition that makes possible any number of other achievements, including his/her ability to achieve access into those college classrooms.

The meaning of any one of our ideas, pragmatism teaches, is to be determined by the world it leads to, not by the world it comes from. The benefit of pragmatic inquiry thus does not lie in its ability to decide, once and for all, the question of what this world is going to be, but instead rests in the ways it can usefully re-orient us to the task. In his defense of pragmatism's value as a method of inquiry deeply concerned with the always human conse-

quences of our beliefs and actions, social historian Louis Menand writes:

> It is sometimes complained that pragmatism is a bootstrap theory—that it cannot tell us where we should want to go or how we can get there. The answer to this is that theory can never tell us where to go. Theories are just one of the ways we make sense of our needs. We wake up one morning and find ourselves in a new place, and then we build a ladder to explain how we got there. *The pragmatist is the person who asks whether this is a good place to be. The non-pragmatist is the person who admires the ladder.* (xxxiv, emphasis added)

Menand's remarks underscore the fundamental shift in our ways of knowing the world that pragmatic inquiry invites, a shift that commits us experientially to the world we theorize and requires us to take account of the difference our ideas are actually making in the scope and expression of people's lives. "The whole function of philosophy," James surmised, "ought to be to find out what definite difference it makes to you and me, at definite instances in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the 'true' one" (30). James' viewpoint necessarily applies to the work of contemporary literacy researchers, whose shared goal is to better understand and explain how our beliefs about literacy connect with our institutionalized practices so that we might make sense of the difference our theories are making in the lives of students. When it comes to the difference high-stakes literacy testing is making in the US today, the quintessential pragmatic question "Is this a good place to be?" is always a good place to start.

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