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"We're in the Business of a Good Education": Schooled to Profit or Educated to Create?

Nicole Nolasco

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“WE’RE IN THE BUSINESS OF A GOOD EDUCATION”: SCHOOLED TO PROFIT OR
EDUCATED TO CREATE?

by

NICOLE NOLASCO

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

In this inquiry, I ask the questions: What could my career, my life, and the world be like in the future? How could public education be impacted by the frenzy over accountability, standards, and the belief that competition and unrestricted capitalism will reform American schools, especially for students of color and from the working and lower classes? How can I, a high school English teacher, address pressing social and educational issues to affect change? I explore these questions through a work of fiction I have created. Theoretically drawing from critical pedagogy, I use arts based research and fiction as methodology to challenge accountability, standardization, , and neoliberalism through a work of dystopian fiction.

I have identified six “demands” for the reimagining of public education from my inquiry: (1) Teacher education should focus on developing intellectual, thoughtful, and critical teachers who understand that their role is not to test, sort, or label students, but to support, guide, and advocate for all. (2) It is of paramount importance to provide equal opportunities for all students to reach their highest potential (Siddle-Walker, 1996), rather than privilege those who hold money, power, and cultural capital. (3) White students, teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians need to challenge their White privileges before they can critically think about racism and act against its detrimental effects in the classroom. (4) Teachers need to cultivate relationships with students that are based on mutual respect and care, but not on power or control. (5) Teachers and students should never give up hope, rather, create possibilities for change. (6) Teachers and

students should work with administrators, parents/guardians, and other educational workers to create a critical and artful pedagogy where teachers are able to invent critical and inspirational curriculum based upon their own funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and the interests and creative potentials of their students, and where students are able to develop their “epistemological curiosity” (Freire & Macedo, 1995), engage in active learning, have equal opportunities to release their creative imagination (Greene, 1995), and thrive with their funds of knowledge to realize their potential in education and life.

INDEX WORDS: Arts Based Research, Critical Pedagogy, Dystopia, Fiction, Neoliberalism, Resistance

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

To my students for the inspiration

To my teachers for the guidance

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First, I must acknowledge my major professor: Dr. Ming Fang He. Dr. He, you believed in me and in my work even before I realized I had something important to say. You have guided and supported me from the very beginning of this journey, and were quick to tell me that I was “brilliant” and “a beautiful lotus flower thriving on top of the dirty stinky mud.” I am grateful for your guidance and unflagging enthusiasm.

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PART I: WHERE WE ARE

Change occurs only at the edges, one human being at a time. And it occurs most significantly and in a viral, exponential way by means of words. Words made into sentences, sentences made into stories, stories made into novels. --Russell Banks (2009, p.60)

Every time my high school students begin reading a novel, I stress to them the importance of understanding the author's world in order to fully understand his or her writing. One of my classroom mantras is: "Literature is not written in a vacuum," which I continually repeat in order to explain to my students that authors are moved by *something*, and this *something* is what impels them to write. Alice Hoffman (2001) more eloquently explained this phenomenon, stating: "Writers don't choose their craft; they need to write in order to face the world" (p. 97). For the past decade my world has largely revolved around education, and, just like the authors I so admire, I am compelled to express the conflicts, heartbreaks, joys, contradictions, and possibilities of my world through a work of fiction.

Each year of my teaching career has been marked by change. Some were positive and personal changes that led to my growth as an educator, while others cast a shadow over the future of my career and, even, of public education itself. The changes that have most piqued my interest are neoliberal education "reforms," such as an increased reliance on standardized testing to assess students and teachers, standardized curricula and the deskilling of the teaching profession, school choice, and, most importantly, the growing movement to deregulate and privatize public education. Studying these changes is not only important to me because of their potential impact on my professional life, but also because of the damning effect such changes have had on American education, and, in turn, American democracy. Washington and the media

have largely supported neoliberal reforms by painting a picture of a beleaguered America, an America that used to be “great,” but is quickly losing its status as the world’s most powerful nation, militarily, economically, and educationally. The dominant narrative capitalizes on fear, contending that a weak America is a vulnerable America, fueling racism, and xenophobia, while diverting mass attention from, as Wendy Brown (2015) deemed it, a “stealth” neoliberal takeover, moving America even further from the egalitarian and democratic ideals pseudo-politicians profess to defend and closer to a corporate nation state.

While neoliberalism is seen across many aspects of public life, it is particularly powerful in the war against public education. The dominant narrative on public education portrays a system plagued by ineffectiveness: ineffective teachers, ineffective curriculum, and ineffective management. In order to counter this ineffectiveness, the government and corporate philanthropists step forward to “reform” schools. Their solutions, however, do not lie in a more meaningful and culturally relevant curriculum, not in smaller class sizes, not in fewer tests, but in market-driven reforms where students are asked to compete for access to the best schools and educational resources. Proponents argue that choice will propel all schools forward, allowing effective schools to thrive and ineffective schools to rise up or dissolve. On the surface, these plans appear egalitarian; a viable solution to help the nation’s “at-risk” students. When studied more critically, however, neoliberal reforms are simply another way to maintain the status quo, continuing to support students with monetary and cultural wealth, while limiting the opportunities of students of color and students in low income urban and rural schools.

As students and teachers are increasingly tested, surveilled, and held accountable, their opportunities for creative expression and identity formation are stifled. In addition, opportunities for students to attend a truly public school, a place where school boards are elected

democratically and decisions are made with students' best interests in mind, are becoming more limited through the establishment of charter schools, many operated with public money by private, for-profit companies. In order to address the changes facing public education, my dissertation inquiry aims to address questions that have grown out of my experiences as a teacher in urban and suburban high schools in Savannah, Georgia. In order to face *my world* I will address the following questions in a novel set in Savannah in the year 2049: What could my career, my life, and the world be like in the future? How could public education be impacted by the frenzy over accountability, standards, and the belief that competition and unrestricted capitalism will reform American schools, especially for students of color and from the working and lower classes? How can I, a high school English teacher, address pressing social and educational issues to affect change? Exploring these topics through a work of fiction allows me to challenge the dominant conversation on educational "reform," shifting the focus away from new accountability measures and increased standardization as solutions that will fix America's "failing" public schools. My choice of the word *could* is essential because, although the future I envision in my work is bleak, its existence is not definite. There is room for hope and change—what *could* be, not what *has* to be.

My work heeds Tom Barone's (2001) call for educational researchers to move beyond searching for definitive answers and to enact "a playful, exploratory spirit toward uncovering and expressing alternate (sometimes even conflicting) interpretations of the phenomena under scrutiny" (p. 24). Utilizing fiction as a methodology is the way in which I will continue this conversation, using my novel to put forth "research that is steeped in imagination, research that attends to the rhythms of season and weather, life and death, breathing and aging, research that walks a familiar path with an unknown destination" (Leggo, 2006, p. 90). The use of fiction

allows me to present an educational landscape that draws upon elements of the current public education system, while utilizing imagination and theory to break through methodological boundaries, literally writing and rewriting the story of public education.

Autobiographical Roots

Many forms of qualitative research in the field of curriculum studies demand that researchers not only uphold high levels of transparency and reflexivity within their work, but that they also interrogate their autobiography in an effort to more fully understand their place in the research and to further illuminate the topic of study. Ming Fang He and JoAnn Phillion (2008) posit that “the researcher is not separate from the sociopolitical and cultural phenomena of the inquiry, the data collected, findings, interpretations, or writing” (p. 1). As a result, in order for scholars to conduct research that is “personal, passionate, and participatory,” they must first understand what led them to the research and how their life sustains and supports this research, even after the study is complete (p. 1). Through an interrogation of my past, I determined that my story has three threads which led me to this inquiry: an early love of reading and writing, an open mind for social justice, and a calling to serve as a teacher.

I wrote my first story in the second grade, sitting on a sun porch off of the kitchen in my home in Suburban Detroit. It was a Halloween story, as I recall, and I peppered my loose leaf paper with fall stickers upon completion, an indication that I had earned a good grade on the story, even though I just wrote it for myself. Proud of my accomplishment, I carried it around for several weeks, reading it to anyone who crossed my path. Although I cannot remember the exact plot, I am sure it was heavily inspired by something I had read or seen on television. Most of my early work was somewhat plagiarized or imitative, but the thought of writing stories intrigued me so much that I wrote and delivered a speech about it as “my future career” the next school year.

My interest in writing novels stemmed from my love of reading. My mother, a passionate and life-long reader, took me on weekly trips to the library and, shortly after beginning kindergarten, I received my own library card. After the librarian handed me the slim evergreen-colored card, I wrote my name, *Nickie Brants*, on the slick white strip on the back of the card in permanent marker and slipped it inside of my small red plastic wallet. I used the same card until, sometime in my early teens, it snapped in half from overuse. In addition to our library trips, my mom always spoke fondly of her own childhood love of reading. Her favorite books growing up were mysteries, especially those following girl detectives Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden. Although I tried to read Nancy Drew books to please my mom, I was never very interested in them. I preferred the popular series of my generation: Ann M. Martin's *The Babysitter's Club*. Both of my parents had a profound impact on my interest in books. While my mother read and provided me with things to read, my father introduced me to stories through nightly read-alouds. My first and most cherished books were Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series, James Herriot's animal stories, and three books about the lives of writers, artists, and musicians. Each book gave a three to five page biography of the artist accompanied by a beautiful illustration of the artist surrounded by the things he or she was famous for. The biographies I remember most fondly are Emily Dickinson, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Andy Warhol, and Georgia O'Keefe. As a child books fed my hunger for knowledge, and my parents always encouraged me to seek out answers in books; therefore, I primarily learned about life from what I read. Books were always available to me, and they oftentimes provided me with an uncensored look into life, something that shaped my worldview from an early age.

Writing stories appealed to me not only because I enjoyed reading, but also because I was born with a very active imagination. As a child, my imagination mostly caused me to be afraid of

everything. I was always convinced that our house would burn down, be burglarized, or some other calamity would befall me or my family. Incidentally, these ideas came from another type of story: the soap operas my babysitter watched every afternoon. As I got older, however, I used my imagination to “play pretend,” because I am an only child and oftentimes had to amuse myself without the companionship of other children. Storytelling emerged as my favorite form of imaginative play and self-expression. Before I could write, I would enact elaborate stories with my Barbie dolls or stuffed animals. As I grew older, storytelling evolved from a diversion to a way to entertain. For example, my third grade teacher held a “class meeting” on Friday afternoons, which was a special name for show and tell. One Friday I forgot to bring something interesting to school, but I did not want to miss my turn, so I used my five minutes to tell my classmates about my family’s recent move. To my delight, my peers laughed at my story and were thoroughly entertained by my jokes about our bathtub that, when we first moved in, was filled with “rings like Saturn.” I have been taught by some very indulgent teachers because my third grade class meeting was not the only time I told stories in front of the class. In my high school psychology course I was permitted to “warm up” the class for my teacher, always telling a funny story or two before the beginning of the lesson. My reputation as an entertainer was so well-known in my high school that I was even voted “Best Storyteller” by my senior class.

Telling stories was not only something I did, but also something I wrote. Opportunities for creative writing were my favorite school assignments, and it was not uncommon for me and my friends to write progressive stories (a game where multiple stories were written simultaneously) on school holidays. The stories were usually bawdy lampoons of our schools, acquaintances, and current events. My friends and I even created a book of comic strips about life at our high school, and we starred as the main characters. I would also write stories for

friends as gifts, usually placing them as the protagonist in a wacky misadventure. Finally, one summer in my mid-teens, my parents gave me a laptop computer and I took myself to a coffee shop and began to write a young adult novel. I essentially fictionalized my life and made interesting and romantic things happen, allowing myself to, once again, live within my imagination. A copy of that manuscript survives only in my memory, and for that I am eternally grateful. Regardless, my adolescent writings mark the beginning of my interest in fictionalizing life's experiences.

Although I was intensely interested in pursuing a career in writing, I began to explore teaching while taking an elective class in career preparation at my high school. I chose the profession, initially, because I am an organized and routine-driven person, and I hoped to work a job with predictable hours. Upon further introspection, however, it is clear to me that I first pursued teaching because I enjoy entertaining people and speaking in front of others. Teaching provides me with an opportunity to do this on a daily basis by sharing my passion for language and literature. My experiences as a college student, however, led me to look at teaching as a vocation and not simply as a job.

I began to work in the Chicago Public Schools during my sophomore year in college. My roommate and I were both education majors, and were approached about working as academic coaches at Mather High School. Our job was to meet with high school students on Saturday mornings to prepare them for a city-wide academic competition. The competition was based on the popular television show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and students were asked a series of questions in a format similar to the show, each round earning more money for college. We worked with students throughout the year to prepare for the competition, playing games and quizzing each other on all of the major academic subjects. The competition was even televised

on one of the local channels. Working with these students first introduced me to life in urban public schools. It was also during this time that I also volunteered as a tutor at one of the high schools in Rogers Park, the diverse neighborhood where Loyola University is located. I primarily worked with a young Somalian girl who spoke very little English and was not literate in her native language because she spent most of her life in a refugee camp. I was shocked to discover that she only took one English as a Second Language course each day, and grew frustrated with her when, during our tutoring sessions, she insisted on completing her homework, when I thought it was more important for her to focus on learning English. These experiences were integral in my pursuit of a career in secondary education because I was surrounded by diverse students. Many of my students were immigrants or first generation Americans from India, Eastern Europe, Asia, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Latin America, and Africa. The student populations I encountered in the Chicago Public Schools were drastically different from my classrooms growing up, where my classmates were like me: white and middle class. My experiences in the Chicago Public Schools and my college coursework in education first introduced me to the inequalities in education based on class, race, and immigration status.

I was first introduced to social justice as a senior in high school when I took a religious elective called Peace and Social Justice. One of the class projects asked us to research a social justice issue. Because I was raised to get books from the library about topics I did not understand, I did not find the project difficult, but the subject matter was entirely unknown to me. I completed this project in 2004 when I was eighteen years old and a senior in high school. After a number of Internet searches, I alighted upon the topic of racial profiling post-September 11, and I became so interested in the topic that I continued my research long after the project was over. I spent the next few months preparing for the 2004 election (the first in which I was able to

vote). When I entered college, I read the newspaper every day, joined the college Democrats, worked for the John Kerry campaign and even attended protests against the Iraq war in Chicago's Daly Plaza. At eighteen I was learning things my privileged upbringing had sheltered me from, and I was moved to action.

I was first introduced to the idea of social justice and education in one of my first secondary education courses. At the beginning of the semester our professor gave us a photocopy of Herbert Kohl's (2004) article *Teaching for Social Justice*, and, as a result, my first notions of what it meant to be a teacher were: "don't teach against your conscience. Don't align yourself with texts, people, or rules that hurt children" (p. 42). I still hold true to these principles today. I always tell my students that, above all else, I work for them- not the principal, school board or state, but for them and with their best interests in mind. Loyola professors and the school of education expected that their graduates would teach according to the principles of social justice, an important component of Catholic social teaching. This belief was handed down through all of our coursework and field experiences. My commitment to upholding these principles was so strong that I became a Loyola Chapter Scholar. Chapter scholars were not only top students in the school of education, but also committed to teaching students in schools with the highest need. The terms of the scholarship program stipulated that graduates were to teach in high need schools after graduation, and this commitment led me to my first teaching job in Savannah, Georgia.

I was lucky to attend college right before standards completely took over public education; therefore, I learned to create my own lesson plans without reliance on textbooks, state or school district-created pacing guides, or pre-packaged teaching materials. The first course I taught as a high school teacher was ninth grade English, and I spent much of the summer of 2008

creating lessons for the fourteen year-olds I thought would enter my classroom after Labor Day. Shortly before school began, however, I learned my class would contain students who had failed ninth grade English one, two, or even three times, making my students anywhere from fifteen to nineteen years old. Additionally, my students were not the sheltered high schooler I had been. Many already had children, lived on their own, or were simply so disillusioned by a public school system that continually failed them, that their attendance was sporadic. My first few years of teaching were heart-breaking and exhilarating. I really did not know what I was doing in the classroom, but I came to work each day and tried to teach, which my students grew to appreciate. Many of my colleagues were as disillusioned about education as my students, and had given up on teaching at all, opting to show movies, lecture exclusively, or give as little work as possible, just so their students would be quiet. I cannot say I never taught in this way. I did. I would oftentimes become overwhelmed, and try to spend the day away from my students. Despite the difficulty of my job, I kept going to work. In my hallway alone, two teachers left before the end of the first semester, but I stayed. I had successful and unsuccessful days, but something would not let me leave. I lived off of the advice of one of my college professors: "These kids don't need you to be a martyr for them; they need you to be a teacher to them." These words resonated with me, and led me to maintain high expectations for myself and my students. I simply would not give up, which did not make me a great teacher all of the time, but it did show my students that I cared about them, something that I learned garnered a lot of respect in my school community and made my job increasingly easier.

My first three years as a teacher opened my eyes to the harsh realities of life within American public schools. I learned that not all public schools were like the affluent suburban schools I always attended, but were more like factories interested in standardization, output, and

data. I learned that the school was not a place where students could transcend the poverty of their birth, as I had always been told, but a place that often reaffirmed students' social status through an antiquated curriculum, limited opportunities, and strictly controlled environments. I learned that the school was not a safe haven for students, but, for many, a road to future incarceration. I learned that the school was not a place where teachers enriched their students with creative learning experiences, but was a place where right answers were given to fulfil requirements for graduation. Finally, I learned that public schools could not be "fixed" "reformed" or "restructured," but that more radical action was required to bring to light the needs of diverse American students and counter the status quo. Although I initially kept my head down and tried to do the best job for my students, something kept pushing me forward, prodding me to question more, read more, think more. Eventually these questions led me to the field of curriculum studies, and I found a place where all of my interests: creative writing, social justice, and education, could be addressed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework supporting my work is critical theory and critical pedagogy. These theoretical perspectives provide me with the foundation to critique the ways in which schools operate to uphold particular experiences and ideologies, while devaluing or ignoring others. Critical theory grew from the work of Karl Marx, who looked to philosophy to ameliorate social problems and affect change. Marx's philosophy is grounded in class conflict and production. He argued that as production needs changed (agrarian production versus industrial production), society changed. As a result, those who controlled the production (economy) controlled all aspects of society (knowledge and culture, for example). As workers began to have fewer opportunities to feel in control of their work, the rift between the proletariat (workers) and

the bourgeoisie (wealthy ruling capitalist class) began to widen, and Marx concluded that proletariat-led revolution was the only solution. Marx's theory relied heavily on the "dialectic," emphasizing the importance of dialogue in order to free society from the class struggle and, ultimately, create a "classless society" (Crotty, 1998, p. 119). While Marx's vision for a classless society was never realized, his work continued to inspire generations of scholars.

Marx's work influenced a group of twentieth century scholars at The Institute for Social Research, or the "Frankfurt School." Theorists such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse are credited with reimagining Marxist thought in the 1920's through the 1960's in Europe and, when exiled during World War II (fearing for their lives in Nazi Germany), in the United States. Bronner and Kellner (1989) explain that members of the Frankfurt School "attempted to revise both the Marxian critique of capitalism and the theory of revolution in order to confront those new social and political conditions which evolved after Marx's death" (p. 1). Horkheimer first used the term critical theory in 1937, distinguishing "between a theory that merely reflects the current situation and a theory that seeks to change the situation," speaking to the revolutionary intent of pure Marxist thought (Crotty, 1998, p. 130). Giroux (2001) defined critical theory as "both a 'school of thought' and a process of critique" (p. 8).

As curriculum work was reconceptualized in the 1970's, critical theory was used by curriculum scholars to instill new life in educational research and combat positivism's hold on the field. Critical work has a broad theoretical scope, but it does maintain a number of defining characteristics. First of all, the ontological and epistemological positions counter positivism. As a result, reality "makes a material difference in terms of race, gender, and class" and knowledge is viewed as "subjective and political" (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). Joe Kincheloe, Peter McLaren, and Shirley Steinberg (2011) best summarize critical research, explaining that:

Inquiry that aspires to the name “critical” must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness. (p. 164)

According to the critical theoretical perspective, there exist numerous, at and times conflicting, visions of reality and truth all mediated through race, class, and gender. Consequently, knowledge is not neutral or objective, but “is a social construction deeply rooted in the nexus of power relations” (McLaren, 1998, p. 174). Critical researchers, therefore, are interested in understanding why some forms of knowledge are more valued than others. This effort calls on the work of Jürgen Habermas, one of the second generation Frankfurt school theorists, who differentiated between technical, practical, and emancipatory knowledge. While technical knowledge “can be measured and quantified,” practical knowledge is “acquired through describing and analyzing social situations historically and developmentally” (McLaren, 1998, p. 175). Schools generally value the proliferation of technical knowledge, but critical pedagogues are interested emancipatory knowledge, “which attempts to reconcile and transcend the opposition between technical and practical knowledge” (McLaren, 1998, p. 175). To explore this opposition, critical educators rely on dialectical theories; theories that take into account the contradictory nature of the relationship between individuals and society and posit that “there is a link between knowledge, power, and domination” (Giroux, 2001, p. 18). Because schools and classrooms are sites of great contradiction, they are important sites for critical work.

Critiquing the ways in which knowledge, culture, and ideology operate in society is essential to critical pedagogy. One of the ways in which power is wielded and people are oppressed is through culture. Just as some forms of knowledge are more valued than others,

certain cultural norms and trappings are more highly regarded than others. The dominant culture is the culture of the dominant economic class and one way in which the dominant culture maintains power is through hegemony. Hegemony, a concept attributed to Italian neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci, refers to the ways in which the dominant culture maintains control by obtaining the consent of the oppressed. The oftentimes school functions to perpetuate this hegemony. Michael Apple (2004) explains that for hegemony to persist: “It is not merely that our economic order ‘creates’ categories and structures of feeling which saturate our everyday lives. Added to this must be a group of ‘intellectuals’ who employ and give legitimacy to the categories who make the ideological forms seem neutral” (p. 9). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, hegemony is also supported by the media and popular culture and, therefore, an important cite of critique (hooks, 2003; Steinberg, 2011). An example of the type of hegemony that I take up in my work is the current push for “choice” in education. The language of social justice is used by proponents of school choice to give the movement the appearance of equity. As a result, the public consents to adopt new policies because the rhetoric utilized by the choice movement obscures the reality of a scheme to privatize public schools, while parents scramble to choose schools for their children, they are met with schools that are just (or more) oppressive than the school they left.

Schools perpetuate the ideologies of the dominant culture not only through the curriculum, but also through the ways in which students are “schooled” into class positions. One way in which this occurs is through the “hidden curriculum,” or the “values and norms” perpetuated by the schools, “which stress a respect for authority, punctuality, cleanliness, docility, and conformity” (Giroux, 1988, p. 29). The hidden curriculum glorifies the ideologies of the dominant culture and reproduces class inequalities. Students with the most “cultural

capital,” (Bourdieu, 1986) or knowledge of the dominant culture and its ideologies, succeed, and those from the subordinate culture (and economic, racial and gender groups) remain oppressed, unable to succeed in a system that, despite its egalitarian promises, operates to maintain the status quo. Although teachers have historically perpetuated “the production and reproduction of knowledge, attitudes, and ideology,” they can pose a threat to the dominant social order by engaging in critical pedagogy (Hill, 2012, p. 73). First, teachers must interrogate their own practice and identify the ways in which they perpetuate oppression (consciously and unconsciously) through their work. Paulo Freire (2000) deemed one of the most prevalent forms of oppression the “banking” method of education in which students are viewed as “receptacles to be filled by the teacher” (p. 72). This practice disallows students from their own thought and encourages the passivity and ignorance that the hidden curriculum emphasizes. Critical pedagogy is founded on the principle that “to teach is not *to transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (Freire, 1998, p. 30). Freire worked alongside of his students, Brazilian peasants, and engaged in dialogue with them to gain an understanding of their world and “to understand the ways students perceive themselves and their interrelationships with other people and their social reality” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 20). Dialogue in the classroom is a way for teachers to “become students of their students” and to acknowledge the unique experiences they bring into the classroom, experiences that may directly contradict what is taught and valued in the school (Ayers, 2004, p. 42). It is important to note, however, that dialogue in critical pedagogy should not be used as another way for teachers to impose their beliefs on students, but as “praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world to transform it” (Freire, 2000, p. 79). Only when students begin to think for themselves, Freire argues, is emancipation possible. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of

replacing banking-style education for with “problem-posing” education. In problem-posing education a student is not “filled” by his or her teacher, but they are “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (p. 81). Although the teacher still holds a position of authority in the classroom, this authority is “dialectical” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 17). The teacher no longer seeks to use his or her authority to control or dominate students, but to “create...the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of *logos*” (Freire, 2000, p. 81). According to Freire’s critical pedagogy, the oppressor/oppressed relationship between teachers and students is broken down in favor of a cooperative relationship. This cooperation fosters the revelation of true knowledge (*logos*) and resists the reproduction of commonly held beliefs (*doxa*).

Critical pedagogy is fostered by two important factors: love and hope. The type of love prescribed to maintain critical pedagogy is “an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (Freire, 2000, p. 89). This love is tied to a commitment to liberation and freedom.

Antonia Darder (2009) argues that Freire embodied this type of love; a type of love that is:

a political and radicalized form of love that is never about absolute consensus, or unconditional acceptance, or unceasing words of sweetness, or endless streams of hugs and kisses. Instead, it is a love that I experienced as unconstricted, rooted in a committed willingness to struggle persistently with purpose in our life and to intimately connect that purpose with what he called our “true vocation”—to be human. (pp. 497-498)

Love in critical pedagogy is inextricably tied to the continued struggle for liberation. Although the lived experiences of students and teachers do not always reflect this, critical pedagogy is a continual process focused toward this end. Those committed to critical pedagogy ground the contradiction between reality and possibility in hope. William Ayers (2016b) explains that hope

is: “living with one foot in the mud and muck of the world as it is, while another foot strides forward toward a world that could be” (p. 197). From the perspective of critical pedagogy, therefore, to be educated is to live, and to live is to be free.

Contexts

Neoliberalism Emerges: *A Nation at Risk*

A number of significant events have shaped the landscape of public education over the past thirty five years, beginning with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 report based on an eighteen-month study by the National Commission of Excellence in Education was ordered by President Ronald Reagan, and bemoaned the uncertain future of American education, citing “a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people” (p. 403). The powerful rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk* warned that declining student achievement had weakened America’s economy, calling for broad reforms that would produce students capable of spurring economic growth. The most pervasive recommendations from *A Nation at Risk* were revised standards for all grade levels and subjects, the implementation of standardized testing to assess student learning, pay for performance for teachers, and the employment of uncertified teachers to fill much-needed math and science positions. A second 1983 report, *Action for Excellence*, put out by the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth dovetailed off of the recommendations outlined in *A Nation at Risk* and “called for a closer relationship between American businesses and the schools” (Spring, 2008, p. 471). The language of *A Nation at Risk* and the solutions the report proposed opened the door to the neoliberal and business-modeled educational reforms that dominant the current educational landscape. Neoliberalism is a political and economic system that relies on “the rule of the market, cutting public expenditures for social services, deregulation, privatization and the elimination of the concept of ‘the public good’ or

‘community’” (Ross and Gibson, 2007, p. 3). Neoliberalism has impacted education because “it draws education into the marketplace and transforms it into a commodity that can be traded and thus make contribution to expansion of capital” (Kumar, 2012, p. 7). Additionally, neoliberalism transforms the character (*content*) of education, which not only gets reduced to *skill development* and therefore creates an army of labor force required by capital at this particular historical moment, but also ensures that *criticality* remains a distant agenda in education. (Kumar, 2012, p. 7)

Aligning education with employability and students’ economic contributions through the language of *A Nation at Risk* was, therefore, the first in many steps to neoliberal educational reform since the 1980’s. The narrative of school failure that supported *A Nation at Risk* has greatly shaped the public’s negative view of public schools. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle (1996), deemed this a “manufactured crisis,” however, and placed the emergence of the school failure narrative “within a specific historical context...led by identifiable critics whose political goals could be furthered by scapegoating educators” (p. 4).

Neoliberalism Strengthens: *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*

After *A Nation at Risk*, educational policy continued to reflect neoliberalism with the passage of George W. Bush’s *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) act in 2001 and Barack Obama’s *Race to the Top* (RTTT) initiative in 2010. Under NCLB, standardized tests scores were used to grade schools, students, and teachers in an effort to prepare students to be “workers to compete in a global economy” (Spring, 2008, p. 489). NCLB’s emphasis on job preparedness speaks to the fears originally addressed in *A Nation at Risk*, as high-stakes testing and accountability measures became permanent fixtures in American education. According to the reform plan George. W. Bush outlined in 2001, all students regardless of gender, race, primary language,

academic ability, and socioeconomic status would score proficient on reading and mathematics standardized tests by the year 2014. As a result, schools focused their energies and resources on preparing students to take standardized tests. The results of these tests were used to grade students and their schools. Schools that could not show Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) through standardized test scores were labeled failures, and forced to restructure (losing fifty percent of the current staff) or to close. Linda Darling-Hammond (2004) argued that NCLB was misguided from the start, as the law “mistakes measuring schools for fixing them” (p. 9). The punitive measures associated with NCLB created a frenetic atmosphere in the country’s highest-need areas, as schools struggled to earn a “proficient” label while receiving little additional support to make the extraordinary gains expected under NCLB. When NCLB was implemented, the results of standardized tests dominated the national conversation. Alfie Kohn (2000), an outspoken opponent of standardized testing, highlighted the troubling repercussions of America’s growing reliance on standards and testing to reform education, writing: “The more that scores are emphasized, the less discussion there is about the proper goals of schooling and the more educators are reduced to finding the most efficient means for what has become the defacto goal: doing better on tests” (p. 28). Many schools, fearful of the consequences associated with NCLB’s mandates, focused their energies on test preparation as opposed to more meaningful and creative learning experiences. The stakes had become so high, in fact, that many districts resorted to cheating to pull off the necessary gains. One of the most prominent examples of widespread cheating took place the Atlanta Public Schools, a district controlled by “fear and intimidation,” where teachers were publically shamed and humiliated when their students scored below average on standardized assessments (Samuels, 2011). Reports of “changing parties” held at teachers’ homes to change answer documents and the great lengths educators went to in order

to change student answers, such as using a lighter to re-seal a cellophane test-wrapper after tampering with answer documents, also garnered national attention . Cheating was also reported in Philadelphia (Mezzacappa & Maxwell, 2014), New Jersey, Baltimore, and Washington, DC (FairTest, 2011). Despite the public outcry against NCLB, standardized tests were not eliminated from educational reforms, but were modified and additional test security and oversight was implemented to guard against future cheating. Testing shows no signs of letting up, however, as a 2014 study from The Center for America Progress concluded that “students take as many as 20 standardized assessments per year and an average of 10 tests in grades 3-8” (Lazarín, 2014, p. 3). Additionally, the report concluded that students in urban districts spend significantly more time testing than their peers in suburban districts, noting that “the difference is most profound among high school students. Urban high school students spend 266 percent more time taking district-level exams than their suburban counterparts” (Lazarín, 2014, p. 4). Finally, Rich Gibson (2012) argues that test scores have emerged as the “commodity fetish” du jure in the neoliberal state: “Businesses no longer focus on making, say, steel for use, but on making money, for profits. Education becomes, not leading out, as from the Greek, but for domination, and test scores become the fetish” (p. 50). Although trends in educational standards and initiatives are always changing, testing has remained one of the constants of late twentieth century and early twenty first century education reform.

When it became evident that most schools were not going to meet the goals established under NCLB, President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced *Race to the Top* (RTTT), a grant program that aimed to improve public education through competition, as each state had the opportunity to earn a portion of five billion dollars in federal funding. States wishing to compete first had to adopt new Common Core State Standards, increase the number

of charter schools in the state's districts, and revise teacher evaluation systems (Ravitch, 2013, p. 14). The new procedure for providing federal aid to public schools was one of the most devastating components of RTTT. Diane Ravitch (2013) explains: "By picking a few winners, the RTTT competition abandoned the traditional idea of equality of educational opportunity, where federal aid favored districts and schools that enrolled students with the highest needs" (p. 15). Once again, educational policy in the United States reflected the nation's growing fascination with neoliberalism and further entrenched big businesses into American public schools.

Neoliberalism's Beneficiary: Big Business

Despite the political rhetoric, standardized tests (and the standards and curriculum on which these tests are based) are not implemented to benefit students, but to benefit big businesses. Testing culture developed because tests were held up as the only solution to "fix" America's schools. In fact, millions of dollars are spent annually to uphold a testing-friendly environment across the country. For example, Valerie Strauss (2015) of *The Washington Post* reported on an analysis of four major testing companies conducted by the Center for Media and Democracy. This report delved into the two billion dollar a year testing industry and accounted for the twenty million dollars companies like Pearson, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and McGraw-Hill spent on lobbying for the continued use of standardized tests to judge American students from 2009 to 2014. These companies court government and school officials and offer perks that take the form of trips, future jobs, and donations to cash-strapped school districts.

As schools grow more and more reliant on standardized tests, educational companies earn staggering profits on the backs of students. Lisa Fleisher (2012) of *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the implementation of the Common Core State Standards would cost the nation

between one and eight billion dollars, much of which would go to for-profit companies for developing the new Common Core-aligned educational materials and tests. Matthew Chingos (2012) of The Brookings Institute, reported that annually \$669 million was spent on testing in the forty five states studied and that “89 percent of the main assessment contract dollars” came from six vendors, with a single vendor (Pearson) making up 39 percent of the market” (p. 10).

Stephanie Simon (2015) of *Politico* also reported that U.K.-based Pearson has emerged as the company with the most clout, earning \$258 million annually from “U.S. assessments” (para. 16).

The company, for example, scored major coups after the implementation of the Common Core, signing testing contracts with New Jersey’s public schools for a reported \$108 million and \$59 million from schools in Maryland, respectively (Delevingne, 2015, para. 18). Corporations like Pearson do not only make money from selling tests and testing software to school districts, but also through the sale of curriculum materials for the ever-changing state and national learning standards and through the development of online learning platforms. For example, Pearson charged the University of Florida \$186 million to develop online courses for the public university and the Los Angeles Unified School District paid \$135 million for an online curriculum (Simon, para. 10; para. 33).

Running Schools Like Businesses

After the implementation of NCLB, the language of business began to permeate public schools. Kenneth Saltman (2005) argued: “The field of education has been greatly remade through corporate influence as business terms of accountability, performance, efficiency, upward mobility, and economic competition have become omnipresent in educational policy rhetoric “(p. 49). Business practices have taken over education in small ways, as well, such as school superintendents beings called CEO’s, and in larger ways, such as the school’s increased reliance

on quantitative data to drive decision-making and inform “best practices.” Best practices is a term used in many industries and has become a buzzword in education. For example, when creating lesson plans, teachers are commonly asked to produce evidence that their teaching relies on research-based best practices. Brown (2015) argues that adopting a best practices mentality blurs the line between the private and public sector and encourages “benchmarking” (p. 136). According to Brown: “Benchmarking refers to the practice of a firm or agency undertaking internal reforms on the basis of studying and then importing the practices of other, more successful firms or agencies” (p. 136). Business reforms in education, however, are lauded as a welcome alternative to the inefficient and un-researched strategies that teachers may employ. When business practices are adopted in education, students and parents are viewed as consumers and best practices are employed to keep the consumer happy. This attitude drives competition, a key feature of neoliberalism.

Choice and Competition: The Rise of Charter Schools

Under the tenets of neoliberalism, students and their parents are viewed as consumers in the marketplace of education. In order to encourage this arrangement, charter schools have expanded exponentially to provide parents and students with alternatives to their neighborhood public schools. School choice has been part of the education reform conversation since the mid-twentieth century, when economist Milton Friedman first proposed that students be offered vouchers to attend the public or private school of their choice, with public money following the student to the school he or she chooses (Molnar, 2005). School vouchers were advocated beginning with President Lyndon Johnson and continued through the presidencies of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton (Murphy, Gilmer, Weise, & Page, 1998). Despite presidential support, vouchers did not catch on, but school choice in the form of charter schools did. The

initial conception for charter schools was endorsed in 1988 by Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, who believed charter schools “free from the usual regulations” of traditional public schools, would better meet the needs of all students (Ravitch, 2013, p. 156). The early charter school movement, therefore, was founded on social justice and equity, as many educators sought to engage students through “small schools, small classes, community ownership, dedicated faculty, and a multicultural and social justice curriculum” (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 19). Most charter schools were operated by local educators and, although some operated differently than traditional public schools, they were closely monitored by the parent district to assure their quality. Charters would be revoked and schools shut down if they did not meet the requirements of the charters. After the first charters were granted in the early 1990’s, charter schools made up only a small fraction of public schools nationwide. Following the implementation of NCLB, however, the choice movement gained new momentum as parents were allowed to move their children from school’s deemed failing under the new law to schools with a better rating. While charter schools were not always options for movement under NCLB, the educational marketplace was now open for business. The dramatic rise in the number of charter schools over the last decade attests to this phenomena. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “from the school year 1999-2000 to 2012-13, the percentage of all public schools that were public charter schools increased from 1.7 to 6.2 percent” (para. 2). As a result, “there are now over 6,000 public charter schools in the United States, serving 2.9 million students” (Camera, 2015, para. 2).

After the policies implemented under NCLB did little to improve student achievement, charter schools were widely lauded as an innovative alternative to more traditional public schools. In the popular media, traditional public schools were depicted as weighed down by

ineffective and union-protected teacher and antiquated teaching practices. For many parents, frustrated with their neighborhood schools, charters appear to be a better option. The fight for additional school choice was recently played out through the popular documentary *Waiting for Superman* (Chilcot, Birtel, & Guggenheim, 2010). In the film, young students of color in New York City, Washington D.C. and Los Angeles anxiously await the annual charter school lottery, hoping to be chosen in one of their city's selective schools. The public schools in the film are portrayed as failure factories and charter schools are praised as the only option to provide poor students of color with the best education. Charter schools have proliferated in blighted urban districts such as New Orleans (Buras, 2012), Detroit (Zernike, 2016), Los Angeles (Blume, 2016; Cohen, 2016; Prothero, 2016), and Washington, D.C. (Ravitch, 2013). Although some charter schools do offer students a high-quality education, many are plagued with the same problems that prompted parents to leave the traditional public school in the first place. For example, students in charter schools generally do not perform better than their peers in traditional public schools (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, & White, 2009; Chingos & West, 2015), charter schools are typically more segregated than traditional public schools (Rapp & Eckes 2007; Garcia, 2008; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Rabovsky, 2011), and many charter schools are less likely to enroll special education students and students who are English language learners (Booker, Gilpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2008; Ash, 2013; Diaz, 2016). Similarly, critics of charter schools argue that the presence of charters degrades the remaining traditional public schools, as the district's best students opt to attend charter schools while the district's most struggling students remain enrolled in the traditional schools. Additionally, although public money follows students to public schools, oftentimes, charter schools are endowed with more money and resources than the traditional schools through

philanthropic donations and corporate partnerships (Russakoff, 2015). All charter schools are certainly not created equal and Albert Shanker's altruist vision for charters was perverted by corporate school reformers who have stepped in to profit off of public education "without evidence of academic outcome, fiscal accountability, and equal access" (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 78).

Venture Philanthropists and Foundations

Charter schools have received a boon through the endorsement of powerful business leaders and their philanthropic foundations. Although corporate foundations have contributed to public education for years, "venture philanthropies" began to gain momentum shortly after the passage of NCLB (Ravitch, 2016, p. 210). Foundations operated by Bill and Melinda Gates, Eli and Edythe Broad, and the Walton Family (founders of Wal-Mart), have emerged as three of the most powerful corporate influences in public education in the last fifteen years. Although corporate reformers donate money and other resources to schools, their work is not entirely selfless. These foundations, set up to shelter vast fortunes from taxes and other regulations, have the potential to transform public education using the principles of business. For example, The Walton Family Foundation has donated millions of dollars to public schools, charter school operators, and to pro-charter advocacy groups. The foundation supports the creation of charter schools staffed by inexperienced teachers, many of whom enter the classroom through Teach for America (TFA), an organization that places recent college graduates, most of whom do not have teaching degrees, in American classrooms for two year teaching stints. TFA has been criticized for sending unprepared teachers (TFA corps members receive about five weeks of training) to work with America's most needy students, as well as for focusing primarily on raising test scores, and for sending lower paid and nonunion TFA teachers into struggling schools to replace

their veteran counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Brewer, 2015; Ravitch, 2013, 2016). According to Randall Lahann and Emilie Mitescu Reagan (2011), TFA's role in education is also troubling because of its promotion of neoliberal principles such as "deregulation, market reforms, and collaboration between the public and private sectors" (p. 17). The connection between TFA and The Walton Family Foundation highlights these principles, as the foundation's interest in school choice aligns with that of their ubiquitous Wal-Mart stores (Rich, 2014).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has also been integral in educational reform, beginning with a commitment to small schools in the early 2000's, spending two billion dollars on the project in eight years (Ravitch, 2016, p. 216). When the small schools investment failed to improve student achievement and graduation rates, however, Gates turned his attention to charter schools and other business-minded reforms such as "performance-based teacher pay programs," "promoting national standards and tests" and "finding ways for school districts to measure teacher effectiveness and to fire ineffective teachers" (Ravitch, 2016, p. 223). Gates' financial contributions were influential in the development and adoption of the Common Core State Standards, not only funding the project to write the standards, but also his wealth and corporate clout was used to lobby teachers' unions and law-makers to support Common Core's adoption (Layton, 2014; Klein, 2015; Ravitch, 2016).

The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation also uses philanthropy to influence public education. Eli Broad, a successful businessman, supports neoliberal market-based reforms in education through the curriculum of his Broad Superintendents Academy in the form of "strategic planning, budgeting, accountability, data-driven decision making, technology, human resources, and other skills to improve the functioning of big-city bureaucracies" (Ravitch, 2016,

p. 225). Broad also supports closing failing traditional public schools in favor of charters and paying teachers based on their students' performance on standardized tests (Ravitch, 2016, p. 226). The Foundation's Broad Prize also "awarded millions of dollars to charter management organizations and urban school districts for college readiness efforts and scholarships" (Prothero, 2016, p. 14). After over a decade, however, the foundation discontinued this initiative because of school's stagnating achievement despite the lucrative prize. In his critique of the Broad Foundation, Saltman (2012) argues that school's reliance on venture philanthropists to fund charter schools threatens teacher education and intellectualism, the maintenance of public schools, and the creation of a multicultural school curriculum. He writes: "The moment the goal of education becomes 'achievement,' the crucial ongoing conversation about the purposes and values of schooling stops, as does the struggle over whose knowledge and values and ways of seeing should be taught and learned" (p. 67).

For-Profit Charter Schools

As public schools continue to be categorized as failures, corporate philanthropists, non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs), and for-profit educational management organizations (EMOs) all clamor to get a piece of this ever-growing business. The term EMO was developed by "Wall Street analysts...as analogue to health maintenance organizations" (HMOs) (Miron & Gulosino, 2013, p. 1). Although charter schools are part of a larger public system and are primarily funded by public money, there are many ways in which corporations can profit off of public charter schools, shedding new light on the vision for education under the guise of big business and neoliberalism. According to research conducted by the National Education Policy Center, in 2011-2012 there were ninety seven for-profit EMOs operating schools in the United States; in the 1995-1996 school year there were five for-profit EMOs

(Miron & Gulosino, 2013, p. ii). The for-profit EMO business is dominated by Imagine Schools, which managed eighty nine schools in 2011-2012, followed by Academica with seventy six schools, National Heritage Academies with sixty eight schools, K12 Inc. operating fifty seven schools and, finally, Edison Learning operating fifty three schools (p. ii).

As a result of public oversight, many charter schools operated by EMOs have been shut down or reorganized when they did not operate effectively. Saltman (2005) extensively documented the financial and educational failures of Edison Schools, Inc. (now Edison Learning). Similar failures have been uncovered in other for-profit EMOs, including White Hat, EAI, and Imagine (Fabricant & Fine, 2012). The business practices of these corporations were called into question as a result of a number of profit-making schemes, including buying school buildings and renting them back to public school districts for a profit and cutting school operation costs by eliminating teachers and replacing them with online learning programs (Molnar, 2005; Saltman, 2005; Fabricant & Fine, 2012). Despite pushback against for-profit EMOs, public policy continues to support their existence. The most startling instance of this has occurred in Michigan, the state boasting the largest presence of for-profit EMOs (Miron & Gulosino, 2013, p. 18). Reporting for *The New York Times*, Kate Zernike (2016) documented the EMO and charter revolution that began under the governorship of the “free-market inclined” John Engler (para. 13). In the early 1990’s, Engler looked to charter schools to drive competition and encourage traditional public schools to reform, especially in the city of Detroit, historically one of the worst-performing districts in the nation. Michigan continued to encourage charter development, eliminating caps on charter schools in 2011, offering tax incentives for for-profit EMOs, and limiting public oversight by disallowing the governor or state board of education from closing failing schools (para. 14). In Detroit, these practices have created a school system

full of choices, but very few good choices. As the number of charter schools in Detroit increased, despite declining student enrollment, the competition became so intense that some schools offer “cash bonuses, laptops, raffle tickets for iPads and bicycles” as incentives for enrolling (para. 7). The evolution of Detroit’s public schools into a system of public charter schools offers a prime illustration of how deregulation can quickly lead to privatization, where potential profits for corporations outweigh students’ needs.

Privatization in a Nutshell

Michael Fabricant and Michelle Fine (2012) identified the five components contributing to the “charter revolution” in the United States as: “1. Discrediting public education, 2. Branding charters as educational innovations, 3. Mobilizing the private sector- foundations and hedge funds, 4. Demonizing teachers and unions, 5. Systematically ignoring all of the evidence of public sector innovation and success” (p. 80). While public schools have always been a sight of scrutiny, since *A Nation at Risk*, the rhetoric against public schools has ratcheted up. One only needs to turn on the nightly news to hear public schools described as “failing,” “ineffective” “drop-out factories.” Kohn (2004) echoes Berliner and Biddle’s (1996) argument that public education’s reliance on testing to assess schools is part of a larger plan to discredit public schools and push for privatization through the “freedom” of choice (p. 83). The freedom to choose pushes students toward charter schools; schools that promise revolutionary pedagogy (oftentimes heavily reliant on technology) in no-nonsense environments, where passionate teachers engage students in ways traditional public school teachers cannot or will not. As is evident through the rise of venture philanthropy in education, private sector donors with deep pockets have emerged in full force to support charter schools. Their money not only provides schools with the capital to operate, but these groups have the financial and political power to shape public perception and,

later, public policy on education. Noam Chomsky (1999) notes that neoliberalism flourishes in a system led by corporations, arguing: “The most effective way to restrict democracy is to transfer decision making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions: kings and princes, priestly castes, military juntas, party dictatorships, or modern corporations” (p. 132). Chomsky’s emphasis on the blurred line between democracy and capitalism is playing out in public education as the foundations and corporate interests funding charter schools gain control, pushing out dissenting voices. Teachers and teachers unions are the next victims of the “charter revolution.” One of the most striking scenes from *Waiting for Superman* features an illustration of the “dance of the lemons,” where bad teachers, protected by union contracts, are “danced” from one school to another each year. Similarly, the film exposes “rubber rooms” in New York City, where hundreds of the city’s teachers wait day after day, as charges against them are investigated. These teachers, unable to be let go because of their union contracts, collect full salaries for sleeping, reading, and playing cards. In charter schools, it is argued, there are no “lemon teachers” because most charter schools are nonunion and many rely on young teachers from programs like Teach for America to fill their staffs. Fabricant and Fine (2012) argue, however, that “it is far easier and cheaper to sell teachers as the villains in the melodrama of public school failure than to dramatically rethink the kinds and levels of investment we are making in the poorest communities of color and the supports we are (not) offering educators in these communities” (p. 83). The vilification of teachers and unions is part of larger concern: teacher basing and teacher deskilling. According to Isabel Nuñez (2015), a teacher’s worth is increasingly determined by the results of student test scores and his or her willingness to conform to “externally imposed standards” (para. 1). When teachers fail to achieve these goals, they “are bashed for alleged incompetence or noncompliance” (para. 1). As the teachers are

blamed for many of the problems facing public schools, they are stripped of their professionalism and deskilled. Henry Giroux (1988) has written extensively on teacher deskilling, the practice through which teachers are viewed purely as technicians, transmitting a body of knowledge to their students through approved methods. This practice discourages critical thinking and has given rise to “teacher-proof” curriculums and, more recently, the replacement of teachers with computers. Christine Sleeter (2008) has argued that neoliberalism has encroached on teacher education, shifting the field away from educating teachers to be social justice advocates and focusing instead on tested knowledge that divorces teachers from the communities in which they work. As education is “reformed” through more stringent standards and more rigorous tests, teachers and public school districts are portrayed as the two roadblocks to real change. In order for privatization to take hold, therefore, these impediments must be eliminated (or at least severely weakened). Enacting Fabricant and Fine’s (2012) last step to the “charter revolution,” “systematically ignoring all of the evidence of public sector innovation and success,” makes this possible (p. 80). The positive functions of public schools are easy to disregard as the media and the government continue to portray the public system as an abject failure despite reform initiatives.

Violence, Race, and Making America “Great” Again: The Summer of 2016

Although my writing is largely informed by theoretical work and trends in educational policy, I would be remiss if I did not touch upon the influences of current events in shaping my narrative. Although I initially conceived of my novel, *We’re in the Business of a Good Education*, in early 2013, I wrote the majority of it during the summer of 2016. As an author, therefore, I was certainly influenced by the world in which I live. One of the dominant events shaping my worldview was the 2016 Presidential campaign and the xenophobic, racist, and, at

times, absolutely confounding rhetoric spouted by the Republican nominee, Donald Trump. Trump's inflammatory statements against immigrants, Muslims, and women dominate the national news and perfectly capture the media's fascination with covering meaningless stories as opposed to engaging in investigative journalism. Trump's popularity also highlights the beliefs of a sect of the population who believe that pluralism harms our nation, and, encouraged by Trump, are not afraid to pushback against democratic principles.

The summer was also dominated by a lack of equality and justice in the treatment of African Americans in the United States. Another acquittal in the death of Freddie Gray, and the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of law enforcement, contributed to a national outcry for the justice (for a few days, at least). The country, however, seems divided as many white Americans refuse to acknowledge the experiences of African Americans, instead applauding officers who did what they had to do to eliminate "thugs" from the streets. As an educator and as a white middle class woman living in a place where "walking while black" is frequently reported on my neighborhood's Facebook page, I am intensely focused on understanding my contributions to and ways in which I can fight against, systemic racism in the United States.

Violence also dominated the national and international scene, with terrorist attacks and mass shootings reported on daily. These events are followed by a flurry of interest for a few days following the incidents, but solutions in the form of actual legislation or oversight has yet to be enacted. The constant threat of violence, as fed by the twenty-four hour news cycle, has the power to control and divide people, diverting the conversation away from actual issues. A product of the post-9/11 era, I have seen threat levels rise and fall throughout my teenage and adult life, and the threat of constant war and violence is just another part of the daily

conversation. The upheaval of the summer of 2016, therefore, provided the perfect backdrop through which to not only critique educational policy, but also popular culture, American politics, and the media.

Methodology

Arts based research (ABR), particularly fiction, is my methodology. Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012) define arts based research as “a method to enlarge human understanding” that calls for “the utilization of aesthetic judgment and the application of aesthetic criteria about what the character of the intended outcome is to be” (p. 8). Furthermore, the authors explain: “In arts based research, the aim is to create an expressive form that will enable an individual to secure an empathic participation in the lives of others and in the situations studied” (p. 8-9). The use of arts based methodologies has become increasingly popular over the last three decades as the research landscape has expanded and become more accepting of alternative forms of inquiry. Eisner (1995) argues in favor of broadening the scope of educational research by utilizing the arts, claiming that art and science are not diametrically opposed, but that science and social science research actually contain a great deal of artfulness. Eisner writes: “While embedding artistry in what we normally think of as art is understandable, artistry is not restricted to what we usually think of as art. Simply put, the arts have no monopoly on art” (p. 1). Eisner expresses the importance of infusing educational research with the arts because, he posits, the goal of research is to help people more fully understand. Artistry can help people to understand because “creators have understood and had the skills and imagination to transform their understanding into forms that help us to notice what we have learned not to see” (p. 3). Eisner explains that arts based researchers utilize three distinctive techniques unique to artists: artistic representation (painting, dance, poem, novel, play, etc.), high quality products that clearly exemplify the form (the novel

is a good novel as well as a piece of good research, for example), and the ability to create empathy and forge a connection with the viewer. To support his last assertion, Eisner writes: “What artistically crafted work does is to create a paradox of revealing what is universal by examining what is particular” (p. 3). Using Eisner’s criteria as a guide, I hope to present a novel that is not only well-written, but also encourages readers to make a personal connection with the text through the experiences of the novel’s principle characters.

ABR offers researchers access to new research topics. Patricia Leavy (2009) argues: ABR not only “allow[s] research questions to be posed in new ways,” but also allows for “entirely new questions to be asked” (p. 12). For example, I raised the question: What could education be like in the future? This question, to some scholars, would be considered unrealistic and far too broad for even a longitudinal study. Most qualitative research studies could not comment on the state of public education in the year 2049 because other forms of research lack imagination. Imagination, coupled with my experiences as a student and teacher allow me to express one possible vision of the educational landscape in the future. Lori Neilsen (2002) explains an important change taking place in educational research, arguing: “We are ready to embark on a shift from knowledge to knowing. A shift from *The* to *A*” (pp. 209-210). As a result, I am not striving to write *the* novel on the future of public education, but *A* novel on the future of public education in an effort to open the field to more stories of resistance and change.

One of the greatest strengths of ABR is its ability to gain the attention of a wide audience. Traditional research is usually written by and for academics and the language of this research is, at times, dense and lifeless. Artistic representations of research, however, have the potential to engage a variety of audiences and bring attention to issues facing marginalized groups. Leavy (2009) notes that the emotional responses brought on by viewing ABR promote dialogue and

increased understanding (p. 14). My work, although written to fulfill the requirements of an Ed.D. in curriculum studies, is not written exclusively for an academic audience. I am interested in sharing my work with everyone who holds a stake in public education, particularly teachers and students. As a high school English teacher, I am uniquely situated to bring information about the negative impact of accountability, standardization, and commodification on young people to a wide audience. As a result, it is important to me that my work is comprehensible to students and is something that could engender class discussion and debate, as well as provide students with an opportunity to write about their own educational experiences. It is my hope that my research will not only encourage other scholars to explore fiction as a methodology, but that it will also open up spaces for students to explore their own position in public education in creative ways.

Fiction as Educational Research

The conversation regarding fiction as a valid representation of educational research emerged in the late 1980's and continues today. One of the most important moments in the history of fiction as a form of educational research occurred at the American Educational Research (AERA) conference in 1996. Howard Gardner and Elliot Eisner debated whether or not works of fiction should be accepted as Doctoral dissertations. Gardner argued in favor of traditional dissertations, while Eisner argued in favor of pluralism in the field of educational research, especially at the dawn of the twenty first century. Eisner defined a number of criteria for fictional dissertations: First, that the novel produces questions and leads to further research and exploration and, secondly, that the novel sheds new light on an area of education and educational research and provides a new perspective through which to view educational phenomena. Eisner noted:

I think that the unique and special cognitive functions of the educational novel...are essentially the same as those performed by the literary novel. That is to say, they create images that are, in many senses, larger than life. And larger than life is important in helping us become aware of aspects of the educational world that we may not have noticed before, that we may not have seen. (quoted in Saks, 1996, p. 407-408)

Fiction has always helped people to understand problems facing society; therefore, Eisner argues that educational fiction can perform the same function and open up new avenues of discussion within the educational research community.

Nell Duke and Sarah Beck (1999) argue that the traditional dissertation format is “largely ineffectual as a means of contributing knowledge to the field” of educational research (p. 31). The authors utilize genre theory in their argument, and claim that the dissertation is a unique genre because of its form, content, goals, and audience. The traditional dissertation format is challenged because dissertations have a “limited audience and dissemination” (p. 32). The authors argue that dissertations are typically only read by the candidate’s dissertation committee, which is “especially problematic for dissertations that are directly relevant to practitioners, whose jobs as teachers, counselors, and principals typically leave little time to seek out and read documents of this length and style” (p. 32). Additionally, traditional dissertations lack “generalizability” because each person usually only produces one dissertation in his or her lifetime and the writing one does for a dissertation may not prepare him or her for the demands of professional educational writing (p. 32). The authors pose two questions for reflection when preparing a dissertation: “Will the format of this dissertation make it possible to disseminate the work to a wide audience?” and “Will writing a dissertation in this format help prepare candidates for the type of writing they will be expected to do throughout their career?” (p. 33). Although the

authors see merit in the traditional dissertation format, they encourage schools of education to expand their thinking on acceptable dissertations, in order to move the field forward and to truly help doctoral candidates advance with their careers after earning their degree.

Barone (1992) began working with fiction in order to take a break from the world of theory in order to delve more deeply into research that would be accessible to non-academics, but that would continue to work toward educational reform. Barone discusses the use of writing as a place to cause “disturbances,” which is one of the goals of what he refers to as critical storytelling. He identifies the two main components of critical storytelling: “First, critical stories are compelling, inviting, masterful in the use of their story form so as to incite a desire for genuine textual engagement. Secondly, *what* they incite are acts of tearing down our belief-and-value nexuses and of reconstructing them” (p. 146). Barone argues that critical stories should not be taken at face value, but should encourage conversation between readers, academics, educators, and students. He encourages critical storytellers to “proffer our texts in a spirit of skepticism, inviting lay readers to extend the dialogue in the form of counterstories from which we will learn about our own prejudices” (p. 149). Barone argues not only that educational research can be represented through fiction, but also that educational researchers should engage with the general public in order to expand the scope of research and affect change.

Barone (2008) provides a brief history of the dichotomy between works categorized as fiction and non-fiction, explaining that these categories developed in order to help readers understand how to correctly respond to a text. Barone, however, argues that the lines between genres should be crossed, and have been successfully crossed by novelists such as Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, and Alex Haley. Furthermore, Barone calls upon researchers to follow the examples to Nisbet, Geertz, and Eisner in the pursuit of genre-blurring research. Barone relies on

the theory of Wolfgang Iser to found his argument, specifically Iser's identification of two types of texts: centripetal and centrifugal. Centripetal texts are identified by their authoritative tone and descriptions that mirror the real world. These texts are generally thought to be truthful and valid non-fiction texts. Centrifugal texts, on the other hand, are identified by their formlessness and reliance on fantasy, chaos, and imagination. These texts are not thought of as truthful and are, therefore, generally regarded as works of fiction. Barone, following Iser's lead, argues that the two types of literature, centripetal and centrifugal, should work together to form a text that is complex, contradictory, and will engage readers in complex conversations. Barone argues: "The prevailing binary of truth and fiction (or fantasy) is thereby replaced with a complex conception of the art of reading as one in which a delicious dialectic tension between actuality and imagination may be experienced" (p. 109). In the past, researchers avoided allowing their readers to interpret the text, but Barone argues that "ambiguity has become, for many social researchers, an intriguing characteristic whose healthy presence in their accounts has been not only accepted as inevitable, but openly celebrated as desirable and even useful" (p. 113). Similarly, John Spindler (2008) argues that fictional inquiry gains much of its power through the interaction between the writer and the reader, asserting: "the contribution of fiction is conceptualized in relation to its capacity to link reason and feeling and thus to bring about a shift in readers' understanding and appreciation of educational questions" (p. 23). The interaction between the reader and the text, therefore, is of vital importance in any work of fiction, as it opens up conversations and can bring the researcher and reader to new ideas through the process of reading and subsequent discussions.

Barone and Eisner (2012) further discuss the role of fiction in arts based inquiry, arguing that:

works of fiction may indeed, through their recasting of the empirical particulars of the world, achieve extraordinary power to disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace, to question and interrogate that which seems to have already been answered conclusively and to redirect the conversation regarding important social issues”(p. 101).

While the authors caution researchers wishing to utilize fiction to be prepared to defend their work, the role of fiction and other non-traditional forms of expression (poetry, comics, plays, documentary, for example) in educational research has expanded greatly since the Gardner-Eisner debate, not only because Eisner was the clear victor, but also because researchers are continually looking for new ways to capture the human experience and push past traditional boundaries. Additionally, as life in schools and universities becomes more restrictive, teachers and researchers are increasingly turning to fiction as a way to battle against positivistic research trends and neoliberal reforms that threaten intellectualism and freedom of expression. As a result, educational researchers need not defensively submit their less traditional work, but find a place for this work in a growing tradition.

Exemplary Works

Novels are increasingly becoming more prevalent as doctoral dissertations. For example, Neil Saye’s (2002) dissertation entitled *More than “Once Upon a Time:” Fiction as a Bridge to Knowing* includes a novella, which tells the story of a fictionalized Savannah, Georgia high school. Saye utilizes theory and fiction in his work to “establish a dialectic, a *bridge*, between educational research and fiction, and to imagine an open space, a geography, where counter-hegemonic theory could be found embedded in a fictional world” (p. 19). Using the bridge metaphor throughout his work, Saye successfully moves beyond the traditional dissertation format, proving fiction can be used as a form of educational inquiry.

Rishma Dunlop (2002) wrote the first novel, *Boundary Bay*, to be accepted for fulfillment of a doctoral degree in Canada. She wrote in the style of *bildungsroman* in order to express the experiences of new teachers and teacher educators. Dunlop, an author and educator, used her creativity to create “a cultural product that is the writer’s interpretation of a broad range of considerations, just as every researcher’s writing are a selective interpretation of findings” (p. 220). Dunlop argues that novelists, like other qualitative educational researchers, attempt to make sense of the world through their writings. Just as qualitative researchers tell the story of their research and participants through their narratives, novelists share experiences through fictionalized accounts of their experiences, as well as through the use of their imaginations.

Finally, Katrana Seay’s (2013) dissertation, *And Then the Wall Rose: Counter Narratives of Black Males’ Experience of Elementary Schooling in Urban Georgia*, utilized critical race theory to share fictional counter-narratives of the experiences of black male students. Seay asserts that “fiction has the ability to challenge our thinking and allow us to see things in a different way. When we read fiction, we have the opportunity to make connections to the world and ourselves” (p. 95).

A number of scholars have published works of fiction to reflect on the problems facing American schools, students, and teachers. For example, Harold Benjamin’s, (1939/2004), satire, *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum*, includes a number of lectures on the history of “Paleolithic Education” from Benjamin’s alter-ego, Dr. Peddiwell. Dr. Peddiwell’s lectures, given at a bar in Tijuana, under the influence of a number of tequila daisies, sheds light on the absurd practices of twentieth century education with an insightfulness that has not lost its edge despite the seventy five years that have elapsed since its publication.

T.S. Poetter's (2006) novel *The Education of Sam Sanders*, offers a dismal view of the future of public education. The novel takes place in the year 2029 and presents a school where students engage in computerized instruction all day. Teachers are mere facilitators, whose job primarily consists of turning computers on and off each day. Standardized tests and the results of these tests are vitally important to schools and to students' futures. One student, however, Sam Sanders, refuses to take his eighth grade standardized exam, and his school undergoes a great change as a result. The novel argues in favor of critical pedagogy and shows how this type of education could be enacted in the United States.

Pauline Sameshima's (2007) *Seeing Red*, is an epistolary *bildungsroman*, that charts the romantic and academic relationships between graduate student Julia Quinn and one of her professors. The book weaves love letters, poetry, and theory together to create a "heartfelt work that is accessible," but also "critique[s] from the edges" (p. 17), to question the relationships between art, research, love, and the teacher-student relationship.

Joel Spring's (2013) novel *Common Core: A Story of School Terrorism* expresses what could happen to American public schools in the wake of the implementation of the Common Core. The school system in the novel is dominated by charter schools, big business, and testing. The novel follows the aftermath of a terrorist attack at a charter school, uncovering a plot between China, a large computer company, and a testing company to control the curriculum and feed anti-democratic messages to unsuspecting students.

Carl Leggo's (2012) *Sailing in a Concrete Boat* mixes fiction and poetry in a novel that explores the life of Caleb Robinson as he grapples with his role as a teacher against the conservative backdrop of his Christian school.

Christine Sleeter's (2015) *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into Present* charts the development of young white elementary teacher Jessica Westerfield. Jessica, unsure of how to meet the needs of her predominantly Mexican and Mexican American students, finds herself at personal and professional crossroads, unsure if she should teach the traditional Anglo-centered curriculum, or work with her colleagues, students, and school community to develop a more inclusive Raza Studies curriculum.

Crafting Powerful Fiction

Annie Dillard (1982) explains that the writer's task is to present "bits of the world" to his or her readers (p. 72). Gathering these "bits" and creating the characters through which to share them is the art of writing powerful fiction. For those who are called to write, this act allows them to question the world through the stories they weave. Finding a story to tell is not difficult for writers, as they are keen observers of the world, capable of crafting complete narratives from minute details. Because writing is a unique and personal task, however, each writer approaches it differently. I relied on my own unique method for writing this novel. It began when I read Derrick Bell's (1992) *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, in which he expertly blends fiction with Critical Race Theory. After first reading his book, I, like many novice authors, tried to copy his writing style. Bell utilizes a conversational style in his work, and I tried to emulate it in a brief response to the ideas expressed in his work. My inability to write like Derrick Bell, however, does not discount my skills as an author, so much as it highlights that a writer must develop his or her own unique writing voice to bring their stories to life.

After drawing inspiration from other sources, including Michele Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, Jonathan Kozol's (1992) *Savage Inequalities*, Paulo Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Edward Said's (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual*, Parker

Palmer's (2007) *The Courage to Teach*, Howard Zinn's (2003) *A People's History of the United States*, Ronald Takaki's (2008) *A Different Mirror*, Martha Nussbaum's (2010) *Not for Profit*, and William Watkins' (2012) edited volume, *The Assault on Public Education*, and pairing these sources with my own experiences, I crafted a short story about a young teacher beginning her career in a future where public schools were practically obsolete, teaching was monitoring, and democracy had been almost entirely subverted by neoliberalism.

After writing this short story, I was encouraged to expand upon it through my dissertation inquiry. As a result, I transformed a short story into a novel, bearing the same name: *We're in the Business of a Good Education*. This title is one of the remaining vestiges of the original project, as I added many characters, plot points, and additional conflicts to the novel-length work. Despite the many changes and additions I made to this work through the writing process, references to the initial sources remain the same, with many additional sources and experiences filling the pages as well. Writing this novel was one of the most interesting and exhausting experiences of my life. I have dreamed of writing a novel since elementary school, so, personally, finishing the work was a significant personal accomplishment. When I began this project, I did not consider myself an author, but upon its completion, I would certainly label myself as such, as crafting the narrative emerged as a significant and enlightening part of this project. I have produced a piece of fiction that could easily stand-alone from the more traditional academic parts of this dissertation.

The Writing Process

My process for writing this novel was mostly organic. It's interesting to note however, that my novel-writing style differs drastically from my academic-writing style. When I write academic pieces, I typically engage in meticulous planning before even starting to work, writing

outline after outline to organize my thoughts. When writing my novel, however, I simply opened my computer and started typing, the words falling onto the page as they sprang from my imagination. I modeled aspects of my writing process after suggestions from one of my favorite authors, Stephen King (2000). King's (2000) *On Writing*, is a memoir of his writing life, through which he, first, emphasizes that for a person to be a writer, he or she must write every day. Doing this proved difficult when I had to focus on my fulltime job as high school English teacher, but, luckily, my eight-week summer vacation provided me with the perfect opportunity to practice my craft uninterrupted. As a result, I devoted six to ten hours a day to my novel when my job afforded me the time off. King also comments on the inextricable connection between reading and writing, advising that writers "read a lot" (p. 145). Because I lacked novel-writing experience, I relied on my breadth of experience as a reader to inform my technique. I surveyed my favorite books and took note the things that gave these works their unique power. The combination of characterization, dialogue, setting, and plot make my favorite novels excellent examples of powerful fiction. As I noted earlier, I tried to avoid parroting the style of authors I admire, but, rather, looked to them as guides for the type of technical artistry that is required to craft truly striking fiction.

Elements of the Novel

Plot

On the most basic level, a novel must be comprised of three things: a plot, characters, and a setting. The author's style and tone and the ways in which the plot, characters, and setting are developed express the novel's genre. E.M. Forster (1927) defined plot as: "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality" (p. 130). The plot is kept alive by an active reader's curiosity, and their willingness to keep asking "and then—and then—" (p. 131). For a story to be

compelling, however, it does not have to have an intense plot. King (2000) argued that “plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren’t compatible” (p. 163). As a result, the plot should develop organically as the characters interact. Plot can be very subtle, like that of John Williams’ novel (1965) *Stoner*, the account of a mild-mannered college professor. On the other hand, the plot can be more face-paced. Because this was my first novel, I relied on conflict to drive the plot, which created a faster-paced narrative. The plot of *We’re in the Business of a Good Education* tells the story of two schools and two educational leaders. The Public School, led by novice Cameron Arlo is matched up against the Broad Spectrum Educational Program Center-Chatham County Division’s (BSEPC-CCD) Curriculum Overseer (CO), Britt Larceny. Both leaders struggle to find their place in a world that has changed dramatically in the course of their lives. As Cam reluctantly works for The Public School, Britt must push her personal feelings aside in order to compete in the corporate world.

Characters

In surveying my favorite characters, Mr. Darcy of Jane Austen’s (1813/2003) *Pride and Prejudice*, Dolores Umbridge of J.K. Rowling’s (2003) *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Daisy and Tom Buchanan of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s (1925/1995) *The Great Gatsby*, and essentially every male character created by Ernest Hemingway, a pattern emerged: the *best* characters are the *worst* people (To be fair, Mr. Darcy reforms, but he’s most wonderful at his haughtiest.). Creating believable and well-developed characters, therefore, does not mean fictionalizing oneself, nor does it mean creating a flawless character (This is oftentimes the practice of romance novelists, and, while it does offer a break from reality, is not generally regarded as strong writing.). It does mean, however, that the novelist is charged with telling the stories of “people whose secret lives are visible” (Forster, 1927, p. 99). In my effort to create

characters that fit this description, there were points in my writing where I would grow embarrassed for a character and think *they shouldn't be saying this*. Alternatively, I would grow embarrassed for myself and think, *what will people think about me when they read this?* When I reflected on both of these fears, however, I realized that writing memorable characters requires authors to push away these doubts and remember that the best characters reflect the things that people are too embarrassed, afraid, or politically correct to say. Only when these inner-thoughts are revealed, will a character truly develop. To create the characters in my novel I relied on a composite method, similar to that developed by Ming Fang He (2003), who blended her story with those of two other Chinese women to generate a more complex narrative. In my work I share the stories of composite characters based on students from my past and present, my autobiography and work as a high school English teacher, and readings in the field of curriculum studies, current events, and, of course, my imagination.

Setting

I chose to set my novel in Savannah, Georgia, first and foremost, because it is where I have made my home for the last eight years and the public schools here have served as the location for most of my professional life. As a result, the particular dynamic of “the state of Chatham,” as the school system is colloquially known, contribute to my understanding of how schools operate. Secondly, because I live in Savannah, it is a location with which I am intimately familiar. I wrote much of the novel sitting in my living room, so the sights and sounds of my Savannah neighborhood always served as inspiration while I was working. Finally, a small urban environment like Savannah offers a unique setting because the socioeconomic dynamics change dramatically from one street to another. Because I grew up in the suburban sprawl of metropolitan Detroit, thirty miles separated me from people who did not share my

socioeconomic background. In Savannah, however, the divide between rich and poor, black and white, is much more apparent to me than in the area in which I grew up. In fact, the street adjacent to my neighborhood acts as a dividing line between East and West, or the white neighborhood and the black neighborhood. The segregation I have witnessed in Savannah reminds me of Richard Wright's (1940/2005) *Native Son*, and the protagonist Bigger Thomas, who is confined by his segregated Chicago neighborhood. Bigger explains: "We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail" (p. 28). I utilized my experiences in Savannah to emulate that feeling in the creation of *Marsh Village*, a housing project and location in my novel, which functions to house many of the city's poor black residents.

Genre

I place *We're in the Business of a Good Education* within the larger context of dystopian fiction. I have long been a fan of the dark and violent worlds created in these works, and modeled my own writing after a number of important texts. Dystopian societies are interesting to writers because it provides a vehicle through which to critique disturbing trends in contemporary society by creating an alternative future. This genre, therefore, fits many of the concerns (neoliberalism, inequity, violence, and commodification) that I wish to explore. Dystopia is the dark alternative to utopia, the "perfect city" first proposed in Plato's *Republic* (Heybach & Sheffield, 2013, p. xviii). Comparing educational trends and policy to a dystopia is not hyperbole, but, as Jessica Heybach and Eric Sheffield (2013) explain:

the contemporary educational context is rife with dystopian themes: an unattainable utopian vision; globally/nationally directed mandates to achieve the unattainable; macro- and microsurveillance to ensure its implementation; oppression through technical control;

dehumanizing policy mandates; the restriction of human agency; devaluing human emotion; limitations on human creativity; positivistic measuring and describing; punitive consequences for those who stray—individually and institutionally; limitations of what constitutes knowledge; destruction of self for the good of the unattainable goal; less than ethical behavior enacted to meet the goal; the commodification of human experience.

(p.xix)

The ability to use imagination, therefore, to express the dystopian themes emerging in education is crucial to further critique. Heybach and Sheffield (2013) argue that “one powerful way to recover individual imagination, and thereby our social imagination, is through an exaggerated, dystopian rendering of the world—a rendering of the world that makes visible that which is normally submerged” (p. xx). Imagination is central to my work, as is bringing to light stories that are “submerged” through the media, popular culture, and through the narrative of the dominant culture.

Additionally, I situate my work in a subgenre of dystopian literature, advocated by author Margaret Atwood. She refers to her novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986), *Oryx and Crake* (2004), and *The Year of the Flood* (2010) as “speculative fiction,” which she defines as “plots that descend from Jules Verne’s books about submarines and balloon travel and such-things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happen when the authors wrote the books” (Atwood, 2011, para. 4). Atwood conducted extensive research before writing these novels, relying on social trends and scientific research and innovation to inform her work, explaining: “I would not put into this book [*The Handmaid’s Tale*] anything that humankind had not already done somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not already have the tools” (p. 15). Author Bruce Sterling coined the term “slipstream” to refocus science fiction for postmodern

times, defining it as “a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late 20th century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility” (quoted in Atwood, 2011, para. 7). According to Sterling (2011), slipstream is a genre that has yet to be fully realized. Despite this, Sterling argues that the world “has room” for slipstream because “a genre arises out of some deeper social need” (p. 7). The need Sterling refers to is “the literary reflection of a new way to be alive,” in the twenty first century (p. 10). While I would not categorize my work as classically slipstream, it is important to note that slipstream does highlight the relationship between fiction and cultural studies, utilizing social critique instead of science as its base. This connection, therefore, is what ties my work to slipstream and postmodern literature of critique.

Classic Examples

There are many exemplars of dystopian literature from the twentieth and twenty first century. First, Aldous Huxley’s (1932) *Brave New World*, which tells the story of the World State, a society where deep thought is discouraged in favor of pleasure-seeking and order is maintained by the wonder drug, soma. George Orwell’s (1950) *1984* is another classic dystopian novel, which famously coined the term “Big Brother,” referring to the constant surveillance that Winston Smith and his peers were under in dystopian London. The oppressive society depicted in the novel restrains free thought, but Winston futilely searches for life beyond the Party. Ray Bradbury’s (1953) *Fahrenheit 451* follows fireman Guy Montag, as he and his colleagues burn books for a living. Society is dominated by technology, as the people are always watching television or listening to music in a state of constant distraction. Montag, however, is intrigued by what is contained inside of the books he burns for a living, and attempts to topple the status quo in the process. Kurt Vonnegut’s (1961/2010) short story *Harrison Bergeron* portrays a

society where everyone is equal. To make everyone equal, handicaps are applied (loud ear pieces that distract one's attention so they are not too smart or masks to cover their good looks, for example). Harrison Bergeron, however, does not want to be equal, and uses his extraordinary abilities to momentarily shine before being stopped by the "handicapper general." Margaret Atwood's (1986) *The Handmaid's Tale* follows Offred, a handmaid (a woman whose role in society is to bear children as birth rates have dropped dramatically). The narrative includes glimpses of Offred's life before becoming a handmaid, as she lived in a society comparable to twentieth century America. The novel examines the dystopian state that developed as violence against women increased and a woman's worth was defined by her reproductive capabilities. Offred eventually gets involved with an underground group, Mayday, and works to extricate herself from the oppressive regime. Comedian Albert Brooks' *2030* (2011) offers a more satirical view of the future world, where cancer has been cured, causing resentment between older and younger Americans, especially as resources grow more scarce and the national debt climbs to astronomical levels. It is up to President Matthew Bernstein, however, to lead this world, after a devastating earthquake in Los Angeles pushes the precariously balanced society over the edge.

While *1984* and *Brave New World* have grim endings, other dystopian works maintain a more hopeful outlook. It is with these works, therefore, that I primarily align my novel, opting to create a dystopia that, on the outset, appears similar to the world in which we currently live. This more subtle dystopia is seen in Lois Lowry's (1993/2014) young adult novel *The Giver* and the film *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998). In these dystopias, the world is portrayed as perfect, too perfect. The most stunning moments in *The Giver*, for example, are when the reader is given clues to the nature of the society, as it is slowly uncovered that the characters only see in black and white, that they take pills to suppress their sexual urges, and that those who are deemed no longer

“useful” are euthanized. The juxtaposition of the seemingly utopian society with the dystopian creates a powerful effect. In *Pleasantville*, two teenagers from the 1990’s are transported to the seemingly idyllic 1950’s, and find themselves in similar circumstances, as pain, pleasure, war, and even history are altered, suppressed, and censored in order to maintain “happiness.” These dystopias add variety to the genre, while raising important questions about the place of pain, pleasure, struggle, disease, hatred, and inequality in society. Margaret Atwood (2011) describes these societies as “ustopias,” a combination of a utopia and a dystopia because “each contains a latent version of the other” (para. 10).

Importance of Fiction in Education

Fiction has always been an integral part of my life. I grew up listening to, reading, and telling stories, and continue these practices as an adult. I am confident that without powerful fiction I would not be the creative, sensitive, and imaginative person that I am today. Although I was lucky enough to encounter stories at home, I also developed a passion for literature at school. In the classroom I learned to analyze and think critically about literature, and utilized these skills in all aspects of my life. Maintaining a place for fiction in schools is important for a number of reasons. First of all, placing fiction in a position of prominence in the school curriculum can serve to battle against the standardization, high-stakes testing, and other accountability measures that threaten to consume all outlets for creativity. Reading and writing fiction requires students to call upon their imaginations, not to search for right answers. Additionally, students and teachers grappling with powerful texts are forced into thought-provoking conversations. Henry James (1885/2015) discussed this process, writing: “Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints” (p. 52). Powerful fiction forces readers to reevaluate their positions and view life from a variety of perspectives. Maxine Greene (1991, 1995) argues

that the literary imagination can help students tap into this perspective, which enables them to more fully understand themselves and empathize with others. Greene (1991) commented on her own experiences with powerful fiction, writing: "...fictions like these were revealing my stake in the human condition, helping me reveal the ground of my being- which is also the ground of learning, or reading beyond where one is" (p. 111). The literary imagination, therefore, not only helps students to understand alternative points-of-view, but also pushes them toward new learning experiences. Similarly, Nussbaum (1995, 1997, 2010) argues that fiction allows readers to access their narrative imagination, promoting empathy, fostering critical thinking, and supporting democracy. A curriculum devoid of the arts inhibits students and teachers from envisioning a school, curriculum, political structure or life different from their current state. A curriculum without the possibility for change perpetuates inequality and oppression, while a curriculum instilled with art and imagination perpetuates hopefulness, leaving spaces for creative expression, growth, and transformation.

Fiction has a unique power; A power that comes from the imagination and takes many forms, whether this is the power to move, to excite, to defy, to change, to encourage, or to lead one to the sublime. Powerful fiction is active and ever-changing. Powerful fiction does not allow one to read idly or escape, but, as Franz Kafka professed, acts as "an ax to break the frozen sea within us" (cited in Updike, 2009, p. 6). The destructive and transformative power of fiction must be utilized in educational research and is integral in the reimagining of public education.

Limitations

One limitation to my work was format. Because I was writing a novel within a doctoral dissertation, I had to write continuously in one word processing document. This program is conducive to a traditional dissertation, but limited what I was able to do to format the novel. For

example, special texts (quotes, letters, news articles) could have been more striking in different fonts or with different text treatments, but I was limited by the tools available to me on word processing software.

Reading the Chapters

This dissertation is organized into three parts: where we are, where we are going, and where we could go. In Part I, “Where We Are,” I identify the personal and professional roots of this project. I outline the contexts for this inquiry, focusing on the theoretical roots of my work (Apple, 2004; Ayers, 2004, 2016a, 2016b; Darder, 2009; Freire, 1998, 2000; Giroux, 1988, 2001; Hill, 2012; hooks, 2003; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; McLaren, 1998; Steinberg, 2011), as well as the educational policy and the political and social changes that impact public education. I review the methodology for my work, highlighting the ways in which my research fits into the traditions established by arts based research, specifically focusing on the role of fiction in ABR (Barone, 1992, 2008; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1995, 2012; Leavy, 2009; Neilsen, 2002; Spindler, 2008). I also review exemplary works of fiction (Atwood, 1986, 2004, 2010; Benjamin, 1939/2004; Bradbury, 1953; Brooks, 2011; Dunlop, 2002; Huxley, 1932; Leggo, 2012; Lowry, 1993/2014; Orwell, 1950; Poetter, 2006; Sameshima, 2007; Saye, 2002; Seay, 2013; Sleeter, 2015; Spring, 2013; Vonnegut, 1961/2010), before outlining the process through which I crafted my own fictional research. In Part II, “Where We Are Going,” I present an original novel entitled: *We’re in the Business of a Good Education*. This work blends my personal experience as a high school English teacher in Savannah, Georgia with theoretical works and my imagination. After certain chapters, I offer an analysis of my work, reflecting upon the writing process and highlighting the sources of my inspiration. Although I provide commentary after selected chapters, I encourage readers to enjoy the novel in its entirety first

before reading my explanations. I offer this recommendation because it allows readers to interact with the novel more naturally at first and then to more deeply engage with the assistance of my references and analysis.

In Part III, “Where We Could Go,” I conclude with a reflection on the future of public education in light of my research. Although my novel presents one vision of the future, I point to ways in which this future does not have to become a reality through the development of a critical artful pedagogy that encourages students and teacher to resist testing, accountability, standardization, and neoliberalism through imagination and creativity. While my work certainly offers a warning about the future of public education, I conclude with stories of hope because hopefulness is vitally important to any resistance movement. Freire (2000) argued, “As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait” (p. 92). Certainly the fight to maintain, and eventually improve, public education will be protracted and difficult, but, as my work expresses, those committed to the cause refuse to be deterred. As a result, my novel does not have to be a harbinger of things to come, but an alternative future we will be thankful we did not pursue.

**WE'RE IN THE BUSINESS OF A GOOD EDUCATION
(OR A WHOLE LOT OF BS)**

A Novel

By

Nicole Nolasco

Old Ways Nomenclature

School
Principal
Teacher
Police Officer
Data Team
Public School
NCLB, RTTT, ESSA

New Ways Nomenclature

Educational Program Center (EPC)
Curriculum Overseer (CO)
Curriculum Program Monitor (CPM)
New Ways Enforcement Officer (NWE)
Statistical Analysis Director (SAD)
Broad Spectrum (BS)
Free Market Education Act (FreeME)

Prologue: The (BS) Business

April, 2025

The cherry blossoms were in full bloom around Washington, D.C., as Mavis Lovegrove made her way down the tranquil boulevard leading to her office. She took a deep breath and was once again reminded of one of her favorite scents. It would be nothing but data, profit margins, and sales targets from the moment she stepped into her office, so she paused for a moment to enjoy the smells, sights, and sounds of the outside world. She watched the austere monuments glow as the sun rose over the nation's capital, exhaling powerfully as she turned to enter her building.

Tossing her coat at one of her numerous assistants, Mavis stopped at the threshold of her inner sanctum. "Perfect," she observed as she took in her suite of comfy chairs, leather sofa, expensive rugs and the requisite large executive desk. Everything was sleek and designed to incorporate pops of her signature color: gold, the color of Broad Spectrum. Mavis marched toward her desk. It was an important day and she was looking forward to it. Mavis loved making money and today she hoped to put in motion her most ambitious plan yet. Today she would meet with President Gabriel Torrance and it would be up to her to persuade, cajole, and demand until her requests were approved. She was good at making money and she had proven it over and over again for twenty five years. Of course, she'd gotten a head start by taking over her family's business. The lucky sperm club some cynics called it. She called it hard work. She had seen the possibilities, the trends, and the opportunities. She supported politicians who saw her vision and agreed with it, and hopefully President Torrance would prove no different.

Sitting at her desk, Mavis quickly typed her talking points for the upcoming meeting and summoned one of her many assistants to help her finalize her plans. *I'm ready*, she thought.

Today is going to be a good day.

Chapter 1: Let Go and Let Broad Spectrum

Just as the green glowing numbers of the digital clock in Britt Larceny's SUV changed from 5:59 to 6:00, she turned into the darkened drive of the Broad Spectrum Educational Program Center- Chatham County Division (BSEPC-CCD). Normally an avid listener to news radio, Britt drove in silence today in order to contemplate the year ahead. This day was especially meaningful as it was her first day as Curriculum Overseer (CO) at the BSEPC-CCD. While this was not Britt's first job in education, beginning her tenure as CO marked a new trajectory for her career. She graduated from college in 2032, entering the education system at a decisive moment. Former President Torrance had declared public education obsolete a few years earlier, leading to passionate clashes between Washington and corporate reformers and supporters of traditional public schools. This conflict, part of the larger Class War, played out across the country as people were divided between the Old Ways and the New Ways. Initially, because she was a product of them, Britt supported public schools and other Old Way staples (freedom of speech, welfare, and affirmative action, for example). As the Class War intensified, however, it became increasingly difficult to support these things. People who spoke out against the government and the corporations (two of the largest supporters of the New Ways) were arrested for their subversive actions. All were tried publically, first through media assassination, and secondly through a special court set up to process the large number of subversive rebels cropping up across the country. After trial, most rebels were sent to jail, where many still remained. Since the early 2030's, every town had a square, park, or plaza dedicated to those who fought against the rebels.

Britt, in her early twenties during the Class War, wanted to make a life for herself in the New Ways regime. As President Torrance frequently reminded his citizens, the country had tried

the Old Ways for 250 years and part of living in a democracy was having the power to change laws and policies to suit the needs of an ever-changing country.

She began her career in Chicago, just as the Class War was dying down. Since the turn of the century wars, foreign and domestic, had a way of never ending. Instead, they would simply fade and then flair again as new terrorist attacks or political expediency dictated. Like most citizens at the time, twenty-something Britt was confused as to which side was winning the Class War. Although rebel voices had been quieted for the time being, living in the vast urban sprawl of Chicago, she couldn't help but notice that many Chicago citizens were still poor, unemployed and disenfranchised. Britt had the right education, lived in a safe neighborhood and was starting a good job- one that, at least, comfortably afforded her meager post-student living expenses. In short, although the threat of war and ruin ebbed and flowed throughout her childhood and young adulthood, the composite of urban humanity around her hadn't changed.

When thoughts like these drifted into her consciousness, Britt was quick to brush them away. She was young and embarking on a new career with a prestigious New Ways company. She left the wars, public policies, and dangers of the world to the political leaders. She tried to keep up with current affairs by tuning in to news programing. The well-groomed media commentators always reassured her that all was well- or at least things were heading in the right direction. They would know, right?

It was confident, ambitious young Britt who stepped off a Chicago commuter train to begin her career with the corporate education company, Broad Spectrum. She was first hired as a Curriculum Performance Monitor or CPM. From there, according to the BS recruiter who hired her, the possibilities were endless. Britt had done her homework so she knew that before BS and other corporate takeovers of public schools, the education of young people had been mismanaged

by underfunded, corrupt, and overcrowded public school systems. She was happy to be a part of the New Ways and the prospect of helping young people succeed while she helped herself to a prosperous future.

Over the years Britt was impressed with how quickly BS introduced efficient processes and revolutionary pedagogy and curriculum. After years of ineffectiveness, America's struggling urban education centers were improving- all thanks to corporate reform. Britt worked tirelessly for fifteen years to ingratiate herself to those in power at Broad Spectrum, and now at forty years old, she was one of the company's promising new CO's, and, if she played her cards right this year, hopefully one of the company's next superstars.

Reaching the center's front gate, Britt's headlights hit upon Ellison, one of the center's custodians, as he struggled to insert a large key into the heavy padlock used to keep intruders out when the center was not in session. After releasing the lock, Ellison twirled it a few times around his outstretched fingers while stepping aside to allow Britt's vehicle passage through the gate. Britt rolled through the driveway, barely pausing to halfheartedly wave at the custodian before making her way up to the center. Britt was still slightly unsettled by the building, although she would never share this with anyone. During the transition between public and privatized education, corporations searched for cheap spaces they could repurpose as educational centers. Broad Spectrum Education Center-Chatham County Division was one such place. Broad Spectrum's CEO, interested in preserving the company's bottom line, searched the county for a location to house the area's most struggling students, eventually alighting upon a spacious, and recently vacated, building: the Chatham County Jail. Although the architecture of the jail did not differ greatly from that of most old school buildings, removing some of the hallmarks of the original structure also proved too costly, so they remained. The board of directors argued that

surrounding students with electrified barbed wire fences could actually act as a deterrent from committing crimes, so they remained indefinitely. As Britt passed through the gates, she caught sight of one of the remaining guard towers in her rearview mirror, admiring its new paint job. When the center first opened, Broad Spectrum's Director of Integrated Programs, calling upon a recent study showing a statistically significant correlation between student achievement and the presence of bright colors on campus, had flowers planted around the towers and ordered murals to be painted on them depicting the sights and sounds of Savannah's historic district. At first, the juxtaposition of the cheerful colors and the stark prison architecture brought much-needed levity to the school campus. An artist even painted a cartoon sun donning sunglasses on the side of one of the towers. In the center's first years, the sun was held up as symbol for BS education, seeming to say: "learning can happen anywhere, even in an old prison." After a few years, however, student achievement stagnated, but, fortunately, BS produced another study showing that, in fact, bright colors could have a negative effect on student achievement. As a result, the flower beds were left unattended and the colorful paint began to fade and chip away. The sun that used to instill optimism and hope seemed to mock the Broad Spectrum board of directors, as low test scores, violence, and apathy plagued the center despite the implementation of the latest standards-based and research-based instructional strategies and corporate accountability measures. BSEPC-CCD was designed to be a model of corporate education reform; an educational program center that would definitively prove that corporations, not teachers, should control the curriculum. The school had seen seven CO's in the last fifteen years, all of whom failed to reach the company's achievement and sales objectives. After hours of reviewing the school's data, the board of directors approached Britt, a top-performing CPM at one of BS's Chicago centers, with an ultimatum: show measurable improvements at BSEPC-CCD by the end

of the 2049-2050 schoolyear, or lose your job indefinitely. Britt, always encouraged by a challenge, jumped at the opportunity. Not only was she prepared to succeed where her predecessors had failed, but she also looked forward to a handsome bonus at the end of the schoolyear as payment for all of her hard work. Shortly after arriving in Savannah, Britt took what she believed was a tangible step toward school improvement: painting over the faded murals on the guard towers. Armed with gallons of battleship gray paint, Ellison and his crew spent a good part of the steamy Savannah summer repainting the towers. Britt, still inspecting the tower through her rearview mirror, furrowed her eyebrows, steeling herself for the day ahead.

Despite the ultimatum and the challenges this year would inevitably hold, Britt was surprisingly calm. She felt reenergized about education, largely in part to a lengthy BS corporate retreat in the Arizona desert. Not only was she well-rested after staying at one of the company's luxurious properties, but she also received extensive training on all of the latest BS initiatives and research. She smiled, recalling a training session featuring one of the BS system's most popular employees: Director of Integrated Programs, Hal Ledon. "Lee," as he is known throughout the corporate community, is the embodiment of the BS standards and principles. His corporate responsibility was to combine education with solutions for business by designing curriculum to meet employer-based needs and to provide geographic, demographic, and psychographic targeted marketing capabilities to these same employers (and, of course to BS clients!). A former chief operations officer for one of the country's largest big box retailers, Broad Spectrum CEO Mavis Lovegrove quickly tapped Lee as a perfect fit for the business of education. Lee's no-nonsense attitude and effervescent personality quickly catapulted him to the top of the corporation. He not only helped to transform education in some of the nation's most

impoverished and lowest-performing districts, but he also earned record-setting bonuses for these successes.

As Lee told the large audience of curriculum overseers in Arizona, “Broad Spectrum ain’t about student success, it’s about gettin’ a return on investment for our clients. Students are just tasty little demographic targets.” Lee’s swoon-worthy Texas drawl had a tendency to come out during his most passionate moments. During his first year as DIP, Lee revolutionized how educators were compensated, adding bonuses of up to \$200,000 for top-performing CO’s, and \$75,000 for top CPM’s. Not only was Lee making the kind of money the Broad Spectrum model was built upon, but he was in tune with the challenges CO’s like Britt experienced on a daily basis.

Toward the end of his presentation, Lee held one of his signature “get real” sessions with a new BS CO. The CO, a slight thirty-something brunette with critical dark eyes, shared her struggles as leader of a Philadelphia educational center. According to her account, despite her efforts and the efforts of her committed CPM’s, the center failed to meet their achievement goals for the past three years.

Tears in her eyes, she looked directly into Lee’s endless blues and cried: “I just don’t know if the BS system works for every child!” The room, moments before buzzing with energy, fell eerily silent. Lee, used to defending BS against non-believers, turned toward the anxious audience and placed his hands prayer like over his smirking lips. The stage lights hit upon his eyes, which glinted with anticipation.

He turned toward the beleaguered CO, his expression quickly changing from amused to compassionate, and began to speak, softly at first, “Sugar, it’s obvious you’ve been through a lot these last few years. You started working in education to help out the youngsters in our country,

but you're findin' it a lot more difficult that you ever imagined." At this point, the CO nodded shyly, a small tear running down her face, as Lee gestured toward the packed auditorium and continued, "You ain't a whole lot different than any of these folks here tonight. Heck, we've all been there," he said with a small laugh, shaking his head as if thinking of himself as a younger man. His voice began to raise, each short sentence piercing the hush that covered the audience like a thick blanket. "You're tired. You're frustrated. You're angry. You think there's nothing else you can do and you're ready to give up." Turning toward the young CO, he engulfed her small hands with his powerful paws, "You were ready to try somethin' new, somethin' out of your playbook." He let the words echo through the auditorium as he stared directly into her eyes, seemingly unfazed by the intimacy of this moment. Although the two appear to be the only people in the room, their encounter is being broadcast to the audience large television screens throughout the auditorium, the high definition picture magnifying even the slightest details. As Lee's gaze bored into the young CO, she quickly averted her eyes, searching the floor for a response. Knowing he has stumbled upon the truth, Lee sighed softly, a smile growing on his face. "Darlin', I'm going to ask you a simple yes or no question. Don't worry about my judgement or the judgement of your peers in the audience tonight. Just answer honestly, and I assure you we will work somethin' out." After his preface, she slowly raised her head, tears brimming in each eye.

She gave an almost imperceptible nod and squeaked, "OK."

This was all Lee needed to continue his attack. "Did you follow the Broad Spectrum corporate curriculum?" he asked.

"No. Not all of the time," The CO responded. Lee nodded, as if to say "I see," and continued his questioning.

“Did you ask your CPM’s to follow the Broad Spectrum corporate curriculum faithfully?”

“No.” She shook her head.

Lee continued his questions, his voice rising with each inquiry.

“Did you ask your students to complete Broad Spectrum approved homework? Did you ask your parents to raise their children using the Broad Spectrum parent manual? Did you measure achievement using Broad Spectrum benchmarks? Did you test and re-test on the BS curriculum to improve scores? Did you conduct weekly meetings to review Broad Spectrum procedures and policies? Did you do *any* of the things a top-tier Broad Spectrum CO must do to ensure success?” Breathing heavily and visibly sweating now, Lee stepped away from the CO who, shaken by Lee’s tirade, was openly weeping, and addressed the audience directly. “No, darlin’, you didn’t. You didn’t do the things prescribed by Broad Spectrum, but thought that you, a single CO, knew better than a corporation. A corporation that employs some of the greatest business minds of the century; a corporation that utilizes the most cutting-edge teaching methods to improve student achievement; a corporation that makes billions of dollars in *profit* each year, and trades for \$187 a share on the New York Stock Exchange!” The crowd began to murmur as Lee’s speech reached a crescendo. He stood triumphantly at the center of the stage, the besieged CO to his left, now acting as a foil to his business acumen. Opening his arms to the cheering crowd, Lee thundered: “Y’all came here tonight to see me keep it real.” Shouts of

“Damn right!”

“Yes, sir!”

And even a few “Amen!” rang out in the auditorium. Lee, encouraged by the audience’s praises, continued.

“I said, y’all came here tonight to see me keep it real, and I don’t think I disappointed y’all in that respect.” Shaking his head, he laughed, “No, I certainly did not. But before y’all go back to the hotel for the night, I need to remind you that, as we’ve seen tonight, BS doesn’t work unless you do. BS is data-driven and standards-based, and following the BS principles can make you a very rich man or woman, but you have to follow the program. Now, y’all know that I’m known for my way with words, and I’ve got a couple of new ones for you tonight to help you remember the power of BS. Some might even call this my mantra for the 2049-2050 schoolyear: let go and let Broad Spectrum. Let go and let Broad Spectrum.”

With this, music filled the auditorium and chants of “let go and let Broad Spectrum” lifted to the ceiling. The energy was palpable and the CO’s stayed up until dawn discussing BS and pouring over Lee’s newest book, *From Dropout to Corporate Clout: How One Corporation Transformed American Education*.

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Britt Larceny did not want to end up like the disgraced CO she witnessed on the stage in Arizona, but wanted success to match that of Lee and the other BS leaders. As she checked her appearance in her visor mirror before entering the center, she envisioned a book with her picture on the cover, a speaking tour with Lee, and, of course, the limitless bonuses that accompanied this type of achievement. As she smoothed her sleek red ponytail and touched up her matching signature lipstick, she breathed deeply one last time.

“Let go, and let Broad Spectrum,” she said to no one in particular and stepped out of the car and slammed the door.

Chapter 1 ½: Setting the Scene

In the novel's first chapter I wanted to do two things: begin to shape the educational, social, and political landscapes of 2049 and establish the roles of two of the novel's main characters: Britt Larceny and Hal Ledon. In my work the year 2049 differs from 2016 because many of the prejudices and class conflicts that are now hidden through hegemony are, at times, laid bare in my work. I refer to *The Class War*, which is an idea that stems from the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, who, in the simplest terms, defined capitalism as class conflict (Malott, 2012, p. 17). Marx and Engels outlined the class conflicts of the past, explaining that "each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" (as cited in Malott, 2012, p. 23). I wondered, therefore, what would happen if this happened in the twenty first century; therefore, I developed *The Class War*: a rebellion of the subordinate classes against big businesses and the government (the neoliberal equivalent of the dominant class). In my novel this resistance is quelled by the government, but, because of the widespread resistance to capitalism that lingered, society must be controlled through more violent and oppressive means. The aftermath of this conflict allowed me to create a society befitting the dystopian moniker.

When I first developed this story, I kept names like principal and teacher for roles occupied by the novel's characters. I determined in a later draft, however, that relying on terms from 2016 did not show the true progression of the educational system or of the world itself in the society I created. As a result, I developed not only new terminology for educators and education, but also the New Ways, a new value system for the mid-2030's and beyond. The idea for the New Ways is certainly inspired by some of the great dystopian fiction of the past, primarily George Orwell's (1950) *1984*, where Newspeak is developed to rid the English

language of words that might foment rebellion. While creating the 2049 world in *We're in the Business of a Good Education*, I wanted to show that the privatization of education could happen not only through the cooperation between businesses and politicians, but also when supporters of public education and other “Old Ways,” were severely restricted. As a result, the New Ways were promoted through fear and punishment, but, ultimately, these more dramatic gestures were not needed as people were easily bogged down by their daily lives and happy to submit to whatever the government, the media, or corporations tells them is in their best interests. Britt’s experiences fit into this narrative, but it is important to note that her attitude is not unique. In fact, the willingness (or luxury, depending on your point of view) to shut out things that cause anger, pain, frustration, and guilt is an experience that most readers can easily relate to. I chose to take up this theme in the novel because the disinterest and apathy are two of the stepping stones to the creation of society where civil and human rights of the many are ignored and the desires of the few (people and/or corporations) are supported. Self-preservation is the name of the game in 2049, and Britt, Lee and the Broad Spectrum Corporation represent this from the onset of the novel. This theme also highlights the, at times, imperceptible differences between the fictional 2049 society and the United States of 2016.

Any work of critical fiction magnifies and examines elements of the current society that are unsatisfactory. As a result, I have chosen to emphasize the ways in which our current culture mirrors the bleak picture of America in 2049. The comparison is meant to be obvious and exaggerated to highlight the absurdity of the times. One such moment is when the reader learns that the Broad Spectrum Educational Center is located in the old Chatham County jail. Kerry Freedman (2013) deemed the school’s prisonlike architecture a “dystopian aesthetic” (p. 8). The dystopian aesthetic is unsettling and didactic because “when schools look as if humans could not

be sustained within their walls,” the students forced to reside within these walls are taught they are unimportant (p. 10). It is not only the ways in which students are devalued by their prisonlike surroundings that is of interest to me, but also the ease with which the BS Corporation I created in my story was able to dehumanize students and how the company justified their actions as a commonsense business decision. When corporations, not people, however, dictate education, commodification and dehumanization are requisite byproducts. William Schubert (2009) noted that John Dewey raised this concern in the 1930’s, citing greed (a dominant feature of acquisitive societies) as one of the greatest impediments to education (p. 20-23).

One of the first things I did while revising my original short story was to give all of the characters more thoughtful names. I took cues from Charles Dickens and J.K Rowling, who are renowned for their unique and memorable character names. As a result, I developed Britt Larceny, a money-hungry executive, whose last name doubles as theft. Larceny also connotes untrustworthiness and greed, two essential qualities of any business executive. Mavis Lovegrove, the Broad Spectrum CEO is only casually mentioned in this chapter, but her name is also one I developed to set her apart from the other characters. Hal Ledon, referred to as “Lee” throughout the story, has an unpretentious name, however, which reflects his “everyman” style. Developing Lee’s character was one of the most interesting tasks in writing this book, as his dynamic personality demands the reader’s attention from the first chapter. His entrance into the story was written entirely in one sitting and it developed without a pre-established plan. In fact, Lee was not featured in my original work, but I created him to act as a foil to Britt. As I started to write about his character, however, I realized he resembled a Southern preacher or televangelist. While this archetype is not new, I find this analogy apt because of Lee’s strong devotion to the corporate cause and his unwavering belief in the righteousness of the BS system. In order to

round out Lee's character, I gave him a religiously inspired catch phrase: let go and let Broad Spectrum. This phrase, modeled after the popular Christian phrase, let go and let God, perfectly encapsulates the faith in which Lee and other Broad Spectrum devotees have placed in the company.

Chapter 2: The Last Public School

Cameron Arlo woke up to the sound of his basset hound, Dewey, barking from across the room. Cam kept his eyes closed, hoping the dog would lose interest if he perceived his owner was still asleep. Dewey, however, was not easily fooled and took a running leap onto the bed, landing inches from Cam's nose.

Cam growled, "All right, you beast!" swinging his legs over the side of the bed as Dewey scurried toward the back door of Cam's shotgun-style house. Moving groggily after the dog, Cam glanced at the clock above his stove: 1:57 AM. Of course Dewey had to disturb the first decent rest Cam had gotten in weeks. Cam sighed, opened the back door and settled into a plastic lawn chair. He mindlessly watched Dewey sniff the perimeter of the small backyard in search of his favorite spot. As Dewey roamed, Cam started a mental to-do list. In forty eight hours he would officially begin his new job. As a student, Cam always looked forward to the first days of school. There was something about the classic new school year smells- the freshly waxed floors, the newly sharpened pencils- that gave him hope each and every year. As the recently minted principal of Savannah's Public School, however, Cam's optimism was beginning to sour. With the first day of school only two days away, he was inundated with paperwork, meetings, teacher and student complaints, and recently, the added aggravation of media interviews. The Public School was a public interest story, and the media periodically checked in with the school's staff and students as they did with quintuplets, former child stars, and people who could fit two of themselves in their old pants. This year, even *People* magazine ran a profile documenting Cam's life, career, and hopes for the school. Cam impulsively clenched his fists whenever thinking of the article. Not only did the fluffy writing embarrass him, but it served as a reminder that the readers craved an autopsy report on public education, not a heartwarming tale of resilience. The

article, a two page spread, opened with a formidable picture of Cam wearing jeans, a white oxford shirt, and a blue blazer. He stood, arms crossed, in front of the school, staring past the camera, as if looking forward to the year ahead. The school's ubiquitous flagpole stood in the background, the red, white, and blue waving triumphantly behind Cam's imposing figure. His curly brown hair was cropped short enough to give him authority as the school's new leader, but long enough to show *People's* primarily female readership that he was well under forty.

Best in Class?
Isabel Funk

Renowned for its historic homes, Live Oak lined streets, and slow as syrup lifestyle, Savannah, Georgia hosts scores of tourists each year. As travelers explore this city steeped in American history, they rarely notice a modest red brick building just a few blocks from Savannah's famed Forsyth Park. The Public School, while unknown to most tourists, is a fixture in this historic downtown Savannah neighborhood and stands to celebrate its centennial this September. This feat deserves recognition of its own, but its age is not only what sets The Public School apart. The Public School is America's last remaining public school. Six weeks before the beginning of its centennial school year, I meet the school's new principal: Cameron Arlo. Arlo, thirty four, greeted me in his office, wearing faded blue shorts, fishing t-shirt, and an Atlanta Braves baseball cap. His casual attire emphasized his youth, but, despite his age, Arlo is no stranger to public education. The son and grandson of teachers, Arlo was raised in public schools. He recounted some of his fondest school memories, which included helping his mother, a first grade teacher, grade papers and conducting science experiments with his grandfather, a high school chemistry teacher. Most significantly, however, Arlo's father, Henry preceded his son as principal of The Public School. Cameron, who graduated from The Public School in 2034 and from The University of Georgia four years later, tried his hand at education, but didn't

share his father's passion. "After college, I joined American Teachers United and was placed in a charter middle school in Atlanta. When my two years were up, though, I left the classroom. It just wasn't for me." After leaving the classroom, however, Arlo continued to work for ATU in Information Technology, as working with computers was always something he excelled at, but a family emergency positioned him to continue his family's legacy. Arlo's life changed significantly when his father asked him to return to Savannah last year. "My dad called me one afternoon and told me my mom had cancer, and he didn't know how much time she had left. I wanted to do whatever I could to help, so I took a leave of absence from my job, and moved back home. Mostly, the doctors took care of my mom, and I look care of her dog, Dewey." Arlo inherited Dewey, a five-year-old basset hound, after his mother's death last spring. "When I was growing up, my parents closely followed the news on education, and when my mom heard something she didn't agree with she would always say, 'John Dewey's probably rolling in his grave!'" Arlo laughed at this recollection, his green eyes reflecting the admiration he felt for his mother. When asked about his own philosophy of education, however, Arlo was less effusive. "I grew up in public schools, but I know they are not the most popular choice for education these days. I mean, I worked for ATU, so I definitely see the merits of corporate schools and the New Ways." While Arlo contends that public education can still work in America, the saturation of the market by successful corporate-led schools and the near-extinction of public schools do not bode well for the future of his institution. Perhaps, however, Arlo's youthful energy is just what the school needs to continue. Cameron was tapped to take over the school shortly after his mother's death. "My mom and dad were extremely dependent on each other, especially when it came to their careers. My dad always joked that he was principal of The Public School in name only, and my mom made all of the school's most important decisions. With my mom gone, my

dad found it more and more difficult to go to work, so I started visiting him at lunchtime. Eventually, I found myself there entire afternoons helping my father work, learning about his job. At the end of the 2049-2050 schoolyear, he told me he wanted to retire, but only if I would take over as principal.” Arlo met a number of sleepless nights considering his father’s offer, but ultimately decided to take the job as long as his father worked with him throughout the transition, and promised to be open to new ideas. “I’ve worked in the education business for ten years,” Cameron noted, “and I think The Public School could definitely benefit from some of the corporate ideals. I love my dad, but he’s definitely set in his ways.” Henry Arlo, sixty five, ambled into his old office during our interview. Although a head shorter than his son, Arlo’s shining green eyes and white curls leave no question to Cameron’s parentage. Henry watched his son carefully as he expressed his vision for the year ahead. “Sure, as the last public school I feel pressure to be a model- to show the world that public education works.” Beyond “hard work” and “creativity,” however, Cameron Arlo failed to offer any specific strategies he plans to employ during the upcoming schoolyear. When asked about the school’s compliance with New Way curriculum, Cameron was adamant, however. “Although our school operates slightly outside the corporate system, we meet yearly with an officer from New Ways Enforcement, and get his or her approval of our curriculum. There’s nothing subversive going on in this school. Believe me, I’m the principal, so I would know.” His father nodded in agreement and reiterated, “The corporate model was built on competition and choice, and The Public School is just another option for parents and students. We may not be the most popular choice, but we’re still here. I have worked in public education for forty years, and I have found the perfect replacement. I know Cam can more than fill my shoes, and I am confident he will be integral in leading our school to another 100 years.” Success and public education have long been

conflicting terms in America, but it appears that Cameron Arlo, with the help of his father, is determined to rectify this when he takes over the helm as principal of The Public School next week.

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Certain he wouldn't be able to fall back asleep Cam started working from his kitchen table shortly after two o'clock in the morning. Dewey, unfazed by Cam's restlessness, curled up beneath his feet, snoring soundly. Cam's computer sat open to his right, tiny bubbles floating across the darkened screen. Shortly after taking over his father's position, Cam had vowed to separate his personal and professional lives in order to appease Miss Gloria, his father's feisty secretary. Miss Gloria was not shy about commenting on Cam's almost non-existent social life. Since moving back to Savannah, Cam hadn't put much effort into making a life outside of work. No girlfriend, no real hobbies to speak of, and his dog really *was* his best friend.

"Sorry, Miss Gloria," Cam sighed and swiped his index finger across the computer screen, bringing it to life again. He paused though, admiring his computer's new background photo, his favorite from the *People* photoshoot: a candid of an exchange between himself and his father. The two men, curly heads bent together, were pouring over the school's master schedule. While in disagreement, they still grinned at each other, never able to argue earnestly. Looking at the picture, Cam felt his muscles relax for the first time in weeks, and hoped his somewhat lightened mood would help him to complete his first day remarks to his satisfaction.

Shortly after he began to type, Dewey stood up abruptly, staring attentively at Cam's front door. Cam smirked, extending his hand beneath the table to ruffle to dogs floppy ears.

"Dew, it's probably just a squirrel, bud—" Before Cam could finish his sentence, Henry Arlo rushed into his son's living room, clutching a scrap of paper to his heaving chest.

“Cam!” he sputtered, trying to catch his breath. Leaning against a large bookcase for support, Henry took a few gulps of air before continuing, “It’s getting too dangerous. They are coming after me, and soon they will come after you.” As he spoke, sweat dripped down his lined face and his eyes wildly searched Cam’s living room, as if expecting “them” to emerge from behind the curtains or under the coffee table. Cam, overcoming his initial shock, rushed to his father and grabbed his trembling shoulders. Hundreds of questions bubbled to his lips, but before he could ask them, Henry shrugged off Cam’s grip and thrust the crumpled paper into his hands. Cam looked down at the damp paper, on which Henry had scrawled: *El’s Bells*. The words meant nothing to Cam, prompting him to begin asking the questions his father’s outburst precluded.

“Dad, what are you talking about? *Who* are you talking about?” Seeming to ignore Cam’s inquiries, Henry brushed past him, heading toward the backdoor. “Dad!” Cam shouted, following his dad down his home’s single hallway. Henry paused momentarily at the exit, his fingers wavering over the gold door chain. “Dad!” Cam pleaded again, now trying to speak more calmly, inching toward his father, as if coaxing a skittish cat out of a corner. Henry’s hand dropped to his side and he turned abruptly toward Cam. Cam rushed the last foot to his father, hoping he would finally answer his questions and calm down. As Cam opened his mouth, his father held up his right palm, indicating his intention to speak first.

“Son,” he warned, a calmer look descending upon his face. “I want you to know I love you and I’m proud of you. I hope you will achieve all of the things I couldn’t. It’s not going to be easy, but remember where we came from. Again, I love you, and I’m sorry for what I’m about to do.” Before Cam could respond, Henry deftly cocked his fist and smashed it into his son’s face with every remaining ounce of his strength. As Cameron fell to the floor, blood spurting from his

nose, Henry Arlo quickly unhinged the door chain, flung open the door, and disappeared into the still night.

Chapter 2 ½: Letting the Story Grow

While reviewing popular dystopias, I noted a recurring theme: things that we now take for granted are scarce. This theme is reflected in Ray Bradbury's (1953) *Fahrenheit 451*, as books have nearly disappeared from society and the film *Children of Men* (Abraham & Cuarón, 2006), in which the human population is threatened as infertility rises and births become rare. As a result, I opted to make The Public School the last of its kind. Crafting Cam's character was one of the most difficult in the novel because I had to make him naïve enough to be unaware of his father's true role as the leader of an underground resistance movement, but competent enough to fill his father's shoes as the school's principal. From the onset, I wanted to craft a character who was conflicted between the Old and New Ways; someone who had one foot in each camp.

When I began writing the novel my intention was not to write a mystery, but one developed as I put the characters in play. After writing the first chapter, I determined that I would present a new conflict or plot twist toward the end of each chapter, so the mystery of *El's Bells* developed. When I first wrote this chapter, however, I wasn't exactly sure what it was and how it would play out in the story, but I followed Stephen King's (2000) advice and allowed the story to make itself by giving it "a place to grow" (p. 163).

Chapter 3: A Curriculum Program Monitor

A few miles away from Cam Arlo and Britt Larceny, in a small apartment in downtown Savannah, Fallon Baxter stood impatiently in front of her bathroom mirror examining her face for signs of exhaustion. Although sleep had eluded her the night before, as she knew it would, her twenty five year old skin did not convey her fatigue. Although she was overtired, Fallon buzzed with nervous energy, eager to begin her first day as a CPM at BSEPC-CCD. As her foot restlessly tapped the tile floor, Fallon contemplated a picture hanging on the wall next to her reflection. The photograph, taken a few years earlier at her college graduation, featured Fallon and her parents standing arm and arm in front of the university's imposing gates. As she beamed toward the camera's lens, her parents smiled half-heartedly. Although proud of their daughter for earning a college degree, John and Catherine Baxter were disappointed that their daughter had not yet secured a full-time job. Fallon entered college with every intention of heeding her parents' wishes. She started on the standard job-training track; the track chosen by over ninety percent of college students. The courses were specifically designed to give students the skills needed to enter into their chosen profession. By eliminating the core classes, colleges argued that they were able to save students time and money, as most job training curricula could be completed in two years, as opposed to the traditional four. As a result, colleges were becoming more and more efficient at producing work-ready young people.

Fallon began college in the fall of 2043, planning to study accounting, a major that easily translated into a job after graduation. After one semester of classes, however, she was restless. Her courses were highly structured and most were taught online, so she rarely interacted with her instructors or other students. When she did spend time with her peers, she never quite felt comfortable because they rarely wanted to talk about anything substantial. Usually everyone sat

around simultaneously listening to music, watching television, and playing on their cell phones. No one ever seemed to make eye contact, but, somehow, cliques quickly formed within the freshman class, but Fallon wasn't a core member of any particular group. She tried to focus on her classes, continually telling herself that college was about getting a job, so making friends wasn't really that important. Fallon began the second semester alone, brushing her teeth in the dormitory bathroom, giving herself a tepid pep talk in preparation for the next four months. As she eyed a phrase scrawled on the tile behind her apathetic reflection, however, her mind wandered quickly: "*Beauty is truth, truth beauty- that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.*" She stared at the writing, intrigued by its archaic and paradoxical language. She heard a team of chatting dorm mates charging toward the bathroom, so she quickly took out her cell phone, snapping a picture of the phrase just as the group entered. No one in the group even glanced at the cryptic text. Fallon wasn't certain why she took a picture of the message, but the words rolled around in her brain all day, finally leading her to the university's *Coca-Cola*® Information Commons, a large glass building in the center of campus. A multibillion dollar initiative, The Bottle, as it was christened by the students, was the centerpiece of the university- a place where students could socialize and access cutting-edge technology. Most of her classmates spent time at The Bottle chatting at one of its many cafes (proudly serving Starbucks® coffee) or catching a few minutes of sleep in one of the Sealy® nap pods. Fallon, on the other hand, came to The Bottle for its most underutilized purpose: to seek information. At the center of The Bottle a circle of touch-screen monitors acted as concierges and Fallon figured a quick search would be the easiest way to find out more about the phrase. She held her breath as the computer processed her query. *No results match your request* popped up on the screen. Fallon, having never seen this response before, refreshed the page. *No results match you request*

once again blared across the glowing screen. Fallon frowned at the monitor, unsure of how to proceed. It must be broken, she thought, and moved to the next computer. After trying to find the origins of the phrase on five of the concierge computers, Fallon growled at the monitor in frustration and smacked it for good measure, disappointed that her search had so quickly led to a dead end.

As she slumped out of the double doors, Fallon's eyes lingered upon the jagged roofline of a gray brick building adjacent to the gleaming steel and glass of The Bottle. At first she thought it was an abandoned building, waiting to be torn down and replaced by a shining new corporate-sponsored recreation center or student union, but then she recalled her freshman orientation tour guide briefly mentioning the building: the liberal arts department. The antiquated department's existence was primarily unknown to the student body, and Fallon was unsure of how many people actually worked and studied within the confines of the decaying structure. Fallon, still intrigued by the haunting phrase, and looking for any excuse not to sit through her interminable afternoon accounting seminar, swerved abruptly to her right, heading directly toward the shadowy building. As she drew closer to the department's front entrance, she considered turning back, thinking: *Someone in my dorm probably just made up the phrase, this building looks deserted, and maybe the tour guide said the liberal arts department used to be housed in this building.* An oxidized plaque hung next to the building's heavy wooden doors, the faded lettering slightly assuaging her apprehensions: Liberal Arts Building Dedicated September 1928. The building's collegiate gothic architecture sat in stark contrast to the modern sleek lines of the university's newer buildings. Behind the cracked and discolored bricks, however, Fallon could tell that the building had once been a showpiece of the university. The imposing cathedral-like architecture intrigued Fallon, and she took a deep breath before pushing through the weighty

doors. As she stepped into the darkened lobby, a pungent smell filled her nostrils. She paused, regarding the hall's dusty iron chandelier, trying to place the musty smell. After a moment, she remembered: old books. It had been years since she smelled them, but now she could not mistake their signature aroma. Her interest piqued, she continued to move through the dim vestibule. A faded paper sign affixed to the wall with a yellowed piece of tape directed her upstairs to the liberal arts department offices. As she ascended the stairs, soft music met her ears. She followed the sound down a series of dark corridors, the music and the smell of books growing stronger with each step. Finally, she reached a small reception area in which sat a deserted desk, two faded yellow couches, a faux wood coffee table, and a dusty plastic fern. As she bent down to scan the covers of the faded magazines strewn across the table, a soft rustling made her turn sharply.

“Hello?” she called weakly. No human responded to Fallon's inquiry, but a plump black cat meowed a greeting from the doorway. Fallon laughed to herself, relieved she wasn't hearing things. As she bent down to scratch behind the cat's ears, a gruff voice startled her once again.

“I see you've met Will, our department mascot.” Fallon felt her cheeks redden as she scrambled to her feet. Embarrassed and still unsure of the true purpose for her visit, she stared, mouth gaping, at the man who stood before her. His appearance fit perfectly into the surroundings: faded blue jeans, faded brown loafers, and faded plaid button-up. His age was indeterminate, because although his hair was grey, his face was unlined and his eyes, an intense bright green, dared Fallon to respond.

He seemed greatly amused by Fallon's presence and enquired, “Did you come here on a dare? Or were you looking for a place to hide something?” He eyed her bag suspiciously with his last statement.

Fallon, not sure if the man was angry or joking stammered, "I have a question about something I saw in my dorm this morning." The moment the words left her mouth, she felt stupid. The answers to all questions were available at the touch of a button through the Internet. The man bent down and picked up Will, mulling over Fallon's question as the cat purred softly.

"Didn't you Google it?" he finally said, talking more to Will the cat than to Fallon.

"Yes, of course." Fallon responded, growing a little impatient at the man's attitude. "But the computer kept saying *no results match your request*." He abruptly stopped stroking the cat and, once again, glared at her with his curious intense eyes.

"Well, that doesn't happen very often," he returned. "Whatever could you have searched?" Encouraged by the man's sudden interest, Fallon moved closer to him, extending her cell phone.

"Here's a picture." He glanced at the image, a smirk forming as he spoke.

"Tell me—"

"Fallon. Fallon Baxter," she blurted.

He continued unfazed, "Tell me, Fallon Baxter, why were you so intrigued by this?" Suddenly shy again, Fallon rubbed her hands together, trying to give the impression she was thinking on his question.

After a moment, she began, "I'm not exactly sure, but, I guess, it's the first thing I've had to think about, to really *think* about, since coming here."

Seemingly satisfied with her answer, he spoke sharply, "Keats."

"Excuse me?" Fallon questioned.

Still smirking, the man repeated, "Keats. John Keats. That's who wrote "Beauty is truth, truth beauty- that is all ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know."

Still grappling to understand his response, Fallon asked, “Is John Keats a student here? In your department?” The man looked down at Will and shook his head.

“Come with me,” he requested, directing Fallon toward a hallway lined with small offices. Fallon and Will trotted after the man, stopping at a door covered in stickers, yellowing newspaper clippings, and flyers. A plastic rectangle outside of the door frame read: Maxwell Ellis, Ph.D. “This,” he began “is my office, and I am Max.” He held out his hand, and Fallon scrambled to grasp it. As he opened the door to his office, the smell of old books once again overwhelmed Fallon, causing her to cough slightly. Max laughed, patting Fallon on the back and inhaling sharply. “Isn’t that the best smell in the world?” Fallon took in the room, covered floor to ceiling in books, as Max rushed to one of the bloated shelves. “Keats. Keats. Keats,” he whispered, running his finger over the spines of a dozen volumes before landing on his selection. “John Keats was a Romantic, a poet, not a student here.” He began thumbing through the large book, and Fallon tried to recall any poems or poets she knew. “Here,” he said, thrusting the book into Fallon’s arms. She read the poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn* once, standing among the stacks of books in Max’s cramped office. Then, she read it again. Then, she perched on one of the book stacks and read it a third time. Max waited, writing periodically in a notebook that sat on his desk. Breaking the silence of turning pages and a scratching pen, Fallon finally spoke.

“What does it mean?” These words felt heavy on her tongue and unusual to her ears. She couldn’t remember ever asking that question about something she had read before. All of the things she read in school were accompanied by questions and each question had one correct answer. Never before had she been given an unmediated reading, and she wasn’t exactly sure how to proceed. She knew Max would give her the answer. Teachers always had the right answer. Max swiveled slowly toward Fallon, however, and shrugged.

“Who knows?” he mused. “Beauty is truth-truth beauty. That’s some weird shit.”

“What do you mean *who knows*? Someone has to know. Someone always knows.” Max, having had this conversation with many students over the years, began his usual spiel.

“Fallon, I know you’re feeling overwhelmed right now, but, John Keats is dead. We don’t know *exactly* what he was trying to say through his poem, but we can interpret his words and analyze their meanings. In this department, that’s what we do. We read, we write, and we discuss. We don’t answer multiple choice questions. Something about that poem moved you, and that makes me think you would be a perfect candidate for a liberal arts degree. You told me you haven’t thought much since entering college, and if you’re interested in thinking, I would recommend entering our program. I can’t promise you it will be easy, and I certainly can’t promise you it will get you a job, but I can promise you that you will *think* and you will *feel* and you will look at things in a way you never have before.” Fallon stared at him, showing no indication of her agreement or disagreement, so he continued, his fervor softening slightly. “I tell you what? Why don’t you take this book back to your dorm and study it for a few days. If you are intrigued, come back next Wednesday for our department mixer. If you aren’t, just drop the book off, and continue working for your degree in—”

“Accounting,” Fallon interjected, finally finding her voice.

“Accounting,” he repeated. “A perfectly respectable profession- death and taxes, and all that.” Fallon, puzzled by his reference, shrugged, dropping the book into her backpack.

“Thanks for the book,” she offered, still reeling from his unsettling declaration and proposition. “I’ll definitely keep it in mind, but my parents really want me to be an accountant, and I want job security. That’s why people come to college, anyway.” Max, unperturbed by her position, sighed and looked earnestly into her eyes.

“Fallon, I hope you will consider my offer. If you join us, you might just find out there’s more to life than job security.” Fallon thanked Max again for the book, and hurried out of the liberal arts building, trying to push aside the questions that raced through her mind. When she arrived back at her dorm, she threw her backpack under her desk where it remained for the rest of the weekend. Although the book stored inside the canvas appeared every time she closed her eyes, she willed herself to let it be. No good could come out of more reading, she was certain of that.

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Fallon finally did open the book, and spent an afternoon reading it, but when she mentioned changing majors to her parents, they were unconvinced. John Baxter told his daughter flatly “absolutely not” when she casually mentioned her newfound interest in literature. Catherine Baxter was a little more thorough in her response, recounting her own college experiences for support.

“Look, Fal,” she told her daughter over the phone. “I was interested in that kind of stuff in college, too, but it just isn’t useful. It’s not practical, and digging into that stuff can actually get you into a lot of trouble these days. If that professor bothers you again, I would report him to the New Ways Enforcement office. Literature is one of those things that pretty much went out of fashion on its own after the Class War, so it’s not forbidden, but it’s definitely suspicious that someone would openly encourage you to read poetry- your father and I certainly never did,” she added indignantly. “Look, Fallon, you don’t know how many of my friends got degrees that turned out to be worthless. Absolutely worthless.” Fallon rolled her eyes, thankful hundreds of miles separated her from her parents so they couldn’t read her disinterested body language. Her mom continued, now really on a roll. “These degrees were really meaningless. They studied

things like philosophy and history,” she spat the words, obviously offended by their very existence. “After school, some of my friends not only had tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt, but they also couldn’t find jobs to offset their debt. Your father and I were so lucky to have jobs, so we could afford a home, cars, trips- all of the things we were able to give you growing up. Without our practical educations, we, you, wouldn’t have had any of that.”

Catherine Baxter passionately argued against a liberal education for another quarter of an hour, Fallon only periodically interjected “uh-huh” and “I know” when her mother paused to take a breath. Needless to say, Fallon did not pursue a degree in the liberal arts, but told herself she would look into poetry again once she finished school, had a job, and no longer had to answer to her parents.

Six years after her fateful meeting with Max, Fallon’s life had taken an unexpected turn: life in a new city and the beginning of a career with one of the nation’s most powerful education companies. Fallon did complete a degree in accounting, but was unable (or maybe a little unwilling) to find steady employment after graduation. She lived in a small apartment near the university, and worked, primarily, as a cashier at the local grocery store. Fallon was considering returning to the university full time, when she found Broad Spectrum. The company oftentimes recruited on college campuses, as part of their business model relied on the short-term commitment of intelligent young people willing to give up a few years of their lives to educate underprivileged kids living in the country’s most blighted urban and rural areas. On one of a series of grey mid-western winter days, Fallon noticed a flyer posted near the university entrance. Bold letters asked: **DO YOU WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?** Intrigued, Fallon read more: *Broad Spectrum, Inc. offers exciting career opportunities in the business of education. Travel the country, make lasting friendships, and gain experience for a lifelong*

career in one of the most competitive fields in the world! All majors and interests are welcome. Job training completed on site for the fall of 2049! Fallon noted the time and location of the informational meeting. Although she had never considered a job in education before, something about the poster attracted Fallon, even giving her an inkling of hopefulness for the first time in many months.

A week later, Fallon sat in one of The Bottle's conference rooms, sipping on free Coke and picking the chocolate chips out of a complimentary cookie. The room was small, but filled with people her age, all silently sizing each other up as they waited for the presentation to begin. Each audience member received a Broad Spectrum tote bag upon arrival, the company's memorable slogan, *We're in the Business of a Good Education*, stretching across the front. The bag was packed with BS merchandise and literature, and Fallon casually flipped through a pamphlet featuring the faces of BS corporate executives. The lights in the room dimmed, and an attractive man not much older than Fallon stepped to the front of the room. The presenter, Simon Sawyer, explained that he was the corporate HR director. With that, he began to tell his story.

“Thank you all for coming out this afternoon. A few short years ago I was sitting right where you are. I was twenty two, about to graduate college, and I was trying to figure out what to do with my life. A friend invited me to a Broad Spectrum presentation, and I tagged along, but only for the free food.” Simon paused, allowing the audience a moment to appreciate his sense of humor. “In all seriousness,” he continued. “I had never even considered a career in education. Who did? My university, like most schools, didn't even have a college of education. Teaching was a dying profession, and wasn't even on my radar. Not only was I ignorant about the field of education, I was skeptical. I wanted a job after graduation, and, like most people my age, I wanted to make a lot of money. I had no idea that Broad Spectrum would offer me both.”

Fallon listened intently to Simon, tapping notes into her phone. Below his information she typed: *BS=\$\$\$*. Fallon directed her attention back to Simon as he strolled casually down the aisles of the packed conference room.

“You are all familiar with Broad Spectrum’s slogan: We’re in the Business of a Good Education, but let it sink in for a minute. We’re in the *business* of a good education,” he repeated with more emphasis. “This key word, *business*, was what was missing from education in the past.” As Simon let his words hang in the air, the Broad Spectrum logo projected around the room, changed to a picture of a well-dressed woman with a short white-blond bob and penetrating black eyes. “Mavis Lovegrove,” Simon continued, gesturing toward the picture. “Our company’s CEO realized this over thirty years ago. Mavis Lovegrove, a revolutionary in education, set out to dismantle the broken public education system while those in charge of the failing schools continued to put Band-Aid after Band-Aid over the problems, unwilling to take the drastic steps needed to achieve measurable success. Mavis met the demands of the market by offering parents and their children a state-of-the-art, technology-driven, result-oriented education option. For the first time, students were not relegated to their failing neighborhood school, but could *choose* to attend a high quality BS school. A school *managed* by a corporation, not mismanaged by a community.”

Once again, the pictures around the room changed, now looping through images of some of Broad Spectrum’s most beautiful sites, stopping on a picture of Simon, his hair a little longer and his face a little fresher, crouching in front of a group of smiling Broad Spectrum students. “When Mavis began working in education in the year 2000,” Simon continued. “The number of college students seeking teaching degrees was at all-time low. The profession had a horrible reputation. Teachers were looked at as lazy, ineffective pariahs who could easily be, and were

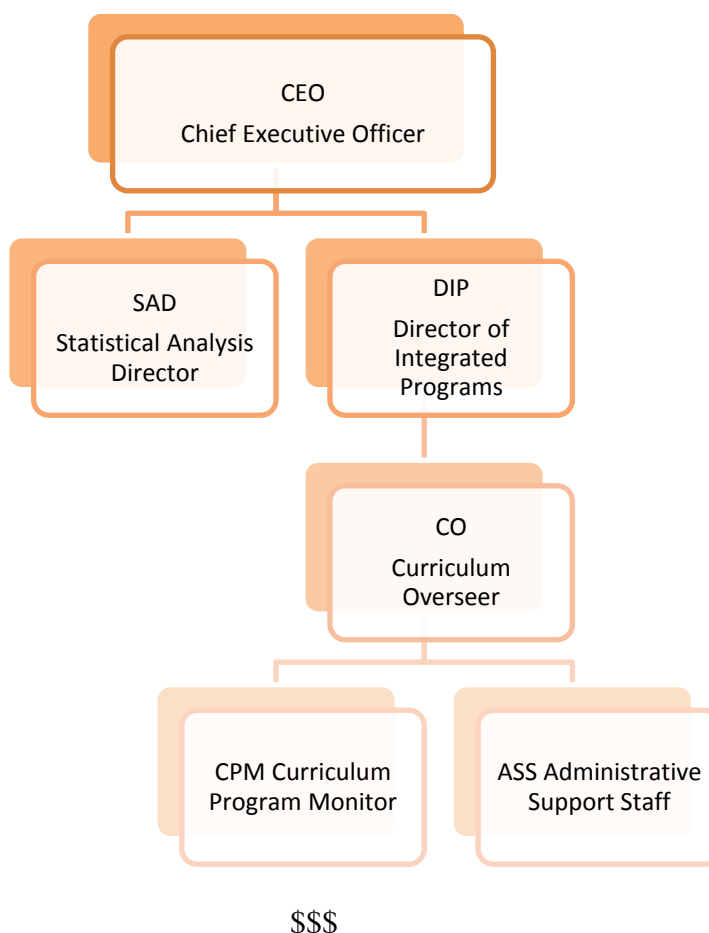
being, replaced by computers. Aware of these sentiments, Mavis developed a plan to revitalize education by taking a number of bold steps. First, she eliminated the need for certification in order to educate. Research had already shown that having an education degree was not an indicator of classroom success. Next, she sought out the best and the brightest, traveling to the top universities around the country to find business-minded innovators to fill her education centers; Educators who hadn't been indoctrinated by schools of education; Educators who were willing to work for corporate achievement by any means necessary. Finally, she offered these young pioneers training, comradery, and competitive salaries. In the past, the teaching profession could not recruit top tier students because the pay was too low, the hours too long, and the reward too fleeting. Supported by her multibillion dollar educational company, Mavis was able to offer training in business-tested methods that would enable educators to work smarter, not harder, helping us to reach measurable objectives. These objectives then translated into higher salary grades and pay for performance bonuses. Mavis didn't do this alone, of course. Working with government leaders like former President Torrance, she was able to eliminate regulations that kept public schools trapped in the twentieth century. And, under her leadership the FreeME system of education thrives today with more than twenty top-tier corporate education companies operating throughout the country." Simon paused and smiled knowingly. "Broad Spectrum, of course," he finished, "leads this field."

Simon continued, "I worked for three years in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in New York City. Broad Spectrum had just taken over the neighborhood public school and transformed it into a BS Educational Program Center. I'll be honest with you, when I first arrived at the center and took a look at the neighborhood, I didn't believe my students could achieve. They were behind academically and they were poor. I stood at the bottom of the

mountain, and I didn't think I could scale it. After a particularly difficult day, I reached out to a more experienced colleague, and he expressed to me one of Broad Spectrum's most popular business mantras: *Let go and let Broad Spectrum*. This reminded me to trust Mavis and trust the company she had created. Corporate reform would not have taken the world by storm if it wasn't effective, right? Once I studied and embraced the BS systems, my job became much easier. I still worked very hard, but I started to see measurable improvement. In fact, by the end of the year, 95% of my students were on target. I earned the school's highest bonus for my effort."

The images around the room changed again to pictures of Simon next to a new car, sipping a fruity drink on a tropical beach, and to a closet lined with expensive-looking loafers. Nodding toward the fruits of his labor, Simon finished his sales pitch. "Now, you might be wondering why I left the classroom. In short, I was successful, and Broad Spectrum highly regards their successful employees and wants them to guide the success of others. Toward the end of my third year in New York, Hal Ledon came to visit me in my classroom." A number of audience-members began to whisper at the sound of this infamous name, and a picture of Lee and Simon, shaking hands in a hotel ballroom somewhere, was projected as Simon continued. "Lee came to visit me and he thanked me for working so hard for the company. He then asked to take my show on the road." Simon's over-the-top mock Southern accent, a tribute to Lee, elicited laughs from the audience. He continued more seriously: "I thought long and hard about the decision, but ultimately realized that I would be of the most help to the company by recruiting the newest BS employees and guiding their success. With this, Simon smiled at his captive audience, and directed their attention to the corporate organizational chart that appeared behind him. "Our team helps BS succeed where the old public school system failed." Fallon reviewed

the hierarchy as Simon delivered his closing line: “Education is a business, and it’s a strong business. A business I invite you to be a part of.”



After Simon’s presentation, Fallon applied for a position at a Broad Spectrum school. After three levels of rigorous interviews, Fallon was told to report to Savannah, Georgia at the end of August to begin her work as a Curriculum Program Monitor. Although relieved to be employed, Fallon was vying for a position in a more exciting city, but accepted the job, hoping to be able to transfer to the location of her choice once she gained a reputation in the BS community. Fallon’s first year as a BS CPM would be provisional, as she had yet to complete the company’s training program. Similar programs like Gates Output Development (GOD) and the Walton High School Instructors Program (WHIP), and America’s Best Classrooms (ABC)

existed, but BS was the oldest and most renowned. Fallon's inaugural BS class was scheduled for the first week of school, and would be taught by her new CO, Britt Larceny. After one year of experience, fifty two official Broad Spectrum classes, and a number of standardized tests, Fallon would be an *official* BS certified CPM.

Fallon's phone vibrated faintly inside the pocket of her pinstriped dress pants, bringing her back to reality: only an hour away from beginning her career. She pulled out the slim device, which gently reminded her: *You have one event on your calendar 'First Day of BS' begins at 7:30 AM. Traffic is light, but leave now to arrive on time.* Unable to stall the inevitable any longer, Fallon took one final look in the bathroom mirror and inhaled sharply. Exhaling deeply, she fluffed her shoulder-length brown hair, and attempted another smile. Despite her best efforts, her happiness still rang false and her nerves were palpable through her trembling lips and hands. Frustrated at her anxious disposition, she broadened her smile, raised her fists in mock triumph and proclaimed to her reflection: "Let go and let Broad Spectrum." Her booming voice startled her to action, as she briskly turned off the bathroom light and rushed to grab her bag from the kitchen table before heartily slamming her apartment door on any lingering doubts and insecurities.

Chapter 3 ½: Art Imitates Life

While many of the elements in my novel are based on my own life and experiences as a public school teacher, Fallon's experiences in the third chapter most mirror my own. My parents, although they didn't call English a "worthless" major, wanted me to be able to find steady employment after college. As a result, I agreed to study English and secondary education, and put creative writing on hold for a few years. I used Fallon's character, therefore, to fictionalize my own experiences and to comment on a number of troubling trends in higher education.

While documenting the broad history of the university is outside of the scope of this project, I hoped to comment on a number of critical issues impacting higher education. Most importantly, I wanted to highlight the role of higher education in a society dominated by neoliberalism. While I advocate for an education founded in the liberal arts, this is not the education that is most valued. As a result, I juxtaposed the technology-laden and corporate-sponsored "Information Commons," with the traditional, although decaying, liberal arts department at Fallon's university. This depiction is, unfortunately, very true to life, as interest in the liberal arts continues to decline as a monetary value is placed on college majors. Cardinal John Henry Newman (1852/1982), for example, argued for a liberal college education, defining it as: "The process of training, by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose, some specific trade or profession, or study or science, is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture..." (p. 115). Colleges and universities are in the midst of an identity crisis. Universities have turned away from their original purpose of providing a broad and liberal education for the few, to training multitudes of young people to get jobs that will (supposedly) enable them to

compete in the global economy. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (2011) paint a bleak picture of modern college campuses filled with “academically adrift” students who are unsure of how to proceed once entering the twenty-first century college. The college life envisioned by Cardinal Newman has largely been replaced by standards, output, and the needs of big business. Arum and Roksa outline the capitalist structure of the modern university, where “...schools are expected not to provide quasi-parental guidance and social regulation, but instead to meet client needs through delivery of elaborate and ever-expanding services” (p. 15). If you have the occasion to visit a college campus, you will notice they are always under construction. New buildings are continually being added to the campus, so it can compete with other schools to attract new students. Many students now choose their school based on the size and quality of the school’s recreation center, the number of fast food restaurants on campus, and/or the strength of the school’s football team. All of these non-academic pursuits influence students’ views on the role of the university, and, unfortunately, these pursuits almost always supersede academics. The use of the word “clients” in place of students emphasizes the power students hold over universities and their role in the commodification of a university education.

Wendy Brown (2015) discusses the changing university in her work, citing neoliberalism’s focus on human capital as leading to a shift in the focus of public universities. She writes: “The saturation of higher education by market rationality has converted higher education from a social and public good to a personal investment in individual futures, futures construed mainly in terms of earning capacity” (p. 181). Once again, neoliberalism subverts public good for private interest as job training becomes the primary goal of a college education. When this happens, not only is democracy threatened, but the hegemonic social order is perpetuated. Brown reflects this in her work, arguing that when a liberal college education no

longer acts as social equalizer or a path to the middle class, “public higher education, like much else in neoliberal orders, is increasingly structured to entrench, rather than redress class trajectories” (p. 184).

Frank Donoghue (2010) posed the question: Can the humanities survived the 21st century and matter-of-factly reported that the overwhelming majority would reply “who cares?” Who cares is the attitude adopted by many schools, as literature, art, and poetry are boiled down to “right answers,” or as footnotes to the things that really matter in life: learning skills that will help you find a job. I chose to use John Keats’ (1820/2006) poem *Ode to a Grecian Urn* to pique Fallon’s interest because its paradoxical ending provided me the opportunity to illustrate how many students are taught (if they are taught at all) to view poetry and literature- as something to consume, not something to puzzle over. Fallon seeks answers, when a discussion is called for.

I first encountered Keats’ poem in 2006 in a course at Loyola on British Romanticism taught by Steven E. Jones. Dr. Jones, like the fictional professor Max Ellison, said he could not fully explain the meaning of Keats’ words and I always remembered that because I couldn’t recall a teacher doing that before. In the same course, I also first experienced the type of protracted research that could be conducted in the liberal arts through a semester-long research project on a topic of choice. I somehow alighted on a study of poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Unitarian beliefs and their influence on his poetry. I really embraced the project and spent about ten hours a week researching (which is a lot for an undergraduate). At the end of the semester, I turned in my work and titled it *XTC to Ecstasy*. XTC was a moniker that Coleridge used, but the title is significant because I compared my experiences as a researcher to a state of ecstasy, which is how I felt after completing the research: completely elated and in awe of what I had learned.

This is the power of a liberal college education. Unfortunately, this type of education is quickly growing unpopular because it is not viewed as “useful” to the masses.

In this chapter, Fallon is also introduced to Broad Spectrum and their teacher training program. I modeled the training program after Teach for America, the popular nonprofit that sends recent college graduates to work in high need classrooms for two years. My criticism of TFA is academic and personal, as I applied for a job with the organization in 2007, but was not selected. I applied with TFA because the group’s mission mirrored my own interests and because I thought it might lead me to an interesting teaching job in a new city. Unlike most of TFA applicants, however, I was an education major. As a result, I maintain that I was not hired by TFA because I “knew too much.” I had classroom experience and was under no illusions that I could waltz in with my expensive education and “youthful drive” and somehow do more than most veteran teachers. This, unfortunately, is exactly the belief that TFA is founded on. For many TFA corps members this is not a problem, however, because their time in the classroom is brief. TFA views teaching as volunteer work and as resume padding, not as a lifelong profession. This viewpoint reflects a deeper issue: the power of programs like TFA to change teaching and, in turn, subvert public education. Many TFA alumni remain active in education, but, unfortunately, many of these former teachers use their Ivy League backgrounds and connections to support school privatization and corporate-modeled reforms (Ravitch, 2013). The powerful rhetoric (using words like choice, equity, and innovation) utilized by TFA encourages schools to hire inexperienced non-union TFA corps members in favor of more experienced unionized and/or tenured teachers. In my novel, Fallon is intrigued by this same type of rhetoric, as education is re-branded as a business and teaching likened to a high-powered corporate career.

Chapter 4: The Village

Savannah, Georgia is a place well-known for its dualities and juxtapositions. The cheerful paint colors adorning the city's oldest homes are dulled by the live oaks that hover dangerously close to their roofs, casting long shadows over the walled gardens. Moss drips from the twisted branches, ticking the tops of orange, white, and royal blue tour trolleys as they roll down the city's narrow avenues. As camera's flash in a vain attempt to capture the tarnished beauty of the old New South, locals delicately swat at the moss or deftly sidestep the dust-colored pools that threaten to deposit tiny critters into their clothes and shoes. Vacationers rave about the charm and elegance of Georgia's oldest city after spending mere hours exploring everything within a number of sanitized square miles. Intoxicated ramblings down side streets or poor directions from a new concierge may lead travelers to less glamorous areas of town, but, typically, out-of-town visitors never see the sharp division between the Disneyland of downtown Savannah and the reality of everyday life for many of the city's residents.

A few miles west of the tree-lined squares, historic mansions, and cobblestone streets, the landscape changes in a number of gradual, but stark, ways. Lush green grass and overwhelming white, purple, and pink azaleas are replaced by dirt and pebble-filled medians dotted with scrubby brown bushes and starved and faded palms. Shops selling local delicacies and restaurants offering cool twenty dollar cocktails are replaced by squat cinderblock buildings, home to liquor stores, churches, or pawn shops. And, more often, squat cinderblock buildings home to past liquor stores, churches, or pawn shops surrounded by groups of unemployed or underemployed men and women, looking for shelter and sustenance, both physical and spiritual, through the cracks in the boarded up windows and barred doors. The intoxicating smells of pralines and fried treats are replaced by an odor that is an odd combination of wet and burning, emitting from the paper mill whose smoke stacks churn gray and white clouds over the

landscape. At the end of this isolated stretch sits “an innovation in green home building,” “a place for hundreds of Savannah’s most needy families to now call home,” “more than a housing project: Marsh Village!” (*Savannah Morning News, March 2033*) The stately brick and wrought iron entrance gate and the rainbow-colored townhomes certainly set a different tone than the Cold War architecture projects of old. But, like many things in Savannah, the outward appearance does not tell the whole story. Built as Savannah celebrated her tricentennial, The Village, as it is colloquially known, solved a number of problems facing the city. First, it freed up space in the attractive downtown historic district for additional hotels, restaurants, and bars, as low-income housing close to this area took up a great deal of valuable real estate. Secondly, it eradicated much of the crime from the city’s booming tourist attractions, as criminals, many of whom lived in housing projects within walking distance of downtown, were now forced out. The city leaders met objections about disenfranchisement by offering a number of free modes of transportation from The Village to downtown, allowing low-income workers to maintain “business as usual.” These buses not only kept workers at their current jobs, but also enabled them to be quickly and easily shuttled back to The Village, as night set in and their services were no longer needed. Savannah was able to construct the multi-million dollar housing project, and its surrounding wall, with generous corporate sponsorships. Washington almost always unanimously supported the separation of *great* Americans from criminals, rapists, and other undesirables through the construction of physical barriers and impediments, so construction on Marsh Village was fast-tracked.

The Village was lauded as “a great place to raise kids,” and “a city within itself” (*Marsh Village Promotional Materials, 2033*), offering resident apartments, townhomes, or traditional single-family dwellings and a number of neighborhood amenities: a fitness center, pool, post

office, dog park, walking trails, and basketball and tennis courts. Fifteen years after its initial construction, The Village was still a prominent location in West Savannah, situated between the port and the paper factory, but its luster had faded and the development was beginning to show its age. The front entrance sign, for example, was always in need of repairs, as vandals, continually wreaked havoc on the twelve letter epithet. Once inside The Village walls, porches sagged, paint peeled, and the residents had all but given up trying to eradicate the algae that threatened to take over the swimming pool. The deep pockets of the federal and local governments who worked so tirelessly to build The Village appeared to have dried up shortly after the development's ribbon-cutting. As The Village began to physically deteriorate, the hopefulness that once surrounded life there began to fade as well. As discontentment grew, rival gangs began to crop up within the confining Village walls, crime increased, and a special faction of the Savannah New Ways Enforcement Office was dispatched to maintain order. Nicknamed *The Village Vigilantes* by the residents, these cops were viewed as either corrupt, taking kickbacks and bribes from the gangs who controlled the streets, brutal, rarely hesitating to open fire on any Village resident they perceive to be out of line, or inept, unconcerned with the well-being of the children and families trying to survive in this underserved enclave.

In July 2034, Tamika Williams brought her daughter Jasmine home from the hospital to her perfect pink townhome in the newly constructed Marsh Village. She placed her daughter's crib next a window that overlooked one of The Village's fishing ponds, nicknaming it Jaz Lake in honor of her infant daughter. Each night before Jasmine went to sleep, Tamika would rub her daughter's back and tell her stories about a beautiful Native American princess who lived next to Jaz Lake long before Savannah was settled, professing the waters brought luck, prosperity, and intelligence to little girls who lived near its banks. As Jasmine aged, Tamika had to become more

creative in her storytelling in order to explain away the strange colors spotting the increasingly untreated water, the foul smells emanating from it, and the dead fish lolling, open-mouthed, on the water's surface. By age twelve Jasmine had outgrown nightly stories, but some nights, if her mother had a good day at work or a few glasses of wine, Tamika and Jaz would reminisce about the lake. Inevitably they would make a plan to clean it up; to scoop out the trash and get Tamika's brother Ellison to fix the filter and borrow a lawn mower to tame the weeds that had grown up next to the banks. Once the sun came up, however, and they saw Jaz Lake again steaming and stinking under the Savannah sun, Tamika would rush off to work and Jaz would rush off to school, and the job of cleaning up Jaz Lake would be put off for the next night when mother and daughter almost believed they lived beside an enchanted lake, and not a neglected retaining pond between a port and a paper mill.

Almost exactly fifteen years after being carried into the perfect pink townhouse, Jasmine Williams stood in a scruffy and faded blue towel staring aimlessly down at the stagnant Jaz Lake. Not interested in putting on last year's black pants, which looked even shabbier next to the gold, still creased-from the packaging, Broad Spectrum polo sitting next to them on her bed, Jaz busied herself with looking for suitable accessories to add a personal touch to her mandatory uniform. It was her first day at BSEPC-CCD. The educational centers closest to The Village were notoriously ineffective, as the poverty and dysfunction that permeated the neighborhood oftentimes seeped into the centers. Even after the local schools were privatized, educators were hard to retain, many of whom walked out mid-year, some mid-sentence, citing stress and exhaustion, irreconcilable differences between educators and students, as they rushed out of The Village, leaving nothing but cheerful bulletin boards and smoking tire tracks in their wake. Jaz shook her head, remembering her third grade year at Marsh Village learning center and the three

interchangeable young white educators who came and went before Jaz and her classmates could get to know them. Jasmine wondered what kind of monitors she would encounter at Broad Spectrum. She had seen a number of commercials for BS education centers, and the diverse students and supervisors pictured always seemed to be celebrating. She could not remember one time when an educator had given her a high-five, but that's all BS employees seemed to do. Although she knew her Uncle Ellison had used his connections to get her a spot at the BS center, she was not overly hopeful that Broad Spectrum was her ticket out of The Village and into a life of prosperity. Her mom and Uncle El always maintained a positive attitude in front of her, but, after eavesdropping on their late-night conversations next to Jaz Lake, she knew their true positions on education, politics, music, Coke versus Pepsi, and hundreds of other topics that came up during their frequent overnight sessions. On an unseasonably cool night toward the end of the summer, Tamika first approached Ellison about sending Jaz BSEPC-CCD. Jasmine had gone to bed early, looking forward to sleeping until noon the next day, which was part of her summer ritual. She was startled awake, however, by raised voices on the patio below.

“No. N-O, Tamika. I don't know this CO yet, so she probably won't even accept Jaz if I ask, but I'm not going to ask, so, as far as I'm concerned, this conversation is over.” Intrigued after hearing her name, Jaz propped herself up on her elbows, and peered cautiously over the window ledge. Her mother and Uncle El sat below in metal lawn chairs, Ellison at the edge of his seat, hands raised passionately, while Tamika reclined in hers, appearing unmoved by her brother's refusal. Tamika and Ellison's penchant for debate was well-known in the Williams family. El was the hot head known for raising his voice and pounding his fist to make his point, while Tamika had a quieter disposition, calmly, but firmly, responding when provoked. Although their techniques differed, both were mercilessly stubborn and their refusals to concede oftentimes

led them to argue for hours on end, only stopping at the threat of violence from another family member who had grown tired of their incessant back and forth. Jaz put her pillow under her arms, tucking in for another epic battle between her mom and uncle. Tamika crossed and uncrossed her legs and examined her nails intently before responding to her brother, which, as Tamika well-knew, only served to agitate Ellison more.

After another few moments of contemplation, Tamika finally crafted her rebuttal.

“Ellison, I know you like to think that because you work at the BS center you are an expert in education, but I’m an expert in *my* daughter, and I know that she’s not getting what she needs at the center here.” Tamika paused and gestured to the surrounding neighborhood. Before Ellison could interject, she started up again, a little more softly, “Look, El, give me one good reason Jaz shouldn’t go to Broad Spectrum?” Tamika let the question hang in the air, and Ellison stalled, standing up and taking a long pull on his beer before responding.

Frustration already breaking his voice, Ellison began, “Tamika, I’ve only been working at Broad Spectrum for a few months, so I can’t even tell you much about the quality of education Jaz will get over there. Do you really know a BS education is the best?” Ellison gained momentum with each statement and appeared to be ramping up to give Tamika a laundry list of reasons why Jasmine should avoid Broad Spectrum, but Tamika cut him off abruptly.

“Ellison, brother, I have been interested in sending Jaz to Broad Spectrum for years, even before you worked there, and I take my only daughter’s education *very* seriously, so I’m going to lay it out for you one more time.” In an unusual move, Tamika stood toe to toe with her brother, placing her hands on his shoulders so he could not shy away from her gaze. “Jasmine needs to get out of The Village. Jasmine needs to get a good education. Jasmine needs to get a job. Part of getting a good job is about getting the *right* education. The Public School is not the *right*

education. We went to public school and you're a janitor and I'm a waitress, and we both live in the projects. Jasmine needs what's now and what's next, and BS is both of those things. If you don't want to help me get her into BS, I'm still going to do it. You might be my older brother, but you don't control my life, and you don't control my daughter's life. She's going to make it out, and education is going to get her there."

Tamika loosened her grip on Ellison's shoulders, but she continued to stare into his eyes, daring him to defy her wishes. Ellison met her stare, but began to mumble about her "always bossing him around," which served to partially diffuse the tense situation. Knowing she had won the night, Tamika, too, began to soften, playfully punching her brother in the arm as if to wish him better luck next time. Tamika and Ellison continued to talk, but Jasmine moved away from the window, losing interest now that the conversation had shifted to topics that did not directly concern her. The next week Ellison approached Britt Larceny about accepting Jasmine into the BS program, and was surprised at how quickly she agreed. While he did not know all of the details, he had heard snippets of contentious meetings between Larceny and The Board of Directors, and was not sure if the CO would take a chance on a student like Jaz, new to the Broad Spectrum system. Once she was in, Tamika and Ellison approached Jaz about switching to BS. She wasn't offered much of a choice, but, in her mind, all educational centers were the same. Some days you learned, and other days you counted the minutes until it was time to go home. Wherever she went, she was prepared to spend the next few years relatively bored, waiting for program completion.

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Jasmine knew without looking at the clock that her primping time was running out, and once again eyed her bland uniform. As if on cue, Jasmine's mother appeared at her bedroom door.

"Jaz, it's already 6:15, and you're still in your towel! The bus will be here in fifteen minutes."

"Mom, I'm just finishing up, OK? I'm not used to getting up this early." Jasmine tried not to roll her eyes as she grabbed her clothes off the bed and brushed past her mother. She hoped if she kept moving, her mom would not continue to lecture. Before Tamika could really get going, Jaz closed the bathroom door, quickly changing into her ill-fitting polo and trying to add some interest to her ensemble by adding gold hoops to her ears. As she applied her favorite lipstick, her mom knocked at the bathroom door.

"Jaz, the bus will be here in five minutes, and you can't be late for your first day."

Jasmine, annoyed, but willing herself not to show it, flung open the door. "I was just finishing up," she smiled, probably beaming a little too heavily to compensate for her true feelings. Jasmine continued to get ready, but felt her mother hovering nearby.

"Jaz," she began solemnly. "I hope you have a great first day. I know it's not easy to switch schools, but I know, *I know*, BS is going to give you the opportunities I never had, so I want you to work hard and do your very best." With this encouragement, Tamika hugged her daughter tightly, pinning Jasmine's arms to her sides.

Jasmine, uncomfortable with her mother's unusually emotional display groaned.

"Mom, you're squeezing me too hard, and I'm going to miss the bus." Brought back to the present, Tamika let go of her daughter and was all business again.

“You’re right about that, baby girl. Get out of here now. I can’t wait to hear all about your first day.” Jasmine, glad to be dismissed without a long lecture, grabbed her purse off of the couch, put on her headphones and walked out the door. With moments to spare, she arrived at the crowded bus stop. She searched the crowd, nodding at a few neighborhood friends, but kept her headphones on, signaling to them she didn’t feel like talking yet. Although school did not start until 7:30, the trip to BSEPC-CCD took at least forty five minutes from The Village, and Jasmine hoped she would be able to get a few more minutes of sleep during the drive. After jostling for a private seat on the bus with the other students bound for BS, Jasmine put her head back and attempted to enjoy her last moments of freedom before starting another monotonous and pointless year. As the bus left The Village, Jasmine noted that vandals had once again sprayed graffiti over the walls that surrounded the neighborhood. The bus passed quickly, but she managed to read the latest message: *“The student’s freedom of mind is dangerous if what is wanted is a group of technically trained obedient workers to carry out the plans of elites...”*

“Weird,” Jasmine commented to no one in particular and turned up her music, closed her eyes, and pushed the strange phrase promptly from her mind. The Village Vigilantes would paint over it before she returned home anyway. They might leave a person bleeding out on the street for hours, but they always rushed to cover up graffiti, especially if the words had any whiff of subversion, especially then.

Chapter 4 ½: Art Continues to Imitate Life

To develop *The Village* I drew inspiration from a number of places. To set up the scene, I recalled F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1995) brilliant description of The Valley of Ashes in *The Great Gatsby*. I modeled my tone after Fitzgerald's work, as we are both describing neglected industrial areas that wealthy people rush through on their way to better places or, if they are lucky, can ignore entirely. The real-life inspiration for the setting came from my experiences as a teacher in West Savannah from 2008 to 2011. The transition between the historic sites of downtown Savannah to a location similar to that described in my work is best illustrated on a drive down Savannah's Bay Street. As you head west, the scenery changes just as I have described in my story. I named the neighborhood Marsh Village because many of Savannah's low income housing projects are named villages. There must have been a concerted effort by the marketing arm of the Department of Housing and Urban Development to make projects more appealing by giving them idyllic sounding names like villages or gardens. There has also been an effort to make low income housing more attractive. One of my most vivid childhood memories is driving past the brown and red brick high-rises that tower over the freeway in downtown Detroit. These were the projects, as my parents told me. I remember being shocked to find out that people lived in the buildings, which, to me, appeared abandoned. When I noticed a number of these twenty-first century neighborhoods going up around Savannah, I couldn't help but think back on the buildings from my youth. These buildings had once been new, and I wondered what these more attractive buildings would look like in a few decades. I played with this idea through my work to emphasize the subtle and overt ways in which our society shows low income people of color their worth.

In this chapter I also addressed the seemingly commonsense relationship between education and a prosperous life (employment, financial security). Education should not, however, be viewed as a means to an end, but as an integral part of one's life. The current public school system does not offer this to many students. It is important here, therefore, to differentiate between education and schooling. According to Peter McLaren (1998) schooling "is primarily a mode of social control," while education "has the potential to transform society, with the learner functioning as an active subject committed to self and social empowerment" (p. 169). Propaganda plays a key role in convincing Tamika to send Jasmine to a Broad Spectrum school, and this same type of propaganda is currently being used to encourage parents to choose charter schools. In the high-stakes educational environment, parents are frenzied to choose the "right" education for their child. Unfortunately, "right" equates to a school that can produce high standardized test scores, devaluing other indicators of learning and feeding into the neoliberal revolution. I ended the chapter with a quote from Martha Nussbaum's (2010) book *Not for Profit*. Quotes from literature, theory, and music appear periodically in the book as ways to spread "subversive" messages to the oppressed citizens of 2049. Nussbaum's quote greets Jasmine as she heads to her education center, foreshadowing the type of mind-numbing technical training she will receive for the next few years.

Chapter 5: The 24 Hour News Cycle

Cameron woke in a crumpled ball beside his backdoor. Opening his eyes sent pain searing through his sinuses and pulsing behind his eyeballs, but even as he groaned in agony, his mind struggled to process the brief meeting with his father. Had his father really knocked him out? Broken his nose? What was El's Bells? As his memory focused, Cam felt eyes on his back.

"Dewey," he struggled, each syllable placing tremendous pressure on his already throbbing nose. Dewey moved closer, nudging Cam's arm affectionately. Cam took a few deep breaths and determined he needed two things: a doctor and to find his father. After inhaling deeply, Cam used both of his arms to push himself into a sitting position, exhaling with a strangled cry as he switched positions. He groped his way to the bathroom, bracing himself to look in the mirror at his, presumably, distorted face. Pushing his vanity aside, Cam quickly splashed cold water on his face, swallowed two aspirin, and tossed his bloodied t-shirt onto the black and white tiled floor. While putting on a clean shirt, he exited his home.

Cam steered his truck toward The Public School, furiously dialing his father's number, cursing loudly as each call went directly to voicemail. Driving and dialing diverted Cam's attention from his surroundings, causing him to overlook the inordinate number of people surrounding the school until he made the turn into the parking lot. Cam instinctively pressed the brake, scrambling to close the open windows that threatened to leave him exposed to the flock of reporters who swarmed his truck.

Through the glass Cam heard one of the reporters shout wildly, "It's him, it's Arlo," sending dozens of pairs of eyes in Cam's direction. Cam quickly scanned the parking lot for, first, an explanation for the presence of this many reporters, and, secondly, for an exit strategy. Cam could not speed up, as his path was now blocked with stocky cameramen and red, white,

and blue news vans. He could not back up, as he was parked at the school's one entrance, a school he was expected to open to students within twenty four hours. Reporters converged on his truck, brandishing microphones, shouting questions through the glass.

“Mr. Arlo, what is your response to this report?”

“Cam, what does this mean for the future of The Public School?”

“Mr. Arlo, where is your father?”

“Cameron, is this the end of public education?” Cam, truly unsure of how to respond, threw up his hands in a gesture of surrender, staring wide-eyed at the panting journalists. He wondered who else his dad had visited last night because he certainly hadn't alerted the media. An unrelenting car horn bellowed through the lot, giving him a moment's reprieve from the barrage of questions. Through his rearview mirror, Cam glimpsed Gloria's vintage red convertible, top down. She tapped her horn vigorously, each staccato note causing the reporters to flinch nervously. While Cameron had been caught entirely off guard by their presence, Gloria seemed prepared, and even somewhat excited, to take them on.

“Don't even think about coming near my car,” she warned the reporters as she inched into the lot. “You scratch the paint on this baby, and you're gonna hear from my lawyer. Now keep on moving. We've got a school to run here, and all I've got to say, and all Mr. Arlo's got to say is no comment.”

A few cavalier journalists attempted to move closer to Gloria despite her warnings, prompting her to rev the car's powerful engine, stopping mere inches from one of the reporter's microphones. She smiled gleefully at the stunned reporter.

“You thought I was playin' with you, but I'm not. I'm not gonna ask you again. Move. Outta. My. Way.” Taking Miss Gloria's threats to heart this time, the reporters and their

ancillaries parted. As a path cleared, Cam didn't waste any time pulling his truck into the parking lot and sprinting toward the door, dodging more questions and cameras as he ran.

Miss Gloria rushed in behind him, muttering "damned media," "outright lies," and "tryin' to touch my car," as she marched toward the school's main office. As usual, she paid little attention to Cam.

As she began to unpack her things, Cam finally broached the subject.

"Miss Gloria, what's going on?" Fiercely clutching her bright pink coffee mug between her thin fingers, she looked up sharply, let out an exaggerated sigh and rolled her eyes in Cam's direction. She continued to busy herself with making the coffee, clucking her tongue as she shook two sugar packets violently.

"You're lucky *I* stay up on the news, so I could come and bail your ass out in that parking lot," she said. Still confused, Cam followed her into his office, growing increasingly impatient as she turned on his computer and began tapping the keyboard animatedly. "Here," she said, pushing the monitor toward Cam. He replaced Gloria behind the desk and turned his attention to the screen. Gloria had pulled up the homepage of one of the local news stations; the headline of the lead story proclaimed: **LOCAL PRINCIPAL MISSING: NWE SEEK ANSWERS.** Cameron's cursor hovered over the damning headline, his fingers trembling. Gloria had closed the office door on her way out, but he could still hear here muffled defenses through the door. She was in crisis management mode, and he desperately needed to find out why. He had seen his father less than twelve hours ago, and now he was missing? Cam took a deep breath and clicked the link, which brought up a video, last updated just minutes earlier. The clip started, the camera focusing on the reporter, a young blond woman in a green dress, her eyes shining gleefully, Cam's misfortune her gateway to a larger market.

“Good morning, Todd and Beverly,” she began. “I’m standing outside of Savannah’s Public School waiting for the arrival of the school’s principal Cameron Arlo. The Public School was slated to open its doors to students tomorrow, but sources say the start of the schoolyear may be delayed pending an investigation into the sudden disappearance of Arlo’s father, the school’s former principal, Henry Arlo, sixty five. A spokesperson from the New Ways Enforcement Office department reported that officers were called to Arlo’s home around five this morning after a neighbor, out with her dog for an early morning walk, noticed that Arlo’s front door was open. Upon further investigation, the officers found the house in disarray and Mr. Arlo nowhere to be found. While officers were adamant that the investigation is ongoing, our source indicated that foul play is suspected.”

The camera shifted abruptly away from the bubbly reporter, zooming in on Cam’s truck. He watched in horror as the camera zoomed in on his mangled face. Not only was his face bloodied, but the footage also showed him yelling angrily at his phone. He could only imagine how his actions would be analyzed by reporter like the one on his screen.

The reporter, now on the move, gasped, “Cameron Arlo has just arrived, and we are making our way to his car now. Mr. Arlo, Mr. Arlo,” she yelled, still yards from Cam’s car, “When did you last see your father? What happened to your face? Have you been in contact with the NWE?”

Her questions were interrupted by Gloria’s blasting horn, making it nearly impossible for her report to continue. The reporter signed off quickly, and Cam stared at the now silent screen. Gloria knocked softly on the faux wood door, the hollow sound breaking him out of his reverie.

“Cam,” she said in an uncharacteristic monotone, “Some people are here to see you.”

“Let them in, Gloria,” Cam croaked softly, trying desperately to adopt a casual pose despite the fact that he was now the subject of the news crawl rolling incessantly across television screens throughout the city. Although the media had obviously latched onto the potential scandal, Cam wanted the truth. A truth he knew wouldn’t be found on the news, or even by talking to the NEW officers. He had seen his father just hours earlier, so how could he suddenly be missing? Cam looked up quickly as two bodies stomped into the room. They introduced themselves as detectives Smith and Wesson with the local New Ways Enforcement Office. Practically mirror images of each other, Jerry Smith and Luther Wesson were big, broad, and bald. This morning they both wore dark suits and self-satisfied expressions as they surveyed Cam’s bloodied face and clothes.

Smith/Wesson (Cam had already forgotten who was who) reviewed the information in the news report, but when describing the state of his house, added significantly, “there was blood at the scene.” Cam stared at the officers, gripping the sides of his chair to keep from blurting out *I didn’t do it*, but he had watched enough crime shows to know that talking out of turn to NWE officers would only serve to incriminate him. In no hurry, Smith/Wesson began to stroll around Cam’s office, pausing to read plaques, awards, and degrees that dotted the walls, some belonging to Cam, but most signifying his father’s accomplishments.

“Mr. Arlo,” the officer began, “Despite evidence pointing to a struggle, your father was not inside the house and his car was still in the driveway. Now, you and your father seem to be pretty close, so I’m sure you can understand why my partner and I have come to you first.” He paused, once again gesturing toward Cam’s disheveled appearance. “Based on our intelligence, Mr. Arlo, you were the last person to see your father, so we think it’s a good idea for you to come downtown with us and answer a few more questions, OK?” Before Cam could respond,

the officers flanked Cam's chair, one hoisting him up by his t-shirt collar, the other adroitly snapping handcuffs around his exposed wrists. Taking in Cam's shock, Smith/Wesson clarified, "I assure you, Mr. Arlo, this is simply protocol. I'm sure we will have you back before school starts tomorrow." Resigned to his current situation, Cam acquiesced and was led out of his office to the waiting patrol car.

Crammed in the backseat, although relieved to be out of sight of the reporters huddled outside of the school, Cam inquired: "Hey, guys, do I still get my one phone call?"

Chapter 6: Open for Business (Formerly Known as “The First Day of School”)

Standing on the sidewalk outside of BSEPC-CCD, Britt Larceny instinctively pressed the lock button of her Mercedes key fob twice, waiting to hear the locking mechanism’s comforting *beep beep*, her cue to officially begin her work day. As she marched up the wide gray walk, she took comfort in the knowledge that, regardless of what the day might hold, her \$200,000 splurge was safe in the parking lot. Ms. Larceny was eternally proud of her car, unashamedly posting pictures of herself in it, next to it, and washing it, on her social media platforms. She even ordered a special vanity plate, BSER (Broad Spectrum Education Representative) for it to let people know BS had given her the money to purchase the type of car most people only dreamt about. She had worked hard over the past decade to acquire the trappings of a female business leader, and now that she was finally beginning to look the part, she felt confident that her year at BSEPC-CCD would push her over the top. Although women in the workplace had long been commonplace, Larceny still felt the effects of sexism and knew that, to compete with men she wished to overtake, she had to rely on not only her intelligence and business acumen, but also on her looks. Looks that were, much to her displeasure, beginning to fade. Toward the end of the summer conference, Mavis Lovegrove held a special session with a number of the top female BS leaders and unabashedly gave them the name and number of her personal plastic surgeon.

Ms. Lovegrove, never one to mince words, laid it out simply: “If they aren’t terrified of you or want to sleep with you, you’ve got no chance in this business. Hopefully they’re both.” Britt had some natural beauty, but spent countless hours working with her personal trainer, getting her hair and nails professionally cared for, and shopping for the most severe suits and heels all in an effort to maintain the BS standard set by the *Barbie-like* Mavis Lovegrove. This year’s bonus would help her shave a few years off of her face and body, something she feared she was going to need more than ever after the effort it would inevitably take to get the CCBSHS

students to meet the company's expectations. She reminded herself to reach out to Brett, the talented BS SAD, Statistical Analysis Director, to discuss what statistical manipulations could be used to improve her chances for success. Stamping her heels even more forcefully into the pavement (she was known to have her shoes re-heeled a number of times each year, as her over-zealous stepping quickly wore them down to the studs), Britt unashamedly took in her reflection as she walked by a row of windows near the center's front doors. Her tailored black suit, towering black heels, and supple leather attaché embossed with the BS logo were a drastic change from the synthetic skirts and blouses she wore when she first started out. She cringed at the thought of the rough fabric, turned shiny from overuse and washing, her un-dyed hair, un-whitened teeth. Shortly after starting with the company, Britt understood to achieve success she needed to emulate Mavis and the other high-powered women at BS. At first she rented expensive clothes and accessories and took advantage of discounted treatments at the local beauty school. As her look sharpened, the right people began to take notice of her, and, she repeatedly told herself, her work. Becoming successful at a company like BS required the relaxation of one's moral fiber, something Britt had come to terms with years earlier. At first, she viewed her position as a part to be played, and, like an actress vying for the role of her career, Britt focused all of her energy into her work, over time developing a natural disposition toward the company's ethos; a model employee willing to do anything for the good of BS.

Her runway-worthy strut faltered slightly as she walked into the fluorescent school lobby. Regaining her momentum, but squinting to reduce the white-on-white glare from the overhead lights and spotless tile floors, Britt ascended the school's central staircase to her glass-ensconced circular office. As she threw open her office door, she was startled to see the shadowy figure of a

man seated in her sleek white leather chair with his cowboy boots propped up on her immaculate black lacquered desk.

Trying painfully to retain her composure despite the well of anger bubbling up in her gut, she flipped on the overhead lights, smiled sweetly and greeted her unexpected visitor.

“Good morning, Mr. Ledon. I see you’ve made yourself comfortable. To what do I owe this honor?” Hal Ledon smacked his hands together powerfully, making Britt jump ever-so-slightly.

“Well, shoot, Ms. Larceny, I was goin’ for the surprise effect, but you don’t seem all that shocked to see me here. I knew I should have hid behind your desk.” He laughed, shaking his head and smiling as if some unseen camera was documenting his every move. Britt attempted to stand purposefully in the doorway, quickly developing a strategy to regain control of this meeting. Hal Ledon did not pay social calls, especially not in Savannah; especially not in August.

“Mr. Ledon, I appreciate you stopping by this morning to wish me luck on my first day of school, but, as you know, it’s one of the busiest days of the year, so my time is very limited.” As she spoke, she glided confidently toward her desk, willing her uninvited colleague to vacate her chair. Lee removed his feet from her organized piles of student data, score reports, and business journals, but made no further motions to leave.

“That’s what I like about you, Britt, you take your job seriously. So many of these *wunderkinds* Mavis finds have the brains, but not the work ethic of our *older*, more experienced employees.” Fully aware Britt’s patience would soon expire, Lee sat for a beat, as his words sunk in. He stood up and gave an exaggerated bow, obviously intent on using his unique blend of

insult and flattery to maintain the upper hand. As Britt brushed his boot dirt from her formerly spotless desktop, Lee began to explain the motive behind his unannounced visit.

“Britt, I know you have been given a big job this year, but I also know that you have what it takes to get this job done right. You are going to turn around this center. Not because your future at BS depends on it, but because you take pride in doing what is best for these kids, and, more importantly, what is best for this company. As Director of Integrated Programs, my job is not only to ensure that all of the BS centers perform, but also that the BS mission continues to spread throughout this country, solidifying the legacy of this grand educational revolution. Like I said, I know you’re going to successfully turn around this monstrosity,” gesturing to the now-deserted former jail, “but there is one more thing the company would like from you; one more thing you can do to make yourself entirely indispensable to BS.” He paused, making sure he had her undivided attention. “Help me to shut down The Public School once and for all.” Britt stared at Lee, somewhat stunned by his proposition. “I don’t know if you heard the news this morning,” Lee continued, thrusting his phone toward Britt. She scanned the screen, large bold letters proclaimed: **PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPAL QUESTIONED IN FATHER’S DISAPPEARANCE**. As she skimmed the article, Lee’s hand began to shake excitedly, making it increasingly difficult for her to read the story.

“You *didn’t*?” Britt questioned.

“Shoot, Ms. Larceny, you know Broad Spectrum upholds extremely high ethical standards, and would never condone such a calculated attack. No, ma’am, this was just dumb luck.” A devilish grin spread across Lee’s tanned face as he spoke. “So, with his father currently indisposed, I hope you’ll join me in courtin’ young Cameron Arlo.” Britt pursed her lips and furrowed her brow, pantomiming deep thought. Lee’s proposal indicated two things: Britt

Larceny had clawed her way into the company's inner circle and that The Public School posed a greater threat to corporate school supremacy than Broad Spectrum initially realized. Recognizing that she had a slight edge in this tête-à-tête, Britt carefully squared the papers on her desk, adopting a casual outward attitude, while internally her stomach and mind churned.

"Mr. Ledon," she said. "We live in a free market country where public schools, while unfashionable, are allowed to compete with corporate schools. With only one public school left in the entire country, haven't we already proven that corporate education is superior to public? This being said, what can you, I mean, what can *the company*, gain from the elimination of this single remaining school?" Lee was beginning to grow frustrated with this woman. He knew she wanted to get ahead. If not, she wouldn't have shown up next to him at the hotel bar in Arizona, laughing at his inane jokes, touching his arm lightly as he spoke, asking him demurely to sign her copy of his latest book. He expected her to swoon at the chance to work closely with him, to please him. The day was going to start soon, and he needed to close this deal before the CPM's and students began pouring in, perhaps diverting Britt's attention indefinitely. Unwilling to give her too much information, Lee knew, however, that he had to throw something her way to assuage her fears that he was taking advantage of her. He forced himself to adopt his signature hangdog smile, surreptitiously checking his watch, challenging himself to make the pitch and officially close the deal in under ninety seconds. Lee's critics begrudged him his hefty salary, but he earned those millions, especially on days like this one. The business of education was a game, and one had to adapt, evolve, and be willing to risk it all in order to make it.

"Britt, there you go again with your sharp mind. I'll tell you what- I thought the same thing when Miss Mavis, our beloved CEO and my beloved mentor, came to me about shutting down The Public School." Lee glanced sincerely at Britt to emphasize their camaraderie, and

then continued his speech. "I'm with you one hundred, no one hundred and ten percent, about The Public School. It's an outlier, an irregularity, as handy as a back pocket on a shirt, as my granddaddy used to say. Believe me, I asked Miss Mavis all of the question you're probably still thinkin', but, if I've learned anything workin' for her all these years, it's that when Miss Mavis gets a bee in her bonnet, it's best to go along or get along. I've disagreed with her more than a few times, and, as much as I hate to admit it, she was right every time. I guess that's why she's the boss. Mavis has a sixth sense about business, for sure, and the rest of us just have to sit back sometimes and marvel at her handiwork. After we went back and forth a few rounds, and I agreed to take on this job, she asked me to reach out to an assistant. Although I met with many well-qualified business educators, especially at the Arizona retreat, you kept popping up in my mind. I knew you, above everyone else I considered, had the experience, corporate knowledge, and discretion to make this special project a success." Lee checked his watch again, seventy three seconds, before planting himself eagerly in front of Britt's desk. As she opened her mouth of respond, Lee held up his index finger, indicating one more thing. "Of course," he added, "Miss Mavis assured me, and whomever I chose as my assistant, that, to show her sincerest appreciation, we would receive a handsome bonus upon the completion of the project." He leaned toward her conspiratorially and whispered, "Maybe this would give you what you need to buy that beach house we talked about this summer?" Lee let the question linger as he backed out Britt's personal space, suddenly all business again. "Ms. Larceny, I know you are a very busy woman with an educational program center to run, but I just could not let this opportunity pass you by. Please," he held out his hand, "Please, join me." From the moment Lee began his pitch, Britt knew she was going to take his offer. Although she did not trust Hal Ledon with his on and off again southern accent, cheesy colloquial phrases, and thinly veiled barbs at her expense, he

was a powerful ally; a powerful ally who certainly had his own agenda and would protect his interests above her own. Partnering with him was risky, but if she hadn't taken risks before, she would still be like Henry Arlo, clinging desperately to the past, to archaic and tired ideals, instead of to the only things that truly mattered anymore: success, power, and money. Bringing BSEPC-CCD out of the red *and* eliminating The Public School was just the coup she needed to further ingratiate herself to Mavis Lovegrove and Broad Spectrum. Her mind made up, Britt stood up matter-of-factly and grasped Lee's outstretched hand.

As she pumped it vigorously, she conceded, "Mr. Ledon, I'm honored that you thought of me, and I look forward to working with you." Their handshake went on for a few beats longer than was typically socially acceptable, each communicating a desperate message. Britt's glower said, *Don't double-cross me, you slimy bastard*, while Lee's cautionary gaze said, *Don't flatter yourself, bitch, I'm smarter than you, stronger than you, and I will dominate this partnership, just like I dominated this meeting*.

"Hot dog," Lee yelped when their handshake finally broke. "I'm pleased as punch that we're gonna work together on this. Now, I'll just mosey on out of here and let you get on with your day. I've already got a couple of things in the works, so I'll be in touch. As soon as I get in the car, I'm going to call Miss Mavis and give her the good news, then, hell, I might just be a tourist for the day- get to know why people love this little city so much." Bringing his energy down slightly, Lee once again grasped Britt's hands, reciting earnestly, "CO Larceny, have a great first day." With this encouragement, he practically skipped out of her office, his cheerful whistles echoing eerily throughout the deserted atrium. As he exited the building, he assessed his final time. Three minutes. Off pace, but worth every second.

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Slightly overwhelmed after her meeting with Hal Ledon, Britt Larceny attempted to calm her nerves and re-focus her energies now that BSEPC was open for business. From the tinted windows of her circular office, Britt surveyed her domain one last time before the staff and students began to arrive. Her office, made completely of one-way glass, stood in the center of the two-story central atrium. The atrium provided ample work space for the students and allowed Britt and other school officials to easily monitor their work. The atrium contained enough computers for each student to have his or her own personal device. Britt took comfort in the monotone hum of these machines, and the order they brought to the once chaotic urban schools. Through online learning modules, students studied traditional subjects like math and science and cutting-edge fields like the recently re-vamped Language for Corporate Citizenship curriculum and New Ways Studies (BS riffs on Old Way English and social studies courses). Superfluous subjects like art and music were eliminated long ago in schools like BSEPC-CCD, as no one has yet figured out how to quantify the quality of a piece of art and because these subjects are of no use to young people, especially to the poor black and Hispanic students who were best served by BSEPC's. Parallel to Britt's office, the prison cells that once lined the walls were expertly converted into offices for CPM's. Britt Larceny came to appreciate these architectural details when she first toured the school, marveling at the ingenuity of the BS designers in charge of the prison's transformation.

Britt mentally reviewed the day's schedule. The students would begin their first day by taking comprehensive pre-tests in each subject. Then, BS's patented algorithm would expertly and effortlessly design unique learning modules for each student. Britt was proud to work for Broad Spectrum because of the company's commitment to innovation and differentiation. Not all BS schools utilized computer-based instruction. In fact, BSEPC-CCD used to employ over fifty

CPM's, each responsible for utilizing BS-approved research-based and data-driven strategies to move students through the standards and curriculum, but, despite the success of this method at other BS schools, some CPM's and students, including those at BSEPC-CCD, continued to fail. As a result, Mavis Lovegrove employed Silicon Valley's brightest minds to create the BS online learning platform. This program offered students a viable alternative to traditional instruction, while cutting costs. Fewer CPM's were needed, and many students moved through the modules quickly, decreasing the amount of time spent in school. Each module begins with a pre-test to assess student knowledge. Then students are immersed in interactive lessons via technology. Throughout each lesson students take a number of formative assessments, and their performance on these assessments (mostly multiple choice questions), determine if they have learned enough (they must earn at least a 70%) to move to the next section. Each unit culminates with a summative assessment. If the student does not pass a unit's assessment, they are able to try again until they master the content. Some students finished entire grade levels in a matter of months, allowing them to move through high school at their own pace. The BS system was admirable because no longer were teachers responsible for planning lessons and assessments. No longer were teachers responsible for subjective and unscientific grading. No longer were teachers responsible for differentiating instruction. No longer did teachers have to go to college to learn things they would never teach to their students. In fact, teachers were no longer, but CPM's. BS completely transformed the profession by placing most of the responsibility on corporate-created learning materials, either delivered through the computer program or through completely scripted lessons. Britt shuddered as she recalled what teaching used to entail, but movement below her office brought her out of her reverie. Her newest CPM, Fallon Baxter, crossed the atrium and Britt curiously eyed her newest recruit. Fallon was new to the corporate world and Britt worried

would find it difficult to assimilate to BS methods, but she saw a lot of herself in the young newcomer, and was certain Fallon could be taught to appreciate the advantages of a corporate education.

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As Fallon entered the building her eyes were immediately drawn to Britt Larceny's office, but the opaque glass made it impossible to know if her boss was aware of her arrival. Uncertain if she was being watched, Fallon walked as confidently as she could muster up the formidable stairs. As she unlocked the door to her office, Fallon was excited for the first time, basking in the accomplishment of having an office. Successful adults had offices, she thought, so she must be one. She made a mental note to mention this to her parents during their weekly phone conversation. Although she had initially disappointed them after her college graduation, they were very impressed she had snagged a job with Broad Spectrum. Her mom was especially awestruck because of her past obsession with *Leen on Me*, a reality show starring Hal Ledon that had been popular when Fallon was a kid. The show followed Lee through his daily life, chronicling Broad Spectrum's crusade to revolutionize education. Fallon had watched a few episodes on the internet before beginning at Broad Spectrum, and had watched Lee achieve a number of coups for corporate education: the elimination of tenure and the establishment of merit pay, the resignation of several ineffective local superintendents and their replacement by business executives, and the closing of underperforming public schools that were quickly replaced by streamlined BS schools.

Once seated at her desk, she was not exactly sure how to proceed. She already knew today would be spent monitoring the first-year students' pre-tests, so, although she had an office, she had yet to find any real work to do once within its confines. While swiveling in her new desk

chair, an assertive knock startled her. As she grabbed onto her desk for stability, Britt Larceny entered the small (former) cell carrying a number of books and folders. Fallon's cheeks reddened, certain Ms. Larceny had seen her goofing around in the chair. Much to her relief, however, Britt did not mention it, but launched quickly, business-like, into her speech.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Baxter," she said with what Fallon perceived as a small smirk, "I just wanted to stop over and wish you good luck on your first day, and bring you some orientation materials. Please review them before our first training session next week. You are very lucky to be working for such a great company, and I'm certain you will be successful here. I started off in a position similar to yours, and look at where I am now." As Britt held her arms out, apparently displaying her accomplishments, Fallon found her voice.

"Thank you, Ms. Larceny. I really appreciate you taking the time to visit with me this morning. I'm looking forward to a great first day." Fallon smiled weakly, biting her tongue against saying more, despite her penchant for nervous chatter. Britt Larceny didn't seem like the type of woman who ever felt nervous, nor did she look like the type of woman who cared if those around her *were* nervous. The words ruthless, confident, unscrupulous crossed her mind as Fallon grappled for something clever to say to her new superior. Noises began to rise from the atrium, as the rest of the CPM's and some students began to stream in, prompting Britt to end their conversation.

"All right, Ms. Baxter, I guess that's our signal to get to work. Have a great first day."

"Thank you," Fallon lamely responded to Britt Larceny's retreating frame. With no time to worry about her severely lacking first impression, Fallon gathered her things, rushing out of her office and into her first day of gainful employment.

The morning's final bell rang overhead, but the room still buzzed with talking students. CO Larceny tapped her microphone and said "settle down" a number of times before the room finally became quiet (save the hum of hundreds of computers).

A satisfied smile spread across her face, and she began.

"Welcome Broad Spectrum students! I am very excited to start the 2049-2050 fiscal year with you! A special welcome goes out to our first-year students and new students. The staff and I look forward to educating you in the BS way. Now, before we begin our pre-tests for the day, I would like to show you a short video message from the CEO of Broad Spectrum, Mavis Lovegrove." Suddenly, *musak* filled the atrium, and the face of a rail thin white woman with bright red lips and short blond hair filled each computer screen. The camera pulled back, and Mavis Lovegrove, in an architectural black business suit and gold heels, was walking through a humming office building.

People of all ages and races worked diligently behind her as she began speaking, "Good morning, students. I am Mavis Lovegrove, CEO of Broad Spectrum, and this," she held out her arms, "is the Broad Spectrum World Headquarters in our nation's capital, Washington, DC. I know you are all excited to begin your pre-tests, so I won't keep you long. I simply want to welcome you back to the BS program and remind you just how lucky you are. You are attending one of the premier Broad Spectrum Educational Program Centers; A place where standards and accountability reign in order to prepare *you* for a successful future. I am sure your parents and grandparents have told you horror stories from their school days." At this, a montage of images flooded the screen: nuclear war heads, a line of inmates in orange jumpsuits, a newspaper headline reading *U.S. Education Ranked Last in International Poll*, a young girl holding a sign that read: *Unemployed and Hungry*. The montage dissolved and Mavis Lovegrove continued,

surrounded by a diverse workforce. “Those were troubled times; A time before The Free Market Education Act, before corporate school reform, and before the development of BS remediation and testing materials.” Mavis Lovegrove sighed and looked wistfully into the camera before continuing. “Thanks to the fearlessness of our government and corporate leaders, however, Educational Program Centers like yours are more productive than ever, but we must remain vigilant to maintain these hard-fought gains. Before I leave you, therefore, I would like to remind you of the seven Broad Spectrum Principles that will guide your education for years to come.”

The CEO’s face now disappeared and the seven principles scrolled across the screen:

1. Achieving Accountability
2. Standardized Success
3. Constant Competition
4. Continuing Choice
5. Worthy Workers
6. Rapid Reform
7. Going Global

The principles disappeared and Mavis reappeared, now standing triumphantly on top of a mountain dressed in skin-tight black shorts and a gold tank top. “With these BS principles,” she began, “There isn’t anything you can’t achieve. Here’s wishing you a great year from Broad Spectrum. We’re in the business of a good education.” At this, she raised her fist in triumph and the camera panned out, showing the peaks and valleys of the mountain Ms. Lovegrove had apparently climbed. *Musak* again filled the atrium, and the Broad Spectrum logo appeared on each computer screen.

CO Larceny returned to the podium, smiling and clapping vigorously. “Wasn’t that inspiring, ladies and gentleman?” she inquired to a crowd who, from their body language and

facial expressions, appeared less than thrilled. Before she could continue rallying her troops, however, the computer screens flickered and a small video box popped up on each screen and immediately began playing. Some students moved their cursors over the screen, but the video box only replicated, causing some computers to display a dozen videos playing simultaneously. The recording featured a masked man seated in front of a wall of books. He dramatically pulled a book from the shelf and began reading, but his voice was distorted, giving it a robotic quality.

“The intellectual has to walk around, has to have the space in which to stand and talk back to authority, since unquestioning subservience to authority in today’s world is one of the greatest threats to active, and moral, intellectual life.” The masked man waved to the camera and signed off. “This message is brought to you by your friendly local rebels, reminding you to start thinking, Savannah!” And just as quickly as it had begun, the video finished and the screen once again displayed the Broad Spectrum logo. The CO gaped at the screen and then quickly smiled at the students to disguise her angst.

“Looks like we had a little technical difficulty, ladies and gentlemen,” she said too cheerfully. “Things like that tend to happen from time to time, so just put it out of your mind.” Pushing forward, evidence that she had already forgotten the incident, she continued, “We will begin the pre-tests shortly. Please be sure to log into your computer using your unique ten-digit code. You should have received these codes in the mail last week. This code will be with you for as long as you are a BS student, and you will use this code whenever working on a BS module or assessment. This code is also tied to your BS purchases, and you can enter it at any of our center’s fast food restaurants, in our Nike® athletics store, or to purchase any products you see advertised during your learning modules. If you have forgotten your code, the CPM’s can assist you. As always, please try your best on today’s pre-tests. They were scientifically developed to

show just how smart you are, and the results will determine the course of your high school career, if not the rest of your life. So, without further ado, good luck and have a great year!” The words barely out of her mouth, Britt looked to her employees expectantly, and quickly exited the atrium.

Chapter 5 ½ and 6 ½: I Clearly Love Alliterations

First of all, I would like to address my use of acronyms in the novel. Some of them are humorous, while others are simply annoying. This captures the nature of education, however, as acronyms abound in our profession. It seems almost as if the number of acronyms a teacher or administrator can drop into a conversation somehow correlates to his or her paygrade. The more acronyms one knows, the more he or she is paid. I used humorous acronyms whenever possible, the most prevalent being BS for Broad Spectrum. BS is colloquially known as bullshit, which is the simplest and most guttural reaction I have to the majority of educational reforms and directives. Bullshit is not just a vulgarity, however, but is a nuanced term that can be used to describe the words and actions of proponents of neoliberal education reforms. Harry Frankfurt (2005) looked to philosophy to analyze the term bullshit. Through his analysis he determined that bullshit is carefully crafted because “the bullshitter...is trying to get away with something” (p. 23). Bullshit differs from a lie, however, because lies are used at specific instances to replace truth, while bullshit provides “much more freedom;” The bullshitter’s “focus is panoramic rather than particular” (p. 52). Bullshitting, therefore, is an art and requires imagination because the bullshitter is not concerned with truth or lies exclusively, but “he does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes the up, to suit his purpose” (p. 56). Bullshit in this way fits into my work because public schools are steeped in it: stories and half-truths perpetuated to serve the predetermined ends of people who generally do not know what they are talking about. For example, corporate reformers and politicians long ago decided that privatizing education was best for their bottom lines and, as a result, they manufactured the narrative that cloaked their bullshit as commonsense. It is in this spirit, therefore, that I use the term BS in my work.

I named the company Broad Spectrum as a reference to Eli and Edythe Broad (different pronunciations, but the same spelling). Additionally, after an early presentation of this work, an audience member told me that Broad Spectrum is also a name for antibiotics that kill everything, which, certainly correlates to the ways in which the type of education I described in my work kills all critical thought and creativity. These types of connections are exactly what make reading a novel so interesting. Therefore, I encourage other readers to make their own associations with the text. Finally, BS, although it appears offensive, has precedence in education. A short time ago, the state of Georgia instructed its teachers to give end-of-course-tests (EOCTs) to all high school students. Some courses, however, had state mandated EOCT's, while others needed new tests. The state named these tests student learning objectives (SLO's). Therefore, students were asked to take SLO tests, which, in my mind, is just as offensive as BS. Some of the acronyms, like EPC-CCD to replace school and CPM to replace teacher became so cumbersome to write and read at times that I thought about eliminating them from the text altogether. I decided, however, to leave them in purely because there were so over-the-top. Well placed hyperbole can add humor, and hopefully readers will see the sometimes overwhelming acronyms as such.

I utilized Michel Foucault's (1977) description of the panopticon as the model for the 2049 educational program center. Foucault describes the architecture that makes constant surveillance possible: "...at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring" (p. 200). Britt's office served as the center tower and the center's atrium full of computers as the constantly surveilled area. According to Foucault, the use of surveillance to control marks an important shift, as society moved away from more violent methods of discipline (public floggings, dismemberment, and killings) to softer, more psychological threats. Foucault writes that in the panopticon

“visibility is a trap” and that the invisibility of the one surveilling “is a guarantee of order” (p. 200). Foucault argues that because of this constant surveillance, those being surveilled (inmates, students, workers) live in “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201). The subtle, overt, and conflicting ways in which power, authority and control are wielded in schools certainly plays a role in neoliberal educational reform, as Kevin Vinson and E. Wayne Ross (2007) argue. They write: “education today must be understood according to a setting in which spectacle and surveillance come together, a state of affairs in which discipline is established and maintained as individuals and groups are monitored simultaneously by both larger and smaller entities” (p. 60). They cite the hierarchical monitoring that is part of contemporary reform, as state bureaucracies observe schools, while the public observes these same schools through accountability measure and the spectacle of standardized tests scores as reported through the media (p. 61).

When I wrote the short story that inspired this novel, I experienced the phenomenon Vinson and Ross (2007) describe, as my school was piloting the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System (TKES), a new accountability measure to observe and evaluate teachers. Under TKES, the number of teacher observations required each year increased significantly, and student surveys were utilized to gauge teacher effectiveness. Of course, TKES was proposed to teachers and students in only the most positive of terms, as more “accountability measures” promised a more accurate picture of one’s teaching ability. The high-stakes and punitive nature of TKES observations, however, make them highly ineffective at improving teaching practice. Additionally, because of the sheer number of observations required under the new system, administrators rarely have time to provide concrete feedback to teachers that could potentially help them improve their instruction. Finally, the standards for these observations correspond to

goals of neoliberal educational reforms such as maximizing class time to encourage productivity and the analysis of student assessment data to inform lesson planning.

When I initially conceived of computer-assisted learning platforms, I was inspired by my school districts' use of a computer-based program that students use to re-take classes they have failed. When the program first started, it was hailed as a way to help students make up missing credits easily and as a way for advanced students to earn additional credits at their own pace. The program is similar to what I have described in my book, and, in my experience, most students simply use the internet to search out the answers to the program's questions. While this program is currently not in widespread use in our district and has not been used to replace teachers, in my research I discovered that the scenario I described in the novel is beginning to take shape. In a recent story from National Public Radio, Anya Kamenetz (2016) reported on the Rocketship Charter Schools. Rocketship schools, founded by Internet advertising executive John Danner, have been lauded for raising standardized test scores for its primarily Hispanic and low-income students. Despite these accolades, the school has been criticized for its "tech-heavy instruction model" and "student-teacher ratio" (para. 6). The instruction in question is the school's use of "Learning Labs," a "cost-saving solution," allowing "students to spend significant time working on laptops in large groups supervised by noncertified, lower-paid 'instructional specialists'" (para. 13). When I learned of Rocketships techniques I was horrified, but also enthused that my work, like most dystopias, was beginning to reflect reality. The charter school's use of "instructional specialists" also speaks to the deskilling of teachers, as teachers are being replaced by monitors, or, more significantly, by computers. The curriculum I describe is largely based on my observation of the online learning platforms I have seen in use in my own school (small lessons followed by multiple choice questions to show mastery of a skill or concept). Missing

from these platforms is discussion and the process of working through difficult information independently, with a teacher, or in a group. When learning is reduced to “right” answers and intelligence is measured by test scores, the intriguing and exhilarating parts of education are lost. To reinforce this point, I incorporated a quote from Edward Said’s (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual*: “The intellectual has to walk around, has to have the space in which to stand and talk back to authority, since unquestioning subservience to authority in today’s world is one of the greatest threats to active, and moral, intellectual life” (p. 121). Not only did I chose this quote to highlight the intellectual work that students and teachers should be engaged in, but also to emphasize that teaching and learning can be acts of resistance, something the students and curriculum program monitors at BS educational program centers have yet to understand.

Crafting Broad Spectrum CEO Mavis Lovegrove’s beginning of the year message was one of the most interesting parts of writing the novel. I have always been interested in how propaganda works, and I am now fortunate enough to teach a course nearly entirely dedicated to identifying and analyzing the use of propaganda and rhetoric in writing and speech, so I was able to put my knowledge to use in this section. The content of Mavis’s speech was inspired primarily by the works in William Watkins’ (2012) edited work *The Assault on Public Education*. I identified seven alliterative goals of BS education, correlating to the goals of neoliberalism. The first goal two goals “achieving accountability” and “standardized success” reflect on the neoliberal obsession and, in turn, education’s obsession, with accountability. Since NCLB, standards and accountability are synonymous with education reform. Berliner and Biddle (1996) deemed this obsession the “manufactured crisis.” Kohn (2012) highlights the connection, explaining: “the whole movement in rooted in a top-down ideologically driven contempt for public institutions, not in a grassroots loss of faith in neighborhood schools” (p. 89). In short, the

accountability movement was portrayed as the only answer to “save” America’s public schools, but this conversation “didn’t start in living rooms,” but in the boardrooms of conservative foundations intent on privatizing public schools. In *A Measure of Failure*, Mark Garrison (2009) explains the “crisis” of the achievement gap, which Garrison deems “irrational” because “equalizing outcomes...will not solve the problem of what are now unsustainable social inequalities because these social inequalities do not have their origin in intellectual difference” (p. 105). In this way standardized tests are used to “prove” preconceived notions (schools are failing, students of color are less intelligent than their white peers). Ann G. Winfield (2012) echoes this sentiment, arguing that accountability and choice are the reimagining of eugenics, as poor and non-white students are continually deemed as less valuable than their wealthy white peers, but the appropriation of the language of social justice to frame the accountability and choice movements disguises the true nature of these “reforms.” Standardizes tests and accountability measures, therefore, are not strongly resisted, and are easily used to maintain the power of elites and to push public education closer to privatization.

Broad Spectrum’s third and fourth goals, constant competition and continuing choice, reflect popular market-based reforms. As public schools (especially those in urban and low-income areas) are labeled “failures,” choice is lauded as a way to provide all students with a high quality education. Although parents are empowered to choose a school for their child, after the choice is made, however, they are largely shut out from decision-making as “corporations and foundations now guide school reorganization” (Watkins, 2012, p. 2). The role of corporations and the super-rich plutocracy in influencing educational policy, reflect the final goal of BS education: rapid reform. The public education system is portrayed as a bloated and inefficient democracy, while the private sector is lauded as capable of doing thing that the public system

cannot. In this way, privatization is seen as revolutionary as charter schools offer parents and students things they cannot receive in public schools (extended days and smaller class sizes, for example). An air of competition develops as traditional public and neighborhood schools compete with charter schools for students. In the world of my novel, choice allows students to select different corporate schools. Each school, however, uses propaganda to reach students, not because they can offer a better education, but because the number of students correlates to the amount of money the corporation stands to make through the re-imagining of the student as a willing consumer.

The BS goals, worthy workers and going global reflect the technological, political, and social changes that have impacted the American workforce since the 1980's. Watkins (2012) outlined these changes, beginning with the technology boom of the late twentieth century and early twenty first century. As a result many manufacturing jobs were eliminated or outsourced to cheaper locations outside of the United States. This change, paired with the deregulation of many prominent industries, an economy founded on credit, and the reorganization of wealth from the many to the few, led to the great recession of 2008 and drives global competition for scarce resources (p. 10-13). As the middle class shrinks and the number of Americans living in poverty grows, getting the "right" education is stressed as finding and maintaining a job is increasingly difficult. Despite this reality, the poor, unemployed, underemployed, and working class are blamed for their predicament, while big businesses and banks are bailed out and even lauded as models of success for schools to emulate.

Chapter 7: The Pitch

Cam sat idly in the small interrogation room watching the station's murky coffee grow cold. He had already been questioned repeatedly by officers Smith and Wesson, and his story hadn't changed. As usual, he and his father had worked at the school together the day before, parting ways around five o'clock with plans to meet up the next morning to make their final preparations for the first day of school. Cam had injured his nose, he sheepishly admitted, after tripping over Dewey's leash and landing face first on the pavement. Someone knocked sharply on the interrogation room door, more of an alert than a courtesy, and Smith and Wesson lumbered into the tiny room. They looked disappointed, which hopefully meant good news for Cam.

"You have a visitor, Arlo. We're going to give you ten minutes," Smith/Wesson grunted. As the officer spoke, a third man appeared behind his large frame.

"Thank you officers so much," began Hal Ledon, squeezing in the room behind the two hulking figures. Unfazed by their indifference, Lee continued, "I really do appreciate y'all allowing me to come and talk with Mr. Arlo. You see, me and his daddy have known each other for a lot of years, and I know he would appreciate me bein' able to talk to Cam. So, why don't y'all just go and get started on whatever you need to do to get Cam out of here while he and I talk."

The officers eyed the visitor, only commenting "ten minutes" before exiting the close quarters. Lee's smile softened as the officers exited the room and he extended his hand toward Cam.

"Mr. Arlo, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm Hal Ledon, but you can call me Lee." With this, Lee reached into his pocket and produced a glossy blue and white business card. Cam

glanced at the card, disappointed that Mr. Ledon was not a lawyer. Seemingly in no hurry, Lee positioned one of his boots on the seat of vacant metal chair, using his thumb to carefully buff a small blemish from the shiny black leather.

“Mr. Arlo, let me first begin by expressing my sincerest sympathies. I know you must be worried sick about your father. He’s a tough ole bastard though, so I’m sure he’s gonna turn up any time now. I’m here today to not only express my own personal sympathies, but also those of my company. My colleagues and I have met with your father many times over the years, and each time we asked him the same question: Will you join Broad Spectrum? Now, you know your father better than anyone, so I’m sure you can guess to his answer.” Lee shook his head. “His answer wasn’t always no. Sometimes he even added a few colorful curse words before or after it.” Lee looked up expectantly at Cam, hoping they would share a laugh over their collective memories of Henry Arlo. Cam, however, stared impassively at Mr. Ledon, trying to make sense of his presence.

Lee, unfazed by Cam’s indifference, continued his pitch, changing tactics slightly.

“In all seriousness, Cam, I know, as men, we feel a sense of duty toward our fathers. Hell, growing up, my dad was my hero. He taught me some important life lessons: work hard, stand up for yourself, and never quit. He was a real stubborn *sumbitch*, though,” Lee recounted, looking above Cam’s head, as if his father was standing in the room with them. Shaking himself out of his reverie, Lee looked back at Cam and continued. “Our dads, Cam, they were old school. They clung to their twentieth century ideals, not knowing they were cozied up in steerage on the Titanic and all the lifeboats were already gone. My dad’s story ain’t nothin’ special. He worked in a factory his entire life. He thought he had job security, a pension, everything *his* father preached about while he was growing up. In 2020, his company moves all manufacturing to

China. He didn't have a college education and he had less than five grand in the bank. After he got laid off, he used to wander around the house muttering, 'My American dream took a slow boat to China.' Before the year was out, he's watching football on a Sunday afternoon and, boom, has a massive heart attack. My mom always said the disappointment killed him. I think it was his pride. He couldn't stand the failure." Lee paused, lowered his eyes and slowly shook his head back and forth. He surreptitiously peered at Cam through his eyelashes, hoping his family history had piqued Cam's interest.

Cam, however, moved restlessly in his chair and interjected, "Mr. Ledon, I'm sorry to hear about your father, but what does any of this have to do with me and what does this have to do with my dad?" Lee's head shot up and he smacked his palms together triumphantly, fixing his gaze on Cam's pleading eyes.

"Cameron," he began excitedly, "don't you see? You and I are both the products of passionate and intelligent men, but, despite their good qualities, our fathers lived in the past, and we were left to suffer as a result. At sixteen years old I was fatherless, homeless, and directionless, and years later, you find yourself in almost the same position: trying to live your father's dream. I am here to advise you based on my own mistakes. I spent years thinkin' my dad's way was best. I thought if I worked hard, I would have a good life, but it was only when my mentor, Mavis Lovegrove, came into my life, that I began to realize my dad's advice was just a bunch of bull. My dad trusted The Old Ways, and look where it left him: dead at forty five with nothing to show the world he had ever existed. After years of trying to make the square peg of my father's values fit into the round hole of the world, I finally saw life as it actually was: dog eat dog. No one likes to admit these truths, but my success was not only based on hard work, but on learning how to play the game, and, then, on dominating that game."

Cam, who had listened patiently, now interjected, “Mr. Ledon, I still do not see how this applies to me. Why are you here? Do you have any information about my dad?” Lee cocked his head to one side and grinned at Cam in a way that seemed to say that most Southern of expressions: “Bless your heart.”

“Cameron,” Lee began patiently. “I know havin’ worked for American Teachers United you aren’t completely ignorant about the revolution that has taken place in education over the last thirty years. American schools are now stronger and more successful than ever, and they reached this level by adopting the principles of the country’s most profitable businesses. I mean no disrespect when I say this, as you know my own father’s failures, but your dad refused to read the writing on the wall. Public education reached its expiration date long ago, and it’s up to you to build upon your father’s legacy by embracing the best thing to hit education since chalk: corporate reform.”

Lee beamed expectantly at Cam, mentally patting himself on the back for composing another excellent sales pitch. Henry Arlo always kicked him out before he was really able to get on a roll, but Cameron was a captive audience to say the least.

“Cam,” Lee continued, once again lowering his voice to convey his deepest and most sincere sympathies. “You probably think I’m crazy visiting you like this, in here, but think about it. What would you rather do when you get out of here, run The Public School or focus your energies on looking for your father? I’m offering you immediate assistance. Here’s what we’ll do: A Broad Spectrum administrator, hand-picked by yours truly, will step in, only while you sort out this business with your father, run the school, and, when you’re good and ready, you can step back in. If you don’t like the way Broad Spectrum operates, we will pull out, no questions

asked. You have my word on that.” Lee smiled earnestly at Cam, but Smith/Wesson opened the door abruptly, breaking the contemplative silence.

“Time’s up,” the officer announced gruffly.

“Well, officer, we were just finishing up in here,” Lee responded. “Now, were you able to hold up your end of the deal? Is Mr. Arlo free to go?” Lee eyed the officer intently and Smith/Wesson mumbled. “What was that, officer?” Lee asked.

“For right now, Arlo, you can go, but don’t think this means we’re done with you. My partner and I still have plenty of unanswered questions, and we want to be able to find you when we’re looking for the answers.” Smith/Wesson led Cam and Lee out of the station, depositing the men onto the dark sidewalk. Cam surveyed the street and identified the familiar outline of Gloria Green and her precious red convertible at the end of the block. As he turned to leave, Hal Ledon grasped his arm.

“Listen, Cam, when you get home, check your e-mail. I’ve already sent you some information about Broad Spectrum- our mission, our values, our salaries. Take a few days to look it over, and, please, get back to me. For your father’s sake.”

“Mr. Ledon, you’re right, my father was bound to an old-fashioned idea. An idea that, I’m starting to think, might not be so crazy after all. So, while I appreciate your offer, I don’t think The Public School needs you or your company right now.” Lee, surprised to see glints of Henry Arlo’s dogmatism within his son, laughed.

“Cam, you are more like your father than I figured, but I like that. I’ve never been one to shy away from a challenge. Have a good night. I’m sure we will see each other again.” Lee sauntered away, leaving Cam alone on the deserted sidewalk.

As Lee rounded the corner, something on the pavement caught his eye and prompted him to walk back a few steps. Someone had left a chalk note on the pavement: *“Why don’t all of us — the teachers and the students — try to take these books to heart, not just analyze them and then go on to the next book? We may be smarter, but are we better?”*

“Dammit,” he cursed and scraped his immaculate boot roughly over the dusty lettering.

“Dammit.”

Chapter 7 ½: A Few Reasons to Read Fiction

As Lee leaves the station, he comes across a quote from Robert Coles (1989): “Why don’t all of us — the teachers and the students — try to take these books to heart, not just analyze them and then go on to the next book? We may be smarter, but are we better?” (p. 80). Coles, a physician and prolific writer, explores the power of fiction in the medical profession, and in life in general, emphasizing fiction’s role in moral development and action. I utilized Coles’ words to serve as a contrast to Lee’s “dog eat dog” pronouncement. Lee used his frustration with the system to promote his own self-interest to become part of the corporate elite, and through this process, lost sight of the humanity of others. Coles’ quote, therefore, serves to not only highlight the role fiction can play in one’s ability to empathize, but also calls into question the skills-based curriculum that dominates popular discourse. Coles argues that fiction shouldn’t be viewed as something to be consumed and then set aside, but should make us “better.” He reinforces this argument, writing: “Novels and stories are renderings of life, they can not only keep us company, but admonish us, point us in new directions, or give us the courage to stay a given course. They can offer us kinsmen, kinswomen, comrades, advisers- offer us other eyes through which we might see, other ears with which we might make soundings” (p. 159-160). Alfred Tatum (2014), for example, emphasizes the importance of the “meaningful literacy exchange” for students, particularly for African American males (p. 36). Tatum refocuses the conversation regarding black male literacy away from expanding what is acceptable (young adult novels, hip hop) to “reading or encountering print texts that initiate or shape decisions significant to one’s wellbeing” (p. 36). In order for students to have meaningful literary exchanges, they must read books that are complex and that reflect their world. Engaging

with these texts is transformative and allows students to reflect on their own lives and improve their lives and the lives of others in their community.

Chapter 8: Student Number Eight-Oh-Four

Fallon started as thousands of fingers began to scatter across the atrium's hundreds of keyboards. Some hunted and pecked slowly, trying to simultaneously read and type their student codes, while others efficiently entered the necessary information, resigned to another year of modules and testing. Fallon stood awkwardly near a bank of computers alternating between a thorough examination of her cuticles and picking small pieces of lint off of her pants. When the students near Fallon glanced in her direction, she gave them an overly enthusiastic smile.

If they held her gaze longer, she said brightly, "Good morning, I'm Ms. Baxter. If you need any help, please let me know." The kids responded with either monosyllabic grunts, eye rolls, or blank stares accompanied by eye rolls. *Teenagers*, Fallon thought. Her survey of the computers in her quadrant led her to a gathering of her colleagues. They stood in an apathetic circle, listening intently to a middle-aged man in a short-sleeved plaid button up. As he gestured, the buttons strained against his protruding gut and coffee threatened to slop over the top of the mug he clutched tightly between his plump and hairy fingers.

His voice boomed above the hum of the computers, "I heard they gave the new CO an ultimatum. Fix the school or..." he let out a gurgled screech and slashed his finger deftly across his throat. Aware his audience had grown by one, his eyes narrowed and he lifted his black coffee mug in the air in a mock toast. Fallon quickly read the mug's inscription: *Sarcasm. It's not just a word, it's a lifestyle.* "Ms. Baxter," her colleague shouted. "Welcome to the cell block! Come on over here, you sly girl, let me introduce you to the rest of the guards." Fallon, although a bit put off by her colleague's brashness, was relieved to be part of the group. While she never made any close friends at her last job, it was good to have a few "work friends" to talk to during lulls or on her lunch break even if all they ever did was bitch about their boss or the

rude customers. Fallon quickened her pace and walked more purposefully the remaining few yards that separated her from the group. She glanced around surreptitiously to make sure Larceny wasn't watching, and also to check on the students. Larceny appeared to have retreated and the students all seemed engrossed in their pre-tests, headphones on, eyes glued to their screens. As Fallon reached the group, all of whom were fifteen to twenty years older than she, the other CPM's gave her wan smiles and nods.

Her gregarious colleague cackled again, his coffee breath wafting into Fallon's airspace. "Don't mind them, he grinned," cocking his thumb in the direction of the knot of BS educators. "I'm August, Gus, Winters, CPM and self-appointed school historian." Gus introduced Fallon to the rest of the CPM's. While they greeted her politely enough, they didn't express any genuine interest. Fallon, more concerned with collecting her paycheck than fitting in, didn't take it personally. Her interest piqued by the bit of conversation she overheard, however, Fallon was trying to determine how to casually prod Gus for information, when an alarm sounded overhead. The veteran CPM's straightened up, looking toward the large screen that had previously projected Mavis Lovegrove's well-wishes. The screen now read: DANGEROUSLY IDLE STUDENTS: 1226(COMPUTER S-28), 723(COMPUTER M-64), 804(COMPUTER E-17).

A number of Fallon's new colleagues cheered quietly; relieved the students listed did not fall under their responsibility, while Gus rubbed his hands together briskly and beamed.

"Time to get to work. Come on, Baxter, looks like there's one in your section, too. Let's prod these little lambs into action. I'll show you how it's done." After a beat, Fallon rushed after Gus who had begun to walk briskly down the aisles of humming computers. Sensing her presence again, he launched into an explanation as he eyed the letter and number combinations on the back of each monitor. "There's an old saying, Baxter, from The Bible, I think, something

my grandma used to say: ‘Idle hands are the devil’s workshop’, and while Broad Spectrum doesn’t ascribe to a religion *per se*, they do believe productive students are good students.” Gus slowed his pace, pointing at each monitor, “S-25, S-26, S-27. Ah, here we are: S-28.” Gus rested his belly on back of the computer monitor and smiled at the perpetrator, a slight black boy of fifteen or sixteen, whose shaved head gleamed under the fluorescents of the atrium. Gus scanned a barcode on the boy’s computer with his BS-issued tablet, and information flooded the screen.

Glancing over the dossier, Gus began, “Good morning, 1226 I was just over there enjoying my coffee and it was brought to my attention that you aren’t working very hard this morning. It says here, you’ve been idle, that means you haven’t been working,” Gus added sarcastically, “for six minutes and thirty three seconds. So, 1226, what seems to be the trouble here?” Gus beamed down at the student, waiting for a reply.

The boy raised his dark eyes to Gus’s and answered, “I just got tired is all, and I wanted a break.” Gus, his smile unwavering, squatted down (a feat that greatly impressed Fallon, who had not expected her bulky colleague capable of such a move) his face inches from the boy’s.

“Listen, 1226, I would expect this type of behavior from a first-year, but you’re not new around here, so I’m just going to pretend that you forgot the rules over the summer. That can be the only reason why you would stop working and remain idle for,” Gus glanced at his tablet again, “six minutes and fifty eight seconds, so why don’t you jump back into that science pre-test because, as I’m sure you remember now, I don’t give a fuck if you’re tired, and I decide if and when you need a break.” Daring the boy to contradict him, Gus straightened up and began tapping notes into the tablet. Seconds later, the boy fixed his eyes back on the computer screen and began typing. Gus continued down the aisle, whistling brightly. “Come on, Baxter, let’s go see about Eight-Oh-Four. I’ll help you with this first one. I’m sure a nice girl like you might feel

a little funny talking like that, but, after over ten years at this school, I can tell you that's the only language they understand. It's a cultural thing. Their parents, if they have two parents even, talk to them like that, so we are just speaking their language. We don't do them any favors coddling them, telling them 'I understand your feelings,' and shit like that. Our job is to prepare them for the real world, and no one gives breaks in the real world; No one cares if you're tired out there."

Fallon nearly crashed into Gus's backside as he stopped abruptly in front of a young black girl whose eyes were closed and whose red lips were slightly open, emitting soft and regular breaths. She was sound asleep. Gus turned to Fallon expectantly.

"Oh goody, a sleeper," he declared. "Sleeping is strictly forbidden at BS Educational Program Centers. They can sleep on their own time, but this is the company's time, and, just like in every other business, time is money. Now, I'm just going to sit back and watch. You've seen my approach to idle students, but everyone has their own style, and sometimes it takes a little while to develop, so, don't worry. I'll step in if things get dicey." Fallon, annoyingly intimidated by the sleeping student, scanned the computer's barcode using her own BS-issued tablet. Quickly she learned that the sleeping girl, 804, was a first-year student, fifteen-year-old Jasmine Williams. While Jasmine's file was thorough, none of the information gave Fallon any information that might help her to develop common ground with the girl. Not sure exactly how to proceed, Fallon set about trying to wake up the sleeping student.

"Excuse me," she practically whispered. Clearing her throat, she spoke again, louder this time, "Excuse me." Jasmine did not stir, and a few of the nearby students glanced at Fallon, their contemptuous looks emboldening her to reach out and shake Jasmine William's thin shoulder. "Excuse me!" she said much more shrilly than she intended. "You can't sleep here!" Jasmine, now awake, jerked from Fallon's grasp, her eyes flashing angrily. Fallon, gaining confidence and

afraid of being shown up by a teenager, launched into speech modeled after Gus's work. "Good morning, 8-0-4. I was alerted that you have been idle for seven minutes and forty three seconds. I see that you are new here, so maybe you aren't used to our rules. Consider this your first and final warning. You cannot sleep while engaging in BS learning modules. You have to learn, and you can't learn while you are sleeping." Fallon, pleased with herself for maintaining an even tone throughout her monologue, looked expectantly at Jasmine. The young girl made no move toward the keyboard. Growing slightly more uneasy, Fallon continued, willing herself not to glance back at Gus for assistance. "So, why don't you get back to work on those pre-tests?" Fallon had attempted to maintain a casual air with her last directive, but her nerves caused her voice to wobble a bit.

Jasmine, now aware that Fallon had no real authority, folded her arms across her chest, looked Fallon directly in the eyes and softly, but defiantly, intoned, "No." Unprepared for this response, Fallon stood lamely in front of Jasmine, opening and closing her mouth like a fish, her cheeks reddening as she eyed more students leaving their work to watch the confrontation unfold. Fallon, trying to regain control of the situation, finally responded.

"What do you mean *no*?" Jasmine, confident she had the upper-hand in the situation, stood up abruptly, her metal chair crashing to the floor sending a discordant clang through the atrium.

"No I'm not gonna *work on my pre-tests*," her voice rising comically to mimic Fallon's own. Jasmine, looking around proudly at her peers, continued sharply, "No, I'm not gonna stop sleeping. No, I'm not gonna do what you say. This pre-test is jacked, anyway. It keeps sayin' 'you did not meet the standard, you did not meet the standard.' I'm sick of it, and I'm sick of sittin' here, and if I wanna sleep, I'm gonna sleep." Not sure what else to say, Jasmine folded her

arms and challenged Fallon with a reproachful look. Fallon did not need to think of a further response, however, because Gus, stepped forward, signaling to the two armed guards who had appeared behind Jasmine shortly after she stood up.

“Now, now, Eight-Oh-Four,” he began, a gleam in his eyes that chilled Fallon. “There’s no need to get so worked up. Ms. Baxter here was just trying to help you get back on the right track. I know you’re not used to the BS way, but we’ll help you to calm down, right boys?” He now turned his attention to the guards who waited, Tasers drawn (more lethal weapons holstered for the moment), for further instructions. Gus nodded slightly and the gun’s electrodes pierced the unblemished skin of Jasmine’s upper arm, sending her into jerky convulsions. Fallon stood, transfixed, as the guards moved in, hoisted the young girl up and moved her quickly from the atrium. Gus put his slug-like arm gently around Fallon’s shoulder, “Sorry you had to see that, sweet girl,” he simpered. “Something like that usually happens during one of the first days. It’s actually a good thing because it sets the tone for the rest of the year and reminds the students who’s really in charge here.” He motioned fleetingly up to Larceny’s office, giving Fallon the impression her boss had been watching the exchange unfold all along. Brightening, Gus continued, “Education’s an ugly business, but somebody’s got to do it, right?” With this, he slapped Fallon playfully on the back, jolting her out of her daze. When she still didn’t respond, he offered: “Listen, honey, why don’t you go and take a break in your office for a little while? The BS way takes a little getting used to- especially for you ladies with a more, er, delicate constitution.”

Fallon, uncertain how much longer she could maintain her composure, rushed toward her office, brushing quietly past Ellison Williams as he pushed sawdust back and forth over the

gleaming white floor, too distracted to notice the tremble of his shoulders, the ferocity with which he held the broom, or even his voice as he murmured “Let go and Let Broad Spectrum.”

The instant her office door closed Fallon began to cry. Surprised she had been able to hold in the tears during her trek across the atrium and up the exposed central staircase, she sobbed even harder as she envisioned the entire student body, and her new colleagues, staring at her, eager for her to break down. Although she had held back her tears, unwilling to add another layer of spectacle to the first day antics, she now cried freely in the privacy of her office. Leaning her head against the cold metal of the door, her thoughts raced as she tried to isolate the sources of her distress. First, her pride had been wounded. Not only had she looked weak in front of the students, but she had also floundered in front of her co-workers. She buried her head in her hands, groaning, as she imagined Gus Winters and his cohort huddled together in the atrium sharing a laugh at her expense. Gus, the obvious ringleader, swilling his coffee, would gleefully report, “New CPM just couldn’t hack it.” Although her feelings were hurt, she cried mostly because of the way student 804, Jasmine, had been treated. Sure, she had seen unruly people violently put down on the news, but there was something different about it when it happened right in front of your eyes. Surely Ms. Larceny must have been away. Otherwise, she would have stepped in to help Jasmine, and to reprimand, maybe even fire, Gus for his over-zealous behavior. Educators weren’t supposed to physically harm their students, and Fallon was sure that corporal punishment was not condoned by the Broad Spectrum Corporation. BS schools represent the paragon of success in the corporate educational world, and they certainly hadn’t achieved that status by tazing insubordinate students. She recalled the smiling youngsters surrounding Simon Sawyer. Surely his success wasn’t based on fear, intimidation, and physical punishment. As Fallon’s breathing became more regular, she concluded Gus was just a bully on

a power trip. She even cracked a smile, envisioning him carrying his snarky coffee mugs and other accoutrements out of the school in a cardboard box. There was no way his actions were indicative of the BS philosophy.

Although her office offered privacy, Fallon could not be sure what was happening outside of the windowless room. Not really wanting to return to work, but also curious if Ms. Larceny had returned to admonish Gus, Fallon pressed her ear against the frigid door. She heard only the pumping of her own blood. She surreptitiously cracked the door, but was only met with the metallic hum of the school's innumerable computers. The keyboards sat silent, indicating the students were breaking for lunch. Confident she could risk a few more moments alone, she settled into her desk chair. With no work assignments yet, she began to peruse the BS literature Ms. Larceny had dropped off earlier. The thick books made Fallon yawn involuntarily. She hadn't picked up any substantive books since her college graduation, despite her vow to do so, but glancing over the material would make her look productive if Ms. Larceny or one of the other CPM's stopped by to check on her. Fallon surveyed the titles. The two largest books were sleek spiral bound volumes entitled *Broad Spectrum, Inc. Employee Handbook* and *Broad Spectrum, Inc. Corporate Policies*. Two of CEO Mavis Lovegrove's books were next: *Once and for all: How Corporate School Reform Will Fix American Schools* and *Transforming Schools the Broad Spectrum Way*. Ms. Lovegrove's ageless face smiled up at Fallon from the cover of the books. A shrewd and intelligent businesswoman, Mavis Lovegrove would certainly be appalled by the behavior at BSEPC-CCD, Fallon thought. The last books were those by BS ace Hal Ledon. Although Fallon had yet to meet Mr. Ledon, she was certainly familiar with his work. Everyone in the BS Corporation spoke highly, even reverently, of him and his accomplishments.

Studying his picture on the back of the book, Fallon thought his teeth were a little too white, his eyes a little too blue, and his tan a little too orange.

Fallon cracked the Employee Handbook, hoping to learn more about Broad Spectrum.

The volume opened with a letter from Mavis Lovegrove herself.

Dear New Employee,

Congratulations on joining Broad Spectrum! We are excited to have you on our team. Enclosed you will find information to help you successfully acclimate to the BS way. Broad Spectrum emerged in a time of crisis in our country, and has grown into one of the nation's most successful companies. This success, however, is due to the hard work and dedication of employees like you. Although Broad Spectrum is now a multibillion dollar company, it has humble beginnings. I inherited the struggling Broad Spectrum textbook company from a rather eccentric uncle in the year 2000. I was young and inexperienced, but as I peddled textbooks from school to school in my hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, I soon realized schools didn't need renovated buildings or more highly educated teachers, they needed fool-proof teaching materials, statistical analysis, and other tools that would set students up for success on the growing number of standardized tests they were being asked to take. The use of Broad Spectrum textbooks, workbooks, and lesson plans, which I first gave out to some of the poorest Baltimore schools for free, raised student achievement at record-setting rates. The success of Broad Spectrum educational materials allowed me to expand the BS brand through a partnership with Education with a Purpose. Education with a Purpose was founded in 2015 by a group of forward-thinking educators in Washington, D.C. The group, whose first office was their local Starbucks, had grown weary of failing schools, failing students, and failing teachers and met weekly to discuss how to change education to meet the needs of their urban and disadvantaged

students of color. Inspired by President Gabriel Torrance's revolutionary pro-business educational policies, they decided to incorporate and the first Education with a Purpose school, Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School, was opened in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 2018. The school relied solely on Broad Spectrum teaching materials from its inception, and gained national attention for their success. Education with a Purpose was founded on the principles of competition and career readiness. Students at EWP schools graduate with the skills needed to compete in the global economy. After the success of MLK, Jr. Middle School, EWP drew my attention, and I knew Broad Spectrum was going to be much more than a textbook company. BS purchased EWP in 2030, allowing for the expansion of BS schools, renamed Educational Program Centers, across the country. Now, in 2049, BS Educational Program Centers compete against other top educational corporations for the business of the country's best students. BSEPC's are some of the most sought-after by students and their parents. In fact, US News & World Report ranked BS schools as the top choice among parents for the past five years. BSEPC's have also been honored by Business Week, Forbes, and The Economist as revolutionary in the field of competitive, privatized, education. The success of BSEPC's highlights the ever strong heartbeat of the American Dream, echoing the words of the great Martin Luther King, Jr., "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." Thank you again for joining the BS team and helping to move American corporate education forward.

Good Luck,

Mavis Lovegrove

President and CEO Broad Spectrum, Inc.

“Ms. Baxter. Ms. Baxter,” a woman’s voice repeated above Fallon’s head. Somewhere between Mavis Lovegrove’s humble beginning and the process of requesting time off, Fallon had dozed off. As Fallon nuzzled comfortably into the crook of her arm, her visitor’s entreaties grew more persistent. “Ms. Baxter, the school day has ended, and you have missed it!” Finally becoming aware of her surroundings, Fallon’s head shot up, and she stared blearily at Britt Larceny. Mortified, she opened her mouth to speak, her eyes landing on Gus Winters as he walked by slowly, taking his time to gawk at Fallon and her mussed hair and sleep-creased cheeks.

“I-I...” Fallon stammered, glad she hadn’t gotten comfortable in her office, since today would probably be her first and last at Broad Spectrum. Before she could stutter through an apology, Ms. Larceny shut the office door and gracefully folded herself into the small chair in front of Fallon’s desk.

“Ms. Baxter,” she began. “I heard you had quite the day. Please, tell me exactly what happened.” Encouraged by Ms. Larceny’s soft tone and compassionate eye contact, Fallon shared her harrowing tale.

“And then the guards came and shocked her. I have never seen something like that up close before, and no one did anything. They carried her off, and everyone went about their business, as if they had seen it a hundred times before. So, I came up here to collect myself, and I started reading, I really did, all about Broad Spectrum and Mavis Lovegrove and Hal Ledon, but, I guess, I drifted off. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, I swear. I would never do something like that. I’m a hard worker, but I understand if you need to fire me. I really do.” Slightly in awe of her new employee’s grave honesty, Britt Larceny nodded along with the tale, finally stopping the young girl with a gently raised palm.

“Ms. Baxter, I can assure you I am not going to fire you,” she began. “In fact, I blame myself entirely for this unfortunate experience. I should have given you a more thorough orientation to Broad Spectrum before open for business day, but my busy schedule kept me from it. Because of this, you were entirely unprepared to undertake the normal duties and responsibilities of a BS CPM. I should have been out there with you today, or, at the very least, given you a more credible mentor than August Winters,” Britt’s nose curled as if she had smelled something unpleasant as she said his name.

Heartened by this action, Fallon interjected, “I *knew* there was no way you could like him. I *knew* he wasn’t a good example. I just *knew* it.” Britt’s expression hardened slightly and she adopted a more businesslike tone.

“Ms. Baxter, again, I apologize for leaving you on your own this morning, but, although I may not always agree with Mr. Winters’ bedside manner, he is one of the company’s most successful CPM’s, and his actions certainly fall within the bounds of acceptable BS practices.” Pausing to assess Fallon’s reaction, Britt continued, “Ms. Baxter, you are very young and, please don’t take this the wrong way, but very inexperienced. Because of these things, it may be difficult for you to understand some of the BS business practices. I took a risk hiring you, banking on the expectation that you could be taught. This is why our weekly meetings are so important. There is a history of education in this country that, I assume, is almost entirely unknown to you. Once you receive your BS education and training, our methods won’t seem so extreme to you.” Looking kindly into Fallon’s eyes, Britt Larceny clasped her hands together and smiled. “So, let’s chalk today up to first day jitters and a distracted CO, and try it again tomorrow. And, please, take some time this week to read about Mavis and her amazing company. I see a lot of that same drive in you, Fallon, which is why I fought to hire you. I hope

you will be successful here, but there's always a learning curve for our new CPM's." Britt beamed proudly at Fallon and stood up to leave. Fallon felt a mixture of trepidation and awe growing within the pit of her stomach as she gaped at the powerful business leader before her. Aware that Ms. Larceny was waiting for a response, Fallon quickly collected herself. "Thank you for your support, Ms. Larceny. I agree one hundred percent. I am young. I am inexperienced. I really do look forward to learning from you." Pleased with Fallon's response, Britt Larceny smoothed her already flawless skirt and turned to go. With her hand on the metallic handle, she wished Fallon a good evening and cheerfully reminded her to "Let go and let Broad Spectrum."

Alone in her office once again, Fallon hoped she had convinced Ms. Larceny of her desire to stay with the company despite her unsuccessful first day. Although outwardly she had agreed with Ms. Larceny, Fallon still had doubts about Broad Spectrum. It wasn't just the violence that gave her pause, but her ignorance about the history of Broad Spectrum and company's like it. An alumna of corporate schools, Fallon unquestionably believed they were superior to the public schools her parents and grandparents spoke of so negatively. While almost entirely certain that Ms. Larceny and her parents were right about corporate education, Fallon looked forward to learning more about Broad Spectrum's *raison d'être*. Gathering up her reading materials, she felt curious in a way she had not since leaving the university. Feeling more relaxed, but still ready to put an end to her first day as a BS CPM, Fallon wandered past the vacant offices near her own. She stopped suddenly, however, as she heard an angry voice coming from inside the employee lounge. Afraid it was Gus Winters, who may have lingered to taunt her, she ducked into an alcove steps from the lounge door.

"I don't know if I can do it anymore. I just don't know," the man's voice declared. "I know I said I was on board, but things are different now. They got my niece this morning. It was

her first day of school, man. Her first day. It took everything in me not to drop this fucking mop and punch those two rent-a-cops in the face, and the CPM too. Don't worry, I didn't, but I don't know how I'm supposed to explain this to my sister, and I don't know how much longer I can keep up this happy janitor act, either." The man paused, and Fallon expected to hear from his companion, but when no response came, Fallon guessed she had stumbled upon a private phone conversation. "Alright, alright," he continued, responding to words Fallon could not hear. "I'll hold on for a couple more days, but, I'm serious, I need to know that my family is safe. *I* was willing to take risks, but I've got to protect Jaz and Tamika, especially if this all goes south." He paused again, and responded, "Thanks, man. I'll talk to you in a couple of days. You, too. Bye." From her hiding spot, Fallon spied the school's custodian, she couldn't remember his name, as he emerged from the lounge, mop in one hand, cell phone in the other.

Chapter 8 ½: Busy Bodies

In chapter eight, I aimed to highlight the dehumanization and commodification of young people as they are increasingly viewed as corporate subjects. In my development of the “education” received at the BS Educational Program Center, I once again called on Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and Punish*, as the students in my story, much like students today, are meant to be busy, docile, and captive. In addition to the physical structure that supports surveillance, the BS Educational Program Center employs a discipline focused on the use of one’s time and the efficiency of one’s body. Maximizing “time on task” and engaging in “bell to bell instruction” contributes significantly to current valuations of teachers and students. As teachers are surveilled, one of the things we fear most is being observed “idling.” If an administrator walks into the classroom, teachers and student should be engaged in productive movements (writing, reading, discussing). Students and teachers are not encouraged to pause, think, or reflect, but to “stay on task” for the duration of the school day. These expectations prepare students for work, as productive, but uncritical, employees are wanted for their labor in order to increase capital for those in power. When students do push back against these standards, they are deemed “at-risk,” culturally deficient (as Gus alludes to in chapter eight), “lazy” or “uneducable” (Winfield, 2012, p. 144). These expectations fall along lines of race and class, as students with cultural and monetary wealth learn: “this is our world and we will discover how we might make it act,” while poor students learn “tell me what to do and I will do it” (Gibson, 2012, p. 58).

Although young people can easily be repressed without physical violence, our society is not opposed to using more violent means to assert power and authority. Giroux (2012) argues that a “war on youth” is currently being waged across the country. He cites neoliberalism, a politics of cruelty, and an escalated social and economic Darwinism as the causes of this war (p.

2-3). As a result of this point of view, young people are viewed as “disposable,” and subjected to a “soft” and “hard war” (p. 2-5). The “soft war” relegates youth to commodities in the ever-expanding market, while the “hard war” refers to the harshest elements, values, and dictates of a growing young crime-control complex that increasingly governs poor minority youth through a logic of punishment, surveillance, and control” (p. 5). As a result of the “hard war,” young people are viewed as criminal, and many, who are given little chance to break free of their oppressive surroundings, are funneled through public schools and directly into prison (the school-to-prison pipeline). The treatment of youth as disposable is closely related to race and class, as popular culture promotes the “end of racism,” a piece of propaganda in great opposition to the lived realities of young people of color in the United States. Giroux argues that when the “poisonous rhetoric and policies” of racism occur, “we seem to lack any vocabulary or historical awareness for addressing it” (p. 31). Because racism is considered a problem of the past, the institutions and power structures that maintain racism in this country are not readily critiqued. As a result, grave injustices are perpetuated against young people of color with little resistance. One of the ways in which the myth of the end of racism is perpetuated is through the language of equity that permeates conversations about schooling and, most recently, school choice. In the later part of the chapter, I used Mavis Lovegrove’s letter to emphasize this connection, as the “American Dream” is positioned alongside of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., forging the rhetorically powerful, but untenable, connection between school choice and Civil Rights.

Chapter 9: Free to Go

Jasmine's eyes fluttered open, struggling to adjust to the florescent lights above. She groped around, hearing the unmistakable crinkle of white sanitized paper, the kind that always bunches up under you, no matter how still you try to sit. She was lying on an examination table in the school's infirmary, in one of the private rooms, not where kids stopped to get Band-Aids and cough drops, but in a secure cubicle that offered privacy for more sensitive injuries. Closing her eyes against the harsh bulbs, Jasmine groaned softly as she became aware of a dull ache pulsing steadily through her body. She hadn't been a perfect student at her last school, but an afternoon's detention for teenage recklessness or insubordination was a walk in the park compared to the swift and corporal punishment doled out at BSEPC-CCD. In fact, Jaz had surprised herself by defying the young CPM's requests so adamantly, but she had grown frustrated enough with the pre-tests to ignore the educator's directives. The BS pre-tests, and the BS students nearby, confused and discouraged her. Question after question flooded her screen, each more challenging than the last, and, in between each section, advertisements blasted through her headphones, shattering her concentration. In her few hours as a BS student, Jaz learned more about a new energy drink, a social networking app, and Nike's® latest tennis shoes than she had about math or history. Hoping to take a break from the repetitive testing, she tried to make eye contact with the students seated near her. They, however, sat zombie-like in front of their screens, refusing to engage with Jaz. Shortly after receiving yet another failing grade on her pre-test, she was approached by the novice CPM. Jaz hadn't intended to take out her frustrations on the unsuspecting young woman, but seeing the CPM try and act tough while her eyes shimmered with fear emboldened Jaz and fed her defiance. While she wasn't sorry she had stood up to the CPM, as reality began to set in, she hoped her actions hadn't jeopardized her uncle's

job. Uncle El was like a father to her, and, although they weren't as close as they used to be, from what she could tell, having a full time job was important, especially for someone from The Village. Half focused on her physical pain and half concerned with her and her uncle's future at BSEPC-CCD, Jasmine jumped as the school's nurse briskly entered the stark room.

"I imagine you're starting to feel some pain," she said. Before Jaz could answer, the nurse thrust two tiny paper cups in her direction. "Take these- it will help." Jasmine propped herself up on her elbow, hoping to pump the nurse for information, but even this small movement sent pain coursing through her body, inhibiting her speech. The nurse's eyes softened slightly, but she did not speak. Instead, she deftly palmed two small pills and fed them to Jasmine who gratefully swallowed, hoping they would help to quell the pain, physical and mental, that threatened to overtake her. In a few moments, however, Jaz could only focus on her heavy eyelids and drooping head, as she drifted off once again into a deep sleep.

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"There she is! Up there! Get her!" Shouts echoed through the deserted school. Jasmine peered down from her hiding spot, her heartrate quickening as two armed guards and their K-9 companions marched purposefully in her direction. She had two choices: apprehension or a daring jump from the school's second story. She chose to jump. She closed her eyes and, for a moment, felt weightless. Then, her stomach dropped and she was falling more quickly each second. Her arms fluttered wildly and she let out a strangled cry. Her eyes flashed open. She breathed heavily. She was alone, alive, on the cot in the school's infirmary.

Her imaginary struggle must have alerted the nurse, who called "She's awake" from nearby. Seconds later, the door pushed open, and Britt Larceny bustled in.

“Good afternoon, 8-0-4,” the CO said without making eye contact. Jasmine attempted to sit up quickly, defensively, but the combination of the nurse’s mystery medication and her recent nap made swift movement more difficult than she had imagined. She attempted the maneuver three times before finally gaining enough momentum to sit upright, her back supported by the cinderblock wall. Despite Jasmine’s obvious physical pain and disorientation, Britt continued. “I have to hand it to you, 8-0-4, you made quite an impression today. Quite an impression.”

Jasmine stared down, reluctant to make any movements that could be misinterpreted as defiant. “I like your spirit. It shows tenacity. Do you know what that word means?” Without waiting for a response, Britt launched into the definition. “Tenacity, a noun, means being determined, very determined. You know who has a lot of tenacity? Mavis Lovegrove, the CEO of Broad Spectrum schools. She was determined to give kids like you, ignorant, poor, ungrateful bastards like you, a chance at a quality education.” Jasmine continued to study her lap, her heart pounding more quickly as a result of the CO’s belligerent tone. “Now, as I’m sure you can understand, it’s my job to make sure that kids like you fall in line in order to fulfil Ms. Lovegrove’s noble vision.” A soft knock forced Britt to pause. “Come in,” she signaled. Jasmine raised her head faintly, relieved to see her Uncle El standing in the doorway. “Ah, Mr. Williams,” Britt said politely. “Thank you for joining us. I was just filling Jasmine in on the mission and vision of Broad Spectrum schools. You know, she shares a lot of admirable qualities with our CEO Mavis Lovegrove.”

“No, I didn’t know that Ms. Larceny, but if you say so, it must be true,” Ellison said. Britt smiled demurely at her employee.

“Anyway,” she continued. “As I was telling your niece, Broad Spectrum schools have a very strict code of conduct in order to preserve the sanctity- there I go with those big words

again,” Britt mused, looking in Jasmine’s direction. “What I mean to say is Broad Spectrum holds students to a very strict behavioral code to guarantee a high quality education. Mr. Williams, these kids are so lucky not to remember a time when schools were mismanaged and ineffective bureaucracies. And rules? Even if schools had them, they were weak and inconsistently enforced. Your sister did the right thing opting to send Jasmine to our school, and that’s what’s so great about our free market education system. She had the *choice* to get the best education for her child.” Britt took a breath and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Mr. Williams, but I have a tendency to wax poetic about my profession. It’s just that I’ve seen education evolve so much, and I’m very proud of the work we do at Broad Spectrum schools. So let’s get down to business, eh?” Britt produced a tablet from behind her back and swiftly tapped the screen. “So, Mr. Williams, as one of Jasmine’s emergency contacts, you have the authority to sign off on Jasmine’s disciplinary record. At Broad Spectrum schools, we utilize a three strike policy. Today’s offense counts as Jasmine’s first strike.” Britt pulled up a document outlining Jasmine’s infractions: idleness, failure to comply, insubordination. Scrolling to the bottom of the page, Britt pointed to two signature lines. “Please, Mr. Williams, sign here, indicating you are aware of Jasmine’s behaviors and that you acknowledge her first strike.” Ellison used his finger to place an illegible signature on the dotted line. Britt moved efficiently toward Jasmine, who now found herself face to face with her “crimes.” The CO took in Jasmine’s hesitation. “Sign your name, sweetie,” she encouraged, pushing the screen even closer to Jasmine’s face. “I’m sure after today we won’t see any more of that pesky insubordination. You’ve learned your lesson.” Jasmine pursed her lips and signed quickly, eliciting a broad grin from the school’s leader. “Excellent,” Britt cheered, again tapping briskly at the screen “Now, if you can just put your student number below your signature. Excellent. Then I’ll sign this and we can file it under lessons learned.”

Britt extended her hand to Ellison. As they shook, she commented, “Mr. Williams, I appreciate your understanding in this situation. You’re a great role model for Jasmine.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Ellison said. Britt now turned her attention to Jasmine.

“Jasmine, I hope our conversation stays with you. I don’t think you can fully comprehend the impact a BS education will have on your life, and certainly, after the sacrifices your mom and your uncle have made, you don’t want to lose that, do you?”

Seeing Jasmine’s blank stare, Ellison cleared his throat loudly to goad Jasmine into replying weakly, “No, ma’am.”

With a smirk only Jasmine could see, Britt pumped the girl’s hand once more, sweetly responding, “Thank you, 8-0-Jasmine. You are free to go.” Britt nodded to Ellison and Jasmine and left the room as efficiently as she had entered it.

“Uncle El,” Jasmine whined as soon as the CO was out of earshot.

“Enough, Jasmine,” Ellison warned, raising a palm to stop her inevitable protests.

“Did you talk to my mom? There’s no way she going to be ok with what went down this morning,” Jasmine continued, undeterred.

“No, Jaz, I didn’t talk to your mom, and I’m not going to talk to your mom. She’s not going to know about this. And, even if we did tell her, there’s nothing she could do. When she signed you up for this school, she signed a contract, which places your treatment entirely in the care of this company. Your mom knew this might happen to you when she sent you to this school. She knew.” Jasmine stopped, giving her uncle’s words a few moments to sink in. “Come on,” he grumbled, doubling back to yank Jasmine’s arm. “Look, I don’t want to hear another word out of you this year. If you think these BS guards are tough—” he paused and shook his

head. “Look, just come to school, do your work, and leave. Not. A. Toe. Outta. Line. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Uncle El, I understand,” Jasmine mumbled, still trying to process her uncle’s uncharacteristic behavior.

“Good,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.” Jasmine followed Ellison numbly into the dusk, just another face in the crowd waiting for their nightly transport back to The Village.

Chapter 10: Cam Arlo: Boy Detective

“I thought I smelled something,” Gloria spat as she rolled up alongside of Cam, her slim arm propped casually along the door of her convertible.

“Hey, Miss Gloria,” Cam mumbled as he rushed past the headlights and scrambled into the car. Scrunching into the seat, he carefully watched his perimeter, glancing furtively in the side and rearview mirrors every few seconds. He was anxious to get away from the NWE office, afraid that at any moment Smith/Wesson would rush out of the precinct doors and pull him back inside. Gloria gave him a sideways glance.

“Huh,” she scoffed as she slowly pulled away from the curb. Cam sniffed his t-shirt.

“Are you talking about me, Miss Gloria?” he asked.

“No, honey, I’m not talking about you, although it wouldn’t have killed you to run a comb through your hair, seeing as you were going to be on television and all.” Cam shook his head as Gloria cackled. He wasn’t really in the mood for her irreverent humor. “No, Cam, I was talking about your little visitor, Mr. Ledon. He shows up at the school a couple of times each year, flattering and fawning,” she mimicked his drawl, “Miss Gloria, when are you going to let me take you out? Miss Gloria, you are pretty as a picture. Argh,” she growled. “He must think I’m a damned fool.” She intensified her grip on the steering wheel, “Your father never had any love for that man, and, hopefully, if you have any sense, you won’t either.”

Knowing Gloria couldn’t beat him and drive, he took a deep breath and replied casually, “He offered to help me run the school.”

“Oh, I bet he offered to run the school- run it right into the ground,” Gloria muttered.

Gathering his courage, Cam spoke more candidly.

“Look, Gloria, I didn’t like him, but, you have to admit, he does have a point. Having someone else, someone more experienced, someone with money, run the school does seem pretty appealing right now. Gloria’s eyes did not leave the road, encouraging Cam to continue his argument. “I mean, I want to find my dad, and I can’t do that *and* operate a school at the same time. And, wasn’t my dad’s fight to keep The Public School public pretty much symbolic at this point anyway? If public education was so great, why are we the only public school left? Seriously, Gloria, these are the things we need to be thinking about right now. My dad’s gone, and he didn’t leave behind an instruction manual, so it’s up to me to decide what’s best. I hope I can count on your support.” Looking around for the first time in minutes, Cam recognized a familiar street. “Hey, this isn’t my—” he started.

“Listen, Cam”, Gloria began as she pulled into Henry Arlo’s abandoned driveway. “If you want to play detective, you might as well start here and now. School’s been postponed for at least a week, so take the time to do whatever it is you think you’ve got to do, and then we’ll talk. Promise me you won’t make any snap decisions about anything.” Cam sat silently with his arms folded firmly across his chest. Gloria had to laugh. “Cam, you’re sitting over there looking just like you did at five years old, which is exactly why you’ve got to promise me. I’ve known you for too long.” Gloria playfully nudged Cam’s shoulder. “Come on, honey. I know this is hard, but go in there and see if there’s anything you can find out. Just take your time. Do it for your daddy, and your mama.”

Cam, still unwilling to look at Gloria, petulantly answered, “All right.”

“Thanks, Cam,” Gloria said, putting the car in reverse to indicate the end of their conversation. “I would tell you to get some sleep, but I know you probably can’t. Please call me tomorrow.”

“All right,” Cam said again, his mind distracted as he stared at the red front door. Gloria backed out of the driveway quickly, leaving Cam alone to face the reality of Henry’s empty house. As she drove away, she took out her cell phone. Seven missed calls.

She dialed the number, “Yeah, I got him. He took the bait. He’s at Henry’s right now, but I’m going to stay close because there’s no telling what he might do.” She hung up, turning back toward Henry’s house just in time to see Cam slip quickly through the front door.

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Cam had walked through this door thousands of times. This wasn’t just his father’s home, but it was his home, his family’s home. It was a small stucco bungalow, still standing proudly after over one hundred years. The exterior and front door were painted a rainbow of colors over the home’s lengthy history, but Cam’s mother eventually settled on a natural green exterior and a cheerful red door. Cam delicately pushed the sticky old door in just the right way, deftly tossing his keys in the wooden bowl his parents had received as wedding gift years before. The keys made an unfamiliar sound, however, landing off their mark. The bowl wasn’t in its usual location. Cam flipped on the light, breathing in sharply as he took in, with new eyes, the home he knew so well. The upturned furniture, dirty boot and shoe prints, and the hastily moved trinkets rattled him.

“Dad?” he called hopefully, stamping his feet purposefully to alert the house, or anyone hiding within it, of his presence. When no one responded, he stepped carefully through the littered living room and made his way to his father’s study. The faded red and blue Oriental rug was hardly visible beneath the mess. His father’s entire collection of books, normally housed in five floor-to-ceiling book cases, covered the floor, forcing Cam to kick them aside to gain passage into the room. An antique mahogany desk, one of his father’s most prized possessions,

was overturned, one of the delicate legs snapped, while another dangled by a splinter of wood. Bending down to more carefully inspect the broken desk, Cam grasped the arm of his father's desk chair. He recoiled quickly, however, as his hand came in contact with a sticky film. Landing on his bottom with a grunt, Cam gaped at his fingers, now dotted with a red, viscous liquid. He froze, holding his hand at arm's length from his body, squinting deeply at the substance. Smith/Wesson's "there was blood" pounded through his thoughts. He roughly wiped his hands on his jeans, blurting out the frustrations that he had suppressed all day.

"Thanks a lot, dad. You left me. You left me, and now I'm supposed to figure this all out of my own. I'm supposed to run the school, defend the school, defend *myself* against the NWE; convince them *I* didn't kill you." Throwing his hands up, Cam continued his rant. "But, you know what? Maybe I don't want to do any of it. Maybe I'm just going to give up. I never wanted this in the first place. Running a school was your dream, dad, not mine." Pulling his cell phone out, Cam mused "Maybe I will just give old Mr. Ledon a call right now. Tell him to take the school; take it because my dad abandoned it and abandoned me. And, don't even get me started on El's Bells. What the hell *is* that? Oh, you know, just another mystery for Cam Arlo, boy detective, to solve. No big deal." Cam laughed hollowly, his voice echoing loudly through the quiet house. Looking around the room again, Cam's laughs turned to gasps, and soon to sobs. Powerless against the emotions that overwhelmed him, he cried unabashedly, hoping to dispel at least some of the anger, fear, and resentment that fueled his tears.

As a child he had developed a self-soothing method powered by repetition. He would recite the alphabet, repeatedly write a simple sentence, or try and count to one thousand without stopping. Cam employed this technique now, picking up armfuls of his father's books and carefully replacing them on the nearly-empty shelves. Cam did not know if his father had ever

formally organized his books, but Cam chose alphabetical order, swiftly placing Foucault after Freire, Bell before Kozol, and Zinn way after everybody else. Occupied by the alphabet, Cam's breathing regulated and his heartrate decreased. As he hoisted a well-read tome onto the shelf, a light blue envelope fell from inside the worn pages. Cameron was penned across the front in Henry Arlo's unmistakable lettering. Automatically, Cam ripped open the envelope and pulled out a piece of matching stationary. He quickly scanned the text, slowly sinking to the floor to read it a second time. The letter was dated November 1, 2048, just a few days before his mother's death. Cam pictured his father passionately writing next to his wife's bed.

To my son Cameron,

Thank you for returning to us in Savannah. Your mom and I love having you with us again. We feel, even if it is for a short time, that our family is complete again. Due to our current circumstances, your mom and I have been giving a lot of thought to life after she is gone. Although it's not something I enjoy thinking or talking about, she insists. Every discussion we have, however, has two recurring themes: you and The Public School. Arguably, these are the two most important aspects of our lives. Your mother and I have created a life in which our very existence is intimately related to the maintenance of The Public School, but she and I disagree on how you fit into this legacy. Your mom believes you should be told everything, while I believe the less you know about our affairs the better. Parents are not supposed to put their children in danger, so, for many years, your mother and I worked together to shelter you from the realities of this world; the realities of The Public School. We believed ignorance was your greatest protection, but your mother changed her mind when faced with her own death. To satisfy both our wishes, we have agreed to a compromise. I will encourage you to take over my role as principal, a position I hope you will accept, and, gradually give you more information about The

Public School, if and when you are ready to receive it. Your mother and I chose this life, but you did not; therefore, I do not want to put you in danger. My colleagues and I have something in the works right now that has the potential to severely alter the futures of corporate and public education, something that could change the course of history. If you are reading this letter, something has altered our plan, and you now have to decide: Do you run or fulfill our family legacy? Don't be afraid, son, you are not alone. There are others like me, and they will keep you safe.

Love,

Dad

Cam read the letter a third time before letting it drop into his lap, the edges of the delicate paper crinkled from his firm grip. Intently focused on the contents of the letter, Cam did not hear the front door open. He did not hear the person who now entered his father's study. He heard nothing before the room went black.

Chapter 11: The Business of Education (Part I)

Fallon trudged through the door of her apartment and made her way immediately to the refrigerator. Her glass adequately filled with wine, she turned on the television and fell into the couch. On the drive home, she had vowed not to think about work for at least one hour in order to give her mind and body time to decompress after her trying first day. Turning her attention to the screen, she watched the opening credits of the six o'clock news.

“Not tonight,” she moaned, groping around for the remote control. Poised to change the channel, she paused as the program’s introduction dissolved into a picture of a good looking guy about her age. The banner at the bottom of the screen read: **FATHER AND SON MISSING-NWE INVESTIGATE**. The picture changed again, to a young reporter standing anxiously outside of NWE headquarters.

“Good evening, I’m reporting live in downtown Savannah tonight, as the disappearance of local resident Henry Arlo, a story you heard first on news seven, continues to develop.” A professional photograph of Henry Arlo, probably taken on school picture day, filled the screen, and the reporter continued in voiceover. “Yesterday morning we first reported the mysterious disappearance of Henry Arlo, the former principal of Savannah’s Public School. Less than forty eight hours later, news seven has learned that NWE officers are now investigating the disappearance of Arlo’s son, thirty four-year-old Cameron.” The picture of Henry faded into a candid of the father and son and then back to the reporter. “In my last interview with lead investigators Jerry Smith and Luther Wesson, I learned that Cameron Arlo was questioned and released shortly after his father was first reported missing, but was ordered to stay in Savannah as the investigation remained open. Detectives Smith and Wesson sought Cameron Arlo this afternoon for further questioning, but, after a broad search, they determined he, too, had

disappeared.” The program cut to a briefing with Smith and Wesson, the broad shouldered officers surrounding my microphones and reporters.

“The New Ways Enforcement office has conducted a thorough search of the city,” one of the officers reported, “but we have been unable to locate Henry and Cameron Arlo. It is too early in this investigation to provide a complete picture of what has happened here, so as we continue to explore all possible leads, we are asking the residents of Savannah to please come forward with any information regarding the whereabouts of Henry and Cameron Arlo.”

The young reporter once again filled the screen, and continued, “Sources close to the NWE report that the officers have developed a number of theories in the case, the most promising that Cameron Arlo murdered his father, and is now attempting to elude the NWE officers who are in the process of gathering the necessary evidence to warrant his arrest. News seven is committed to providing you with the most current information on this case. All new developments will be reported live at eleven.”

“Damn,” Fallon cursed. “Why do all the cute guys have to be murderers?”

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Despite her rough first day, Fallon continued working at BSEPC-CCD, completing her first week without major incident. She avoided contact with student 804, walking quickly by the girl’s computer during her daily rounds. Fallon was beginning to understand why Gus Winters called the CPM’s guards, as her job primarily consisted of walking around and watching students work through learning modules. Occasionally, students would ask questions, but usually their inquiries were more mechanical (help fixing a frozen computer, for example) than intellectual. She had, however, learned a lot about her new employer, the Broad Spectrum Corporation. Her first training course with Britt Larceny reviewed the history of corporate education in America,

during which she learned all about the educational revolution of the 2030's, and the state of education B.C: before corporations.

“Schools were a mess,” Britt declared, as she instructed Fallon in one of the center’s conference rooms. Fallon sat attentively, surrounded by Broad Spectrum literature, her computer open, eagerly prepared to take notes. Britt spoke extemporaneously, but used presentation software to highlight her talking points. “Schools were an absolute mess before corporate reform,” Britt continued, “but, right around the time you were born, things reached a breaking point. You see, schools used to be primarily public institutions controlled in large part by local bureaucracies and funded by local taxes.” Britt forcefully clicked a small remote, replacing the Broad Spectrum screen saver with a bulleted list. The title read: Why America Needed Corporate School Reform. “But, fortunately, President Torrance and our government had the courage to admit that a lot had changed since the public school system was first established, and looked to America’s greatest success stories, large corporations, to implement sweeping changes.” Fallon surveyed the list as Britt spoke.

- Schools were not preparing students for jobs
- Student performance at an all-time low
- Schools inefficiently/ineffectively operated by bloated bureaucracies (government)
- Taxes were too high for the low quality of education received through these dollars
- Schools were spending too much \$ for unskilled labor (custodians, cafeteria workers)
- Ineffective teachers retained their jobs because of unions
- Teacher shortage because great minds were going into higher paying jobs
- Low quality of education put America at risk

“Now, Ms. Baxter, I have a question for you: are all people created equal?” Fallon thought for a moment.

“No, of course not,” she replied. Britt smiled and clapped her hands together.

“That is exactly correct, Ms. Baxter, but, believe it or not, people used to proclaim they were. In school, you may have studied something called The Declaration of Independence.” Fallon nodded, vaguely remembering the document. “The Declaration of Independence, one of the foundational documents in American history, proclaimed ‘all men are created equal,’ and this ideal drove Americans crazy for hundreds of years. Schools, especially, always fought for equality, as billions of dollars were poured into bad schools in order to make them good schools.” Britt grew more and more animated, moving her hands rapidly as she spoke. “Well, of course, this didn’t work, and hard-working Americans suffered as their dollars were taxed and taxed- all in the name of equality. The public school problem was embarrassing and led to the downfall of more than one able political leader.” Britt paused, giving her student time to digest this information. “Before President Torrance, schools dabbled in corporate-modeled reform, some companies operating what were called charter schools; schools that were considered part of the public system, but that did not have to adhere to the same regulations as other public schools, and that were operated by both public and private capital. Charters were largely failures because they offered elements of corporate reform, but not full-fledged deregulation. For real change to occur, America not only needed a revolutionary educational model, but also a radically different mindset. The ideals that for so long had divided Americans, equality, plurality, and freedom, had grown tired. These hollow terms were archaic and divisive, and needed to be replaced by new, stronger, ideals: competition, capital, and self-sufficiency. President Torrance understood this in a way no leader before him did.”

Fallon reflected on Britt's speech as her boss pulled up a video. The decades-old recording filled the screen, featuring a young President Gabriel Torrance. Fallon quickly recognized the forty-sixth President, a champion to her parents. The video paused for the moment, Britt continued her presentation.

"Education reform was always part of politics, but it was not until the groundbreaking work of President Torrance that schools really began to evolve. President Torrance outlined his courageous plan in the speech I'm about to show you. President Torrance's *Public Education is Dead* speech set the stage for a new world order of education, and I think it will give you a strong foundation for understanding Broad Spectrum and our role in the transformation of American education. So, without further ado..." Britt smiled and scurried to the wall to turn off the lights and then scurried back to the computer to hit play. Watching President Torrance's words always served as a source of inspiration for her and she looked forward to discussing the speech with Fallon.

The camera focused on President Gabriel Torrance as he stood casually in front of a classroom of young students and their teachers. Reporters flanked the students, microphones drawn, eagerly awaiting the President's remarks. President Torrance smiled easily at the crowd as he prepared to speak. The banner across the bottom of the screen announced: **PRESIDENT TORRANCE TO ANNOUNCE HISTORICAL EDUCATION PLAN**. Beneath that, in smaller letters, it read: Live from Martin Luther King, Jr. K-8 School in Washington, D.C.

"Good morning, my fellow Americans," the president began. "I am speaking to you today from one of the most important places in America, a classroom. Classrooms are one of the foundations of our society, but, unfortunately, American classrooms have been sorely neglected for many years." The camera angle changed, now panning the audience slowly, rolling over

students dressed in crisp uniforms as they listened intently to the President's words. The President's voice continued in the background. "Our nation has been through a lot during the last five years, and I thank you for electing me to a second term, and for allowing me to lead you through times of calm and crisis. We have faced continued attacks from hostile nations, and battles continue abroad to, once and for all, overwhelm our long-standing enemies."

The picture changed again, and images of American soldiers fighting in faraway deserts, a line of caskets draped in American flags, and tearful families displayed the harsh realities of war. President Torrance's remorseful face once again filled the screen, and he continued.

"With our attention focused on the war overseas, we have neglected problems in our own backyard. The problem I have come here today to speak with you about is great and it impacts every American: our broken public education system. Every President wishes to leave behind a powerful legacy, and I am no different. While some of my contemporaries are known for their commitment to the economy, others are remembered for their skillful foreign relations. I, however, want to be celebrated for my revitalization of American education. When American education is radically reformed, the economy, foreign policy, and our country's safety and security will be significantly strengthened as well."

The President lifted his hands to the audience and shrugged defensively, "Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *every President promises to fix education, and we always end up with four years of the same old thing*. I completely understand your reservations. Other Presidents have implemented reforms, vowing to leave 'no child behind' or they have tried to use federal funding as a carrot to improve student achievement in a 'race to the top.'" The President made exaggerated air quotes around these policy references, pausing momentarily before continuing. "So, trust me, I'm well aware that the education system is flawed, but reforms of the

past simply have not worked. In fact, these reforms have added to the problem. Before I go into the specifics of my plan, I would like to tell you a brief story about how I became interested in education reform.”

The President relaxed his posture, shifting to a more conversational tone.

“In my job I am fortunate enough to meet from all walks of life. About a year ago, I was having dinner with friends here in Washington, and I struck up a conversation with our waitress, a young mother named Indigo Morales. Mrs. Morales and her husband work hard to support their two children.” An aid standing nearby handed President Torrance a photograph, which he turned toward the audience. “Indigo’s two children, Michael and Melissa,” he lifted the photograph higher, displaying the young woman’s children to the audience, “are her world, and she told me how she desperately wanted them to receive the best education. She wanted this because she believed that, in America, education is the key to a good job and a successful and financially stable life. Unfortunately, the public schools she attended growing up and the public schools her children were attending were failures. At the school her children attended, the students’ test scores were far below the national average, the school’s ineffective teachers were protected by powerful teacher’s union, and, to top it off, the school was filled with unmanageable children who diverted the teacher’s attention away from Melissa and Michael and the other students who wanted there to learn. Sure, I had heard all of this before,” he continued, “I knew American public schools were in trouble, but placing human faces on these numbers really shifted my perspective. So, the very next morning I began to assemble an educational task force. This group of educators and business professionals not only studied American schools, but also gave me a crash course in the contentious history of public education. My work with the task force and a thorough and thoughtful examination of public education has led me to a revolutionary

conclusion: The public education system in this country is broken beyond repair; Public education is dead.”

The room erupted as the reporters could no longer contain their questions. The President remained silent, and raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he said. “I know this is a lot to take in, but, please, let me finish, and then we will have time for questions.” The room continued to buzz, but slowly grew quieter. Satisfied, the President proceeded. “The United States has never been a country afraid of doing things our own way. We were founded on that very principle, in fact. But, the United States is also a country that, when the time is right, is not afraid to abolish our old fashioned traditions. When this country was founded, segments of our nation were disenfranchised: Native Americans, African Americans, and women. Slowly, society evolved and we abolished slavery, gave women the right to vote, and granted equal protection for all people under the U.S. Constitution. The mark of a great country is not the people’s ability to maintain tradition, but the people’s ability to evolve with the times.” The President paused as a smattering of applause filled the small classroom. Regaining his momentum, the President spoke again. “We have worked on this experiment for over 150 years- this experiment in multiculturalism, in equality, and what have we gained? Our country is diverse, sure, but now there is so much diversity that there is no longer unity. We have become a nation of overly-politically correct zealots and because of this, America is weak and America is vulnerable. Despite our call for equality and acceptance, does racism still exist? Are women still paid less than men? Are Muslims and Jews still discriminated against? The answer to all of these questions and more is yes. So, I propose something radically different. We should just give up.” The President paused, gauging the crowd’s reaction. The room was completely silent. President Torrance unabashedly forged ahead. “After studying

education extensively, I easily concluded that all of the problems, the low test scores and the low graduation rates, everything, boiled down to our obsession with equality. Smart students have always achieved, but we have mistakenly focused our energies on the lowest-performing students living in the worst areas. For a revolution to happen in education, we must focus on our successes, and let the failures take care of themselves. Now, I know, to some of you, this sounds too radical, but let me put it in perspective. A world without slavery was once considered radical. A world where men and women worked side by side was once considered radical. A world with a black President was once considered radical. Americans have never been afraid to rise to a challenge, and this is one of those trying times. We have met with obstacles in the past, and I am certain, with the right mindset, we can contend with our current challenges and emerge victorious.”

The camera now shifted, focusing on a blond woman standing attentively at the President’s side. “The ideas I presented to you today are the product of many great minds. One such mind belongs to one of my most trusted educational advisors.” President Torrance nodded to the woman, continuing, “My fellow Americans, please allow me to introduce to you Mavis Lovegrove, President and CEO of Broad Spectrum Incorporated, the company that operates this very successful school.” At first, Fallon did not recognize the company’s leader because her facial features had changed markedly over the last twenty years. Her hair was still blond, but now her nose was a bit narrower, her cheeks a bit hollower, and her bust a bit bigger. When she spoke, however, Fallon conceded that the woman on the screen was really the Mavis Lovegrove from the first day of school introductory video. Mavis smiled warmly at the President, replacing him at the microphone.

“Thank you, President Torrance. It has been my distinct pleasure to work so closely with you this year, and I look forward to a long and fruitful partnership between my company and the United States government.” Following her introduction, Mavis retreated to the sidelines, allowing President Torrance to outline the specifics of his plan.

“One of the first things I understood about education reform,” he continued, “was that there was too much red tape. Someone might have a great idea to help student achievement, but his or her idea is rarely implemented because they had to jump through hoops, usually hoops created by a bloated and corrupted schoolboard, to make even the slightest changes. If schools are going to be overhauled, changes need to happen swiftly and decisively. Therefore, I present to you, my educational policy: The Free Market Education Act, known around my office as FreeME.” The President chortled to himself as Mavis Lovegrove applauded vigorously.

“Thanks, Mavis,” he said over his shoulder. “Ms. Lovegrove and her company were intimately involved in the creation of FreeME, so you can understand her excitement over this announcement, but I’m sure everyone here, and the American people, will soon share in our enthusiasm over this new bill. When developing this policy, I made a list of all of the great American success stories, and when I reviewed my list, I realized that it was made up mostly of great American companies; companies that not only succeeded because of their great innovations, but also in their record-breaking profitability. For years we have clung to the idea that education and business should never intersect, and by doing so we have robbed many children of a high quality education, and also cut companies off from maximizing their earning potential with some of our country’s most malleable consumers: children and adolescents. I think Mavis’ company, Broad Spectrum , uses a slogan that sums up the new direction of American education: we’re in the business of a good education.” The President paused, acknowledging

Mavis once again. “FreeME is designed to run schools according to the principles of the free market, liberating schools from many of the constraints that have stunted their effectiveness. Some of the highlights of the plan are: a revised educator training and hiring processes, eliminating the need for teaching certification and, in some cases a college degree, for work in schools. Next, I propose a revised curriculum that focuses more on marketable skills, and less on the so-called ‘soft’ subjects like literature and art, and, importantly, FreeME offers parents with unlimited choice to pick a school for their child based on their preferences and needs. Under FreeME, schools may be operated by public systems, but, it is my belief, that we will soon see an economic boon as educational companies, like Broad Spectrum, crop up all over the country, each operating great schools, and each earning large profits in the process. America is not the economic powerhouse it used to be, but tapping into this new and diverse market has the potential to not only provide higher quality educations for our best students, but also to propel our economy forward. The Free Market Education Act will head to Congress in a few weeks, and I am hopeful that representatives from both sides of the aisle will support its passage. The United States is a country that is continually evolving, and the passage of FreeME will only solidify this powerful legacy. You can just look to Michael and Melissa Morales, Indigo’s two children, as examples of the success will come from FreeME.” The President gestured to the audience, where the two children he referenced earlier sat in matching uniforms. “After my education from Mavis and other business of education leaders, I shared what I learned with Indigo, who then chose to send her children here, to Broad Spectrum’s Martin Luther King, Jr. School. From what I understand, both of their test scores have gone up since enrolling here and their mother couldn’t be happier.” The President beamed at the students and led the audience in a round of applause for the achievement. “Under FreeME success stories like this will be commonplace, as more and

more families will have the opportunity to compete for the best schools. Please join me in this educational revolution. Thank you very much, and may God bless America.” The audience applauded, but their clapping was quickly overwhelmed by the reporters’ insistent questioning. Britt clapped along with the audience as she moved to turn off the video.

She turned expectantly toward Fallon and asked brightly, “Any questions?”

Chapter 9 ½, 10 ½ and 11 ½: Privatization in Five Easy Steps

In this chapter I expressed the dominant narrative on public education and its failures through President Torrance's "Public Education is Dead" speech. The speech follows Fabricant and Fine's (2012) five steps for "charter revolution:" "1. Discrediting public education, 2. Branding charters as educational innovations, 3. Mobilizing the private sector- foundations and hedge funds, 4. Demonizing teachers and unions, 5. Systematically ignoring all of the evidence of public sector innovation and success" (p. 80). Using these themes, I wrote President Torrance's speech to show how the propaganda of corporate reform and the passage of the fictional Free Market Education Act (FreeME) made it possible to all but eliminate public education in two decades. I purposefully modeled President Torrance's rhetoric on that of education "reform" in 2016 to emphasize just how close the United States is to a no-holds-barred corporate takeover of public institutions. Fabricant and Fine explain that privatization is an easy sell as the government, the media, and corporations work together to spread a "discourse of a naturalized ideological truth about the effectiveness of market reform" (p. 62). As a result, privatization is viewed as "the only alternative to the encrusted and ineffective work of the bureaucratic system of public schooling" (p. 62-63). Similarly, Saltman (2000) argues that "market metaphors generally, with positive-sounding terms such as choice and efficiency, appeal to people because they promise an easy and universal solution to problems that in fact require messy and slow democratic resolutions" (p. 9). The President's words capitalize on a number of well-worn fears and prejudices, but I opted for a public call for the end of equality in order to more fully align the FreeME reforms to the free market economy and support the dystopian theme of my work. I also wished to reflect on the current divisive political climate, where "others" are blamed for economic and social disparities, shifting the conversation away from the

true root of the problem: a political and economic system where “the insatiable demand for profit is the motor for policy, not public, or social, or common weal or good” (Hill, 2012, p. 65). I opted to call President Torrance’s FreeME a “revolution,” to highlight how neoliberal reforms are painted as innovative and cutting edge, when they are simply a re-packaging of capitalism. As society continues to look for solutions for inequality in capitalism, real critical work is deflected and stifled, which is one of the most important contradictions I wish to address in my work.

Chapter 12: SAFE

“You shouldn’t have brought him here, Gloria. You know how Henry felt about him knowing too much.”

“Look, El, if I thought I had a choice, I would’ve left him home, but I didn’t have one. Lee went to visit him today *and* the NWE are looking for him. Knowing or not knowing, he isn’t safe anymore. Besides, we owe it to Henry to try and protect him if we can.” Cam listened to this conversation with his eyes closed and head throbbing. He kept quiet, however. In the past forty eight hours he had been violently and unexpectedly attacked twice, so his movements were understandably cautious. He opened his eyes enough to take in his surroundings, but not enough to betray that he was awake. Cautious not to make any sudden movements, he gathered as much information about his surroundings as he could from his captive position. The ceiling was lined with old wooden beams, and the lights above him were dim, but industrial. The walls were a made of a solid dark brick and the floor was unadorned concrete. His head was propped up on the arm of a lumpy sofa; a sofa with a familiar pattern. The red plaid monstrosity had long sat in his father’s home office, a relic from Henry’s college apartment. Although Cam tried to keep still, one individual sensed he was awake and took a running leap onto his stomach. Cam sputtered as Dewey began vigorously licking his face. Now fully awake, Cam sat up and searched the room wildly for his father’s distinctive white head. The cavernous room was sparsely furnished with a number of folding tables, metal chairs, and a few rolling dry erase boards. The most prominent fixture in the room was the books, bookshelf after bookshelf full. The collection reminded him of the one in his father’s ransacked study. About a half a dozen people milled around the room, but his father was not one of them. Miss Gloria and a younger man he didn’t recognize were talking animatedly near one of the sagging bookshelves.

Cam locked his eyes on Gloria and shouted, “Hey!” His voice broke the quiet, and, suddenly, all eyes were on him. Not having thought past an opening line, Cam stuttered, “What the, what the hell is going on here?” Gloria made a stopping motion to her companion and rushed to Cam’s side.

“Hi, Cam, baby,” she began sweetly. “I know you must be very confused right now.”

“Confused?” Cam interjected harshly. “I’m mad as hell. First, my dad ambushes me, ranting and raving about ‘El’s Bells,’ then I’m questioned by the NWE, intimidated by a corporate thug, and, to top it all off, I’m knocked out again!” Cam raised his arms, prepared to launch into another tirade, when the man standing with Gloria interrupted him sharply.

“He told you about El’s Bells? You’ve got to be shitting me.” The man threw his arms in the air, his voice growing more scathing with each phrase. “Years of work down the drain because of you. All the planning and the sacrifices for nothing, and I’m sure you couldn’t keep your big mouth shut, in there yapping to the NWE, and even better, to Hal Ledon.” He turned to Gloria and shook his head, “I told you it wasn’t a good idea to bring him here. I knew he would ruin everything.” He walked a short distance away from Cam and Gloria, muttering, “All that work, all that time, and this guy comes along and messes everything up.”

Cam, now too fired up to back down, yelled after him, “Listen, asshole, he didn’t tell me about El’s Bells, apparently just like he didn’t tell me about much of anything. I lived with him for over half my life, and I’m just starting to realize I didn’t even know him, my own father. So, forgive me if I don’t give a shit about your precious Ell’s Bell’s. I want answers. Now.” Cam folded his arms across his chest and tapped his foot impatiently. “Oh, and, by the way, I didn’t mention any of this to the NWE or Hal Ledon. I may be out of the loop, but I’m not an idiot.”

Ellison shot back, "You could've fooled me." Cam lunged toward Ellison cursing, but seconds before his fist contacted with Ellison's jaw, Gloria jumped between them.

"Enough! Enough of this foolishness," she shouted. The men were stunned into pausing, but they continued to glower at each other with fists raised. Gloria first directed her attention to Ellison. "El, get ahold of yourself, please. I already told you why I brought Cam here, and you're going to have to live with it." Cam grinned at Ellison, taunting him as if he were Gloria's favorite and, therefore, exempt from her wrath. Moments later, however, Gloria turned sharply toward Cam, catching his grin before it quickly turned down. "Oh, and don't think you're innocent here, Cameron Michael Arlo. I've known you both since you were babies, and I wouldn't think twice about whuppin' either one of you." The men looked quizzically at each other, and then sheepishly to the floor, as Gloria continued her lecture. "You're both grown ass men acting like children, and I'm not going to stand for it one more minute. We're going to sit here and, Ellison, you and I are going to explain everything, and you two are going to be civil to one another. Understand?" The men continued to stare at the floor, each unwilling to defy Gloria, but also unwilling to speak first. "Understand, Cameron Michael?" she asked pointedly. Cam looked up, but would not make eye contact.

"Yes, Miss Gloria," he replied quietly. Satisfied, she moved on.

"Understand, Ellison Frederick?"

"Yes, Miss Gloria," he responded.

"Good," she said cheerfully. "Now, let's sit down and, Cam, we can fill you in on some of your father's business, and, El, since we can't get rid of Cam now, I'm sure we can find a way to fit him into our operation here." Without waiting for replies, Gloria led the men to a nearby table.

As they settled into their seats, Gloria retrieved a familiar blue letter from her back pocket. Cam started to object, but Gloria glared at Cam, silently calling for his silence. She began, smoothing the crumpled letter as she spoke.

“Cam, I’m going to be straight with you because it seems, considering the circumstances,” she gestured to the letter, “that’s what your dad wanted. There’s something very important you need to know about your dad. He was not just the principal of The Public Schools, but he also founded SAFE, Savannah Area Freedom Educators.” Cam stared blankly at Gloria.

“What is SAFE? Like a club for teachers in Savannah?” he asked.

Before Gloria could clarify, Ellison groaned, “Yeah, you got it. We just sit around and write lesson plans, and—”

“Enough, Ellison,” Gloria warned. “This is all new to him, so give him a break.” Ellison kept quiet, but continued to eye Cam with contempt.

“How can I be more explicit?” Gloria continued. “Your father is the leader of a group of radical educators here in Savannah and united with similar groups across the country. Your father organizes a network of people committed to some of the Old Ways and a return to thinking. SAFE, and groups like it, also work to uncover the ways in which corporate educators abuse and exploit students and the local community. When things first began to change in education, your dad fought loudly for the Old Ways, but, eventually, this fight earned him the wrong kind of attention, and he was forced to bring the organization underground. Even after the Class War, he devoted his life to undermining corporate education, refusing to give up, even after many of his allies disappeared.” The way Gloria emphasized the word “disappeared” chilled Cam. He hoped his father was not among those who would never return.

“You mean people who want to bring back public schools?” Cam questioned.

“Public schools are part of it, sure,” Ellison responded, a little more patiently this time. “But we’re also fighting for the intangibles that public schools offer society: freedom to explore new ideas and engage in meaningful discussions. We’re also looking for spaces to fight back against corporate oppression and transform society.”

“So you want to go back to the Old Ways?”

“Not exactly,” Ellison replied. “Sure, there are some aspects of The Old Ways that are superior, but we’re looking to something completely different- something that hasn’t been tried before.”

“How do you do it?” Cam asked.

“Lots of ways,” Ellison replied. “First, we kept The Public School open. Your dad was able to find a loophole in FreeME that enabled him to keep running the school, but one school cannot sustain a revolution, so we’ve done some more radical things, too. Like, remember a few years ago when the Super Bowl was interrupted by a masked man reading? He was reading from books that talked about the Old Ways, trying to make people remember.” Ellison smiled mischievously and continued, “We have a couple of really daring tech guys over in California who made that happen for us. Sure, your dad got cut off pretty quickly, but pulling off this stuff really makes the corporations crazy; it shows cracks, and, if you get enough cracks—”

“Wait,” Cam interrupted. “The Super Bowl reader was *my dad*?”

Gloria responded this time, “It sure was. We recorded it in this very room,” she gestured to her sides. Cam shook his head, whispering to himself, “wow” over and over again.

Gloria gently touched his shoulder and said, “I know it’s a lot to take in, Cam.”

Cam, still trying to understand how his dad could have kept this from him, haltingly questioned El and Gloria.

“Why did this, I mean, why didn’t my dad tell me?” he asked.

Gloria touched Cam’s hand gently, and replied, “Your dad’s number one priority was always your safety. I know he planned to tell you everything, but he wanted to leave you with deniability for as long as possible. He, better than anyone else, knew the full power of our enemies. He had to be cautious to not only protect you, but also to protect SAFE and our affiliated groups.”

“So, where’s my dad now?” Cam asked cautiously. He desperately wanted to ask the question, but he also feared the answer. Gloria and Ellison looked at each other, but neither made a motion to speak. “Come on, guys. Where is he?”

Gloria finally spoke gently, “Cam, running a group like SAFE comes with great risks; risks your father was more than willing to take. Many of our colleagues have gone on missions in the past and never returned. Others just disappeared, and we still aren’t sure if they were taken by the government, the corporations, or if they just got too scared to keep fighting and went underground. Your dad always warned us that every day could be our last, not just as an organization, but our last day alive.” Gloria paused, looking softly at Cam, who had been hoping for a more concrete answer. “Look, Cam,” Gloria continued, “something obviously happened to him before he came to your house the other night, something that made him run. We all have places we can go to in case of an emergency, but these places are only secure because we keep the locations secret. I hope your father is hiding out somewhere, waiting for whatever it was to blow over, so he can come back and join the cause. I know this isn’t the explanation you hoped for, but until we hear from him, it’s our job to keep fighting.”

“But, what if he’s, what if he’s—” Cam couldn’t finish the sentence and dropped his head onto the table. Gloria spoke sharply, refusing to allow her emotions to overtake her voice.

“Cam, this is the life your dad chose, the life we all chose. And if anyone can survive out there, it’s your dad. I’m certain of that.” Cam continued to stew for a number of minutes, finally straightening up, brushing a few tears from his eyes. He steeled himself and looked directly at El and Gloria.

“I want in,” he said flatly, “but I have to know one thing first: What is El’s Bells?”

El smiled and slapped Cam enthusiastically on the back.

“All right,” he said. Gloria smiled, but her mirth did not extend to her eyes.

“We’re happy to have you Cam,” she said evenly.

“Yeah,” El chimed in, “You have more guts, and brains, than I thought. Hey, no hard feelings about earlier, right?”

“No hard feelings,” Cam answered, shaking El’s outstretched hand. Pleased that the young men were now getting along, Gloria excused herself to take care of other business. Now that things had calmed down, Cam eyed Ellison more closely and tried to figure out where he had seen him before. Finally, it dawned on him.

“I remember you,” he said. “You were what, a junior or senior, when I was a freshman?”

“A senior,” Ellison replied. “I wondered if you’d recognize me,” he continued, his earlier defensiveness now almost complete gone.

“Is that how you started working with my dad?” Cam asked. Ellison shook his head.

“Not exactly,” Ellison said. “I always respected your father, but I didn’t stay in touch with him after high school. By chance, I ran into him a few years ago, and we started talking, just catching up at first, but, as our conversations grew more substantial, he told me about SAFE and I started working with him.”

“How did you get interested in all this stuff?” Cam asked, gesturing to the bustling rebel headquarters.

“It was luck, I guess,” El spoke and shook his head in wonder. “I graduated high school at the height of the Class War, but before the Old Ways were completely abolished, especially on college campuses. Your dad, and some of the other teachers at The Public School, helped me to apply and I found a small group of rebel academics at the university. We tried to keep quiet about our work, since even reading a book made people suspicious. Some of my professors and friends were arrested, jailed, but, for whatever reason, I was spared.” He thought for a few moments, and continued, “I was scared though, really scared, so I dropped out. I thought that once President Torrance was out of office, that things would go back to normal. When they didn’t, I got more and more frustrated. So, working with SAFE gave me a chance to finish my education,” he gestured to the books lining the walls, “and really stand up for what I believe in in ways I was too afraid to as a younger man.”

“Wow,” Cam marveled. “I just don’t know how I could be so ignorant about the Old Ways, the New Ways.” He searched El’s face for answers.

“Look, Cam, you were young, it didn’t concern you, but you’re here now, you know now, so do you want me to fill you in?” El questioned.

“Yes, please,” Cam answered eagerly.

“Alright, this might take a while, so get comfortable. “El’s Bells,” Ellison began proudly, “is one of SAFE’s most important and far-reaching projects ever. In the past we’ve disrupted the corporate structure and tried to knock people out of their techno-consumerism stupors through small acts of civil disobedience, but this, this, is unlike anything we’ve ever tackled before. El’s Bells is about more than disruption. We are aiming for complete and utter decimation, something

big enough to reawaken the Class War and create lasting change. The project was a collaborative effort between me and one of our colleagues, Max Ellis, a college professor from the Midwest.”

“Ok,” Cam started, relieved at least understand the mysterious name, “but what are you trying to do?”

Ellison held up his hands and responded, “Hold on, hold on, I’m about to tell you. You see, your average citizen is a lot like you, no offense,” he said apologetically. “He or she falls into two categories: don’t know, don’t care, or just don’t know. They are content to either live in their blissful ignorance, believing the lies and propaganda spread by the government and big companies, or maybe we should just call them all big companies, am I right?” He laughed again, lightly punching Cam on the arm. Taking in Cam’s blank expression, El deadpanned, “Tough crowd.” Cam cracked a small smile, but motioned for Ellison to continue. “Anyway, Max and I figured, if we are able to infiltrate one of the country’s top educational companies, we might just have a shot of shaking things up in a more meaningful way.”

“Broad Spectrum,” Cam wondered, envisioning the former Chatham County jail “So you work at Broad Spectrum?”

“Yes, but I was only able to get a position as a custodian so, at this point, our plan is a little stalled. I have identified a few candidates within the school who might be willing to join the SAFE cause, but I can’t approach them yet, it’s too risky. If Britt Larceny, that’s the CO over there, found out I was talking to CPM’s about anything other than the trash, I’m sure she wouldn’t hesitate to fire me, or worse,” he gulped. “You see, the school isn’t profiting like the CEO expected, so things are a little tense. For right now El’s Bells consists of me, El,” he pointed to himself, “ringing the bells, or cluing people into the Old Ways of thinking, by strategically placing messages all over the city.” We have graffiti in bathroom stalls, on

sidewalks, anywhere with a lot of traffic. And,” he beamed, “we’re even branching out into the media. You should’ve seen the great video Max put together for Broad Spectrum’s first day of school. The CO was not happy about that one, no she was not.” He shook his head and laughed. “You see,” El continued, “the hope, for now, is that people will see and hear the messages, lines of poetry, quotes from historical documents, passages from the great old pieces of literature and even some academic books,” he listed, “and they will start thinking. Once they start thinking, they might start questioning, and that’s how our revolution goes.” Ellison folded his arms across his chest and smiled proudly at Cam. Cam, however, did not smile back, but wore a grave expression.

“El, think about it,” he started eagerly. “Why would my dad come to me about El’s Bells? What if he was trying to warn me about something? Something you didn’t know about yet.” Ellison’s face fell as he contemplated Cam’s questions.

“We were so careful, though, Ellison began in disbelief. “There’s no way, just no way we could have been compromised. Unless—” Ellison was cut off as a siren sounded overhead. Cam and Ellison wheeled around wildly, as Gloria ran to the center of the room.

“All right, people,” she shouted commandingly. “We’ve got a situation here!”

Chapter 13: The Business of Education (Part II)

Fallon walked slowly down the dimly lit alleyway, watching her feet carefully to avoid tripping on the uneven bricks. She had just finished her third BS certification class with CO Larceny, so focusing on the bumpy street as she walked toward her apartment was a much-needed distraction. Each class was intense, as Larceny unceasingly lectured and Fallon unceasingly typed notes. While the first class introduced Fallon to the origins of the business of education, the second class focused on the pushback. Fallon was too young to remember the Class War firsthand, but her parents had talked about it occasionally, mostly to voice their support for the government, who, according to the media and the history books, decisively quashed the rebels in late 2030. Fallon studied the Class War in school, but, like most kids, she had memorized some names and dates for a test, and then moved on with her life. CO Larceny, however, reviewed the war for Fallon during their second meeting.

“Small groups across the country opposed President Torrance. Most of them were loafers used to living off of the government and didn’t like the idea of losing their entitlements. The few rebels who did have real jobs were still stuck in the Old Ways.” Larceny snorted at their idiocy and continued, “The rebels blamed the government and strong corporations like Broad Spectrum for their poverty, when it was really their own laziness that kept them from getting ahead. And don’t even get me started on equality!” She threw her arms in the air animatedly. “People in this country were never meant to be equal, and, like President Torrance said, we were a weak and divided nation because we couldn’t let go of that idea. Only when we adopted the principles of business and the free market to run our schools, did people finally start to get the picture.”

“What were the rebels like?” Fallon asked.

“They were weak and disorganized, mostly. They staged a few significant protests, even some acts of violent terrorism, but, eventually their supporters began to fall away. I think they realized they were fighting a losing battle. The ones who really wouldn’t give up were easily destroyed by our military, and things have proceeded peacefully ever since.”

Today’s class consisted of preparing Fallon to enter the world of educational sales. Ms. Larceny explained at BSEPC-CCD, CPM’s split their time between monitoring students and making sales. Britt Larceny began her lecture, in her usual fashion, by praising Broad Spectrum’s CEO.

“Although Mavis Lovegrove revolutionized education through her partnership with the Torrance administration, she *always* had a brilliant mind for business, especially the business of education. Trust me, before FreeME, Broad Spectrum was already a profitable company, mostly because Mavis always kept us on the cutting edge of the rapidly changing educational marketplace. For example, when the company started out, Mavis realized there was money to be made in textbooks and other educational materials in a way her uncle, the company’s founder, had never completely realized. You see, at that time, the state teaching standards changed almost every year, so districts were always searching for new resources; resources that Broad Spectrum was willing and able to supply. Mavis soon decided, however, that Broad Spectrum could not only design and sell the curriculum, but also the corresponding standardized tests. Districts jumped at the opportunity to buy BS teaching materials, hoping they would help students perform on the BS tests that were increasingly becoming an important part of student’s grades.” Britt stopped herself, remembering her own student, who had ceased typing for the moment, and was smiling strangely to herself. “Miss Baxter, do you have a question?” Britt asked. Fallon, suddenly aware she was being addressed, shook her head quickly.

“Oh, no, Miss Larceny. I’m sorry, I was just thinking about something. Nothing important.”

Britt smiled and continued, “Ok. Just make sure you stop me if I’m moving too fast. You know how I am once I get started with BS, I just can’t stop!”

“I’m fine right now, Miss Larceny, but I’ll be sure to tell you if I need anything repeated.” Fallon smiled back at her boss, trying to contain her laughter. The business educators she knew always espoused the merits of BS without the slightest hint of irony. Britt rubbed her hands together excitedly and continued her lesson.

“Excellent. As I was saying, Mavis is the type of business leader who is never satisfied. She is always searching for the next big educational trend. So, even though teaching materials brought in large revenues, Broad Spectrum was still an ancillary player in the field of education. The company didn’t have a lot of say in the day-to-day management of schools, which was something Mavis wanted to change. In the late 2000’s and into the 2010’s, public schools continued to fail despite the prevalence of high quality educational materials Broad Spectrum provided. I mean, some teachers were even give scripted Broad Spectrum lesson plans, what Mavis used to call a *teacher proof* curriculum, and they still couldn’t get it together. As you can imagine, the public demanded better schools, and Broad Spectrum once again stepped in to fill a need: school management and operations. Mavis, always thinking about the company’s bottom line, attacked this from a number of fronts. One business venture just involved buying school buildings and renting them to the public districts. Another venture placed Broad Spectrum consultants in struggling districts to review the school’s teachers and students and then make recommendations for improvements. This venture was particularly lucrative because our consultants always recommended that the districts adopt BS curricula to improve achievement,

so the districts were paying us twice: once through our consulting fee and again for the teaching materials.”

“Ms. Larceny,” Fallon interjected. “Did the schools get better because of these BS interventions? “

Britt considered the young woman’s question for a moment, and replied, “Some did, but most didn’t. You see, I worked the type of school Broad Spectrum was trying to fix, so I saw firsthand how difficult it was to teach students in inner-city schools. The students had too many other problems, poverty, broken homes, and violent behaviors, to be able to learn much of anything, but your question, Miss Baxter, leads perfectly into Mavis’s best idea: stand-alone Broad Spectrum schools. In the educational climate thirty five years ago, this could be achieved by operating charter schools. In order to attract more students, Mavis partnered with technology companies to market Broad Spectrum schools as twenty first century learning centers where students had unprecedented access to computers, tablets, and the Internet. Despite taking steps to make BS schools the most successful in the nation, charters didn’t take off as Mavis had hoped. Of course, this wasn’t because it was a bad business model, but because the American mindset was still set against the relationship between businesses and schools. People argued that corporately run schools were just as ineffective as public schools, so, while some charter schools were successful, others failed, but you know Mavis refused to give up the idea. She knew privatizing public education could and would work. Only when schools were set free from the bonds of the public bureaucracy would Mavis’s educational revolution be fully realized, however.”

Britt paused dramatically, giving Fallon time to appreciate the significance of Mavis Lovegrove's impact on education. Fallon sat quietly, wondering if there was a movie on the life of the Broad Spectrum CEO and who might play the lead character.

“When Mavis was appointed to President Torrance's educational task force in 2025,” Britt continued, “she, and other leaders in the educational business world, convinced the President that the only way to fix schools was to almost entirely eliminate the public system and to focus less on student learning and more on what really mattered: making money. Besides, test data could always be manipulated to serve the company's needs, since that all people equated with learning in the 2020's anyway. President Torrance was a visionary who was not afraid to stand up to the teacher's unions and the local school districts to make the necessary changes. Believe it or not, the greatest supporters of the educational revolution, however, were parents. They were sick and tired of paying high taxes for under-performing public schools and they wanted a system that offered more flexibility; a system where they could choose the best school for their child. Mavis understood intuitively that without community support, corporate schools were destined to fail. That's why she encouraged the U.S. government to engage in an influential media campaign to educate the American people about ineffective public schools. The Public Education is Dead campaign coupled with the FreeME legislation, provided Broad Spectrum with the ideal educational climate to grow into the company it is today. Here, let me show you some of the famous PED campaign advertisements.”

Britt went to her computer, and quickly projected an image onto the room's large screen. A white-haired man wearing a blue suit, red bowtie, and white top hat pointed threateningly at Fallon. Below him, bold black and red letters proclaimed: **I WANT YOU TO CHOOSE THE BEST EDUCATION FOR YOUR CHILD.** Below, a short paragraph stated: *Under the Free*

Market Education Act, parents have the power to choose; the power to choose where their children go to school and who they go to school with. For more information, visit www.publicedisdead.gov.

Admiring the poster, Britt commented, “The PED campaign brilliantly blended classic patriotic images like Uncle Sam,” she gestured to the man in the poster, “with the modern problems facing society.” Britt clicked forward and another image filled the screen. This advertisement featured the crouching silhouette of a muscular man, grimacing as he struggles under a heavy boulder. On top of the boulder stood a young black woman surrounded by a dozen small children, a brown man with a large black mustache wearing a poncho and a sombrero, and a man wearing a turban and a woman covered head to toe in a burka, both wielding machine guns. The text above read: WE’VE CARRIED THEM FOR LONG ENOUGH. YOUR EDUCATION, YOUR CHOICE, YOUR AMERICA.

“It was a wildly successful campaign, Ms. Baxter. It got parents on board with FreeME, and they quickly started taking action using the ‘parent trigger’ provision within the law.” Before Fallon could question her superior, Larceny continued. “FreeME offered parents more than just choice, but also the opportunity to vote out current school leadership. If the parents didn’t like the way a school was being run, they were able to take action into their own hands. They didn’t have to wait for a slow-moving bureaucratic schoolboard to do it either. This provision allowed parents to shop for corporations to take over the public schools. Sometimes these transitions took as little as two weeks, as bloated public schools were replaced by streamlined corporations. The schools were cheaper to run because educators were paid for performance, not guaranteed excessive salaries because of their advanced degrees or years of service. Also, as you’ve seen at BSEPC-CCD, technology was increasingly used to replace CPM’s, so schools required fewer

employees. Finally, other private companies were used to fill school support positions, like janitors and secretaries, so schools were not spending as much money on employee benefits. Hal Ledon, Mavis's Director of Integrated Programs, also came up with a brilliant money-saving idea: use students in the lowest performing schools to complete these menial tasks. Student labor was incorporated in many schools as part of the work readiness curriculum. So, you see, Broad Spectrum was able to profit just by giving the people what they wanted: freedom of choice and an end to public school bureaucracy." Brushing her palms together to indicate the simplicity of this transition, Britt paused to judge her student's reaction. Fallon gazed intently at the advertisement and half-heartedly raised her hand. "Yes, Ms. Baxter?" Britt said.

"Ms. Larceny, um, weren't people, I mean, didn't people, you know, black people or Hispanic people," she lowered her voice to a whisper as she said "black" and Hispanic" even though she and CO Larceny were the only people in the room. "Weren't they offended by these ads?"

"Oh no, Ms. Baxter, PED and FreeME were not about racism! No one was trying to say that blacks or Hispanics or foreigners were inferior to anybody else. PED and FreeME just embraced competition; people competing against each other for the best things: the best jobs, the best schools, the best neighborhoods. All people were welcome in this competition and no one was discriminated against in that respect. Everyone had equal access to the competition, so if people didn't make it, they had no one to blame but themselves. When President Torrance called for drastic social changes, he didn't call for segregation; he didn't call for hatred. He just wanted people to *earn* the things that many people took for granted. If anything, these reforms pushed minorities forward!" Fallon listened intently to her CO's explanation, but the PED advertisement still unsettled her.

Britt's explanation, however, made Fallon think that further questions were not welcome at this time, so she nodded politely and simply said, "Oh, I see."

"I knew you would, Ms. Baxter. It's like President Torrance said, quite revolutionary, really." This leads us to your role as a Broad Spectrum employee, Ms. Baxter," Larceny continued with as much enthusiasm as ever. "As the public system began to dissolve, Broad Spectrum could no longer rely as heavily on public money for its revenues, so Mavis had to, once again, rework the business of education to suit Broad Spectrum's bottom line. Britt gestured to Fallon and continued. "This is where you come in, Ms. Baxter, as your most important job is not to teach students, the computers pretty much take care of that, but to sell advertising space to our local and national business partners. And this," she proudly proclaimed, "is the true heart of the business of education for Broad Spectrum's inner city schools."

Ms. Larceny spent the rest of the class explaining sales quotas, commissions, and BS-client relationships. Fallon would receive a more thorough introduction to sales in her next class, where a special guest speaker, Hal Ledon, Broad Spectrum's DIP, would walk her through her first sales call. Britt assured Fallon that before taking a management position, Lee was one of the company's top salespeople and that his advice would make Fallon more comfortable with her duties and responsibilities as a Broad Spectrum CPM.

As Britt gathered her things after class, Fallon posed a question that had been gnawing at her for the entire class, "Are there any public schools left?" she asked casually. Britt's hand froze momentarily over her smooth leather bag, which she was in the process of filling, but she quickly recovered herself and spoke as she packed.

"It's funny you should ask that, Ms. Baxter, because the country's only public school is located here in Savannah." She pulled out her cell phone and began tapping at the screen. She

pushed the phone toward Fallon and said, “I have a suspicious feeling though that the school’s about the close.” Her mouth twitched and she looked at Fallon as if they were sharing an inside joke. “This,” she nodded to the image on her phone, “is the school’s current principal. He’s been missing for almost two weeks.” Fallon instantly recognized the handsome man she had seen on the news after her first day of school.

“Wow, he’s still missing?” Fallon wondered.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” Britt responded judiciously. “It’s really a tragic story, but the world is full of weirdos, you know.” Fallon shrugged her shoulders, indicating her agreement, but she was still curious about Cameron Arlo and his school.

“So, what do they teach at a public school?” she asked, casually throwing her bag over her shoulder. Britt eyed the young woman for a moment before providing a succinct answer.

“I’m actually not quite sure anymore, Ms. Baxter, but, although The Public School is still allowed to operate, they are bound to follow a government and corporate-approved curriculum, so at least they aren’t filling kid’s minds with the crap they used to. Look, Ms. Baxter, public education disappeared for a reason, and you’re lucky you never had to experience it. If you don’t believe,” she hooted, “just ask your parents or your grandparents. They will remember the Old Ways even better than I do. I’m sure they can tell you some horror stories.” Britt held the conference room door open and laughed a little too loudly, her voice echoing through the empty school.

As Britt and Fallon exited the building, a few minutes later, the CO turned to her sharply and said, “Goodnight, Ms. Baxter. I know I’ve given you a lot to think about these past few weeks and, I know that, whenever we look into the past, we might have a tendency to question, to want to know a little bit more.” Britt placed her hand firmly on the Fallon’s shoulder, “But, I

promise you, you won't find anything of interest if you start digging into the Old Ways. You're so young. You don't remember what it was like before President Torrance and before the Class War. We are all much better off now, and," she smiled and her voice shifted to a more casual tone, "soon you'll be even better off, too. It wouldn't surprise me if you were one of this year's top performing CPM's. Wouldn't that make you happy?" Britt asked, unlocking her massive SUV at the same moment, forcing Fallon to look at the expensive vehicle and mentally compare it to her own small sedan.

Fallon looked back at her boss and replied, "Yes, I hope so, Ms. Larceny. I really hope so."

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As Fallon neared her apartment building she became aware of a sharp, but not entirely unpleasant odor. She sniffed more purposefully, turning from side to side to identify the scent's source. To her right, the building's small parking lot was deserted save for a number of battered vehicles. To her left, bright orange letters dripped down the dark bricks, the spray paint still visibly wet. Fallon looked around her again, now more carefully, but she was alone in the alley. She read the glowing words quickly over and over again. "*We need not to be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were really bothered? About something important, about something real?*" She stood staring at the words, her head cocked to one side with her hand resting gently on her hip. Her trance was broken as a couple walked by, giggling arm in arm, in front of her. She moved quickly, capturing a photo of the words with her phone before rushing up the building's narrow steps and into the side door. Crouching behind a nearby car, Ellison Williams watched Fallon rush inside, an empty can of orange spray paint clutched between his unsteady hands.

Chapter 12 ½ and 13 ½: The American Meritocracy Dream

In these chapters I wanted to challenge the ideology of meritocracy that dominates the national conversation regarding class, social mobility, and education. In her explanation of the Class War, Britt outlines this mythologized belief: In the United States, if you work hard, you will be successful. Furthermore, it is argued, one's race, ethnicity, language, class, and gender contribute little to one's ability to achieve success. In the United States, however, the mythologizing of the "American Dream" is the way in which inequality is justified. Those who fail to achieve, simply did not work hard enough, concentrating the blame on the individual. Meritocracy insulates the elites and the inherently unequal capitalist structure from critique because people misappropriate their dissatisfaction. The Public Education is Dead campaign sought to capitalize on this mindset, setting up "others" as the cause of the country's vulnerability, economic decline, and failing education system. Although arbitrary prejudices have divided the nation since its inception, these sentiments are even more dangerous in the "post-racial" twenty first century. Malott (2012) argues that these feelings have exacerbated since the bank bailout of 2008. He writes that, despite the ever-growing stratification of wealth in the United States, "the knowledge produced about this trend paints a picture where out of control government spending, fueled by welfare socialism, has created a massive debt thereby choking American workers to death" (p. 20). Furthermore, this critique is racialized as it "assumes it is hard working white Americans who are being exploited by liberal politicians like Obama by giving undeserving lazy minorities their money" (p. 20). I highlighted this thought process in my novel through the PED campaign, in order to emphasize how the society continues to divide itself along arbitrary lines. Setting up African Americans as lazy welfare recipients, teachers are tenured do-nothings, or immigrants as tax-dodging criminals keeps society focused on socially

constructed stereotypes instead of looking for ways in which to band together to fight the true sources of oppression: neoliberalism, the media, and the global elite.

The school system also relies on meritocracy as a way to justify segregation and inequality. The foundational principles of programs like *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* maintain that all students have equal educational opportunities, (or, increasingly, the power to choose a school that offers equal opportunities) when, in reality, this is simply not true. Kozol's (1992, 2005) work provides detailed accounts of the ways in which American schools are sharply divided along racial and class lines, highlighting the de facto segregation that keeps white middle and upper-middle class students in the best schools (many resources, most qualified teachers, safest/newest school buildings), and students of color and students from the poor and working classes in the worst schools (fewer teaching/learning resources, struggling/unsupported teachers, test preparation-focused curriculum, unsafe facilities). Despite the abundance of evidence that points to school segregation and unequal opportunity, the national mythology still posits that education can lead people out of poverty and into a life of prosperity; that education can, and does, equalize all Americans.

These heavily segregated schools rely on two vastly different curriculums, especially in the era of standardization and accountability. Kozol (2005) recounted visiting numerous low income elementary schools where scripted lessons using the language of business and the marketplace were utilized. Students, therefore, were encouraged to be "managers," to evaluate their school work according to its monetary worth, and not to "*engage with knowledge*," but to "possess it" (p. 96). The scripted lessons and the lesson focused primarily on test preparation that prevail at the nation's poorest schools, emphasize the vast difference between how the country educates the wealthy and how the country educates the poor. Kozol summarized: "the general

idea that schools in ghettoized communities must settle for a different set of goals that schools that serve the children of the middle class and upper middle class has been accepted widely” (p. 98). Most damning, however, is not only the practice of educating the classes differently, but that this practice is hidden behind the ideology of the “American Dream.” Kozol explains:

And must of the rhetoric of “rigor” and “high standards” that we hear so frequently, no matter how egalitarian in spirit it may sound to some, is fatally belied by practices that vulgarize the intellects of children and take from their education far too many of the opportunities for cultural and critical reflectiveness without which citizens become receptacles for other people’s ideologies and ways of looking at the world but lack the independent spirits to create their own. (p. 98)

Hosts of examples can be called upon to illustrate the ways in which those in power in The United States implicitly express a disregard for the education and well-being of those outside of the dominant culture. Luckily, however, these students do have advocates and opportunities within the public system. Whether it’s a caring teacher, an innovative principal, or a concerned parent, these students can be helped through the power of public oversight. Unfortunately, as the educational “reforms” continue to revolve around accountability, failure, and choice, parents oftentimes use what little power they have to leave traditional public schools. In my work I alluded to “parent-trigger” laws, which is based on legislation that was passed in California that “forces school districts to completely overhaul a public school or turn it over to a charter is 51% of the parents vote for such a change” (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 35). Coincidentally, the push for choice and charter reform is largely supported by businesses and foundations who serve to gain from the proliferation of charter schools (Fabricant & Fine, 2012, p. 35). Therefore, when parents choose charter schools, they may make this choice as the result of the calculated

propaganda and rhetoric utilized to discredit public schools, as school choice is portrayed as “an opportunity rather than a poor substitute for proper investment in public schools” (Saltman, 2005, p. 150).

In my novel, I questioned what would happen if public oversight (which is already greatly weakened) was completely eradicated. This happened when the public was taken out of schools, and corporations stepped in. Saltman (2005) described a similar process in his study of Edison Schools, a company that attempted to operate for-profit charter schools across the country in the late 1990’s and into the 2000’s. Many of the ideas for my novel and the development Broad Spectrum were inspired by Edison’s business model. For example, Edison’s founder Chris Whittle, the creator of the in-school news program (and its revenue-generating commercials) Channel One, cozied up to government officials, using money and power to buy influence and allow Edison Schools to operate within the public system. Alex Molar (2005) summarized this strategy best, arguing: “Education companies are selling themselves as reformers, but they are in fact lobbyists. While they purport to advocate reforms in the public interest, they in fact lobby for self-serving advantage” (p. 118). Mavis Lovegrove is such a lobbyist; an entrepreneur who realized that education could be big business, and used political connections to sell this idea not only to those in positions of power, but also to the American people.

The Edison Schools promised to do more with less. They vowed to improve test scores, prepare students for their future, and to do this by spending less money than the traditional public school. While their educational goals were admirable, the company’s primary goal, to make money, is what separated them most from traditional public schools. Edison Schools, however, failed to achieve any of their goals and were, therefore, closed. Importantly, the Edison Schools were not shut down only because they weren’t financially successful, but also

because the public challenged the schools when they failed to meet their purported achievement goals. In my work, however, I weakened public oversight to the point that, if they chose, schools could operate purely to make a profit, while still claiming meritocracy as the guiding principle behind educational opportunity. In a school system where neoliberalism is the guiding ideology, profit-making is the school's most important function. Dave Hill (2012) explains the role of neoliberal capitalism in schools: "The capitalist agenda *for* education centers on socially producing labor-power (people's capacity to labor) for capitalist enterprises. The capitalist agenda *in* education focuses on setting business "free" in education for profit-making" (p. 79). Broad Spectrum schools operate according to both of these agendas, but I focused primarily on the "profit-making" capabilities of schools.

In the imagined future of my novel, I determined that Broad Spectrum needed to develop a method for guaranteeing profits, as relocating public money would quickly fail to earn the type of profits public companies demand. As a result, I redefined the teacher's job to be that of a salesperson. Students are already subjected to advertising and corporate influences in schools, but I created an environment in which companies had unrestricted access to students, a prime marketing demographic. According to the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (2016), "companies spend about \$17 billion annually marketing to children." I theorized, therefore, that this kind of capital could easily be funneled into corporate schools, with Broad Spectrum's curriculum program monitors focusing their energies on selling screen time and advertising space instead of teaching. Alex Molnar (1996, 2005) has emerged as one of the most prominent voices speaking out against the commercialization of schools, arguing that schools are increasingly educating students to be consumers, not citizens, as the freedom to consume is slowly overshadowed by freedoms inherent in democratic life. Saltman (2000) similarly argues

that as the need to consume dominates American lives, “it produces desire in the service of assimilation, homogeneity, the abandonment of individual uniqueness; it tends toward massification, undifferentiation, brutal acriticality, and docility” (p. 69). As students spend increasingly more time with technology, their exposure to advertising grows, further solidifying their role as consumer. The drive to consume diverts attention from some of the most important aspects of life: critique, creativity, and empathy. With this in mind, I chose to include a quote from Ray Bradbury’s (1953) *Fahrenheit 451*. Guy Montag, the story’s protagonist, frustrated and confused after witnessing a woman burned to death over her books, lashes out at his technology and drug-addled wife: “We need not be let alone. We need to be really bothered once in a while. How long is it since you were *really* bothered? About something important, about something real?” (p. 52). This sentiment is what needs to be fostered in schools, not quelled by a never-ending stream of corporate curricula, high-stakes tests, and distracting propaganda.

Chapter 14: “Hell, Yes!”

Cam, Ellis, and the rest of the SAFE members rushed to Gloria as she shouted and corralled everyone at the center of the room.

“We’ve got a situation here!” She yelled again.

“What’s up, Glor? What can I do?” Ellison asked, pushing his way to the center of the group. Cam hung back, not sure if he could be of any help and running through a list of potential “situations” that could affect a group like SAFE, all of which left him unsettled. He’d said he was in, but was he really *in in*? Cam didn’t have much time to think, however, as Gloria glanced at the group that had assembled around her, and then quickly back to her phone.

Without looking up, she barked, “We need the TV! Channel seven!” Two recruits went running across the room to an old set, and one fumbled with the remote. The group gathered around the television, some even perched on Henry Arlo’s old sofa. Gloria stood near the group, still engrossed in her phone.

“What is it, Gloria?” Ellison questioned again.

“Hush,” she said to Ellison, waving her hand absently in his direction.

The channel was currently airing a popular afternoon gameshow, but the laughing contestants were abruptly cut off and a voiceover announced, “This is a news seven special report.” Todd and Beverly, Savannah’s favorite newscasters, came into the frame. Beverly was smoothing her dress and Todd was adjusting his tie, evidence that they had not been expecting to be on camera so soon. Always professionals though, they both smiled at the camera and Todd began.

“Good afternoon, Savannah. I’m Todd Brixton.”

“And I’m Beverly Tatum. We are coming to you live ahead of our scheduled five o’clock broadcast to bring you a story we have been following for a number of weeks: the disappearance

of local man Henry Arlo.” Everyone in the SAFE headquarters turned to look at Cam who desperately gripped the edge of the sofa, making eye contact only with news seven’s Beverly Tatum.

“We have a reporter on the scene in downtown Savannah,” Todd Brixton continued. The screen split, and Cam recognized the ambitious young reporter who had relentlessly pursued his truck when his father was first reported missing.

“Thank you Todd and Beverly,” she began. “I’m standing in Savannah’s historic Johnson Square just blocks from NWE headquarters. Just a short time ago, Henry Arlo was taken into NWE custody. We have exclusive video of his arrival at the station.” Cam tensed as his father was led, in handcuffs, past a throng of reporters. *No matter how “unexpected” the news is, those vultures always manage to capture it live*, Cam thought. Henry’s face was unshaven and his white hair disheveled. Cam noticed his dad’s rumpled and torn clothes were the same he had worn during their last encounter.

As the reporters shouted at Henry trying to get a statement, he turned toward the camera and bellowed, “El’s Bells! Now is the time!” but the NWE officers escorting him prodded him forward and into the station before he could say more. The reporter returned to the screen.

“Those working closely with lead detectives Smith and Wesson report that Arlo was found in a beach cottage on Tybee Island. Based on that brief clip, it appears that Henry Arlo could very well be mentally unstable.” Beverly now interrupted the field reporter.

“Was Arlo being held there against his will?”

“Good question, Beverly,” she answered confidently. “Our viewers will recall that Arlo’s disappearance was previously thought to be the result of a violent encounter. Our sources report,

however, that Arlo may have staged his own disappearance, even spattering his own blood on the scene to make it look like a kidnapping.”

“Why would he stage his own kidnapping?” Todd asked.

“It appears,” the reporter began, “that Arlo skipped town to avoid arrest after engaging in subversive activities.”

“How did the NWE locate him?” Todd questioned again. The camera zoomed out, and Hal Ledon, outfitted in his signature black cowboy boots, stood confidently next to the young reporter.

“An old friend of Henry Arlo’s, Mr. Hal Ledon, first brought his concerns to the NWE, and he joins me now. Mr. Ledon, please tell me about your relationship with Henry Arlo.”

“Good afternoon, darlin’ and good afternoon, Savannah,” he smiled directly into the camera. The young reporter blushed, which made Lee smile even wider. “As you said, I’m an *old* friend of Henry’s,” he chuckled, “because I, too, work in the education business. Now, I always knew Henry was a little bit different, runnin’ a public school and all, but I never dreamed he would organize against the government.”

“When did you start to become suspicious of him?” the reporter interjected eagerly. Lee’s face fell dramatically.

“I guess it was around the time his wife passed,” he answered. “You know what grief can do to a man. I didn’t worry about it too much at first; I figured it would ease up with time, but, when I paid him a visit a few weeks ago, he kept talkin’ about the Old Ways, dredging up things from before the Class War.” He paused for dramatic affect. “So, shoot, when I found out he was missing, I went right to the NWE. Something just didn’t smell right about it.” Lee looked sincerely into the camera, and the reporter patted his arm lightly.

“I’m sure the officers were grateful for your help, Mr. Ledon. Cameron Arlo, Henry’s son, remains missing. Do you have any theories on his disappearance or whereabouts? Do you think he and his father were both involved in subversive acts?”

Lee looked at the reporter and said coolly into the camera, “I saw Cam hours before he disappeared and, I hate to say it, but it certainly seemed like he was leanin’ that way. I wanted to help him run his school, for the good of the kids, you know, but he flat out refused my offer. And, before I knew it, he was gone, too.” Lee stared earnestly at the reporter.

She held his arm again and whispered, “I know this must be hard for you, Lee. Please let me know if there’s anything, *anything*, I can do to help.” Todd Brixton cleared his throat loudly to remind the reporter she was still on live TV. “Oh, yes,” she stammered. New Ways Enforcement officers Smith and Wesson have issued a warrant for the arrest of Cameron Arlo. His whereabouts are currently unknown, but the NWE are vigorously searching his home and the Public School and questioning his known associates for clues. If anyone has information on his whereabouts, take a page from Mr. Ledon’s book, and please come forward.”

“Cameron Arlo may be armed and he may be dangerous. Please, don’t hesitate to call the NWE if you see him or have any information,” Lee interjected.

“Thank you, Mr. Ledon,” the reporter replied. “Now back to you, Todd and Beverly.” Before the news feed went back to the studio, Hal Ledon could be seen whispering something in the reporter’s ear, eliciting a high pitched giggle from the young woman.

“Wow, that story just keeps getting better and better,” Beverly marveled. “It’s worth noting that report came to you live from Johnson Square, the site of the infamous 2031 conflict between the rebels and the U.S. army; the conflict that left over one hundred rebels dead and was just one of many battles across the country that day.” Beverly shuddered visibly. “That story

brought back memories of the Class War. Dark times.” She shook her head, “Dark times indeed.”

“You’re certainly right, Beverly,” Todd said. The anchors remained silent for two beats, contemplating the report.

Then, Beverly smiled and continued brightly, “In other news, it was a scorcher out there today! So hot that this little guy,” a small pink pig wearing a swim trunks filled the screen, “was caught cooling off in the fountains in Ellis Square!”

“Can you believe that?” Todd marveled. “He was going hog wild!”

“Turn that crap off,” Gloria spat, and within seconds the bubbly anchors were silenced.

“What are we going to do?” Cam asked in a daze, still staring at the black television screen.

“We’re going to finish what Henry started,” El said proudly. “You heard him. We’re going to go through with El’s Bells.” Some of the SAFE members clapped and others whooped enthusiastically in agreement. “Right, Gloria?” Ellison called, smiling hopefully. She glanced, unsmiling, at the young man, her expression difficult to read. “Right, Gloria?” he asked again, his smile wavering slightly.

She held his stare for a moment longer, and replied softly, “Hell, yes.” Ellison grinned at her as she said more forcefully, “Hell, yes. Hell, yes!” The SAFE crew rallied around Gloria chanting, and Dewey even emitted a few celebratory barks. Once the cheering died down, people continued to talk excitedly over each other. As members of the group began to rush off to their respective work stations, Cam shrugged at Dewey who sat attentively at his feet. The dog had a mission of his own, it appeared, and licked Cam’s leg affectionately before trotting over to the plaid sofa in search of a comfy cushion.

“Thanks a lot,” Cam called after him. After standing dumbly with his hands in his pockets for another minute, Cam moved toward Ellison. He was giving instructions to a small group, but nodded to Cam as he approached.

“All right, I want y’all to reach out to our affiliates in Atlanta, Charlotte, and Miami. We want everyone in the South to be ready to mobilize quickly. Got it?” The group indicated they did and headed off.

“Hey, El,” Cam started. “What can I do to help?”

Ellison opened his mouth, but Gloria, who had appeared by his side seconds before, answered.

“You can sit tight,” she said.

“Gloria, everyone is making calls, organizing, mobilizing,” Cam protested, imitating Ellison’s language.

“I understand that, Cameron,” Gloria said, “but those people aren’t wanted by the NWE.” Ellison placed his hand firmly on Cam’s shoulder.

“Look, Cam, I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but we have to be smart about this if we’re going to pull off El’s Bells. So, just sit tight, like Gloria said, and I’m sure we’ll find something you can do from here.” Cam shrugged off El’s hand and skulked over to the sofa.

He rubbed Dewey’s head and grumbled, “What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Chapter 15: And Now a Message from our Corporate Sponsors

“Line up, line up,” Gus Winters snarled at the students in the crowded atrium. “Line up, you bastards,” he continued, swatting at the air with an old ruler like a deranged conductor. As the students reluctantly began to fall in line behind Gus, he tapped Jasmine on the shoulder with the edge of his ruler. “Hey, Eight-Oh-Four, I’ll be watching you extra careful today, so no funny business, *capiche?*” Jasmine nodded, moving quickly to the back of the line. Fallon listened to this exchange from two rows away, but focused on her tablet, reviewing her own list of charges for the day. Gus, disregarding Fallon’s standoffish body language, yelled in her direction, “Baxter! Baxter!” Unable to ignore him any longer, Fallon glanced his way. As soon as their eyes met, he said, “Check out my new toy.” He twirled the wooden ruler neatly between his fingers. Fallon smiled weakly, enough encouragement for Gus. “You know, these were the weapon of choice in schools about one hundred years ago. Sure, these guys,” he gestured to the school security officers lingering near the exits, “have semi-automatics, but there’s something special about this.” He grinned and thrashed the ruler sharply back and forth like a sword. “That’s gotta hurt,” he mused as the narrow piece of wood hummed through the air. Fallon nodded curtly, searching the room for anyone who might rescue her from this unsolicited conversation. “Your first field trip,” Gus said, glancing at Fallon’s line of students. “You’ve got a pretty decent group here, but still don’t let them out of your sight. Something happens to ‘em when they get out of this building.” He tossed the ruler from hand to hand. “That’s why I brought this little baby along.” He turned abruptly toward his line of students, taunting them with the ruler. “I’m thinking hand-lashings might just make a comeback today.” Movement by the front doors averted Gus’s attention, and Fallon glided quietly down the line of students. “There’s the warden,” he said to the space Fallon had just occupied. “Yeah, good idea,” he recovered. “It

looks like we're about to get this show on the road, so I better count my kids again too." Fallon continued to move away from Gus, thankful Britt's interruption. She continued to find herself stuck with him during their daily rounds, and, although she had politely declined his invitations for after-work drinks, he persisted, always insinuating that her job depended on being in his good graces. CO Larceny stood at the front of the group and called for everyone's attention.

"Good morning, ladies and gentleman," she began. "Today, you have been selected, because of your strong performance on the quarter's learning modules, to go on a field trip to visit two of Broad Spectrum's learning partners: Georgia Pacific® and McDonald's®. Broad Spectrum works with many other successful companies to offer you all real-world learning experiences like this, so I know you will take full advantage of this excellent opportunity. Your CPM's are prepared with exciting cross-curricular lessons. Please follow them to the busses and have a great day!" Britt led her students out of the former jail. It was still dark outside, but she hoped she might get a glimpse of the sun on their way back. As the bus lumbered through the city, Fallon reviewed the day's lesson entitled, *Georgia Pacific®: Responsibly Meeting America's Greatest Needs*. It began with instructions for the CPM's:

Dear Educator, Today you will take your students on a tour of one of the most interesting and vibrant businesses in Southeast Georgia: The Georgia Pacific® Company. The following lesson was created by our in-house education team and provides you and your students with an unprecedented look at one of America's most prominent industries.

Beneath the introduction, the lesson's learning objectives were listed:

- Students will identify the role of paper-products in their lives
- Students will understand how paper is made
- Students will understand how Georgia Pacific® positively impacts their community

- Students will understand how Georgia Pacific® conserves the environment
- Students will evaluate how Georgia Pacific® compares to other, similar, companies
- Students will create an informational campaign to inform their community about Georgia Pacific®

Beneath the learning objectives, began the CPM script.

CPM: Good morning, students. Today we will tour one of the Savannah's most important landmarks, The Georgia Pacific ® Company. Can anyone tell me how they use paper products in their lives? *[Wait for student answers. Acceptable answers include: paper, paper napkins, paper towels, facial tissue, etc.]*. That's right! We sure use paper in a lot of ways, and many of these products are made in our very own community by Georgia Pacific®. Our educational program center chooses to use Georgia Pacific products exclusively because not only does the company support our local economy by providing jobs, but Georgia Pacific® always employs the highest standard of environmentally-friendly business practices in the paper industry to guarantee the health of our planet for generations to come.

Fallon sighed and tried to figure out how she could make the canned script sounds more natural.

"Don't stress so much, Baxter," Gus, who had managed to snag a seat next to her on the bus and to innocently slide into her during each turn, interrupted. "You just read the words on the screen. Believe me these kids aren't going to ask any questions. They're just waiting for the end of the tour so they can strap on the feed bags at McDonald's." He pulled something up on his tablet, and motioned for Fallon to take a look. "After a few trips, you'll be just like me," he smiled proudly. "I've practically got this thing memorized." Fallon skimmed the text of Gus's

lesson: *A Healthier World through Fast Food*. “Every year they change the script to update the number of burgers sold, but that’s about it,” Gus said.

“Thank you, Mr. Winters,” Fallon replied, returning to her own lesson.

Gus snorted and shook his head, “New CPM’s. You’re all alike, but you don’t have much longer to cram because we’re almost there.” He took a deep breath and pointed out the window. Fallon followed his finger to The Village gates. “There’s home sweet home for most of these kids,” Gus explained. “Take a look at that place and you can see why these kids are so bad. Just products of their environment, I guess.” Gus droned on, but Fallon studied The Village, only half-listening. A few seats away, Jasmine also eyed the neighborhood, thinking of ways to sneak away from the field trip and back into her bed. After her rough first day of school, Jasmine, as promised, committed to the part of docile BS student, completing learning module after learning module. The quizzes at the end of each module only required her to parrot information that had been drilled into her brain moments earlier. All in all, being a BS student didn’t take too much effort. She even found herself looking forward to finishing a module, mostly because she was rewarded with a few minutes of computer gaming time. Her favorite was a shopping game where she had two minute to rush through Publix looking for specific items like Cool Ranch Doritos®, Minute Made Lemonade®, and Colgate® toothpaste. She had gotten so fast that, last week, the game even e-mailed her a coupon for a free bag of Nabisco Oreos®.

On their nightly ride back to The Village, she shared her good fortune with her uncle, but he only shook his head and muttered, “This is exactly the kind of nonsense we’re fighting against.” She had rolled her eyes at him. She had grown more accustomed to his outbursts and knew not to push him. Things hadn’t been exactly right between them since the first day of school. He had stopped dropping by her house and when she saw him at school, he barely

acknowledged her existence. This morning, however, he had been in a rare good mood, whistling happily as they sat next to each other on the way to BSEPC-CCD. Maybe he finally got a girlfriend, Jasmine mused as the bus pulled up to Georgia Pacific's visitors entrance.

"All right, kiddos," Gus hollered from the front of the bus. "I want you walking in single file lines. No talking, no laughing, no horseplay of any kind." He scanned the seats, pausing significantly on a few faces, including Jasmine's. "Remember," he continued. "If, and only if, you don't act like a bunch of little shits in there, will we stop at McDonald's after the tour. Got it? Good."

Gus waddled down the narrow aisle and Fallon followed reluctantly behind him. Jasmine watched his Gus's retreat and blurted out, "Hopefully you'll leave some burgers for us, fat ass!" She clapped her hand over her mouth as the bus fell silent. The silence was broken in seconds, however, as the students erupted into uncontrolled laughter. The corner of Fallon's mouth turned up slightly and she was relieved her back was still turned to the students. Gus stopped short, tightly gripping the rounded tops of the seats, his shoulders heaving. He turned around slowly and smiled strangely at the busload of students.

"It seems, Miss Baxter," he began evenly, "We have a comedian in our midst."

Fallon, hoping to diffuse the situation, shrugged lightly and said, "You know how kids are, Mr. Winters. Let's just get on with the trip. I'm sure," she turned to the group, "we won't have any more outbursts today."

She glanced at Jasmine for a fraction of a second before Gus interrupted, "Oh, I *know* how kids are, Ms. Baxter. I *know* how these lazy, ignorant, good-for-nothing kids are." His voice strengthened with each insult. "Living in these slums," he flung his arms out. "Living in these slums never going to amount to anything, that should be punishment enough, a lifetime of

punishment for ‘em, but, they’re always asking for more. No, Ms. Baxter,” he screeched and Fallon wasn’t sure if he was angrier with her or the offending student, “I don’t bust my *fat* ass,” he emphasized, “each and every day so these little brats can insult me and get away with it. No, ma’am, I don’t.” Gus shook his head forcefully from side to side and raised his index finger to the crowd. “So, we’re going to head back to the school and, I promise you, before we get back, I’m going to know who did this and you, oh you,” he laughed, “are going to see exactly what my fat ass can do.”

Gus turned around quickly and stood face to face with Fallon.

“Please,” he said, his chest still heaving, “get back to your seat, Miss Baxter.” Fallon hastily averted her eyes and shuffled to the vacant seat. As she slid quickly across the bench, Gus looked over the bus again and shouted, “Driver, back to the school, and make it quick. I’m hungry, real hungry, and there’s only one thing that’s going to feed this appetite!” Fallon watched a grin spread across her colleague’s face and her mind immediately flashed between the thin splinter-filled ruler and student number 804, Jasmine Williams. Fallon recognized the girl’s voice immediately as it called out inside the cavernous bus, but even though she knew she should, she didn’t intend on sharing this information with Gus. As he dropped heavily next to her in the seat, she pushed aside her revulsion and gently touched his arm.

“Gus, listen,” she whispered. “I’m sorry about that kid. You’re right, a total brat. You’re probably going to want an extra drink tonight, so,” she swallowed in a vain attempt to appease her dry throat, “why don’t you let me get you one?” Gus eyed her skeptically. “I’m serious, Gus,” she continued, applying slightly more pressure to his arm. “After you tell Larceny about what happened, she’ll probably even let us get off a little early. What do you say?”

He pondered her request for a few moments and placed his hand firmly on her leg before responding, “You know, Baxter, you’re right. I’m really going to need a drink after I kick the shit out this kid, so, yes, I would be happy for you to accompany me for a drink after work. Maybe a drink will even turn into dinner? Who knows?” He smiled at Fallon and squeezed her knee before cupping his hands around his lips and shouting to the driver again, “Hurry up, honey. We’re not getting any younger over here, and I’ve got a date tonight!”

Fallon focused her attention out the window, mentally kicking herself for thinking her ploy would work. Gus might be a lecher, but he wasn’t an idiot, and now Jasmine was still in danger and she was stuck going for drinks with her repulsive co-worker. Fallon racked her brain for an illness she could develop in thirty minutes or less as the bus rolled down the school’s long driveway. She squinted as the sun, now up in earnest, shined directly into her eyes, momentarily blocking the campus from view. The bus slowed down and Fallon craned her neck and shaded her eyes to catch a glimpse of whatever was blocking the road.

The students seated nearby began to whisper animatedly and the bus driver murmured, “What in the hell?” now bringing the bus to a complete stop. Gus jumped up and moved briskly down the aisle.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he questioned impatiently, but the driver only pointed up to the deserted guard tower. Red, spray-painted letters, each two to three feet high, jumped down the side of the tower: *“Making money, making money, making money, making money, making money’s for the birds. If it wasn’t for making money, we’d be making love not war, honey. Fuck what ya heard.”*

As Gus gaped at the message, Fallon stealthily took out her phone and snapped a picture of the words to add to her growing collection. The students, now jostling for window seats to see the profane message for themselves, brought Gus out of his trance. He whirled around.

“Sit down and shut up,” he shouted. Turning back to the immobile driver, he said, “What are you waiting for? Move!” With Gus glowering over her shoulder, the driver quickly put the bus back in gear and headed down the remaining stretch of pavement. Before the bus came to a complete stop, Gus bounded down the steps, calling “Nobody move! Baxter,” he threw his thumb over his shoulder, “Follow me!” Hardly recognizing her name, Fallon scrambled after him, nearly tripping over her shoes in her haste. Gus and Fallon rushed up to the school’s sidewalk, where CO Larceny stood waving her arms passionately at the school’s custodian.

“Ellison, how could you be so careless? You left the padlock off the gate last night, and look what happened. We’ve been, we’ve been,” she searched for the right word, “vandalized!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Larceny, the custodian replied. “I could have sworn I locked it, though.” Before he could continue, she shouted to Gus and Fallon as they came into her sightline.

“What the hell are you two doing back so early?” Fallon hung back, quickly realizing their impromptu return was unwelcome to the harried CO.

“Ms. Larceny,” Gus began. “We had an incident on the bus and a student’s behavior forced us to return early.”

“What kind of behavior?” Larceny asked. Gus did not reply. “What kind of behavior, Gus?” she asked again more pointedly. Gus remained silent, pursing his lips to give the impression of deep thought. “Fallon,” Larceny snapped in the young CPM’s direction. “What kind of behavior caused Mr. Winters to call off the field trip before it even started?”

“A student rudely commented on Mr. Winters’ fat ass, Ms. Larceny,” Fallon responded quickly, avoiding eye contact with both her colleague and her superior. Gus’s face fell as the words left Fallon’s mouth and CO Larceny laughed in Gus’s direction.

“Dammit, Gus,” she said. “You’re telling me that you canceled field trips, contractually obligated field trips to two of our most important clients, because some kid insulted you. Come on!” She brought her voice down slightly and continued, “In case you didn’t notice when you pulled in,” she gestured fiercely toward the guard tower, “I’m kind of in the middle a situation here, and you pick today, *today*,” she emphasized, “to have a hissy fit!”

“Britt, listen,” Gus said, but was cut off before he could plead his case.

“Enough!” Larceny stopped him. “Gus, I don’t have time to babysit my CPM’s, so, I suggest you make yourself scarce for the rest of the day. Fallon, take the students inside and have them continue with their modules. Make sure they work silently. You need to shut down any discussion of this vandalism, and, Fallon, if you can’t keep them quiet, alert one of the security guards to apply a little more pressure. Any chatter needs to be quashed immediately, understood?” Fallon nodded at Britt. “Ellison” the CO turned her attention toward to custodian. “Get a painting crew up to that tower immediately. Mr. Ledon’s scheduled to arrive in a few hours and *that*,” she gestured to the guard tower again, “better be gone.” With that, Britt turned on her heel and flung open one of the center’s doors with such force that its handle smashed into the side of the building with a metallic clang.

Alone of the sidewalk Falon spoke first, “Gus, about that drink—”

“Fuck off, Fallon,” he cut in before she could finish. “I tried to welcome you into this school, but now you’ve made an enemy. A powerful enemy.” Fallon and Ellison watched Gus skulk off to his car, cursing violently as he went.

“Hey, Ellison? It’s Ellison, right?” Fallon asked.

“Yeah, you got it,” he responded.

“Jasmine, student 8-0-4, you’re related, right?”

“Jaz is my niece,” he returned.

“She’s the one who caused the scene on the bus,” Fallon said. Ellison thought he detected laughter in her voice, but he couldn’t be certain. He didn’t respond, but looked at Fallon out of the corner of his eye. She was smirking.

“She really got him”, Fallon continued. “But I think he knows it was her, and, if that’s the case, then she’s got a target on her back.” The two stood in silence for another few moments.

“Thanks, Fallon. It’s Fallon, right?”

“Right,” she answered.

“Funny,” Ellison mused, “about that guard tower.”

“Yeah,” Fallon returned. “Really gives you something to think about.” As Ellison turned to leave, he bent down, pointing to the spotless pavement.

“I think you dropped something,” he said. When he stood up, he placed a small white card in Fallon’s hand.

“Oh, thanks, I guess I did,” she replied, and then glanced at the card quickly before slipping it into her back pocket.

Chapter 16: The Business of Education (Part III)

Afternoons at BSEPC-CCD were usually long, but on the day of the botched field trip time moved especially slow as Fallon walked aimlessly through the rows of computers. The students were surprisingly compliant despite missing out on the field trip, for which Fallon was extremely thankful. Although she gave the impression of monitoring the students' work, her mind wandered obsessively to the card nestled in her back pocket. She was certain that everyone in the room could see its outline, but willed herself not to feel for it. Besides, she knew it was still there. While in reality the card was practically weightless, to Fallon it felt like a brick lodged inside the thin fabric of her pants. She was acutely aware of her every move, afraid even the smallest deviation from her normal routine would betray her secret. Ellison had been discreet, but, she feared that school's security cameras had picked up the exchange; cameras Britt could be reviewing in her office right now. Even though she knew the one-way glass encasing Larceny's office made monitoring her actions nearly impossible, Fallon couldn't stop herself. As a result, she stretched casually while monitoring the back row of computers. She placed her hands on her hips and arched her back, half closing her eyes. Through her eyelashes, she surveyed the dark windows, hoping, at the very least, to catch the CO's exit. As she moved through the rows of students, Fallon clenched and unclenched her fists to mask her trembling fingers. She was angry at Gus for his belligerent attitude toward the students and, later, toward her. She was scared for Jasmine and the prospect of Gus's vendetta, but, mostly, she was confused by her own careless behavior. Why had she protected Jasmine's identity? Why had she embarrassed Gus in front of Ms. Larceny? Why had she taken the card from Ellison? These questions rolled in a loop through her brain until, suddenly, a bell sounded, signaling the end of the day. Apparently she hadn't been as in tune to her surroundings as she thought.

“See you all tomorrow,” she called weakly at the students as they piled toward the exit. As she tucked in chairs and straightened the keyboards, she felt someone move behind her. She glanced in the darkened computer screen and identified Jasmine’s reflection. “Yes?” Fallon asked, busying herself by lining up the computer mice at precisely the same angle to hide her anxiety. Jasmine hesitated, but Fallon did not push her.

“I just wanted to say thanks,” Jasmine whispered. “Thanks for the bus.” Fallon stopped working for a moment and turned to face the young girl.

“I don’t know what good it’s going to do,” Fallon said, “but you’re welcome.” Fallon looked meaningfully into Jasmine’s eyes for a moment before returning to her work.

Jasmine shifted her weight from foot to foot and said, “Yeah, well, you still didn’t have to. I don’t think any other adult around here would’ve.” Fallon nodded gratefully, but kept her head bent over the computers, trying to formulate an adequate response.

“Look, Jasmine, this place isn’t—”

“Isn’t what?” CO Larceny suddenly appeared next to Fallon. Fallon quickly looked up and scanned the room for Jasmine.

“She’s gone,” the CO submitted. “What were you two talking about anyway?” Fallon answered automatically.

“Oh, she was finally apologizing for her behavior on open for business day.” Fallon grew more confident with her story and added, “I was about to tell her that this isn’t the kind of place where a person won’t be forgiven for her mistakes.” Fallon thought of the card in her pocket and hoped that this was true.

“Excellent,” Britt replied, clearly satisfied. “You see,” the CO pointed to where Jasmine stood, “there’s a young lady who’s really benefiting from the BS system. She had a rough start,

but now she's completing modules and learning and maturing through the process. That's what we're here for, Ms. Baxter, and after a day like today, that's nice to see." Fallon nodded in agreement and wondered aloud.

"Ms. Larceny, I bet it has been a rough day for you, so I understand if you want to cancel our class tonight." The CO assured Fallon the class would go on as scheduled.

"Crisis management is just another part of a BS CO's job. Besides," she started to say as the distinct echo of heeled shoes filled the atrium, "Mr. Ledon traveled all the way here to speak to you this afternoon, and that's something you certainly don't want to miss." As she finished, Hal Ledon, whom Fallon recognized from the BS literature, joined their conversation.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he bowed, smiling into his gleaming black boots. "You must be Ms. Baxter," he added, extending his hand to Fallon. He placed both of his hands warmly around Fallon's. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I look forward to getting to know you this evening, but, before I do, I'd like to have just a teensy," he held his thumb and index finger close together, meetin' with your CO, if that's all right with you?" Before Fallon could reply, he assumed her consent and politely ordered, "Why don't you meet us in, oh, about twenty minutes?" Lee released Fallon's hand and quickly moved to Britt, placing his palm gently on her back to help guide her up the school's massive staircase.

As the two BS leaders retreated, Fallon croaked, "Ok," certain Mr. Ledon was not listening for, nor had he expected, a reply from the novice CPM.

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Fallon's hands shook wildly and she missed the lock twice before the key finally staggered in. She pushed through her office door and closed it quickly behind her, making sure to lock it from the inside, decisively thumping the handle twice to gauge its hold before moving

to her desk. She threw herself in the chair, shoving her hands firmly under her thighs to keep them still while she thought. She could easily leave the card in her pants until the weekend, laundering it until it was just another fuzzy wad of paper wedged in her pocket, indistinguishable from an old receipt or a gum wrapper. She could march down the hall and show the card to Ms. Larceny and Mr. Ledon, or she could return it to Ellison, tell him that she made a mistake, she wasn't interested. None of these options seemed exactly right, however, so she cautiously raised one side of her body and reached inside of her pocket.

She rubbed the textured paper between her thumb and forefinger for a moment before counting down, "Three, two, one." On one, she ripped the card from her pocket and placed it face up on her desk. She had involuntarily shut her eyes, but now forced them open to read the disappointingly sparse text more carefully. In the center of the card black capital letters read, SAFE. Beneath that the acronym was explained: Savannah Area Freedom Educators. The only other text on the card was a short quote: "Education as the practice of freedom," which was attributed to someone named Paolo Freire. The quote reminded her of the dorm bathroom, the wall outside of her apartment building, and most recently, the side of the BSEPC-CCD guard tower. She flipped the card over where a handwritten note read: *If you want to know more, meet tomorrow 10:00 PM- 300 W. River St.*

Fallon turned the card between her fingers, carefully reading it each time, despite having already memorized the words. After completing this ritual at least a dozen times, she stood up, put the card back in her pocket, gathered her course materials and left her office. She walked purposefully toward the conference room, not wanting to be late for her fourth BS certification class. Voices carried into the hallway, however, prompting Fallon to relax her pace significantly.

“Mavis is not happy, Britt,” Lee warned.

“We covered it up quickly, Lee,” Brit said. “Very quickly, and I’m hiring additional security and I’ve already reprimanded the custodian who left the gate unlocked. I’m doing everything I can here to protect our school, but I think the *best* thing we can do is maintain business as usual.” Fallon diverted from her original path, hugging the wall outside of the conference room to avoid detection. From inside the room, Lee made a shushing sound.

“Calm down, Britt,” he said. “Shoot, I know you didn’t *mean to* leave the school vulnerable to a subversive tagging; you didn’t *mean to* threaten everything we’ve worked so hard to maintain for the last twenty years. I know you didn’t *mean to*,” he said again mocking what he perceived as Britt’s excuses. “Look, Britt, the business of education is the foundation of our society, and if they’re not strong, the economy’s not strong and our country’s not strong. Sure, the media isn’t going to report this incident, but, between you and me, things like this are not just happening in Savannah; they’re happening all across the country. This is bigger than Henry and Cam Arlo and The Public School. Much bigger.” His voice intensified, “And, if we want to squash this, I mean really squash this, you’re gonna have to do a hell of a lot better than additional security.”

Fallon inched away from door, afraid that, at any moment, Lee or Britt would walk outside and find her there eavesdropping. Working quickly, Fallon edged further down the hallway, took a deep breath and threw herself onto the floor.

As she, along with the books and papers she was carrying, spilled onto the floor, she cried out, “Oh, my!” definitively alerting her instructors of her presence. Lee and Britt quickly appeared in the hallway, staring down at Fallon who was splayed out on the linoleum. She

looked up at them innocently and lamented, “I’m just so clumsy sometimes! I literally tripped over my own feet!”

Lee bent down to help her and said, “Well, Ms. Baxter, you certainly know how to make an entrance. And,” he looked at his watch, “Right on time, too!” He laughed and offered his hand to Fallon, pulling her easily from the floor. She brushed off her pants, lingering for a moment over the SAFE card. Fallon settled into her seat as Lee deposited her spilled belongings on the table. He picked up his own book and carefully inspected the cover. “Do I really look that old, Ms. Baxter?” he asked in mock horror. Fallon opened her mouth to speak, but Lee cut her off. “I’m just kiddin’, Ms. Baxter. Shoot, don’t answer that. Do not answer that,” he repeated and hooted with laughter, tossing the book back onto the pile. Britt rolled her eyes at this exchange, but smiled brightly when Lee turned to face her. “Ms. Larceny,” he began. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty of work to do, so, please, let me take care of Ms. Baxter. She’s in good hands, don’t you think?”

“Of course, Mr. Ledon,” she replied. Fallon noted that their speech was more formal now that they had a visible audience. Britt and Lee watched each other for a few moments longer before the CO turned to go. “Oh, Fallon, one more thing,” “We just got word that Broad Spectrum is hosting a media event on Saturday night at The Public School. I would like all of my CPM’s there to support the company and our latest initiative. I can’t go into too much detail now, but I’ll need you there by seven o’clock, OK?”

“Yes, sure,” Fallon responded as she tried to figure out exactly what a “media event” was.

“Excellent,” the CO replied. “I look forward to seeing you there.” As Britt closed the door, Lee smiled devilishly at Fallon.

“Sometimes I get the feelin’ she doesn’t trust me,” he said. “She’s a great lady, Ms. Larceny, but she’s real by the book,” he made air quotes around the words. “I guess I’m not exactly known for followin’ protocol, so that could account for her, what would you call it?” he scratched his chin thoughtfully, “*trepidation*.” His eyes glinted proudly. “But, hell,” he continued, “as far as I’m concerned, if you’re not willin’ to rattle a couple of cages, you’ve got no place in the business of education, especially in an innovative company like Broad Spectrum.” He looked back at Fallon trying to gauge her allegiance before moving on. “That’s strictly my opinion, of course,” he held his hands out apologetically, “Miss Mavis makes the big decisions, you know, and I just execute ‘em.”

He winked at Fallon, now beginning his lesson in earnest. “So, Ms. Baxter, you’ve been a Broad Spectrum employee for a few weeks now. How do you like it?” CO Larceny rarely addressed Fallon during her lectures, so Lee’s question caught Fallon a bit off guard.

“Um,” she stammered. Lee folded his arms patiently and waited for her to answer. “It’s certainly been interesting,” she remarked, hoping to put a positive spin on her misgivings. Lee considered her answer for a moment and then perched casually on top of the table, inches from where she sat.

He leaned close to her face and said, “You don’t have to sugarcoat it, darlin’. There’s a reason Broad Spectrum has such a rigorous hiring and training program. It’s simply not for everyone. But,” he raised his index finger proudly, “I get the feelin’ that you’re one of the good ones; one of the CPM’s who’s going to make it. So,” he slapped his thigh, “Let’s get down to business.”

“While teaching kids will always be part of the Broad Spectrum corporate mission,” Lee said earnestly, “the company began dabbling in corporate partnerships shortly after the passage

of FreeME. By providing advertising space for our school's corporate sponsors, Broad Spectrum not only reimagined American schooling, but also re-energized many of America's most important companies. You see, kids and teenagers are some of the nation's most voracious consumers. And where do these kids spend most of their time? Ding, ding, ding, you got it," he shouted, imitating a gameshow host, "in school! But, before President Torrance, before Miss Mavis, and before FreeME, this market was largely closed off to advertisers. Fortunately, our wise leaders in business and in the government recognized that an alliance between the corporations runnin' schools and the corporations runnin' the country could benefit everybody. Companies already spent billions of dollars advertising to kids, but now this money could be used to gain unprecedented access to this powerful audience and help schools in the process." Fallon watched Lee as he confidently paced the room, extemporaneously recounting this business coup.

"Miss Mavis and I worked closely together in those early days," Lee reminisced, "sometimes visiting a half a dozen companies in one day, offering each the opportunity to buy naming rights for spaces within the growing number of Broad Spectrum Educational Program Centers in their communities. That's how we ended up with the DOW® Chemistry Labs across the Midwest, Microsoft® Learning Hubs in the Pacific Northwest, and Wal-Mart® Lifestyle Learning Centers here in the South. Broad Spectrum also partners with companies for exclusives, which is why Coca-Cola® is the official soft drink of Broad Spectrum schools and McDonald's® supplies all of our school lunches. Smaller companies got in on the action as well, some buying advertising space on the school walls or the very popular thirty to ninety second ads I'm sure you've seen playing after each lesson on the online learning platform." Lee paused to appreciate Broad Spectrum's bold business moves.

“You see,” he continued proudly, “everybody wins. Broad Spectrum makes money through ad sales, product placement, licensing agreements. Hell, all kinds of stuff. *And*,” he emphasized, “the companies we partner with make money because brand loyalties are established in early childhood. Kids aren’t just being educated in reading, writing, and arithmetic, anymore, Ms. Baxter, but also in good ole’ fashioned American capitalism. Hell, we got kids as young as five exercising their freedom of choice- telling their parents to buy these cookies or that toy, all because they learned about it in school. It’s really a sight to behold when a kid begins to understand the power of the dollar.” Lee looked wistfully into the distance. “I better jot that one down,” he said excitedly. “The power of the dollar- I think that’s gonna be the title of my next book.” He turned his attention back to Fallon. “Now, I bet you’re beginning to wonder how you can get in on these dollars. Broad Spectrum actually offers CPM’s a couple of options to maximize their earnings. First, CPM’s can earn performance bonuses based on student test scores. These are nice, but, to be completely honest with you, you might work really hard in a center like this one and not see a lot of progress.” He lifted his hands defensively and conceded, “Don’t get me wrong, the Broad Spectrum curriculum works, but, in a school like *this* with kids like *these*,” he gestured around the empty conference room, “you’re just not gonna see those big gains. It’s not your fault, Ms. Baxter. The kids are just not as smart. If they were, they wouldn’t be poor and struggling. Miss Mavis, though,” he marveled, “she figured out how to make failure profitable.” He whistled to acknowledge the genius of the company’s CEO before elaborating. “You see, before FreeME, it was difficult to find and retain good teachers, especially in the nation’s toughest schools. Smart people, hard-working people, they went into high-paying professions, so Miss Mavis had the brilliant idea to make teaching one of those high-paying jobs. Of course, this couldn’t be done in the bloated public system, where money

that could have been used to pay teachers more went to irrelevant things like art or music.” Lee shook his head in disgust. “Luckily, Miss Mavis determined that teachers, or what BS refers to as CPM’s, in Broad Spectrum’s lower performing schools could make money through sales commissions and bonuses and not have to worry so much about student achievement. And that’s how you, Ms. Baxter,” he pointed energetically at her, “will make your powerful dollars.”

He smiled triumphantly and Fallon half-listened, typing a few notes, but mostly searching the internet to find out more about the address on the back of the SAFE card. Number 300, as far as she could tell, did not exist, but the street view map of locations nearby revealed a number of abandoned warehouses, relics from Savannah’s cotton-shipping days. Most of these antebellum buildings had been transformed into boutique hotels or restaurants serving reimagined Southern favorites, but 300 West River Street remained untouched by developers. Suddenly aware that his student’s attention was waning, Lee moved to her side and waved his hand in front of her computer screen.

“Hello, Ms. Baxter. Earth to Ms. Baxter,” he said waving his hand in front of her face. Fallon quickly switched tabs, returning to her sparse class notes, but it was too late. “Oh, I see what you’re about, Ms. Baxter,” Lee said.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ledon. This isn’t what it looks like.”

Lee’s scowl turned quickly into smile, and he responded, “Oh, don’t worry about it, Ms. Baxter. I forget sometimes what it’s like to be young, wanting to hit up the bars on,” he paused to recall, “on a Thursday night. Those were the days. I bet you’re dying to get out of here so you can meet up with your friends. I promise,” he placed his hand on her shoulder gently “I’ll get you out of here in just a few minutes.” He squeezed her shoulder again and smiled before summarizing his lesson. “So, all in all, your job is to sell companies advertising packages within

the school. You tell them about our student demographics, always remembering to mention that most of these kids can't even tell the difference between a learning module and an advertisement; you present them with data on our student enrollment and the number of hours each student spends in schools each week and then, poof," he mimicked tiny explosions with his fingers, "you get a bonus." And then, he added significantly, "Broad Spectrum gives you a bonus, and then, if things go well, at the end of the fiscal year, an even bigger bonus." He pumped his fist and went "ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching." Fallon watched him wordlessly, forcing herself to smile as he pantomimed stripping bills off of a large stack of cash. "And that, in a nutshell," he concluded, "is Broad Spectrum sales. Now, get on out of here, and have a couple of drinks on me." Fallon thanked Lee for his presentation and gathered her things, warning herself against packing up too quickly, although her instructor had now given her a valid excuse for rushing.

As Fallon made her way to the school's exit, she stopped for the first time to analyze the advertisements plastered liberally to the walls. One featured the infamous white Coca-Cola® bottle outline against the company's traditional red background. The text read: *Important Dates in American History: July 4, 1776: America Declares Independence from Great Britain, April 30, 1789: George Washington Becomes the Nation's First President, April 15, 1865: The Civil War Ends, May 8, 1886: John Pemberton Introduces Coca-Cola and Quenches the Thirst of America's Across the Nation.* Fallon winced, recalling Mr. Ledon's comment about the fluid boundary between advertising and the curriculum. As she turned out of the parking lot, however, her mind wandered between the SAFE meeting and a sudden craving for a Coke.

Chapter 14 ½, 15 ½ and 16 ½: The Corporate Curriculum

In these chapters, I wanted to shed light on what could be taught in the schools operated by corporations. My inspiration for the sponsored field trips, the scripted curriculum, and the school and business “partnerships” stems primarily from the work of Alex Molnar (1996, 2005), and the chapter fifteen’s title is based on a chapter from Molnar’s (1996) *Giving Kids the Business*. Consumerism in schools, although a ubiquitous part of twenty first century schooling, is not new. As early as 1929, the National Education Association (NEA) published a report arguing “that corporate-sponsored materials should, in general, only be used if they are indispensable to the education of children” (Molnar, 1996, p. 39). Because corporate-sponsored educational materials serve the interests of the corporation, not students, very few, under these guidelines, should be allowed in schools. Critiques of this nature persisted, but corporate influences thrived “in the deregulatory, turn-a-quick-buck, what business-says-goes, ‘public-private partnership’ American political environment” of the late twentieth century (p. 39). There was a stronger and more calculated push for corporate influence in schools after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. The document called specifically for corporations to partner with schools to improve education and, in turn, the struggling economy. These partnerships take a number of forms and are oftentimes marketed as easy ways for cash-strapped schools to make extra money or to earn much-needed school supplies. Many of these programs call for students, parents, and school staff to consume (shop at particular stores or buy certain products), and a portion of the profits will be given back to the school. Alternatively, as a prize for consuming, schools will earn educational materials or technology. As many public schools, particularly in poor and working class neighborhoods, struggle at times to provide students with essentials, “free” products or cash from corporations is highly appealing. Saltman (2000) argues, however, that

“the corporate tax drain caused by successful corporate lobbying against taxes and social spending has contributed to public schools-particularly urban and nonwhite public schools-being incapable of raising sufficient funds” (p. 61). Ironically, many schools are forced to partner with the greedy corporations who have left them underfunded. As students and parents flock to buy products that will earn money for their school, the companies also gain as they “write off the cost of the ‘free’ materials that carry their advertising messages as a tax-deductible expense” (Molnar, 1996, p. 27).

Companies also target school-aged consumers through the use of advertisements disguised as curriculum. These lessons aim to create life-long brand-conscious consumers and, in some cases, are designed to boost a company’s public image. General Motors, for example, used their curriculum to express their commitment to the environment (despite the pollution the company’s manufacturing and products produce), while Mobil Oil used their curriculum to spread a positive message about NAFTA, an agreement from which their company served to benefit (Molnar, 1996, p. 38-43). Curriculum materials from Pizza Hut, Miller Brewing, Prego, Revlon, Campbell’s, and McDonald’s and hosts of other companies have been handed out at the nation’s public schools. Although not all teachers use the free materials, many do, especially in the nation’s poorest schools, where teachers are oftentimes the least prepared and experienced and have the fewest resources. When the school curriculum is developed by a corporation and unquestioningly implemented by desperate schools and teachers, “the curriculum promotes the objectives of a third party whose interests may well conflict with these of the children, their families, and the country” (Molnar, 2005, p. 86). The greatest conflict of interest with corporate-influenced curricula is that corporations aim to make money, not to engage students in critical thought or prepare young people for democratic life. In fact, corporations seek to quash these

qualities as they may interfere with people's willingness to consume. In order to tie these sentiments into my work, I chose to close chapter fifteen with a quote from the song *Tears of a Clown* written and sung by The Casket Girls, a pair of sisters from Savannah (Greene & Greene, 2016). Their words, "Making money, making money, making money, making money, making money's for the birds. If it wasn't for making money, we'd be making love not war, honey. Fuck what ya heard," challenge the misconception that there isn't life beyond capitalism. Resisting the need to consume, however, is increasingly difficult, as corporate ideology increasingly permeates the school and curriculum.

Chapter 17: “I’m a Rebel.”

Cam divided his time at SAFE between watching the news for updates on his father, playing fetch with Dewey, getting coffee for the senior SAFE members, and reading from the many books that were housed in the group’s headquarters. Although he had only been underground for a few days, he was already lonely and restless. While Ellison and Gloria tried to include him when they were around, they, much to Cam’s displeasure, spent most of their time away from the group’s headquarters. Ellison had to retain his job at Broad Spectrum and Gloria needed to remain visible in The Public School community, especially now in light of Smith and Wesson’s investigation. Cam was lounging discontentedly on his father’s old sofa when Gloria arrived on the evening of SAFE’s monthly community meeting, the first since Henry’s arrest. As soon as she entered the room, Cam rushed to her side, pleading with her for news of the outside world.

“What did you do today, Miss Gloria? Did you talk to the NWE? Is there any news about my dad? Do you need help getting ready for the meeting? What—”

“Cam, please,” she interrupted his barrage of questions. “Let me settle in for a minute before you start talkin’ my ear off.” Cam stepped aside, but shuffled impatiently as Gloria organized her things on the old metal desk she kept as her home base. Every few seconds he glanced in her direction, sometimes even opening his mouth to speak. Gloria’s glare, however, the one she usually reserved for students waiting outside of the Henry’s office, helped him to hold his tongue until her signal. After reviewing a few documents, making a number of notes on a yellow legal pad, and taking a few healthy sips of coffee, Gloria smiled sweetly and said, “Good evening to you, too, Cameron. How was *your* day?”

Annoyed by Gloria's insistence on formalities in the midst of a crisis, but also afraid offending her might leave him further in the dark, Cam answered politely, but through gritted teeth.

"Good evening, Gloria. My day was fine. I helped some members copy agendas for tonight's meeting and identify possible quotes for our graffiti campaign." He smiled eagerly at Gloria, hoping his pleasantries were sufficient to begin a real conversation.

"Oh, isn't that nice," she responded, but didn't offer details about her own day.

"What about you?" he tested the waters. When she didn't reply, he continued, "Did anything interesting happen to *you* today?" She looked up at him as if seeing him for the first time and motioned to the empty folding chair next to her desk.

"Come on," she smirked, "I guess I've tortured you enough for one night." Cam scrambled to the chair, awaiting her news like Dewey waited under the table for scraps. "I did speak to the NWE today," she continued. Cam's grip tightened on the metal chair and Gloria laid a hand gently on his arm. "Your dad's fine," she soothed. "At least for now," she said more gravely.

"What did Smith and Wesson tell you?" Cam pleaded. "They do more asking than telling, honey," Gloria retorted. "But I just told them the truth: that I hadn't seen or heard from your father since the evening before he went missing. Now, when they asked me if I knew he was involved in subversive activities, I had to get a little more creative. I showed them intra-office memos written by your father, explaining the importance of aligning the Public School's curriculum with the government's guidelines, for example, and minutes of staff meetings during which your father encouraged his teachers to try out scripted lessons like the ones offered by company's such as Broad Spectrum. You see, I told them, he may have been running a public

school, but it was well within the boundaries of what was considered acceptable. Nothing subversive around The Public School, you know.” Cam looked at Gloria with disbelief.

“These documents, you mean, you,” he pointed weakly at Gloria, “and my dad,” he pointed aimlessly behind him, “were preparing for this for years.” Gloria swiped her fingers deftly across her lips mimicking a zipper.

“I don’t know what you could be talking about, Cameron,” she demurred. “I simply showed them the contents of your father’s public files and they could easily see that he was running a perfectly legal and legitimate school. It was as simple as that.” She casually removed some pieces of lint from her skirt as Cam marveled at her story.

“Do they know about,” Cam lowered his voice, “Do they know about *this*?” he indicated the SAFE headquarters. Gloria shook her head.

“I can’t be sure, but Smith and Wesson’s interrogation techniques are pretty heavy-handed, so I find it hard to believe either one of them could hold onto a secret like that.”

“So what’s the plan? What are we going to do to get my dad out safe?” Cam asked enthusiastically. Gloria’s patience for Cam seemed to run out as she turned back to her legal pad.

“You’re going to have to wait for the meeting to hear about that,” she said, all-business once again. Cam started to protest, but Ellison made a timely entrance before Cam could continue pleading with Gloria for additional insight. “Why don’t you go bother him for a while?” Gloria nodded in El’s direction. Taking the hint, Cam energetically approached El, hopeful he would be a little more forthcoming than unpredictable Gloria.

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Fallon checked digital clock on her microwave 9:13. Only three minutes since she had last checked it. She huffed around her living room, quickly traversing the small rectangle. She didn't want to leave too early, but, because she wasn't exactly sure where she was headed, she needed more than usual fifteen minutes it would take her to walk from her apartment to River Street. She had tried to keep herself busy since coming home from work at 5:30, but television couldn't hold her interest, and her dinner sat untouched on the kitchen counter. She spent most of the evening pacing, vacillating between staying in and going out. She tried to track down Ellison all day, but he always seemed to have important business to attend to across the campus whenever she got close to him. Now, forty five minutes before the start of whatever was supposed to start down on River Street, she stood with her purse slung over her shoulder and one hand on the doorknob still trying to decide if she was even going to leave her apartment.

"All right, Fallon," she said to herself. Rolling her eyes at her own weakness, she said a little louder, "All right, Fallon, get out of here. You're just going for a nighttime stroll. You can always turn around and head right back home." Afraid she would change her mind again, Fallon quickly exited her apartment.

Fallon gripped the iron railing attached to the steep spiral steps that led down to River Street, trying to steady her shaking hands and legs. Revelers hooted behind her as she made her way cautiously down to the cobblestone path. The streets hummed as people made their way to the riverfront for the monthly Friday night fireworks. Fallon moved in the opposite direction, however, and walked casually toward whatever awaited her at 300 West River Street. She avoided eye contact with those she passed, especially the NWE officers who were patrolling the busy street. She also paused every few feet to look at a souvenir or to review a menu posted outside of one of the street's many bustling restaurants. As she admired a neon green t-shirt that

read *My Grandparents Went to Savannah and All I got was this Lousy T-shirt*, a loud voice made her jump, nearly knocking over a nearby display of Savannah shot glasses and coffee mugs.

“Ms. Baxter I thought that was you!” Hal Ledon shouted as he rushed to her side. Fallon’s heart raced as she attempted to run through the list of potential excuses she developed before leaving her apartment. Her mind was blank, however, as Lee draped his right hand casually over her shoulder, a plastic cup dangling between his fingers. “Miss Baxter,” he continued, “you are quite the party animal, hitting up River Street two nights in a row!” He snorted with laughter and swayed dangerously close to Fallon. “I’ll let you in on a little secret,” he stage whispered, “you inspired me to come down here, and when I got some particularly good news this afternoon, I figured, hell, I’m going to go downtown and celebrate. Yes, sir!” He laughed again and slurred, “Yes, ma’am!” A crowd of partiers ambled down the sidewalk, pausing next to Lee.

“There you are!” one of the women shouted, playfully pointing at Lee’s chest. “Come on,” she ordered, “we’re headed down to watch the fireworks and don’t think I forgot you said the next round was on you!” Lee smiled goofily at Fallon and waved.

“Goodnight, Ms. Baxter. Be safe out there.” He then turned to his companion and hollered, “Let’s go! Let’s go watch the fireworks and, and,” he grappled for something to say, “let go and let Broad Spectrum pick up the tab!” Fallon exhaled for the first time in minutes as Lee bounded after the woman, laughing at his clever turn of phrase. Trying to normalize her breathing again, Fallon replaced the souvenir t-shirt on the rack and continued her trek down River Street. As she headed west, the crowd thinned significantly until she was standing by herself, using her cell phone flashlight to read the building numbers.

She passed in front of the crumbling bricks a number of times, resolved to turn back when a voice called out, “You’re new around here.” She whirled around, moving her flashlight quickly to the left and right. Finally, it passed over the voice’s source. A middle aged black man sat on an upturned bucket within one of the abandoned doorways. He casually crafted a rose out of sweetgrass and when he finished his work, he stood up, grabbed the bucket with one hand and presented the rose to Fallon with the other.

“Thank you,” she said automatically.

“You’re welcome, missy,” the man replied as he opened the shadowed door. Fallon stared inside, but made no move to enter. A bare lightbulb faintly illuminated a narrow brick-lined hallway. “Go on, now,” the man said with a bit of laughter behind his voice. “Nothin’ in there’s gonna bite you, except for Miss Gloria,” he cackled, “but she’ll probably take it easy on account of this being your first meeting and all.” Fallon glanced around the deserted street and then moved slowly forward. “Thata girl,” the man cheered, coaxing her forward with his free hand. As soon as she stepped into the hallway he said, “Have a blessed evening,” and quickly closed the door behind her.

“Wait, wait—” Fallon cried, but it was too late. The door was shut and the man couldn’t, or wouldn’t, hear her from the outside. With nowhere to go but forward, Fallon moved slowly down the dimly lit hall. As she approached a turn, voices echoed from the next room. She took a deep breath and turned into the reverberating warehouse. Dozens of people occupied the folding chairs arranged in rows at the center of the room. A large screen hooked up to a computer had been set up in front of the chairs. The screen read: SAFE Community Meeting Friday, September 3, 2049. Fallon stood awkwardly at the edge of the room, alternatively trying not to draw attention to herself and trying to make eye contact with a friendly face.

As she engaged in this complicated personal dance, Ellison called to her from across the room.

“Fallon! You made it!” Relieved to at least find she was in the right place, Fallon moved to meet him. “Thanks for coming, Fallon” El said as he formally shook her hand. “Welcome,” he extended his arms, “to SAFE headquarters.” He gazed proudly at the packed room. Before El could elaborate, the guy from the news, Cam Arlo, appeared by his side.

“It’s after ten, El, let’s get this meeting started,” he whined.

El slapped Cam on the back playfully, “Ok, ok, Cam. I was trying to wait for Gloria, but I know she’s got plenty of projects on her plate right now, so we’ll get things rolling in just a few minutes.” El turned back to Fallon. “Fallon Baxter, this is Cam Arlo,” El extended his hand in Cam’s direction.

“Nice to meet you,” Fallon reached out to grasp his hand, “I’ve seen you before- on the news. It’s nice to know you’re not a murderer.” Cam shook her hand limply, hardly seeming to hear her. El, on the other hand, laughed heartily at Fallon’s introduction.

“I knew you were one of us, Fallon. I just knew it,” he said. Cam continued to stare anxiously at El, prompting him to reassure Fallon. “Don’t mind him. He’s just preoccupied about the meeting.” Fallon smiled faintly, noting that the pictures she had seen on television of Cam Arlo didn’t do him justice, and even though his personality left a bit to be desired, she still found herself attracted to him. “Why don’t you two get settled,” El offered, pointing to two empty seats nearby. Cam grunted his agreement and stomped to one of the chairs.

“Thanks, Ellison,” Fallon said and followed behind Cam. As she settled into the seat next to him, something wet made her hand recoil sharply. “Oh, hello,” she said to the basset hound who had unceremoniously licked her hand. Dewey looked up at her innocently. “I see what

you're about," she confessed as she scratched behind his floppy ears. Cam cracked a smile as he watched this exchange unfold.

"He's really a master manipulator," he revealed. Fallon turned to Cam and as soon as she removed her hand from the dog's ear, Dewey let out an insistent bark.

"I'm beginning to see that," Fallon replied, ruffling the dog's ears playfully.

"Yep," Cam continued, "there's a sucker born every minute, and Dewey knows that better than anybody." Cam looked significantly at Fallon and grinned.

"Well, he's your dog, so you should know," Fallon quickly retorted. Fallon and Cam smiled at each other for a moment, but Dewey barked again, diverting their attention to the front of the room. Ellison stood in front of the group and made settling motions with his outstretched hands.

"All right, All right, let's all take a seat and get this meeting going," he began. When the room quieted, he continued. "First, I want to thank you all for coming out tonight. There are a lot of familiar faces, and even a couple of new faces in the crowd tonight," he looked in Cam and Fallon's direction, "and you all are the core of SAFE. You all are the ones out there every day working toward a better future, holding on to the belief that there is goodness in this world and that people can be, no *will* be, reminded of that if we just keep on fighting. So, let's start the meeting by giving each other a round of applause." He paused, clapping loudly. A number of SAFE members then stood up and clapped and pointed at Ellison.

Someone whistled and shouted, "You're the man, El!" Ellison smiled sincerely at his fan.

"Thank you, thank you all very much," he said as the clapping died down. "I appreciate that you have all so willingly placed your trust in me in Henry's absence." A smattering of applause rose up again, and Ellison stopped once more to let it fade out. "Tonight," he continued

powerfully, “we meet to prepare for one of our most important missions. Tonight,” he repeated, “we prepare to not only rescue Henry, but also to topple Broad Spectrum and the corporate regime!” The room now truly erupted in applause and cheers, but Ellison made no effort to quiet the chanting members.

Cheers of “Demos!” “Hell, yes!” “Down with BS!” and “Free Henry!” filled the room.

Next to Fallon, Cam shouted, “That’s my dad!” and clapped vigorously. Fallon watched the group in amazement. How her life had changed in twenty four hours. Cam turned to her and smiled, “My dad,” he said with pride, “he started all of this. Isn’t it great?” Fallon nodded weakly, still marveling at her current situation. “What’s wrong?” Cam asked.

“It’s just,” Fallon shook her head, “I guess I’m just a little worried what my parents will think. Yesterday I was just a BS CPM, but now I’m, I’m...” she struggled for the word.

“You’re a rebel, that’s what you are,” Cam finished her sentence and continued to clap heartily. As the room swelled with cheers, whoops, and applause, Fallon thought back on all of the convenient choices she had made throughout her life: the times where she had listened to her parents instead of following her own path; the times where she ignored things that didn’t sit right with her because she they didn’t directly affect her. This, however, this wasn’t one of those times.

She watched the passionate faces of the people around her, joined together for something greater than money, greater than entertainment, even greater than Broad Spectrum, and smiled and whispered, “I’m a rebel.”

After a few more rounds of cheering, the crowd finally settled down again and Ellison continued the meeting.

“Alright, for the sake of some of our new members, let’s review what we’re fighting for.” The audience whooped their approval and El continued. “The change from public to corporate schools wasn’t simple, it was dramatic. Gone was input from locally-elected school boards. Gone was the community investment in the success of public education. Gone was the oversight and support of community members and local journalists. Gone was the need to think because everything was programmed into neat software bundles, sold to you by Broad Spectrum that told you everything you needed to know. Gone was any chance that children would realize their full potential because they were touched by a compassionate and thoughtful teacher. Of course, few people understood the long-term impact of these dramatic changes. People were indoctrinated, intimidated and distracted throughout the process. Protest was forbidden, but daily life was distraction enough. Finding a job, keeping a job, feeding the kids, paying the bills, and, of yes, the constant threat of yet another terrorist attack or mass shooting kept the average citizen overwhelmed, fearful, and compliant. Apathy permeated against this backdrop, many years in the making, and most people unknowingly warehoused their kids in sleek and shiny new buildings filled with the latest technology. The media, the government, everybody told them this was the right thing to do, so, dammit, they did it.” He took a deep breath and Fallon marveled at the history El had just laid bare. It didn’t match up with what she had learned growing up, but it gave her a new perspective.

Ellison pulled a small clicker from his pocket and advanced his presentation.

“SAFE is fighting for end of corporate schools and the emergence of a truly public school system and we are founded on this idea,” he motioned to the screen. “The slogan, *public not perfect*, captures the essence of our organization and will be our rallying cry as we continue to work to take back the education system from the hands of corporations. BS aren’t the only ones

with good marketing, am I right?” He smiled at the crowd and a number of people cheered. “But,” he continued, changing the slide, “we can’t rely on propaganda alone, or we’re no better than BS and the rest of them. We have to remind people of what they are missing without a public system, and tell them how we plan on addressing the problems that affected the public system before the Class War. Remember, the New Ways are bad, but the Old Ways weren’t the best either, so we’re not trying to revert back to the Old Ways, but to reinvent education and society in *revolutionary* ways.” El pointed to the screen, highlighting items on a bulleted list. He pointed to the first item, local control of schools. “Right now we have people in Washington, people in Los Angeles, making decisions for kids in Savannah. We propose putting those decisions back in the hands of our local leaders. We’re not just talking about people in government either, which leads us to our second belief, open dialogue and planning with the local community *and*,” he emphasized, “with students.” Fallon thought back to her own education. No one, other than that one weird college professor, had ever asked her what she thought about something, what she was interested in. It would definitely be a big change for the BS students.

“With more community engagement,” El went on, “schools will also be places that offer a more holistic education. Kids in our poorest communities always struggled in public schools school because the problems they faced inside and outside of the classroom were, at times, insurmountable. Now, we’re realists, so we know we can’t fix every problem for every kid, but we can definitely put in place a network of support, emotional, physical, and education, that can give every student a shot at not only a good education, but also a good life. Public schools shouldn’t just work for white kids, or rich kids, but for all kids. ”

“What do you think President Torrance would say about this?” Fallon whispered to Cam.

“I know, right?” Cam marveled. El continued, pointing to something that directly impacted Fallon: Respect and value America’s educators.

“You see,” he started, “in order to create a culture of public schools where thinking, creativity, and real learning are prominent, we need educators who are not only intelligent, but who are given the freedom to create their own curriculum and help students grow as citizens through thoughtful and creative means. We want to create an educational climate where teachers are valued members of our communities. This is something that hasn’t happened for a long time in America, but we’re hopeful that teachers will be positioned as important professionals and intellectuals. In short, we want a system where a computer does not pass for a teacher.” El looked to Fallon and nodded at her knowingly. She thought of the hundreds of computers at Broad Spectrum’s Chatham County location.

“Finally,” Ellison pointed to the final two bullet points, “We want to keep corporations out of schools and, by doing this, redefine success. The use of standardized tests had much more to do with power, control, and money than truly assessing student learning. Although we all know this, the greater population has been duped by the propaganda distributed by our government, the media, and the companies who create, and profit from,” he added significantly, “these tests. Standards, standardized curricula, standardized tests, they’re all going out the window, and, yes, I know this is a tall order, but we’re focused, determined, and, if I do say so myself, on the brink of a major victory.” Ellison smiled at the group, letting SAFE’s message sink in. Fallon’s stomach fluttered. Although she had been moved by the BS rhetoric in the past, SAFE’s proposition resonated with her on a deeper level.

“Here’s what we know,” Ellison continued, and began to outline SAFE’s itinerary for the next twenty four hours. “There is a big media event planned tomorrow at The Public School. It

appears that Smith and Wesson are going to officially announce Henry's charges and representatives from Broad Spectrum are going to be on hand to take over the school." Gasps and boos rippled through the audience. "I know, I know," El consoled the group. "But it's the perfect opportunity for us to have our own *media event*." He let his last words hang in the air for a beat before continuing. "As many of you know, I've been working undercover within Broad Spectrum for the last six months as part of the El's Bells operation. Now, before Henry's capture, I planned on spending the year observing BS and gathering intelligence to make our case against them. I couldn't very easily walk up to the CO during my first week and say, I'm working with a rebel group of educators and we want to expose your educational program center for what it really is, a money-hungry, soul-crushing corporation. Do you think you can help me out with that?" Laughter rose from the audience. "Due to our current circumstances, however, Gloria and I decided we would accelerate our program by using the takeover of the public school as our big show- our opportunity to share the message of SAFE and *public not perfect* with the world. The timing might not be perfect, but if we don't act tomorrow, the Public School will close and we may have lost our opportunity entirely." Ellison spent the next few minutes explaining the plan and then split the SAFE members into small groups to complete the final preparations.

Fallon gathered her things and hurried after Cam, who was in her group. Once they were settled, she attempted to make pleasantries with the other group members, but her attention span was short. She fidgeted and kept twisting and turning in her seat in an effort to keep tabs on Ellison as he moved from table to table. Dewey, who was trying to nap under the table, let out a low growl as Fallon's continually tapping feet jostled him uncomfortably. She knew she wanted to be a member of SAFE, but she had hoped to begin her tenure gradually, not as an accessory

to the subversion of one of the world's most powerful corporations. Finally, Ellison pulled up to their table.

“Good evening, everybody,” he began energetically. “This,” he pointed to each of the six people at the table individually, “is my top team. Well, everybody except Cam. I just felt sorry for him,” he laughed, but Cam just shook his head and threw up his middle finger. “Just kidding, buddy,” Ellison said, waving his hand playfully in Cam's direction. “All right, the cameras will begin rolling at eight o'clock sharp tomorrow, and that's when our plan goes into full effect. Jeff and Sydney,” he pointed to a young couple seated next to Fallon, “what's the status of your press passes?”

“We've got them right here, El” Jeff responded, whipping two laminated cards from his shirt pocket. “Working for Todd and Beverly,” he said sarcastically, “does have its perks.”

“Excellent,” Ellison said eyeing the passes. “What about you, Michael?” he gestured to a short man with glasses and a fluffy beard. “Has your roommate given you any more information about what's going on at NWE headquarters?” Michael rubbed his beard thoughtfully and replied, “He hasn't said much, El, but he did let me know that they've got big plans for tomorrow. He said there would be things we hadn't seen since The Class War, whatever that means. He's off tomorrow, which usually means he'll feel like talking when I get home tonight” he pantomimed lifting a bottle to his lips.

Ellison nodded, “Ah, I get ya, Mike. Just keep me updated.” He now shifted his attention to Cam. “Cam, buddy,” Ellison began congenially. “You are going to be my eyes and ears here at home base. I want you watching the news, communicating with me and the other ground operatives, and,” he paused, “ready to destroy any incriminating evidence stored in our headquarters in case things don't go our way tomorrow night.”

“That’s bullshit! Absolutely not!” Cam spat angrily, standing up to match Ellison’s stance.

Ellison calmly raised his hands, “Listen, Cam, this isn’t personal and it isn’t about you.”

“You’re damn right it’s not about me,” Cam interrupted. “It’s about saving *my* dad, and if anyone’s going to be out there on the ground, it’s gonna be *me*.”

“Cam, I understand your frustrations, but it’s just too dangerous. All those cameras, and you’re a wanted man. It could jeopardize the whole operation, and we just can’t have that.” Cam clenched his fists, trying to contain his rage.

“You don’t understand, El, because you’re gonna be out there. You can’t understand.” El placed his hand gently on Cam’s hunched shoulders, but Cam shrugged him off.

“Hey, Cam, here comes Gloria. Maybe you’ll listen to her.” Fallon followed Ellison’s eyes over Cam’s shoulder and her mouth suddenly went dry, her hands starting shaking, and head started pounding. Fallon glanced at her group members, all of whom smiled at the approaching figure. “Gloria,” El called, “Can you please talk some sense into Cam about tomorrow?” Before Gloria could offer her advice, however, Fallon slid out of her chair and onto the stone floor with a resounding thud.

Chapter 18: Two BS Employees Walk into a Bar...

“We did it. We actually did it, Britt,” Lee announced. He raised his glass to his colleague as she made her way to him through the dim bar. It was just before five o’clock and Lee’s voice boomed through the small space. The Friday after work crowd would make their way within the hour, but, for now, they had the place much to themselves. “Anything she wants,” Lee ordered to the bartender as she approached Britt. He downed the rest of his own drink and inspected the empty glass. “Another for me, darlin’ and keep ‘em comin’- we’re celebrating!” He grinned at Britt and clapped her on the back heartily. “We did it, dammit,” he marveled again.

Britt inspected Lee’s bright, but rheumy, eyes,

“Lee, we still have a lot to do to get ready for tomorrow, so I suggest,” she eyed his empty glass significantly, “you pace yourself.” He furrowed his brow, and she softened, “It’s just, I don’t want you under the weather for tomorrow’s big announcement.” She touched his arm lightly, “You are the face of BS, after all.”

He grinned at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

“I am, aren’t I?” He kept his eyes on the mirror, even running through a number of poses for the press conference: sincere, jocular, concerned, he needed to be able to express a wide range of emotions to the viewing audience. Britt cleared her throat, bringing Lee out of his imagination.

“Anyway,” she continued, “Here’s the plan for tomorrow night: The NWE officers are going to speak first. They are going to present their case against Arlo, which, thanks to you,” she pointed at Lee, “is quite broad, apparently.”

Lee demurred, “It’s all in a day’s work. I really have to thank the little people who made it all possible.”

Britt scowled and replied, "Speaking of 'the little people,' is your informant ready?"

"Yes, yes," he waved his hands at Britt to reassure her. "I know you're looking forward to that little bombshell," he raised his eyebrows at her.

"Nobody plays me for a fool," Britt said through gritted teeth.

Lee patted her hand soothingly, "I know, darlin', I was as surprised as you were that a rebel operative had infiltrated BSEPC-CCD, but tomorrow it's all going to be over for Ellison Williams and the rest Henry Arlo's ragtag group of rebels. We crushed them back in '31 and we're going to crush them again tomorrow. Ain't life grand?" He took another healthy swig from his glass and gave out a satisfied "Ahhh."

Britt, not yet willing to give in completely to Lee's celebration, questioned, "Your informant is one hundred percent certain that they don't know?" Lee nodded earnestly at Britt and assured her.

"Britt, honey darling," he soothed, "would they be planning some big dust up for tomorrow if they knew their whole organization was headed down the crapper?" Britt didn't reply, but her shoulders relaxed slightly. "Come on, now," he chuckled her lightly on the chin, "tell me more about tomorrow. You're so sexy when you're giving orders."

Britt shoved him lightly.

"Oh, Lee, you're horrible." She knew she had to at least pretend to protest his advances. It was all part of the game they had been playing since the Arizona retreat.

Britt cleared her throat and squared her shoulders to indicate that things were all-business between them again and continued to lay out the next day's press conference.

"Needless to say, after the NWE presentation, people are going to need to be reminded of what we stand to lose if our country's most important values are subverted by rebel groups like

SAFE. To remind people of the greatness of our nation and her most powerful companies, you will introduce Mavis. She's going to really play up those lingering Class War fears and show and video that will spin the event in our favor." Britt began tapping her phone. "The PR department sent me a small sample. Check this out," she placed the phone face up between them.

The video began with a longshot of a sunrise over a wheat field and a bright green tractor chugged along the rows. Soft music played in the background and a voiceover began.

"Is that?" Lee questioned.

"Yes," she pressed pause on the video, "it's the guy who voices movie trailers. The company is sparing no expense for this." Lee pursed his lips and nodded, impressed with Broad Spectrum's continued commitment to high-quality propaganda.

Britt re-started the video and the voiceover began, "America was once a simple place: a place where people knew their neighbors, a place where people shared common values, and a place where people relaxed on their front porches after a hard day's work." The camera panned out further, and the picture took on a less idyllic quality. Behind the farmer's neat rows of wheat, rose a city. Fires smoldered in the streets, masked men robbed and looted, and women and children cried out in agony as they wandered the perilous streets. The voiceover continued, "When violence, terror, and economic uncertainty threatened to take over our country, one company rose to the challenge; one company stood firm; one company brought our country back: Broad Spectrum," the voiceover proclaimed as the company's logo filled the screen. The logo dissolved and the city was once again featured, except the fires were replaced by trees and flowers, the masked men with smiling NWE officers and businesspeople, and the wailing

women and children now played happily in a colorful park. Over children's giggles, the voiceover concluded: "Broad Spectrum: we're in the business of a good education."

Britt turned off her phone and grinned at Lee.

"What do you think?" she asked. He let out a low whistle.

"Wow. All I can say is wow. We're really going to put on quite a show. It has everything the audience wants: violence, betrayal, intrigue. I almost wish I could watch from home, but I guess I do have a pretty important part to play." Britt patted his arm.

"You certainly do, Lee. I think it's safe to say that these reminders, paired with shutting down The Public School and Mavis' commanding speech should go a long way in quelling future uprisings."

"So," Lee continued, twirling his finger at the bartender to indicate another round, "How about I give you a little sample of my remarks for tomorrow?" Before Britt could respond, he cleared his throat dramatically as fresh drinks appeared in front of them.

"Tonight, ladies and gentleman," he began, "is the end of an era. While public education was officially declared dead by the eminent President Torrance over twenty years ago, tonight we place the final nail into its bloated coffin. As America's last public school closes, we should not mourn what America has lost, but celebrate what America has gained: A complete reform of the education system, something many tried and failed to do for ages, but something that Broad Spectrum has accomplished in two short decades. So, this evening, as we replace The Public School with the BS Future Academy, we don't do so with a heavy heart, but with pride and hope. Pride for our nation and hope in its bright future. Remember, this isn't just a victory for those students who were mis-educated under Henry Arlo for so long, but it is a victory for all students; students who were able to say yes. Yes to change. Yes to competition. Yes to

FreeMe.” Lee stopped and placed his hand on his head up high awaiting Britt’s praise. She clapped reluctantly and he took a mock bow in thanks.

“It’s not quite finished yet,” he conceded. “I still need to put in some finishing touches. I feel like a kid on Christmas Eve- there’s so much to look forward to.”

“Don’t open your presents yet,” Britt warned. “Oh,” she continued, “who’s going to introduce the academy’s new CO? What’s her name again?”

“It’s funny you should ask that,” Lee replied, looking eagerly toward the bar’s entrance, “she just walked in.” The bar was now filling up, so Britt couldn’t identify the new CO in the growing throng of after-work revelers. Moments later, however, a slight, but ardent woman pushed her way through the crowd and appeared at Lee’s side. “Britt, I present to you,” he held out his arms, “Gloria Green, the newest member of the BS team.”

Chapter 19: The Media Event

“Dewey. Come on, Dewey, give her some air,” Cam insisted, hooking his finger around the dog’s collar to restrain him. Cam and Dewey crouched next to Fallon on the floor of SAFE headquarters. Fallon, who was just becoming aware of the dog’s wet nose in her face, batted at him gently.

“I’m ok, I’m ok, buddy,” she whispered. The dog backed off slightly, but eyed his new friend carefully as she stirred.

“Not so fast,” warned Cam, pressing her shoulders down gently. She opened her eyes weakly, catching sight of Cam’s face above her own. “I happen to have a lot of experience in this area, so don’t even think about getting up yet,” he reported. Dewey barked his agreement and plopped down on Fallon’s stomach, causing her to exhale sharply. Cam laughed and ruffled his dog’s ears affectionately. “Now you really can’t go anywhere,” he said.

Fallon patted Dewey gently, but insisted, “I can get up, Cam. I have to get up. Where’s Ellison? I need to talk to him right away.”

“Good luck with that,” Cam replied. “Gloria rushed him out of here right after you passed out. What happened to you anyway? Do you have low blood sugar? Do you need a snack?” Fallon grumbled and struggled under Dewey’s weight, finally managing to extricate herself and sit upright next to Cam. Dewey, unhappily displaced, moved one paw protectively over Fallon’s hand. She rolled her eyes at the dog and his owner.

“No, I don’t have low blood sugar. It was just, it was just,” she struggled to explain how she had ended up on the floor, “Look, I just need to talk to Ellison, all right?” Cam snorted.

“Like I told you, it’s not going to happen. He’s gone.” He spread his arms, encouraging Fallon to look around. She did and realized that the previously bustling SAFE headquarters was

now almost vacant. She scowled, but Cam continued, "I know you're nervous about tomorrow, but El's got everything under control. Just relax and let's get you home." Cam pushed himself up from the floor and reached down to help Fallon. When she didn't grasp his hand, he waved it in front of her face. "Hey, come on," he encouraged. She looked up at him, but still would not take his hand.

"Who is Gloria?" Fallon asked pointedly.

Realizing Fallon wasn't going to budge without information, Cam sat on the edge of a nearby chair.

"Miss Gloria, was, is," he corrected, "my dad's assistant, and, as I recently found out, an important member of SAFE. After my dad and El, she's pretty much in charge." Cam held out his hand again, hopeful his answer had satisfied her curiosity. Fallon thought intently, still refusing to move. "What is it, Fallon?" She looked past him, chewing the inside of her lip. He grew more annoyed, insisting again, "What is it?"

"It's just, well," she began, "on my way down here tonight I ran into my Mr. Ledon. Do you know who he is?"

"Yeah, I know him," Cam replied.

"Well, at first I was really nervous when I saw him, but when he started talking, it was obvious he had been drinking, so I relaxed a little. I figured he might not even remember seeing me. Once I got to the meeting, I wasn't even thinking about it anymore, but," she hesitated again.

"Come on, Fallon," Cam urged, growing impatient with her pregnant pauses.

“OK, OK,” she held up her palms. “Well, you know Mr. Ledon is a real flirt, so I wasn’t surprised when a woman showed up, pulling him back to the bar. It’s just, the woman was Gloria.”

“Gloria?” he questioned. “Our Gloria? Are you sure? I mean, you only just met her tonight. And even then,” he smirked, “you didn’t get a very good look at her.” Fallon sighed and pushed herself up from the floor.

“Yes, I’m sure, Cam. I know what I saw, and we need to tell Ellison as soon as possible. He could be in danger.”

“Fallon, look, Gloria has been working with my dad for over thirty years. There’s just no way. Maybe you did see her with Mr. Ledon, but, I bet you that’s just part of the plan, part of El’s Bells.” Fallon looked skeptically at him.

“It was pretty convincing, Cam.”

“I’ll tell you what,” he pulled his phone out of his pocket and held it up for Fallon. “If I call Ellison and ask him, will you give this a rest? It’s already after midnight, and Dewey and I need our beauty sleep.” Fallon crossed her arms across her chest and tapped her foot impatiently.

“It’s a start,” she said. Cam mumbled under his breath and made a show of dialing, pressing each number dramatically to convey his irritation. He held the phone up to his ear, and Fallon edged closer to him. He scowled and turned away from her, but she only moved closer.

“Fine,” he conceded, holding the phone away from his ear and pressing the speaker button. After the forth ring, Cam looked smugly at Fallon, “See,” he taunted, “I told you—” before he could finish his sentence, the ringing stopped. Cam’s eyes widened and Fallon shushed him, bending closer to the phone. Muffled sounds came through the black rectangle.

“El?” Cam questioned. “El, this is Cam, can you hear me?” He shrugged to Fallon, “He must have a bad connection.”

As Cam moved to hang up the phone, the sound sharpened and Ellison’s voice pleaded, “Why, Gloria? We were just about to make it. Why give up the fight now?” Gloria’s humorless laugh echoed through the phone.

“Be serious, Ellison. You didn’t really think SAFE was going to be able to overpower Broad Spectrum?” She paused, her footsteps fading in and out. “Oh, you did?” she said with mock concern. “El, you’re one of the good ones. You truly are. It’s real admirable that you still believe. I mean, *really* believe in SAFE, in Henry, in public schools. I wish I could be more like you, but for once in my life, I want to be on the winning side.”

“So you did it all for money?” Ellison asked.

“Now don’t judge me like that, El,” Gloria countered sweetly. “I’m not that base. Sure, the money is nice, and Broad Spectrum’s got plenty to give, but it’s bigger than that. You see, over the years, I’ve learned that nobody really cares about doing what’s good, doing what’s right, they just want to do what’s best for them and not be bothered by the rest. So, for once, I’m doing what’s good and what’s right for me. Frankly, El, I’m tired of fighting. Things haven’t changed and they aren’t going to, so I might as well kick back and enjoy. Don’t worry though, El, I’m not just picking on you. I can promise you that.” Fallon glanced nervously at Cam, but his eyes remained glued to the phone. “But here I am spoiling tomorrow’s show for you,” Gloria went on. “You’ll be right up there, so you’ll be sure not to miss a minute of the action.”

“You’ll never get away with it, Gloria,” Ellison said. “There are rebels all over Savannah, all over the country prepared to fight.”

“Yes, maybe there were,” Gloria responded evenly, “but I already sent word to everybody at SAFE telling them that you and I received some dangerous new intelligence and that tomorrow’s demonstration needed to be postponed until further notice. Now, they’re just going to have to sit back at headquarters and watch the corporate takeover of The Public School, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. Come on, boys,” she shouted. “Take him back to his cell! He’s going to make television history tomorrow, so he needs his beauty rest!”

Muffled sounds and voices once again crackled through the phone’s small speakers, broken by shouted orders.

“Get up, get up,” a man’s voice barked gruffly. Fabric rustled audibly, as Ellison moved. “Hey, there’s something sticking out of his pocket. Come on, Wesson, I thought you said you checked him when she brought him in,” the man lamented to his partner.

Fallon quickly pressed the red end button and she and Cam stared at each other for a two beats before simultaneously questioning, “What are we going to do?”

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Fallon squinted into the crowd from atop the small stage erected in front of The Public School.

“Fifteen minutes to show time,” a guy totting a boom mic hollered as he crossed the stage. Fallon shifted her weight, already sweating uncomfortably through her black suit. Beverly Tatum and Todd Brixton stood nearby preparing to go on air.

“My nose is shining like a Christmas bulb,” Beverly shouted as she caught sight of herself in one of the large television screens set up on either side of the stage. Todd rolled his eyes in her direction, but continued to recite tongue twisters to warm up his voice. The crowd surrounding the stage was growing, as interested parties from across the city arrived for the

show. It was a frenzy of activity as camera crew members, television producers, and BS and NWE officials scrambled to make their final preparations. Fallon casually searched the growing crowd again, trying to catch sight of familiar faces. Although she didn't see any, she hoped they were out there. Britt Larceny and Hal Ledon conferenced quietly at the edge of the stage, and Fallon inched her way toward them.

"Where do you think you're going, missy?" Gus Winters demanded, blocking her path. "Excuse me, Mr. Ledon," Gus called to the BS director, "Don't you want Ms. Baxter right up front when the cameras start rolling?" Lee looked annoyed at Gus for a split second, but, remembering he had an audience, quickly softened.

"Yes, yes, thank you Mr. Winters," he responded turning his attention toward Fallon. "Don't be shy now, Ms. Baxter. You're pretty as a picture tonight, and we want to make sure our finest CPM's are featured front and center behind me and Miss Mavis, so get on down there." He motioned toward the front of the stage with a wave of his hand. "We'll be down there in just a minute, so don't you be nervous," he assured her enthusiastically. Gus gripped Fallon's shoulders tightly and guided her toward her spot.

"Yes, Ms. Baxter," he said through gritted teeth. "You want everyone to be able to see your pretty face tonight." He deposited Fallon roughly near the podium, throwing her into a young woman who was also scanning the crowd.

"Excuse me," Fallon offered as their bodies collided.

"No problem," the young woman replied and Fallon recognized her for the first time.

"Jasmine?" she whispered in disbelief. "What are you doing here?" Jasmine stood confidently in low heels and a simple black dress, making her look significantly older than her fifteen years.

“Oh, hi, Ms. Baxter,” she responded casually. “Somebody from the center called my mom and told her they wanted the best students to be here tonight to represent Broad Spectrum, so, of course, she dressed me up and sent me down here. She tugged at the pearl necklace hugging her neck uncomfortably and continued to survey the school grounds. “Hey,” she looked to Fallon again, “you haven’t seen my uncle anywhere have you? I guess he’s been pretty busy helping to get this thing ready,” she indicated the stage, “but I wanted to show him that I’m not the bad student he thought I was at the beginning of the year. They didn’t ask just anybody to stand up here.” Jasmine beamed at Fallon. She touched Jasmine’s arm gently.

“I haven’t seen him, Jaz, but I’m sure he was already proud of you, really proud. Look, I know this is going to sound strange,” she said more insistently, “but I think you should go back home. I can’t explain right now, but you’re just going to have to trust me.” Jasmine opened her mouth to protest, but was cut off before she could. Everyone on the stage hushed as Mavis Lovegrove made her entrance. She wore a black and gold dress that, coupled with her white-blond hair, separated her from the rest of the BS group.

“Miss Mavis, why didn’t you let me know you had arrived?” Lee greeted her at center stage.

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Lee,” she responded and eyed the disorganized group of CPM’s and students.

“All right, places everyone!” the director shouted. Jasmine looked pleadingly at Fallon as the man clapped his hands roughly on Jasmine’s shoulder, “Students on this side,” he ordered, moving Jasmine to the right of the stage. “Everybody else on the right,” he continued, herding Fallon and the other BS employees to the opposite side of the podium. Two large NWE officers flanked Mavis and Lee. Britt hovered on the outside of the core group. “We’ll be live in just a

few moments,” the director warned. “Todd and Beverly are going to give the intro, then officers Smith and Wesson will take over, followed by Mr. Ledon and Ms. Lovegrove will close us out. “Any questions?” Without waiting for a reply, he hopped off the stage, and made his way over to Todd and Beverly, who were now seated at a popup news desk nearby. Fallon widened her eyes desperately at Jasmine, but she was stuck inside the heterogeneous group of BS students preparing for their television debut. Fallon’s colleagues eyed her maliciously as she jostled them in an attempt to keep an eye on Jasmine.

“It’s about the start, can you settle down?” another CPM grumbled at Fallon after she inadvertently stepped on her colleague’s foot.

“Sorry,” Fallon muttered, aware she was now attracting negative attention. Fallon took a deep breath and smoothed her skirt, just as the director appeared in front of the stage again.

“We’re going live to Todd and Beverly,” he yelled holding up his fingers for the countdown, “in five, four, three, two, one.” The audience buzzed with excitement as the televisions screens surrounding the stage tuned into the broadcast. Todd and Beverly smiled at the camera and began their report.

“Good evening, citizens,” Todd spoke sincerely. Tonight, as we come to you live from The Public School here in Savannah, Georgia we welcome not only our local viewers, but also those of you tuning in from across the nation.”

“That’s right, Todd,” Beverly interjected cheerily. “We are so honored to host this historic event, and, believe me, it’s electric here tonight.” She gestured to the live audience and they cheered in agreement as the camera panned over them.

“Wow!” Todd marveled. “What a great crowd. Thanks again for coming out,” he waved heartily to them. As the yelling died down, Beverly turned to the camera gravely.

“Tonight marks nearly twenty years since our government emerged victorious from one of the darkest moments in American history: The Class War.” The audience watched reverently as negative images associated with The Class War filled the surrounding screens. “I know, I know,” Beverly continued, shaking her head at the violent and disheartening pictures. “It’s hard to look. For the older generation, it brings back bad memories. For the younger generation, it brings fear. Your children might be asking themselves: could that happen again?” Beverly paused and looked significantly into the camera. Todd continued the narrative.

“When I was a little boy, my parents told me to trust the government and things like that would never happen again, and, as it turns out, this was pretty good advice. Tonight, we will hear from two representatives of our government, Officers Jerry Smith and Luther Wesson of the New Ways Enforcement Office. They, with the help of a number of brave citizens, were able to crush a rebel operation; an operation supported by people who foolishly refused to follow the New Ways, and threatened the very way of life many of us have taken for granted over the last twenty years.”

“Thank you, Todd,” Beverly picked up. “We now turn to officers Smith and Wesson, who will share their harrowing story.” The news anchors disappeared from the screen, and Smith and Wesson replaced them, their massive wingspans extending beyond the frame.

“Good evening,” Smith/Wesson boomed, standing too close to the microphone. Not as polished on camera as his predecessors, he backed up and continued robotically. “A short time ago Savannah Metro began working with two citizens, Mr. Hal Ledon of the Broad Spectrum Corporation and Ms. Gloria Green of The Public School,” he reported matter-of-factly, extending his arm to the school behind him. “They brought it to our attention that a group of rebels, operating under the acronym S-A-F-E, led by Henry Arlo, the former principal of this

school, were working to discredit and, eventually, overthrow one of the government's closest allies: the Broad Spectrum Corporation." Smith/Wesson paused as surprised gasps rippled through the audience. Referring to his notes, Smith/Wesson continued with more passion now. "Tonight, our department is happy to announce that we have not only captured Henry Arlo, but also his second-in-command, Ellison Williams."

As Smith/Wesson finished, shouts rose up from the back of the crowd.

"It's them! Look! They're walking them up!" bystanders called. Fallon stood on her tiptoes, but found it difficult to see anything through the bright lights that surrounded the stage. Instead, she focused her attention on the television monitors, which now showed Henry and Ellison being led, in handcuffs, through the crowd. Henry eyed the camera defiantly, his white hair and beard even more unruly than during his last television appearance. Ellison, on the other hand, looked to the crowd, wincing instinctively as they hurled insults at him. Unable to contain herself, Jasmine rushed forward, but was quickly blocked by one of the hulking officers.

"Hey, that's my uncle!" she shouted in frustration.

"Stay in your place, young lady," Smith/Wesson ordered.

Jasmine looked around for an ally and pleaded, "What is my uncle doing here? We've got to help him!" Jasmine's cries grew more insistent as she tried to sidestep the officer who continued to block her path. Fallon moved to comfort her student, but Gus Winters beat her to the young girl's side.

"Don't mind her, officer," Gus began, motioning for the officer to back down slightly. "She, like the rest of us, was fooled into believing her uncle was just an idiot janitor." Gus clasped Jasmine's wrists tightly and pulled her toward him, "Why do you think I invited you here tonight, Eight-Oh-Four?" he questioned violently. "Sure, you could've watched your

uncle's humiliation on television, but I thought it would be much more meaningful to watch it live. You need to see the consequences for insubordination. Hell, we can even call it experiential learning." Jasmine's stiffened under Gus's hold, but didn't speak. "Now," Gus turned Jasmine around, "Why don't you get back over to your spot and watch the show. You're going to really enjoy it, I guarantee it." He pushed Jasmine toward the other students and watched intently as Henry and Ellison mounted the stage in their matching orange jumpsuits. Fallon tried to catch Jasmine's eye, to assure her that someone was watching out for her, but the event was quickly turning into a frenzied rally.

The jeering reached a crescendo as the prisoners shuffled in front of the audience, unable to move quickly due to their bound hands and feet. Remembering her role as a BS CPM, Fallon clapped dumbly as those near her whooped and hollered with the crowd.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Gus shouted above the din. "That's our janitor. Sweeping the floors and plotting against the company right under our noses." He looked hopefully in Lee's direction and finished, "Good thing Mr. Ledon had our backs." Gus's comment went unacknowledged, however, as Smith and Wesson met the prisoners at the edge of the stage and ushered them in front of the podium. Their captives now on display, Smith/Wesson moved to quiet the crowd.

"Ladies and gentleman, ladies and gentleman," they repeatedly appealed, but the crowd continued roaring.

Shouts of "Traitors!" "Rebel swine!" echoed through the air. In front of the stage, the director made elaborate slicing motions across his throat.

"Get them to shut up," he hissed. "We have to go to a commercial in ninety seconds." The officers tried unsuccessfully to quiet the crowd and looked pleadingly at the director. Finally,

a piercing whistle broke through the din, and hundreds of heads turned to the source: Gloria Green. Dressed head to toe in her namesake's color save for the silver knot on the top of her head and the silver heels that enhanced her slight frame she appeared triumphantly on the stage. She whistled again and Smith/Wesson nodded at her gratefully.

“Well,” Smith/Wesson improvised, “We planned on giving Ms. Green a more formal introduction later in the program, but as you can see, she is the type of woman who really needs no introduction.” Gloria smiled confidently and the officer continued, “Gloria Green, in a selfless display of bravery, helped our department to undermine one of the most significant threats in recent history.” Henry and Ellison stood shackled next to their former colleague. Ellison shook his head in disbelief, repeatedly mouthing *how could you?* as the officers heaped on the praise.

Henry, having already come to terms with her betrayal, cursed violently.

“Brave, my ass! SAFE is brave! SAFE forever! Open your eyes, people! Open your eyes...” Before he could finish, Gloria calmly reached into one of the officer's holster, drawing out his baton and deftly smashing Henry over the head with the thin cylinder. The crowd gasped collectively, but erupted in cheers as blood spurted from Henry's head and spread darkly across his matted white hair.

“And, we're headed to commercial!” the director yelled above the crowd “You're a natural lady,” he said to Gloria. “My producers are going nuts. They want more like this, lots more! He pushed on the headphone clinging to his ear and furrowed his brow, nodding vehemently to whoever was giving him orders through the earpiece. “Uh huh, Uh huh,” he repeated. “Ok, change of plans!” he yelled to the stage. “We're going to keep going with the officers and Gloria for now. Ledon, you're tabled for the moment.” The director eyed Henry,

who was now crouched on the stage clutching his head, but quickly went on about his business, reminding the crew of their angles, and touching base with Todd and Beverly at the news desk. “This is great television, just great!” he marveled. “We’re back in thirty seconds, people!” he shouted, checking his watch.

As the director called places, Lee complained to Mavis.

“What about my, I mean, our, speeches. Gloria’s stealing the spotlight. You should be center stage, Miss Mavis. This is your night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mavis assured Lee. “Remember, tonight’s about glorifying the company and Gloria’s certainly doing that,” she said admiringly.

“And, we’re back,” the director called, and Todd and Beverly recapped the beginning of the broadcast.

After Henry’s bludgeoning was repeated through a corporate-sponsored replay, Smith/Wesson recounted Gloria’s role in SAFE’s thwarted plot, “We know this may come as a shock to all of you law-abiding citizens, but these men,” the officer pointed accusingly at Henry and Ellison, “and their team of rebels,” may have kept their operation going if Gloria Green, a rehabilitated former member of their group, had not stepped forward to tell us about their work. Ms. Green also provided us with the location of the group’s headquarters. And tonight,” he paused for affect, “we are able to put all of her intelligence to good use.” Smith/Wesson smiled and pulled out a small black metal square from inside the podium. “Miss Gloria,” he motioned to her, “we would love for you to do the honors.” He held the unidentified device out to her as he spoke. Gloria smiled and made her way to the podium, stopping along the way to kick the injured Henry Arlo in the ribs, eliciting another loud cry from the audience.

“Thank you, officer,” Gloria said, taking the device and smiling directly into the camera. Moments later, the newsfeed changed and a darkened corridor filled the screens. Fallon squinted at the television, her heart quickening as she recognized the street and the building. “Ladies and gentleman,” Gloria announced triumphantly, “I give you 300 West River Street, Savannah, Georgia: SAFE Headquarters. This building is now full of rebels waiting for further instructions. Unfortunately,” she signed melodramatically, “they aren’t going to be around for any more missions.”

Henry and El turned sharply toward Gloria, and El screamed, “No! No, Gloria, No!” Gloria ignored his protests, however, and giggled uncharacteristically at the audience as she gently depressed the small gray button on the face of the metal square that she held between her hands. The crowd in front of The Public School watched the televisions screens silently, puzzling over Gloria’s actions. The viewers were quickly jolted out of their reverie, as a massive explosion ripped through the SAFE headquarters, knocking out the live feed. The news footage was unnecessary, however, for those gathered around The Public School, as the remnants of the SAFE building shot through the sky like a macabre fireworks display. Smith and Wesson led the audience in applauding Gloria’s actions.

“Tonight,” one of the offices shouted over the roaring crowd, “with the push of a button, we have stopped dozens of rebels and,” he looked significantly into the camera, “sent a clear message to anyone else harboring rebel sentiments.” The crowd cheered as the newsfeed was restored and images of the bomb’s victims faded in and out of the screen. Through watery eyes, Fallon registered the familiar faces of many of the SAFE members she had been introduced to at yesterday’s meeting. The last image elicited the loudest cheer from law enforcement and the audience: a candid of Cam and Dewey relaxing on the beach. Ellison and Henry stared at the

picture in disbelief, each blaming himself for the tragic circumstances in which they now found themselves. Smith/Wesson continued, "You will remember one of the ways in which President Torrance kept the peace during The Class War was by targeting disloyal rebels and bringing them to justice in a public forum. Tonight, we find ourselves resurrecting a number of these tactics in order to restore order to our city. Henry Arlo and Ellison Williams," he pointed to the orange-clad men wallowing at his side, "have attempted to break up everything hard-working Americans like you fought for during the Class War, and, tonight, we must stop them once and for all." The crowd cheered approvingly. "You see, when people go against the New Ways, it puts our country at risk. The men standing in front of you tonight did just that and they will be punished for it." The audience continued to jeer at Henry and El as Smith/Wesson leveled the charges against El and Henry. "Tonight, we charge Ellison Williams and Henry Arlo with conspiracy, terrorism, and treason. While they still have to be tried, we feel pretty certain that they will be found guilty." Smith/Wesson chuckled and continued, "That's right boys, soon you're going to be packing your bags and getting a one way ticket to the Pen, where we're going to lock you up and throw away the key." Smith/Wesson gestured to a van that was making its way through the school's entrance. "Here come the New Ways Enforcement officers now, so you better breathe in this sweet fresh air while you can, because it's going to be a long time before you have another chance."

"Hot dog, this is gettin' good," Lee commented from the BS group. Smith/Wesson moved to Henry and El as the van approached the stage. Smith/Wesson motioned to where he assumed the driver sat behind the vehicle's heavily tinted windows.

"Come on now, boys," Smith/Wesson called out, "we've got to get this show on the road." As Smith/Wesson's words echoed through the crowd, the doors of the van flung open and

group of men and women rushed out and headed toward the stage. Cam Arlo led the SAFE members, and the other rebels who had come from across the region to help, toward the stage to free Henry and El. The camera crew captured Cam as he jumped onto the stage wild-eyed and began cursing the NWE officers and the BS leaders. A group of SAFE members quickly subdued Smith and Wesson and chanting filled the air, as swarms of rebels circled the stage. “El’s bells!” some called, while others shouted “Public not perfect beats BS!” Gloria stamped her foot.

“How did you? How did you?” she stammered.

“You thought you packed SAFE headquarters, Gloria,” Cam answered, “but once I found out you were working with BS, I organized this little,” he paused and gestured to the screaming rebels, “demonstration.”

“You’ll never make it out alive,” Gloria spat back.

“Oh, I think I have a pretty good chance,” Cam replied and looked directly into the television camera that was currently following his every move. As the rebels overtook the stage, Mavis Lovegrove began to shuffle, as casually as she could, to the edge of the crowd.

“Hold it right there, Lovegrove,” Cam warned.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mavis questioned. Cam scoffed and turned back to the camera.

“America!” he shouted. “We’ve come here tonight to tell you the truth about Broad Spectrum. Mavis Lovegrove,” Cam pointed to the CEO, “and her *business partner*, President Torrance, plotted the downfall of public schools twenty five years ago. They promised us choices for better schools. They promised us well-educated students. They promised us job security. What we got was bad choices, unthinking and obedient students, and job security for

Mavis and her corporate cronies. America!” Cam grabbed the camera with both hands. “We know you’re out there and that you want something different. If we stand together, we will be victorious!”

As Cam looked into the camera again, a shot rang out. As the crowd scattered in panic, Mavis Lovegrove took this as her cue to exit and skirted away from Cam. Before she could get far, however, Gus Winters charged into her.

“I don’t get paid enough for this shit,” he shouted, knocking the CEO to the floor as he made his way off of the stage. The gun had been fired by Hal Ledon who now wrapped his arms tightly around Fallon, the gun pointed at her temple.

“It has come to my attention,” he leered at the camera trying to garner support from the audience, “that there’s another rebel in our midst tonight.” Lee tapped the gun for emphasis and Fallon cringed.

“Don’t do it, Lee,” Cam cautioned, rushing toward him. Lee stopped him, however, by pushing the gun more forcefully into Fallon’s temple.

“Now Cam,” he warned, “I wouldn’t make any more sudden movements if I were you. I’m doing this for you, Miss Mavis, for the company,” he raved. Fallon writhed under Lee’s grip. “Don’t worry, darlin’” he soothed as he switched off the gun’s safety. “It’ll be over in a hot second.” Turning his attention back to Cam, he continued. “I didn’t like all those things you were saying to Miss Mavis, Cameron. You’re making it sound like Broad Spectrum wasn’t interested in the success of our nation and our nation’s most valuable resource: well-educated young people. Dammit, Cam, our company slogan says it all: We’re in the business of a good education, and the American people trusted us to take over the schools, and we’ve done exactly what they asked us to do. I know El told you some story that got you all excited, but it’s just not

true. Corporations transformed American schools for the better, and closing The Public School is the last chapter in this reform. So, give up now, and nobody has to get hurt. Ok?” Cam stared silently at Lee for a moment before making up his mind.

“No, Mr. Ledon, I don’t think I’ll give up,” he said before lunging at him. As Cam flew through the air, a second shot rang out. The cameras kept rolling and they panned the stage for the source. Finally, they stopped on Hal Ledon, now crumpled on the ground clutching his bleeding thigh.

“Dammit! You shot me! I can’t believe you shot me!” Lee cried. Cam, Fallon, and El stared in disbelief as the BS leader writhed on the stage floor.

“Oh, shut up,” Britt said, kicking Lee in the boot. “It’s just a flesh wound.” Turning to her audience, Britt smiled and said, “What, you didn’t think you’re the only ones who knew about El’s Bells did you?”

Chapter 20: El's Bells

"Excellent work, Brittany *Eleanor*," Henry said from the side of the stage.

"You're welcome, boss," she replied and pulled a key out of her pocket. She crouched next to him and quickly unlocked his handcuffs. She then turned her attention to El.

"But you...But you..." he sputtered. Britt nodded.

"Sorry I couldn't tell you, El," she said while loosening his cuffs. "I was too high up in BS to risk it, but, believe me, I wanted to."

"But...but..." El stammered again, now looking at Henry.

"Max and I will explain everything later, El," he said. "But now we have to get the hell out of here. NWE officers are probably right around the corner, and," he nodded at the still-wailing Lee, "somebody's might even want to help that guy out."

"Where are we going to go, dad?" Cam asked. "Our headquarters is gone and our faces are all over the news." Jasmine hid under the stage through the commotion, but now appeared next to the SAFE group.

"I've got an idea," she said.

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As Cam drove the commandeered NWE van down Bay Street, Britt and Henry finally gave the impatient SAFE group the answers they sought.

"I first met Henry through my old college professor, Max Ellis," Britt explained.

"You know Max?" El and Fallon asked at the same time?

"*You* know Max?" El asked Fallon. Fallon's shrugged.

“I mean, I only met him a couple of times. He asked me to study the liberal arts, but my parents talked me out of it. I mean, it was really impractical. Sitting around, reading poetry, what has that ever done to help anybody?”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Fallon,” Britt answered. “Poetry means a lot more than you know. Despite what the BSers want you to think, this world is complex contradictory and, sometimes, the only way we can begin to understand it is through poetry, through novels, through art. Max taught me that, and I never forgot it, even after I started working for BS.”

“But how could you keep working for them?” El asked. Britt shook her head.

“It wasn’t easy, believe me, but, once Henry told me about El’s Bells, I knew I could do more good for the cause if I worked to dismantle BS from within.”

“So I’m thinking taking down BS involved a lot more than just plastering graffiti around the city,” Cam said and glanced over his shoulder to El. El shrugged and looked out the window.

“Hey,” Britt said gently, “Henry and I were just about to fill you in. You have to trust us on that. Everything you did at BS and everything you’ve done at SAFE helped our cause.”

“Those messages were powerful, El,” Henry picked up. “Even more powerful, I think, than all of the facts we’ve collected on BS over the years. People can ignore or misinterpret hard evidence, but they find it a whole lot harder to ignore something that hits them here,” he tapped his chest for emphasis.

“He’s right,” Britt continued. “That’s exactly what I was saying to Fallon. Sure we have evidence that BS allowed students to test and re-test to achieve better test scores than traditional public schools. Sure we have evidence that Mavis and her company spent millions wining and dining politicians to encourage their support for corporate education. Sure we have evidence that Mavis encouraged the use of *creative* accounting methods to exaggerate their profits, drive up

stock prices, and pay her and her friends giant bonuses. But, these facts don't fill people with hope, they don't drive people to action the way these words can; the way these words do."

Cam now steered the van into The Village and Jasmine directed him to the perfect pink townhouse next to Jaz Lake. Every light in the house was on and Tamika stood, with her phone to her ear, in the front window. When Jaz jumped out of the van, she dropped the phone and ran outside.

"You're safe. You're safe," she said and hugged her daughter tightly. When she finally let go, the SAFE group had all exited the van and were assembled in the front lawn. Tamika hugged and kissed her daughter once more and then swiftly smacked her brother on the back of his head.

"That's for putting Jaz in danger," she said and smacked him again. "And that's for lying to me."

"Ok, ok," El said and rubbed his tender head. "I'm sorry, all right, but we're back now, and we could really use your help." El smiled sheepishly at his sister. She frowned and looked the group over.

"Ok, come on inside," she said and sighed. Once inside, the group gathered around the television to try and get some clue as to the repercussions of the night's actions. Todd and Beverly were back in the studio and reporting on the events with gusto.

"We're coming to you live from Savannah with breaking news," Todd began. "The establishment of Broad Spectrum's latest educational program center, The BS Futures Academy, turned violent tonight when a group of domestic terrorists stormed the stage in protest." The camera cut away to footage from the event that featured the SAFE team's exit from the NWE van. The video ended and a headshot of Mavis Lovegrove filled the screen.

“Joining us by phone tonight is Broad Spectrum’s CEO, Mavis Lovegrove,” Beverly picked up. “Good evening, Ms. Lovegrove. Thank you for joining us. First, please tell us how you are feeling.”

“I’m a little shaken, certainly,” Mavis answered, “but I’m doing fine otherwise. My friend and one of our greatest Presidents, Gabriel Torrance, always said that people who failed to see our revolutionary vision would oppose us violently. Most people, however, understand that what BS has done for this country has helped us immensely, but there are still a few, there are always a few, who fail to see this, but we are undeterred.” The SAFE group booed and hissed at the television, almost drowning out Beverly’s next question.

“Ms. Lovegrove, our newsroom received a package this evening filled with e-mails, financial reports, and meeting minutes from Broad Spectrum. Attached was a list of allegations against your company. Allegations ranging from the unethical business practices to the ways in which you treat your students. Ms. Lovegrove, how do you respond to reports that your company uses unnecessary force when disciplining students?” Beverly asked.

“Broad Spectrum takes safety and security very seriously,” Mavis began. “So seriously, that we have multiple armed officers on campus at all times. These officers, though, are not there to threaten students, but to ensure student safety. While most BS students are hard-working and compliant, some just can’t seem to follow the rules. These students are a threat to the safety of our staff and students and they are also a threat to the other student’s learning. There are certain kids coming from certain backgrounds that you just can’t reason with. They are violent, defiant, and our officers are forced to use force against them in order to protect the safety of the students as well as protect themselves. Broad Spectrum prides itself on our disciplinary focus. We hold our students to high standards and if they don’t meet them, we apply

the appropriate punishments. We are preparing young people by giving them the personal discipline needed to be successful in work and in the world.”

“How do you respond, then, Ms. Lovegrove, to your critics, the people who say that BS educational program centers are inferior to public schools?” Mavis laughed lightly.

“I’m sorry for laughing, Beverly,” she said, “but I just cannot understand that critique. First of all, BS students have some of the highest test scores in the nation and we also have a powerful network of alumni who are heading to college, getting jobs, and becoming leaders in some of the world’s most powerful industries. The numbers don’t lie, and they clearly show that Broad Spectrum is the best choice out there and millions of these educated consumers are choosing to send their children to BS schools.”

“I can’t stand this anymore,” Henry shouted at the screen. “I don’t know how she can get up there and say those things year after year. It’s just...It’s just...It’s just—”

“Bullshit?” Britt interjected.

“Exactly!” Henry shouted at her and began tapping his phone. He scrolled down the screen, pressed a button and put the phone to his ear.

“What are you doing, dad?” Cam asked, but Henry quieted him with a wave of his hand.

“Yes, this is Henry Arlo.” He listened for a moment. “Well, you’re just going to have to trust me. I want to be on air. I want to talk to Beverly.” Henry waited again and suddenly Beverly touched her ear.

“Excuse me, Ms. Lovegrove,” she said. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to cut our interview short. My producer is telling me that we have Henry Arlo, former principal of The Public School on the line and he would like to say a few words. I hope you’ll forgive us, Ms. Lovegrove.”

“Certainly, Beverly,” Mavis replied briskly. “This should be entertaining.”

“Thank you, Ms. Lovegrove,” Beverly said. “Now, we turn to Mr. Arlo. Hello, Mr. Arlo, are you there?”

“Good evening,” Henry began. The SAFE crowd buzzed, excited to hear their leader on the news. He shushed them and continued. “I have worked in public education for over forty years. I have served as principal of The Public School in Savannah, Georgia for the past twenty five years, and it was a job that brought me great heartache.” He paused and took a breath. Fallon noticed tears were beginning to form in his eyes. He took another breath before continuing. “Heartache because I worked hard, my teachers worked hard, my students worked hard, but we could never quite seem to make it. Our school, our test scores, our performance, was always *below average*. We followed every trend, used every intervention, but, still, we were *below average*. Year after year, student after student, test after test, *below average*. Over time, we began to believe this meant we were *below average* too; that we were somehow deficient, somehow less-than others in our community, in our country, who didn’t seem to have the same problems; those who were always *above average*.”

“Tonight, when I heard Mavis talking about the failure of public schools, I just couldn’t keep quiet any longer. I had to share the truth as I know it. For years I, along with my friends, colleagues, and my wife,” he paused again, his voice thickening, “fought to maintain public education because we know that public education isn’t dead. No, public education is not dead; public education has yet to be born!” Henry removed the phone from his ear, pressed end, and placed it back in his pocket. El clapped Henry on the back. Fallon and Jaz stared at him and Cam enveloped his dad in a powerful hug. Seconds later, three swift knocks echoed through the living room. The blue lights of the NWE flashed through the semi-closed blinds. Henry

continued to hug his son tightly. Three more knocks. Henry loosened his grip on his son and nodded at the group. He then turned and walked to the front door.

“Who is it?” he called and turned the knob with a smile.

Epilogue: The First Public School

September, 2099

Jasmine opened her eyes and frowned. She had been having the most magnificent dream and groped for the journal she always kept on her nightstand. She turned on her lamp and quickly jotted down what she could remember. She frequently shared her dreams with her students at the SAFE School, and she was certain they would have an idea of what her unconscious mind was trying to tell her. She finished writing and looked at the clock. It was too early to head to school, but too late to go back to sleep, so she slipped out of bed and down the narrow hallway to her writing desk. Maybe her dream could somehow figure into one of her many unfinished poems or stories. She had started writing in her late teens because this was the only way she could correspond with her uncle and the other SAFE members while they were in NWE prison. Her letters turned into stories and poems to entertain, to provide hope, to humanize.

Unable (and unwilling) to go back to the BS schools, Jasmine, with the support of the rebels who remained, was one of the SAFE School's first students. The idea of opening their own unique school had always interested Henry and El, and, in their absence, it became a reality. The SAFE School unofficially opened in the winter of 2050 in a variety of undisclosed locations around Savannah. People came together to read, discuss, and plan. They were educated because their lives depended on it.

Slowly, the public school movement began to grow. Students of all ages met across the country to discuss their lives. Sometimes people would bring books they found interesting or read an original work. Sometimes people would work together to figure out problem. Sometimes they would get tired of what they were doing and move on. Sometimes they would just do nothing. There were no limitations, so each public school made their own path. Sure, it was

never simple and easy, and sometimes people tried to control one another, to wield power over others. Sometimes they disagreed on what to do, but these missteps were managed because education was no longer about declaring some people winners and most people losers; education had nothing to do with a building, a test or a grade, but had everything to do with people gathered together for a common goal: to discover, to discuss, and to live.

Jasmine's mind had wandered away and left her once again, as it was known to do. That didn't bother her much though, because she had many of her greatest ideas during these wanderings. In fact, she looked forward to these daily ramblings. She searched her mind for the adventures this day had in store. One student wanted to learn everything he could about the birds that lived outside of their school. Jasmine knew nothing about birds, but she had found some binoculars and a book about birds of the Southeastern United State in her attic and that would have to suffice for now. If she didn't know something, her students would certainly teach her. Another group wanted to write a play about the city's history. They had started by interviewing Jasmine about her experiences and now they were in the throes of their research. Whenever they discovered something new, they excitedly reported it to Jasmine and the other SAFE School students. Jasmine wasn't sure if they would ever finish the play, that didn't really matter. They had their whole lives to continue the project. Other students simply wanted to read for the day, and Jasmine was more than happy to let them. She would find her students under trees or sprawled on benches and periodically she would check in with them about their reading. (No, not to ask them to identify the author's main idea with supporting textual evidence- this isn't 2016, remember). Other times, she would read her own book or write her own stories. Just because she was the teacher, didn't mean she was done learning. In fact, learning, listening, and being open to new ideas were the most important parts of her work.

There she went again- lost in thought! She shook her head and got up from her desk. Her ideas refused to be contained to paper this morning. She sighed and tucked her chair back under the desk. The day spread out before her and she knew the words would come- they always did.

PART III: WHERE WE COULD GO

I ain't afraid of you. I'm just a victim of your fears. You cower in your tower praying that I'll disappear. I got another plan, one that requires me to stand. On the stage or in the street, don't need no microphone or beat...I got a list of demands written on the palm of my hands. I ball my fist and you're gonna know where I stand.--Saul Williams (2004)

In this chapter, I theorize and make meaning of the ideas presented in my novel. I break my arguments into seven demands that focus on teachers, students, resistance, and the arts through the lenses of critical pedagogy (Apple, 2004; Ayers, 2004, 2016a, 2016b; Darder, 2009; Freire, 1998, 2000; Giroux, 1988, 2001; Hill, 2012; hooks, 2003; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011; McLaren, 1998; Steinberg, 2011) and arts based research (Barone, 1992, 2008; Barone & Eisner, 2012; Eisner, 1995, 2012; Leavy, 2009; Neilsen, 2002; Spindler, 2008). My vision for public education is expressed as a “list of demands,” drawing inspiration from William Ayers’ (2016b) book *Demand the Impossible* and the Saul Williams’ song *List of Demands*.

The changes I seek in public education will not happen passively, rather, require the active participation of dedicated and creative individuals and groups. The status quo has reigned long enough and it is now time for teachers, students, and the public to reimagine public education. For a long time, even while writing this book, I was hesitant to outline these demands because I considered them too radical. When I shared my ideas, I would end them with something like “but that will probably never happen.” Dewey, (the philosopher, not the dog), served as the guide for the type of bold proposal I needed to make. Dewey’s 1933 visit with the “Utopians,” highlights the critical differences between schooling and education. In fact, for the Utopians, “education is carried on without anything of the nature of schools” (cited in Schubert, 2009, p. 13). In order to demand the type of education I envision for the future, I push aside my

doubts and use my imagination to think like a Utopian. I ask myself: If I could design public education from scratch, what would it look like?" Ayers (2016a) calls this avoiding the "TINA trap: There-Is-No-Alternative" and encourages educators to embrace what could be (p. 87). It is in this spirit that I outline my demands for an end to *schooling* that is founded on advancing neoliberalism, maintaining the status quo, and perpetuating anti-intellectualism, in favor of *education* that is founded on democracy, the maintenance of social justice, and the promotion of critical thinking, creativity, and freedom.

Teacher education should focus on developing intellectual, thoughtful, and critical teachers who understand that their role is not to test, sort, or label students, but to support, guide, and advocate for all (**Demand 1**). Society's relationship with teachers and the teaching profession is very complex. As a result, teachers are alternatively beloved and reviled. We are beloved because everyone has a memory of his or her "favorite" teacher. While these favorites take many forms, these teachers overwhelmingly have the ability to see their students as individuals and to cultivate each student's unique humanity. When teachers are beloved, however, they are viewed as the exception, not the rule- the few who make a real difference in the lives of students. Teachers *en masse*, on the other hand, are oftentimes reviled because we are easy targets for the "failure" of public schools. According to the dominant narrative, low test scores mean schools are failing, and "bad teachers" are one of the primary causes of the low test scores and failing schools. These teachers are allowed to keep their jobs because, it is argued, they are protected by unions and tenure and cannot be fired. In my novel, building upon these feelings, I all but eliminated the role of teachers. Teachers are already being replaced by computers (Kamenetz, 2016) and when they do remain, they are asked to teach more students with fewer resources and to raise student test scores above all else.

I am fiercely proud of my profession, but in order to maintain its integrity, I am also fiercely critical of it. The art of teaching is disappearing because of standards, testing, accountability and neoliberal educational reforms that have “deskilled” and de-professionalized educators and shifted our role from teachers to technicians (Giroux, 1988; Apple, 1995; Nuñez, 2015). Schools of education have the power, however, to pull the teaching profession back from the abyss and imbue intellectualism, theory, and critique into teaching. Many universities, however, like K-12 schools, have succumbed to the ideologies of neoliberalism and, as a result, many teachers do not understand the intellectual, political, and theoretical components of the profession. Henry Giroux (1988) argues that many “teacher education programs are designed to create intellectuals who operate in the interests of the state, whose social function is primarily to sustain and legitimate the status quo” (p. 160). When the school’s function is to legitimize the unequal social order, teachers are encouraged to utilize prescribed standards and curricula to transfer onto students a particular body of knowledge. Paulo Freire (2000) explains this relationship: “Students are viewed as “containers” or “receptacles to be ‘filled’ by the teacher. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are” (p. 72). The “banking method” has maintained its prominence as standardized tests are increasingly used to rank students, schools and teachers (Freire, 2000). From the onset of their professional lives, teachers are encouraged to adhere strictly to prescribed standards and curriculum because, if they do not, they are told, students will be in danger of failing the all-important tests; the tests that are typically held up as the most significant indicator of student and teacher success. Increasingly, the results of these tests are being used to evaluate teachers. For example, in the state of Georgia, the results of the Georgia Milestones Assessment (GMAS) account for thirty percent of a

teacher's evaluation (lowered from fifty percent after teacher pushback) (Tagami, 2016). The state has yet to implement a merit pay program based on student test scores, but Governor Nathan Deal has expressed his support for merit pay (Downey, 2016). The nation's obsession with quantifying student and teacher performance is one facet of neoliberal "reform." It is argued that test scores are an objective way to evaluate teachers and that merit pay has successfully motivated business people for years. Teachers do not likely enter the profession with the intention of spending their precious classroom time drilling students with mindless test preparation, but this mentality can easily take over as test scores are tied to teacher performance and, in some cases, to teacher pay. The surest way to prepare students for standardized tests is through direct instruction, and lessons that encourage critical thinking and creativity are pushed aside until test preparation is complete.

Resisting the banking method requires rigorous intellectual work and it must begin when teachers enter the university. Unfortunately, colleges of education, toeing the line of corporate reform, continually inundate pre-service teachers with technical courses on topics like classroom management, assessment development, and "methods" of teaching, leaving them almost entirely ignorant of the rich theoretical traditions in the field of education, particularly in the field of curriculum studies.

Teachers must delve into theory for a number of reasons. First, theory provides teachers with the knowledge that there are alternatives to the "imperialist white-supremacist patriarchal hegemony" that dominates the social order (hooks, 2003, p. 102). Teachers cannot be expected to help students uncover "the myths, lies, and injustices at the heart of the dominant school culture," if they are not aware of the ways in which power is constructed and wielded in schools

(Giroux, 1988, p. 7). Understanding the ways in which schools and teachers wield power (and the ways in which teachers are implicit in this) is of vital importance for all teachers.

Secondly, theoretical knowledge provides teachers with the confidence to embrace their professionalism and engage in pedagogy that is creative, intellectual, and political. When a teacher truly views himself or herself as a professional with knowledge and authority to make important decisions in the classroom, he or she reaches the heart of teaching: “an enterprise dedicated to truth and enlightenment” (Ayers, 2004, p. 31). Maintaining professional confidence makes it possible for teachers to identify the differences between what those in power deem important (test scores, discipline, data) and what teachers and students determine *together* is important for their education (creativity, flexibility, authentic experiences). Teachers who trust themselves will then seek out these experiences even if they are not part of the standards or prescribed curriculum. The willingness to engage in “creative insubordination,” and do what is right for one’s students above all else is of the utmost importance to a professional teacher (Ayers, 2010, p. 143). Developing this professional confidence, however, takes time and the support of other teachers. Now in my ninth year of teaching, new teachers have begun coming to me for advice. When they do, their questions are usually about how to appease the administration. I, however, encourage them to ignore (as best they can) these demands from above and to trust their professional judgement and do what is best for their students. An exemplary teacher, bell hooks (2003), argues that teaching is service and that “serving students well is an act of critical resistance” (p. 90). This resistance oftentimes situates teachers “at odds with the environments wherein we teach” (p. 91). Teachers must use their professional judgement and commitment to service, however, and *choose* to do what is in the best interests of their students. Keeping one’s head down and doing what is asked (testing, drilling, filling) is an

option, of course. Continuing to “teach” in this manner, however, is a futile endeavor because it will never lead to the purported ends (higher test scores). First, this practice will perpetuate the status quo (some kids are “high achieving,” while others are “below the standard”). Secondly, it will “justify” the end of public education, as inferior public schools (as judged by “failing” test scores) are already being closed or replaced by non-profit and for-profit charter schools.

Implementing every “research-based” teaching strategy and gathering mounds of student achievement data will do very little to influence test scores, so teachers should trust themselves and take a risk.

In short, an education based on theory provides teachers (and in turn, their students) with the language to critique the world around them and affect change. This knowledge, however, comes with the understanding that teachers are not neutral, apolitical, and ahistorical technicians, but must be willing to “stand up for truth and knowledge, liberation and freedom, and against oppression” (Ayers, 2004, pp. 10-11). If teachers understand the profession in this way from the beginning of their undergraduate career, they will appreciate what it means to educate and to be educated. If they do not, they may forever want for a “well-articulated framework for understanding the class, cultural, ideological, and gender dimensions of pedagogical practice” or, more probably, perpetuate inequality through their ignorance (Giroux, 1988, p. 163).

For teachers to begin resisting their role as an oppressive and unskilled technician, they must first unlearn much of their own schooling. This is a difficult and continual process because most teachers, through their own educational career, were indoctrinated to be obedient, quiet, and uncritical. It is not surprising that teachers are predominantly white, predominantly middle class, and predominantly female. We are the embodiment of the “model student.” Although my education has helped me to strive to be a teacher for social justice, I was not, and am still not,

immune to the “hidden curriculum” that taught me to be obedient, quiet, and uncritical and to value these traits in my students (Giroux, 1988). The presence of this tension in my educational life (as a student and a teacher) perfectly embodies the central tension, the “aching persistent tension between reality and possibility” facing teachers, students, and schools (Ayers, 2004, p. 18). Teachers may not be able to resist all of the oppressive features of schooling all of the time, but we cannot use this as an excuse to ignore the practices and policies that hurt our students and our profession. I do not know many teachers who believe standardized tests are an accurate reflection of student’s learning or intelligence, but, despite this, teachers are extremely reticent to speak out against tests and the other harmful trends facing our schools and students. In order to expose the tensions between the current situation and what we want and need for our students, teachers must take on critical and intellectual roles in their schools and communities. Giroux (1988) argues that when teachers act as “transformative intellectuals,” they, on the most basic level, acknowledge that teaching requires thinking. A teacher who thinks must, first and foremost, think critically about his or her profession and “must take active responsibility for raising serious question about what they teach, how they are to teach, and what the larger goals are for which they are striving” (p. 126). It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that teachers are continually engaged in intellectual work in order to resist the allure of “the model teacher,” “the model student” and “the model school.” This resistance, however, must come with the understanding that teaching is a lifelong commitment to engage in critical and intellectual work.

As a recovering “model student,” I know first-hand just how difficult this can be. Despite my extensive theoretical knowledge, my teaching is always a work-in-progress. There are many days where I lecture to students, where I ask my students questions, but don’t give them time to adequately form their own answers. There are times when I fail to acknowledge their

individuality or misunderstand or ignore their needs or favor my own. There are times where I do what my state, district, or administration demand even when I know it's not in my students' best interests. Like all educators, I am imperfect and a product of the type of schooling I profess to want to end. Despite these contradictions, I am, however, able to reflect on these actions and, as a result, continually strive to be a more just, more caring, and more committed teacher because it is what I was called to do.

Teaching must be understood as not only a profession, but also as a calling and a vocation. Parker Palmer (2007) explains that when a person has found his or her true calling, it fills them with “deep gladness” (p. 31). This does not mean that every day will be easy and carefree. In fact, for those who are called to teach “teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart- and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be” (p. 11). Teaching with love and heart makes our work more enjoyable, but it also makes it exceedingly difficult. For teachers to truly love their students and profession, they must be willing to resist the comfortable, the simple, and the known and venture into uncharted territory.

It is of paramount importance to provide equal opportunities for all students to reach their highest potential (Siddle-Walker, 1996), rather than privilege those who hold money, power, and cultural capital (**Demand 2**). “You must have a lot of dumb students.” This pronouncement was made by one of my classmates in an English class during my last semester in college. At the time, I was student teaching and my classmate drew this conclusion based only on a cursory understanding of my school and students. His logic: Your students are poor. Your students are black and brown. Students who are poor and black and brown are dumb. The implied secondary argument was: You are dumb for thinking you can teach poor black and brown students. My classmate's attitude mirrors that of the dominant culture, and this attitude (and its wide

acceptance as fact) has led to a public school system that values the educations of white middle and upper class students above the educations of students of color and poor students. People seem to have a difficult time accepting this, so I'm going to write it again, even more explicitly. Schools in the United States are unequally and unfairly funded (Kozol, 1992, 2005; Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2015; Turner, 2016). Schools in the United States are segregated (Kozol, 1992, 2005; hooks, 2003). I'll take it even a step further, just so that my position is perfectly clear. White students are not inherently more intelligent than students of color. White students are not inherently harder workers than students of color. White middle and upper class students don't *deserve* a better education, but, decade after decade, in city after city, this is what they receive.

Schools have a bad habit of reducing students to things. In a recent meeting about our school's standardized testing plan for the year, I was told that "we [teachers] are responsible for their [students] data. We are responsible for their scores." I copied this quote down because the language disappointed and troubled me. To me, the message was clear: teachers and schools are responsible for producing numbers and nothing more. How we achieve this doesn't matter, as long as the results suit the needs of the administration, which suit the needs of the district, which suit the needs of the state, which suit the needs of the national government, which suit the needs of the big businesses and billionaire "philanthropists" who call the shots in America's public schools. It is difficult, at times, for teachers to focus on their students as individuals because students are boxed in and labeled at a young age. Some of these labels, "nice," "hard-working," "gifted," earn them praise and privilege, while others, "at risk," "SPED," "EBD," limit their opportunities and disallow them an identity outside of these arbitrary descriptors

Palmer (2007) argues that a culture of fear leads teachers and schools to label and categorize students unnecessarily. He explains that teachers rely on "thoughtless stereotypes that

float freely in faculty culture” to blame students for our own failings as teachers, or the failings of the school (p. 42). Relying on these stereotypes reaffirms “our assumption that students are brain-dead” and “leads to pedagogies that deaden their brains” (p. 42). Palmer uses the example of the “student from hell” to illustrate this point. This student exists in all classrooms, and he or she appears to the teacher as disengaged or apathetic. Palmer encountered such a student, but after being given the opportunity to talk with the student and to learn more about him, determined “that the silently and seemingly sullen students in our classrooms are not brain-dead: they are full of fear” (p. 45). I experienced a similar situation recently with my own “student from hell.” On the surface, my student appeared completely uninterested in anything I had to say. During class, he didn’t talk with his classmates, played on his phone, or put his head down. I let him be for a while, hoping my passionate teaching would move him out of his stupor. When he continued to exhibit these behaviors, I talked to him, but focused the conversation on his missing work and my willingness to let him hand it in, but still avoided discussing his feelings. A week later, I called his mother to review his grade and she told me that her son hates school. She elaborated, however, explaining that her son didn’t see the point of taking my class because he believed, even from the first few weeks of school, that he couldn’t pass the standardized test for our course given at the end of the year. She explained that his attitude about school soured at the end of elementary school, about the same time standardized tests become a prominent feature of his schooling. After I got off the phone, I was reminded of Palmer’s words and realized that my student’s behavior was the result of fear: fear of failure; fear of being perceived as dumb; fear of making a mistake. This fear immobilized and silenced my student. Palmer explains that “the silence that we face in the classroom is the silence that has always been adopted by people on the margin—people who have reason to fear those in power and have learned that there is safety in

not speaking” (p. 45). Students, especially student of color, are marginalized in our society and in our public schools. They are taught from an early age that they are deficient (below average test scores, not on grade level, not meeting the standards). As a result of these “deficiencies,” they are placed in classrooms and schools where they are anesthetized by “drill and kill” instruction that prepares them for tests they most likely won’t pass. Years of “failure,” breeds fear, and this fear manifests itself in the student’s behavior.

White students, teachers, administrators, and parents/guardians need to challenge their White privileges before they can critically think about racism and act against its detrimental effects in the classroom (**Demand 3**). While Palmer’s “student from hell” was quiet and apathetic, another version of this student is loud, combative, and nearly impossible to “manage,” by teachers and administrators. This student is not only regarded as “brain-dead,” but he or she is also regarded as a criminal. The school marginalizes and dehumanizes the unruly “student from hell” by focusing on order and discipline. The school’s emphasis on schedules (bell to bell instruction, five minute class change), minute uniform rules (shirts must have a collar, skirts must be no more than three inches above the knee), identification cards (must be worn around the neck at all times), and surveilled and controlled movement (don’t go anywhere during the first twenty and last twenty minutes of class, and don’t go anywhere without a pass), make schools “feel like an institution of punishment, not of enlightenment and liberation, a place to recover from rather than an experience to carry forward” (Ayers, 2016a, p. 26). Ayers’ description of school as a place to “recover from” struck me because this is exactly how most students feel after a day in school. It is not uncommon, however, to hear a teacher rationalize the oppressive structure of the high school as something students must get through before being able to enjoy the freedoms of college. In high schools, students are herded like cattle from place to

place, talked at (not to) by most teachers and administrators, and given overwhelming amounts of information to memorize and regurgitate for hours on end. Students who resist this are labeled as “noncompliant,” and punished accordingly (discipline referrals, suspension, expulsion). Student discipline falls along lines of race and class, with a disproportionate numbers of poor students of color receiving discipline referrals compared to their white middle class counterparts. For example, the United States Department of Education’s 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection (2016) found that “while 6% of all K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions, the percentage is 18% for black boys; 10% for black girls; 5% for white boys; and 2% for white girls” (p. 3) The research also found that “black K-12 students are 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white students and that “black girls are 8% of enrolled students, but 14% of students receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions” (p. 3). There were points in my novel where I realized the 2049 dystopia I created were not much different from events happening in school across the country in 2016. The treatment of students at the Broad Spectrum educational program centers is not much different than the way students (especially students of color) across the country are criminalized every day. These students are routinely harassed, handcuffed, or otherwise physically restrained by school resources officers or police for offenses ranging from cursing, “insubordination,” “noncompliance,” or school uniform infractions. The “zero tolerance” policies put in place by many public schools criminalize minor infractions and, oftentimes, what one teacher or administrator deems “insubordination” or “noncompliance” may be regarded as minor misbehavior by another. In a striking example in 2015, a South Carolina high school student was violently flipped from her desk after refusing to give up her cell phone. Fortunately, the officer was fired for his overreaction, but, oftentimes, this type of behavior is justified and viewed as the

only way to reform urban public schools. Popular culture perpetuates this idea through film like *Lean on Me* (Twain & Avildsen, 1989), *Dangerous Minds* (Bruckheimer & Smith, 1995), and *Freedom Writers* (DeVito, Sher, Shamberg, & LaGravenese, 2007). While some of the students in those films are nurtured and succeed, the majority are painted as criminals. The student criminals and drug-dealers deemed “incorrigible,” by infamous principal Joe Clark (played by Morgan Freeman in *Lean on Me*) “are dismissed,” and order is maintained with padlocks, chains and a baseball bat. Giroux (2002) argued that “rather than being *at risk* in a society marked by deep economic and social inequalities, youth have become *the risk*. (p. 35). This image, therefore, of a school overrun by young criminals, dominates the conversation about public schools. As a result, tougher discipline policies are put in place, and even encouraged by the public, because this is seen as the only way to mollify the unruly minority students that populate America’s “failing” public schools. My dystopian depiction of a school dominated by order and corporal punishment, therefore, is simply a reflection of the deficit thinking that dominates the national conversation and could lead to a world where students of color are not only warehoused in schools where they are “taught” by computers, but are also dehumanized and commodified by the corporations controlling their schooling.

Shortly after my college graduation, a family friend told me that after starting my teaching job my optimism would quickly fade and I would understand why people were racist. A few months later, it did become apparent to me that many of my colleagues (most who had been working at our school for decades) seemed to hate our students, their community, and their “culture,” as they sometimes called it sarcastically. In short, many of my co-workers were implicitly and explicitly racist. While these teachers worked with students of color on a daily basis (which served to feed their racism), teachers who work in majority white must also be

conscious of race and racism. For example, in a recent episode of National Public Radio's *Code Switch* (Demby & Meraji, 2016) podcast, the hosts interviewed college professors about the use of "trigger warnings" on college campuses. One of the professors, Hasan Jeffries, argued that trigger warnings were partially a topic of discussion because many white professors fail to think critically about the ways in which their lectures affect students of color. He recounted a story about a white professor on a panel commenting that he only thought about race when asked. This demand harkens back to my demand for a theory-based teacher education, but it also requires a commitment from teachers (who for now are predominately white) to think critically about their White privilege and to identify the ways in which their actions reinforce and/or work against racism. Failing to think about race is no longer an option, and teachers must choose the path of anti-racism. This change is possible, but it has to be chosen and driven toward with "vigilant awareness of the work that we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination" (hooks, 2003, p. 36). Developing this type of critical reflective thought is, admittedly, difficult, but its presence will reimagine education to be more equitable, honest, and freedom-producing.

Teachers need to cultivate relationships with students that are based on mutual respect and care, but not on power or control (**Demand 4**). In addition to developing a language for discussing race in the classroom, teachers must reimagine their relationships with their students in other ways. This begins with acknowledging each student as an individual. This means that teachers value students for who they are, acknowledging and valuing students' race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or socioeconomic status Ayers (2016a) explains how this is done:

When we respect a child or a student and support her or him in the essential work of unfolding what is within and creating a unique and specific identity, the signal of what to do and how to respond come from specific encounters with unique persons- complex, dynamic, ambiguous, twisty and wiggly- and not some disembodied one-size-fits-all rule or principle. (p. 36-37).

The key words here are unique, specific, and dynamic. Students should not be viewed as part of a group, but as individuals. Over the years I have learned that when I am quick to judge my students, I fail them. If I resort to labeling, I stop looking for solutions and start blaming. This reaction, as Parker Palmer noted, is based in my own fear. Fear that I will be considered a bad teacher by my administration. Fear that not every student loves me. Fear that I will lose control and no one will learn anything. When I force myself to reflect, this fear can be hurtful (I don't want to admit that I am wrong- ever), but it can also be productive. I am productive when I acknowledge that all of my students are unique and that they are always changing. One of the most interesting parts of working with young people is that their identities are in-flux, but labeling them, forcing them into unnaturally structured settings, and subjecting them to test after test does little to help them grow into their burgeoning identity. Teachers must, therefore, step back and give students the freedom to explore and grow, to develop their identities.

In order to do this, first, teachers must be willing to take risks. One of the smallest, but most daring risks a teacher can take is to simply say "I don't know." This simple gesture goes against everything the "model teacher" is taught. We are supposed to be all-knowing and to transfer this knowledge to our waiting students. I try to use this tactic when reading poetry with my students, as one's interpretation of a poem depends heavily on his or her personal experiences. I try to pose a question like: "What do you think this line means?" When my

students don't answer (which oftentimes happens), I try and assure them by saying something like: "I really don't know. I promise, which is why I'm asking." After assuring them a few more times, we might start having a productive discussion about the poem. I try to make a pretty big deal about their discoveries, not only because their insight is usually much different than my own, but also because it helps to quell the fears that keep them from speaking out. I have to reassure my students so many times that it is appropriate to speak their minds because their schooling has long discouraged it. Again, this reticence is based in fear. For example, Bell hooks (2003) explains that the fear instilled in students by the dominant culture causes them to "doubt themselves, their capacity to know, to think, and to act" (p. 130). As a result, students must be taught by a caring and thoughtful teacher who is willing to engage in "authentic dialogue" with them (Ayers, 2004, p. 97). Dialogue is foundational to critical pedagogy and the way in which teachers and students break free of the dichotomies that serve to oppress. Freire (2000) explains:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. (p. 80)

Freire argues that "problem-posing" education allows students and teachers to work together to "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world and *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (p. 83). To appear progressive, schools have long promoted watered-down versions of critical pedagogy. For example, teachers are encouraged to organize lessons around "essential questions." While the questions may be displayed in the classroom, students are not asked to authentically engage with the questions, but simply to compile evidence

(through the traditional banking method) to answer the question. Once the unit of study is over, the question is deemed answered and the subject closed. True critical pedagogy, however, is never-ending because students and teachers are not looking for concrete answers, but for active engagement that “is not so much neat, logical, smooth, and obvious in advance; it is more often messy, rough, unpredictable, and inconsistent” (Ayers, 2004, p. 81). Again, in order to truly engage in this practice, teachers and students must be willing to let go of their prescribed notions of teacher and student and engage authentically and without fear. For example, bell hooks (2003) explains that her family regularly participates in “education as the practice of freedom” because they adhere to a “mutual willingness to listen, to argue, to disagree, and to make peace” (p. 120). Although it is difficult at times to imagine a classroom that functions this way, it is not impossible. It is this sliver of hopefulness, the belief that schools could be different, that I will explore in the final sections.

Teachers and students should never give up hope, rather, create possibilities for change **(Demand 5)**. One of the greatest barriers to change in public education is hopelessness. Teachers believe they are powerless to resist the directives imposed by educational leaders. Students believe they are too young, too ineloquent, and too uninformed to resist. Some parents believe it is simply “too bad” that certain kids receive inadequate educations, but that those communities simply haven’t done enough for themselves. Other parents believe that the problems are too great to fix, but hold out for the next charter school lottery. Over all of these thoughts, the narrative of neoliberalism beats on, and the dissident voices are all but drowned out. There are those, however, who continue to fight with hopefulness and the understanding that “there are no closed systems, that every system has a gap and that in that space is a place of possibility” (hooks, 2003, p. 23). For example, parents across the country have organized as part of the opt-out movement.

These parents have chosen to protest the use of standardized tests in public schools by choosing to opt their children out of the state's standardized exams. 650,000 students opted out in the 2014-2015 school year (FairTest, n.d.).

Students have also joined together to take a stand against standardized testing. For example, in 2014, more than 5,000 students in Colorado staged a walk-out and refused to take the state's newly mandated science and social studies exams (Brundin, 2014). Similarly, in 2015 high school students in Albuquerque, New Mexico walked out to protest the PARCC assessment (KRQE News, 2015). Student activists also see their work as part of a greater struggle for equality as part of the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, students in Baltimore organized a "die-in" to protest school closings in the city (closings justified in large part by test scores) (Lettis, 2014). Teachers have also joined the resistance movement. In 2012, for example, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) led a highly publicized seven-day strike in an effort to resolve compensation issues, questions about teacher health care, teacher evaluations, and job security (Ahmed-Ullah, Hood, & Mack, 2012). CTU also staged a one-day walkout in the spring of 2016 to protest the state's proposed funding plan for Chicago Public Schools (Perez, 2016).

While this type of resistance poses a threat to the status quo, resistance can be even more powerful when it is woven into the fabric of education. Resistance should not be perceived as something one engages in outside of the school day or only at select times, but should be part of the daily curriculum, part of daily life. When students and teachers engage in a curriculum that works to uncover the contradictions of their daily lives they reach the root of education toward freedom (Freire, 2000; hooks, 2003; Ayers, 2004, 2016a, 2016b).

Teachers and students should work with administrators, parents/guardians, and other educational workers to create a critical and artful pedagogy where teachers are able to invent

critical and inspirational curriculum based upon their own funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and the interests and creative potentials of their students, and where students are able to develop their “epistemological curiosity” (Freire & Macedo, 1995), engage in active learning, have equal opportunities to release their creative imagination (Greene, 1995), and thrive with their funds of knowledge to realize their potential in education and life (**Demand 6**).

To educate is derived from two Latin words: *educare* (to mold) and *educere* (to lead out).

Education in most public schools falls is *educare*, to mold students into acceptable forms by bestowing information upon them. In fact, the top definitions of “to educate” in the Oxford English Dictionary begin with the word “give,” highlighting the transference of knowledge that is commonly associated with education. The secondary definition of education, however, finally gets somewhere: “an enlightening experience.” The word enlightening is significant because enlightening connotes revelation. Freire (2000) argued that “problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality” (p. 81). The practice of “unveiling,” or revealing, touches the heart of the type of education I propose here. My passion for education stems from these enlightening moments- the times where I took my knowledge and used it to create something new. The times in my life when I’ve been able to do this successfully, I experienced the most unique sensation: a combination of deep accomplishment and satisfaction paired with significant unease. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1849) describes a similar feeling while communing with nature: “I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear” (p. 14). Emerson’s words capture the complexity of education: when one is truly engaged in it, it is awe-inspiring but also unsettling. In order to experience these awe-inspiring moments of true education and learning, students and teachers must be given the opportunity to create.

It is well-publicized that opportunities for creative expression in public schools are minimal. Creative writing, painting, drawing, sculpting, dancing, acting, and singing are considered (very) ancillary activities that hang on by the thinnest of threads to the contemporary curriculum. The critical artful pedagogy, a pedagogy infused with opportunities for creation and art, is a threat to standardization because it will not be quantified. It is fluid, subjective, and personal. It is ever-changing and flexible. It is a work-in-progress. Critical artful pedagogy allows teachers and students to explore areas of deep personal interest and to use their knowledge to create. The process through which students and teachers create is the foundation of critical artful pedagogy and the way in which they learn, empathize, and develop their identities. Writing a novel was the inspiration for, and the embodiment of, the critical artful curriculum I have been imagining, theorizing, and practicing throughout my inquiry.

I started with a question: What could my career, my life, and the world be like in the future? I narrowed the question a little further, and asked: How could public education be impacted by the frenzy over accountability, standards, and the belief that competition and unrestricted capitalism will reform American schools, especially for students of color and from the working and lower classes? After years of experience as a classroom teacher, I developed these questions out of my own concerns and I wrote a novel through which I explored them. This process required me to read, synthesize ideas, write in different genres, create characters based on my theory and experience, collaborate with others, think and imagine deeply, revise and rewrite for clarity, take a position and defend this position, and, in the midst of this all, to live my life. This experience reaffirmed the sacred connection between education and life: to be educated is to live. Without education, we are continually at risk of being commodified, subjugated, and disappointed. With education, however, we are able to resist and maintain hope.

Critical artful pedagogy allows students and teachers to develop empathy by accessing our “narrative imaginations” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 96). Regular contact with literature and the arts make it possible for us to experience other realities and also to see our own experiences unfold in fictional worlds. This leads to an enlarged understanding and “to see another human being not as a thing but as a full person” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 96). The development of empathy is not enough, however, but the narrative imagination must be engaged to create and to act. Creation and action touch two of the most important aims of critical artful pedagogy: to develop students’ identities and to develop future citizens in our democracy. Ayers (2004) argues: “Democracy demands active, thinking human beings- we ordinary people, after all, are expected to make the big decisions that affect our lives- and in a democracy education is designed to empower and enable that goal” (p. 10). When teachers and students create, they are asked to develop identities outside of testing and consumption and develop strategies to resist. Critical artful pedagogy, therefore, has the potential, to change the direction of public education. This change will be gradual and those of us who choose to fight against standards, testing, and neoliberalism will face challenges and opposition. The greatest obstacle, however, is our own unwillingness to believe that change is possible.

Franz Kafka argued that fiction acts as “an ax to break the frozen sea within us” (cited in Updike, 2009, p. 6). After going through the process of writing my own novel, however, I must revise Kafka’s argument slightly. While fiction is powerful, one must not just consume fiction (or any other work of art), but must use that art as inspiration for one’s own life-changing and world-changing creations. Reading the words of fiction, analyzing the form and content of a painting, or studying the words of a renowned poet form the fissures in the frozen sea within us,

but creative action is the ax. It is our job, therefore, as teacher, students, and citizens to find our medium and use it to create the world of our imaginations.

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