The Substance of Truth

Tolu Olorunda

Tolu Olorunda is a cultural critic whose work has regularly appeared on AlterNet, BlackCommentator, CounterPunch, Truthout, and several other publications including ColorLines magazine, The Nation magazine, and Wiretap magazine. His book, The Substance of Truth, takes a frank look into what has become of a society that touts grand and lofty ideals which it often fails to fulfill.

With essays addressing issues as broad as the education system, 21st century media culture, Hip-Hop culture, youth culture, neoliberalism, and moral poverty, Olorunda argues the days ahead would darken in promise if rigorous action isn't soon applied to rectify the way people think, how they respond to their surroundings, and the decisions they take to make the world better than it stands today. This struggle, he insists, could define whether or not a livable future would exist for the most vulnerable of all—children, whose plights are increasingly cast aside and ignored.

From the book: "At risk of appearing alarmist, it's easy to ignore all the warning signs hanging around us that suggest the clock is ticking fast—real fast!—and that time left for due action is short. But if life for the next generation should contain some semblance of sanity—where life itself means more than shopping malls and commodities, where Power stands accountable to the demands of communities— all fear of coming across hyperbolic would have to give way to the realities staring us down. The risk also extends to coming across Pollyannaish, as though all the impurities and iniquities holding hostage society can be cured with essays or lectures.

But we cannot afford to let this moment slip by unattended, unengaged. The problems number endless—and so do the possibilities. And at no other moment has a generation been more fortunate, with the ease of technology, to make miracles happen amidst frightening circumstances. At no other moment has the clarion call blared this clearly and loudly."
TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION
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This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus “Pato” Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
The Substance of Truth

Tolu Olorunda
DEDICATION

For Sisi, a force coming with furious speed...
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INTRODUCTION

But I will look about my village at the illiteracy and disease and ignorance and I will not wonder long. And perhaps... perhaps I will be a great man... I mean perhaps I will hold on to the substance of truth and find my way always with the right course... and perhaps for it I will be butchered in my bed some night by the servants of empire...

—Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun

Never did I fall under any illusions, while putting this book together, that my ideas, or those inherited from thinkers and artists (dead and alive), would set off a big bang, and refashion society into a model of what I feel is just. Reality often stings mercilessly. But I believed (and still do) that impacts, however small or insignificant in the present, could be counted on—that someone(s) somewhere would connect with the thoughts contained and rise up and mutter, “The world as it is isn’t all it can be.” That this person, or persons, would gather all that is meaningful, amidst the rubble of rhetoric, and carry out on careful crusades to make more manageable our world. And I’m not speaking of abstracts: I’m speaking of mass movements that begin with disaffected people linking arms to demand better of their government, of their fellow citizens, of themselves.

I think here of the Cook County, Illinois, sheriff who ordered his deputies in late 2008 to halt home evictions. “We won’t be doing the banks’ work for them anymore,” he announced. I think of the Ohio Congresswoman who, from the House floor in early 2009, commanded homeowners facing foreclosure—“stay in your homes... you be squatters in your own homes. Don’t you leave.” I think of the 200 union workers of Republic Window and Doors in Chicago who, fired without the mandatory 60-day prior notice in December 2008, occupied their workplace for six days, until their affluent employers buckled under rising pressure and national outrage.

History holds great stock of men and women, tired of asking and begging, who took to the streets, to pulpits, to classrooms, to jailhouses, to government halls, to workplace water coolers, to television and radio stations—to inspire others for great awakenings. Whether the Civil Rights Movement, or the Women’s Rights Movement, or the Labor Rights Movement—examples vary. But prodding masses of Everyday People into action was a firm resolve to recreate reality, even while staring down daunting obstacles.

Through time, however, this resolve waned and whittled. Cynicism, narcissism, and nihilism crept in: and millions grew so set into their shabby and bitterly discomforting lives that inhumane bills were passed as law without even a faint whimper from a dominant public lulled into slumber. Politicians could champion legislations that trampled upon basic human rights, and could rest well, assured the public was too burdened with the exorbitant toll of daily life to stop and take account and plot according action. The gap between Rich and Poor expanded out of sight, with millions of children abandoned beneath poverty line.
INTRODUCTION

Then a series of events—each one striking with greater force than the last—jolted the public into wide-awake consciousness. To name a few: prisoner-abuse scandals, debunked war pretexts, sky-piercing deficits, and the inevitable financial tumbledown. This time, no amount of fear-mongering, of panic buttons, of skullduggery, could shut back the eyes of millions now privy to the bottomless pits into which their leaders were willing to stoop: to hide the truth.

These are the truths I hoped to build this book around. In essays contained, I explore the truth of the education system, the truth of society’s apathy toward—and war on—children, the truth of media and youth culture, the truth of the neoliberal-world-order slowly and impressively manning control of all levers of our world, and the truth of the steps to take for a livable future if all the rage thickening the air today should fizzle out into constructive channels—rather than yet fasten the precipitous decline of humanity.

*Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne*, says James Russell Lowell. With great disgust for how things are, and greater hope for how they can be, I set out to create a document unbridled in spirit and fervently committed to letting suffering speak: hopefully corroborating somewhere along Ralph Waldo Emerson’s convictions that “[t]he truth takes flesh in forms that can express it.”

At risk of sounding sentimental, or coming across as a journalist brandishing earth-shattering smoking guns, or a prophet pronouncing the doom of society, or a pioneer blazing philosophical trails, I should allay readers of these fears now. Many of the problems underlined, the examples supplied, the suggestions issued, undoubtedly boast lineage far beyond the publication date of this text: all confirming Mark Twain’s theory that a “man originates nothing in his head, he merely observes exterior things, and combines them in his head—puts several observed things together and draws a conclusion.”

These are truths which many have brought to the awareness of society in times past, but truths yet to be engaged with the resolve required to force the lasting changes desperately needed. My mission, then, was to peel through the truth and acquire the core—the element—The Substance.

While facts may fall under agenda-driven analyses, Truth can’t. My only agenda, then, was to present a clear case why all that glitters shouldn’t be worn around the neck: why an education system only useful to the well-off produces far more than semi-illiterate students; why the true value of any society can be best measured with the quality of life its children enjoy; why a Market Society, where human lives carry price tags, cannot be sustained and must be resisted.

But however strong a conviction, James Baldwin’s warning must be heeded: “the truth is a two-edged sword—and if one is not willing to be pierced by that sword, even to the extreme of dying on it, then all of one’s intellectual activity is a … delusion and a wicked and dangerous fraud.”

I hope, dear reader, that as you read and wrestle with these thoughts, your quest leads right to the substance of truth—and you forever hold on.
PART I:
THIS GREAT EQUALIZER: SCHOOLING, PEDAGOGY,
AND THE ESSENCE OF EDUCATION
CHAPTER 1

TEACHERS

The Good, the Bad, the Great

The teacher must have a genuine interest in mental activity on his own account, a love of knowledge that unconsciously animates his teaching.

—John Dewey, How We Think

[T]eachers cannot follow the medieval tradition of detached withdrawal from the world. … [They] cannot be pedants or dilettantes, they cannot be mere technicians and higher artisans, they have got to be social statesmen and statesmen of high order.


Social relations in the classroom that glorify the teacher as the expert, the dispenser of knowledge, end up crippling student imagination and creativity; in addition, such approaches teach students more about the legitimacy of passivity, than about the need to examine critically the lives they lead.

—Henry Giroux, Teachers as Intellectuals

The slam poet Taylor Mali is best known for “What Teachers Make,” a prescient poem recounting a dinner party conversation with a witless lawyer whose views, while acidic, well reflect dominant thought in this society:

He says the problem with teachers is, “What’s a kid going to learn
From someone who decided his best option in life was to become a teacher?”

He reminds the other dinner guests that it’s true what they say about teachers:

Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.

“I mean, you’re a teacher, Taylor,” the lawyer pesters on. “Be honest: What do you make?” While Mali took hold of this chance to remind him why intelligent people, the world over, consider teaching the most important profession, this question, of what teachers make, elicits not so bad a concern. The National Education Association reports that from 2007–2008 starting salary for teachers dipped low as $24,872, with most earning on average between $37,764 and $59,304, contingent on area income of living, district funding, etc. Another report revealed in 2006 teachers “earned 85.7% as much (14.3% less or $154 less) in weekly wages as did those in … comparable occupations”—based on “raw skill requirements” and “market valuation of these skills”—“representing a 2.3 percentage point erosion in relative teacher pay since 2002.”
Society does not care much for its teachers—no groundbreaking declaration. Yes, it demands teachers of the highest caliber command classrooms. Yes, it rewards the “good” ones and punishes the “bad” ones. Yes, it moralizes on and on about why schools serve as critical sites of social activity, and why this Great Equalizer must employ the best and brightest taxpayer dime can afford. But society has proved, for decades, unwilling to take timely steps to ensure affordable living wages and encouraging environments that make the work easier done.

Teachers, of all “comparable” professions, might receive less pay but are more monitored. They are constantly called into offices to have their works, teaching styles, and instructional models reviewed. They are watched closely by administrators overprotective of the students placed in their cares. They wield little autonomy over curriculum content and its application in the classroom. They must operate within narrow, allotted time schedules to carry out insurmountable loads of work. They are often berated by parents when children fail, and unappreciated when the same children do well. They face sharp, unannounced wage cuts while still expected to carry on business as usual—even when unable to secure decent housing to sleep at night. Through all, they arrive first and leave last—constantly grading papers and engaging in other laborious, time-sapping activities. They help students see a world far apart from the hierarchical design schools are mostly structured after. They inspire hope in the minds of children whose living arrangements speak of anything but life and meaning.

Here, I speak of honorable teachers—better yet, educators; best yet, Transformative Intellectuals. Conventional wisdom suggests the scrawls of a leftist thinker shouldn’t contain these words: but not all teachers are equal in purpose. Some are simply substitute teachers with contracts—utterly disengaged from the lives and identities of the students into whom they breathe life daily—while others, with courage and compassion, help redeem millions of kids once thought of lost and irrecoverable. And I speak a great deal from experience.

I’ve had teachers I often conjured semi-violent fantasies about. And I’ve had teachers whose unrelenting empathy pushed through to pull me out of academic burning houses, lit with the matchsticks of apathy. I’ve had teachers I believed had personal vendettas or scores to settle against me, for whatever reasons. And I’ve had teachers who displayed deep interests in seeing me successful and great at school. I’ve had teachers whose smugness and cowardly hubris pushed me far away from class. And I’ve had teachers whose love kept me in antsy anticipation of the next day’s work.

There are teachers who simply go with the flow, concerned only about the paycheck a month’s hard work brings. And there are those who spit in the face of whatever authority tells them kids must be seated in straight lines and taught objectively.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 drew a demarcating line between these two kinds of teachers. It knew those who failed to find students as sources of inspiration, filled with limitless potentials, wouldn’t dare raise objection to the crude thought of Teaching to the Test. But it also knew thousands across the country wouldn’t take this sweeping assault on the educational process lying down; teachers
who understood curriculum delivered in an “engaging, exciting manner” makes “teaching to the test … unnecessary.”

Teachers, educators, intellectuals, and concerned citizens of all calling rose up—in one voice, with one statement: children are not widgets. Children, they said, should be the last treated as lab rats by corporate clowns in white suits ultimately invested in privatizing all public institutions; and the Bush Administration knew the fight wouldn’t end simply by facing down insurgent teachers, for bullies, in the end, are greatly unpopular. Thus the scheme of paying “good” teachers—those who followed instruction to the T—and firing “bad” ones—those who questioned why a child’s ability for greatness had to pass through channels of narrow questions with even narrower sets of “multiple” answers. And many fell for it—even liberals otherwise committed to alleviating the insurmountable burdens bending over the backs of teachers. And in one fell swoop, the neoliberal cast cleaned house. The trick worked: officializing the notion that obedient teachers equal great teachers and submissive students equal successful students. Four decades back, Paulo Freire was sounding the alarm against this idiocy:

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers,” into “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.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Therefore, the better students relinquish all right to critical thinking, the greater their chances of straight A’s. Teacher orders “Sit!” and like trained dogs they must submit without protest. Teacher springs a “pop quiz,” and they must bow their heads and complete (compete?) complaint-free. Students, in this context, must be controlled at all costs, a concept which worked well with 1st grader “Lamya Cammon,” whose teacher late 2009 cut off some of her braids because she made noise with the plastic beads attached to them. “Stress” and “frustration,” the union said, provoked the teacher.

Teacher as Totalitarian concepts measure intelligence not on artistic, scientific, or social skill, but on how successfully a student follows instructions, unaltered. Other forms feature Teacher as Omniscient and Teacher as Sovereign—though not as sovereign as the principal or school board or chancellor, who can flip a pen and lay off hundreds at once. Teachers, within this frame, must inculcate into students unwavering obeisance to authority—a practice sure to end democracy faster than any plots conjured by cave-ensconced terrorists. Janice Hale, documenting her son’s early-childhood experiences a decade ago, shared some of the creative language used to bring the message home:

When I picked up my son, I was told that he was definitely a smart little boy. He had correctly solved twenty-four of the twenty-six items on a language concepts test. However, he refused to participate in the other tests because he wanted to play with the toys and play with the other children.
The director explained to me that they wanted only children who do what the teacher tells them to do. … She said that they draw a circle of behaviors and accept only those children who fall within the circle.10

The circle forms a great metaphor for what schooling has become: an impenetrable cocoon suffocating all attempts at self-expression. Students don’t walk into the circle. The circle is drawn to enclose them, meaning many aren’t even aware they stand in the circle, much less begin coming to terms with its consequences. The “circle of behaviors” not so much connotes keeping “things in order” or ensuring “security,” as defining their destiny before they do so themselves. It is about building boundaries to curtail unacceptable conduct in terms of Law and Order. It is about prepping kids for a society not too fond of dissent and difference. “Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do,” John Gatto observes:

This is the most important lesson of them all: we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives. If I’m told that evolution is a fact instead of a theory, I transmit that as ordered, punishing deviants who resist what I have been told to tell them to think. This power to control what children will think lets me separate successful students from failures very easily.11

Kids in many public schools today resemble greatly a model community of I, Robots—unquestioningly submitted to the policies and control of curriculum and corporations. And while mainstream liberal critiques of the education system usually aim well at government practices and problems, the encroaching corporate seizure of public education receives little address. With growing autonomy wielded by companies over federal regulations, even governments fall serf to financial hostage from corporate overlords. So even if, by some stroke of luck and tireless activity, elected officials enact strident legislations to roll back the intrusion of private firms into classrooms and school offices, more would be required, on a grassroots level, to ensure this last domain of moral democracy remains undefiled.

The greater work, yet, would have to come from conscionable teachers—whose students are most vulnerable. “Teacher authority can never be neutral; nor can it be assessed in terms that are narrowly ideological,” Henry Giroux informs. “It is always broadly political and interventionist in terms of the knowledge-effects it produces, the classroom experiences it organizes, and the future it presupposes in the countless ways in which it addresses the world.”12 The role—far from function—of teachers demands more than tallying attendance, unleashing tests, and signing bathroom passes. It is no more satisfactory to say, I’m a teacher because I teach students, or I’m a teacher because I work in a classroom. And perhaps this best separates teachers from educators because no teacher of good conscience would rather call armed officers (an increasing, ubiquitous presence in public schools these days) on a student acting unruly, than reach for less caustic and more redeeming options.

In inner-city schools, where White teachers often offer the last best hope of qualification, those all too familiar with the “burnout” experiences of colleagues would more likely resolve inter-classroom disputes—which can be common—with unseemly haste. But nothing good comes of children arrested, humiliated, and
dragged off in handcuffs for petty infractions. With raging frequency these days, ambitious White teachers, lacking proper training in cultural sensitivity, trample down the self-esteem of Black and Brown students. Two years ago, a New York suburban middle school White teacher, trying to teach a lesson on slavery, bound the hands and feet of two Black girls, before having them crawl under desks representing slave ships.\textsuperscript{13} Two years prior, a Kentucky high school White teacher, Paul Dawson, ordered a Black student: “Sit down, nigger.” The honor roll student, Keysean Chavers, hurled the word first, Dawson claimed (Chavers denied). “Stunned,” he blurted: “Get away from the door, nigger!” And he did so because “that’s sort of what I’ve been trained to do.” The school board, concerned for Chavers, suspended Dawson for 10 days and sent him off to the All-Mighty Corrective of “Diversity Training.”

With Black men barely breaking 2\% of the 4.8 million teachers nationwide,\textsuperscript{14} no less dramatic a noun than \textit{crisis} should command the attention of those who still think inner-city schools must be rectified—and quick!—to break apart the school-to-prison pipeline funneling millions of Black and Brown youth into juvenile halls and jail cells. Surely if White men lacked so great a representation in classrooms—town halls, conferences, emergency meetings, expanded scholarship opportunities and the like would be at once dispatched to help salvage what would take expression as a National Tragedy.

For Black males born into female-headed, single-parent households, the issue complicates further. Teachers working in inner-city classrooms should respond with greater sensitivity to this truly national tragedy. A Black male teacher might serve as sole worthy male factor (or father figure) in the child’s life. And for many low-income kids, the classroom often represents rare steady, stable surrounding. The least asked of conscionable teachers is to make it as loving, caring, healing, and alleviating as possible.

Great teachers count because for 6 hours or more daily, a child trapped in deleterious domestic conditions can experience and envision a different side to life—removed from the pain and punishment of abuse and abandonment. Great teachers—not just “good” ones: craven before neoliberal forces—help restore the humanity of a child whose world is frequently turned upside down. Great teachers pose striking threats to the plan for privatization, making life hard for corporations to invade the classroom unopposed. Great teachers stay focused all times, “linking empowerment—the ability to think and act critically—to the concept of social transformation.”\textsuperscript{15}

\section*{NOTES}
\begin{itemize}
  \item[(5)] State-by-state salary figures can be found here: http://www.teacherportal.com/teacher-salaries-by-state
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER 1


10 Ibid., *Learning while black*, p. 71.


CHAPTER 2

ARE SCHOOLS THE ASSASSINS OF EDUCATION?

Subordinated by a hierarchical system that indoctrinates students early on, letting them know that their success depends on their capacity to obey, most students fear questioning anything about the way their classrooms are structured.

—bell hooks, *Teaching Community*

[T]he whole system equates urban children … with what is naturally criminal and in need of reform. ... Encouraging students to be critical thinkers, to question accepted beliefs and norms, remains key to a teacher’s role at any grade level. ... The public educational system … should be overhauled! Trashed. Dumped. Parents, teachers, and students need to say it’s over. Enough!

—Lenore J. Daniels, “Arne Duncan Doesn’t Care About Black and Brown Children! Why Should He?”

When civil rights leader Malcolm X declared five decades ago “Education is our passport to the future,” he was unlikely investing infallible trust in the school system to carry the cross. The last two decades alone have printed out hundreds of texts chronicling the deleterious effects schools seem to be having on students—thriving in households nationwide by fanning the sweltering frustration, of parents, with the quality and content of school-based education. Concerned parents understand that if education should “draw out” degrees of greatness in students, the school system might be way of mark with an alarming fixation on provincial curricula and high test scores as metric scales to weigh intellectual worth.

The swelling homeschooling movement confirms this much. Parents have begun searching, like never before, alternative pedagogical avenues through which the guarantees of self-discovery and metacognition can fulfill in the minds of children. They seem convinced “failure to achieve harmony of mind, body, and spirit has furthered anti-intellectualism in our culture and made of our schools mere factories.” Few parents thus desire seeing their seeds of life raised as products and commodities, trampled along the way for exhibiting flaws common to most kids.

No more is it secret that many public schools these days are modeled, in style and standard, after prisons. In some states, with more money spent on “correction facilities” than education facilities, disruptive students fall victim fast to zero-tolerance policies, leading off to detention halls eerily identical to the penitentiaries many ultimately end up in. And most public schools located in low-income districts, dilapidated and underfunded, invest more energy reducing violence and preventing gang activity than sculpturing and molding future pioneers. Poor students are
disciplined into submission with roguish rules and regulations, all to ensure academic “excellence” on tests narrower than a bell’s curve.  

“Zero tolerance is not simply the effect of possibly ignorant adults who misunderstand data on youth violence; it is not simply the resulting social policy of ill-spirited adults who carelessly toe the line of pejorative media representations of youth; it is not simply another devastating practice of traditional top-down, corporate models of school governance. … [It is] all of these things, together.” The words of Christopher Robbins, whose 2008 book, *Expelling Hope: The Assault on Youth and the Militarization of Schooling*, writes out the epitaph of a society long-relieved of its soul, consigned now to chop down children whose blooming is yet to begin.6

Schools now feature surveillance systems plastered at every nook and cranny; and all day long, kids are monitored closely by police officers and other security personnel. And even when the closing bell rings, students still fall within the omnipresent reach of curriculum, dragging their feet home, joyless and lifeless, with book bags filled, backs hunched. Why wouldn’t they hate school, when deprived of any opportunity better spent “learn[ing] … by exploration or by apprenticing to some wise person in the neighborhood”?7

The traditional form of homework, which countless studies have discredited as unproductive, not only deprives children of free time after school, but also “disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning.” Still, many solemnly swear any shift in practice promises nothing short of Armageddon. And for good reason: “When education leaders continue to cling to the traditional bromide of blaming student’s lack of success on laziness, even in the face of other reasonable explanations, we must begin to suspect that the emphasis on homework serves the needs of powerful groups within our society.”8

The public school system is fractured nearly beyond repair, and raging calls for a complete overhaul might have it right. Charters, vouchers, and all other commercial alternatives cannot be counted on to do the trick.

With strict dress codes and military drills, many of these *academies* speak more of rigidity and regiment than freedom and fulfillment. bell hooks took a courageous stand in 2003: “When educational settings become places that have as their central goal the teaching of bourgeois manner, vernacular speech and languages other than standard English are not valued.”9 With self-expression penalized (even criminalized), excellence has more to do with wearing school uniforms neatly, and accurately enunciating words, than helping young minds find themselves. Many charter schools also make great use as political footballs, punted back and forth by witless politicians who with error-riddled data claim public schools fail to meet the mark not for inadequate funding or deficient resources but undisciplined students and unwilling parents.

Charter schools, numbering about 5,000 nationwide, and serving over 1.5 million kids, have bubbled within the last decade, most at the behest of millionaire executives whose gazes have been increasingly sharpening toward this new financial frontier. Of certain, there are at least two kinds of charter schools: the regular and the *boutique*, the latter of the Harlem Children’s Zone, KIPP, and Aspire sort (fronted by for-profit
management corporations funded by billionaire hedge-fund managers and other Wall Street tycoons); and the latter has featured, in recent times, a strong push for longer school days, for immersion of students at early ages into the capitalist culture, for school hours from 7:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M., including Saturdays (twice monthly), for cell phones in the hands of teachers, who must expect calls late as 11:00 in the nighttime. Strong push has also been levied for early career education, to inject into the mental DNA of kindergarteners a love of money that promptly comes to life following college graduation. Attention is paid closely to the children and how they learn, to their interests, to their dislikes; but the teachers installed to instruct them from rigid manuals often earn less than traditional district peers, while CEOs rake ever higher returns on their investments.10

These schools, whose founders know more about portfolio than pedagogy, and more about CDS than curriculum, are often raised to existence with anti-public philosophies—anti- the very nature and functions of public schools. So, Exclusion and Selection is to be expected, the Refused banished and forced to dust off their jackets and return to their leper colonies. With practices where many are called but only a few chosen, there are no tired, poor, or huddled masses—the wretched and homeless are presumed the responsibility of public schools.

Charters are big business today, explaining the sudden interest of the rich and powerful. In mid-December 2000, at the last lap of the Clinton Administration, while charter drones were beginning to find their voice, and the country had lived a full year past predictions of a millennium massacre, Congress passed a New Markets Tax Credit law, under the Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000, to stimulate economic and entrepreneurial activities in dilapidated communities. “Wealthy investors and major banks have since been making windfall profits by employing a little-known federal tax break to finance new charter-school construction,” Juan Gonzalez of the New York Daily News reported in May 2010. “The program, the New Markets Tax Credit, is so lucrative that a lender who uses it can almost double his money in seven years.”11

Looming threats of free-market recklessness in the education system aside, advocates insist The Good outlasts The Bad: that, though money matters can color badly the charter phenomenon, widespread results—with far better performances from students previously falling fast through the cracks of the public school cesspool—should allay critics. Unsurprisingly, a June 2009 Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) study, documenting lower performance of Black and Latino students in charter schools (compared to public school peers), hasn’t inspired doubt in the minds and hearts or cheque books of the most virulent sponsors.

The study, Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States, which swept over 70% of the nation’s charter school students, found in the “robust national demand for more charter schools” something worrying, with only “17 percent of charter schools [reporting] academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools, while 37 percent of charter schools showed gains that were worse than their traditional public school counterparts, with 46 percent of charter schools demonstrating no significant difference.”12
CHAPTER 2

With help from Academy Award-winning director Davis Guggenheim, however, the Charter School Movement could ride a chariot of cheers on to public acclaim in October 2010. *Waiting for “Superman”*, his documentary, captivated national interest, insisting public schools fail students deliberately (charters: the only promising remedy), cheering on merit pay for “good” teachers (the “bad” needing immediate removal, in droves), and blaming teachers’ unions as the deadliest threats to the futures of a generation of students currently laboring in “drop-out factories.” His documentary caught the glowing eyes of widely watched TV show hosts as Oprah Winfrey and Anderson Cooper. All major cable news networks also treated the documentary to fawning reviews, as did popular publications like *Time* and *New York Magazine*. And no less than President Barack Obama was arrested in emotion, following a special White House screening, describing it as “heartbreaking” and “powerful.”

The Charter School Movement coalesces strongly with the Merit Pay Movement, the latter urging more schools to pay low-income students for higher performance on standardized tests, as though, like carrots to a donkey, the students need financial incentives dangled before them just to do well in class. Money better spent re-building defunct public schools, better spent furnishing rundown libraries, rushes down the hands of harebrained bureaucrats into drain holes, all the while bright futures dim out. Kin to this scheme is rewarding teachers for classroom test performance, encouraging a by-any-means approach to pedagogy where teachers feel compelled, if not duty-bound, to do all it takes to produce high grades.

Merit pay has failed woefully wherever applied. Revelations of teachers and principals forging student records—in hopes of higher bonuses—should dash the dreams of those who find it refreshing. From Britain, 1710, where teachers had students memorize passages before English exams, to Texas, 2010, where a principal and assistant principal helped students erase wrong answers and fill the right ones in—the line runs unbroken. Multiple studies, published 2010, should also finalize this debate.

It seems only logical that public school teachers, surviving on miserable paychecks, would stoop to whatever moral lows to keep the lights on. Proponents of merit pay yet maintain it supports “good” teachers; goodness, in this sense, turning out incalculable, indefinite, and inconsistent, for a “bad” teacher might thrive in a room filled with high-income students, while a skilled and sensitive teacher would likely face steeper hurdles helping Ritalin-riddled kids see their inner purpose and flourish.

But the concerns of teachers rarely pinch top priority these days; they are left behind—like the children. And though the Obama Administration, unlike its predecessor, doesn’t find confusing the timeless truth that no vocation beats that of the teacher in importance, nothing yet honors this conviction legislatively. High school teachers with monthly incomes of $2,500 can hardly perform with the exuberance expected of them when bills stack high, unpaid; and stomachs roar, unfilled. All successful artists, thinkers, critics, activists, essayists, intellectuals, and educators can point back to what crucial impact great teachers had on their development. For low-income students especially, skilled and sensitive teachers often separate success from failure, snatching their bodies from the clenched jaws of nihilism.
This, sadly, falls far from the convictions held by some—among whom, tragically, might be President Obama, as when speaking at a Los Angeles town hall meeting in March 2009, he remarked:

[Y]ou can’t just be talking more money, more money, without also talking about, How are we going to reform and make the system better? … [E]ven as overcrowded as schools may be, as poor the computer equipment may be, if you took a bunch of kids right now from China or India and you put them in these classrooms, from their perspective these would be unbelievable schools. I mean, they don’t have better facilities, but they’re out-performing us in Math and Science. Why is that?16

That money alone can’t solve all problems rings true enough, but for schools so dilapidated that students share textbooks, that students cram into rooms with broken heating systems at wintertime, that teachers have to photocopy book pages for student use, money certainly would make strong difference. That an ostensibly liberal president acknowledges overcrowding and underfunding as real problems, but fails to connect the dots between inadequate resources and underperforming students should give pause to those convinced, as Sir Ken Robinson lamented at the 2006 TED conference, “all kids have tremendous talents and we squander them, pretty ruthlessly.”

President Obama’s words not only echo his predecessor’s—and the No Child Left Behind battalion—but also discredit the tireless work of those struggling to redeem the hopes and humanities of disenfranchised kids—those gradually withdrawing from a society seemingly more invested and interested in prisons than schools.

Ken Robinson outlined, with depth and eloquence, why narrow and myopic conceptions of intelligence—scientific and mathematic, for example—corrupt the minds of both adult and child:

We know three things about intelligence: One, it’s diverse. We think about the world in all the ways we experience it. We think visually, we think in sound, we think kinesthetically. We think in abstract terms. We think in movement. Secondly, intelligence is dynamic. If you look at the interactions of a human brain … intelligence is wonderfully interactive. The brain isn’t divided into compartments. ... And the third thing about intelligence is—it’s distinct.17

That intelligence is diverse, dynamic, and distinct must have eluded the ears of President Obama’s Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan—a man of modest academic achievements: there but for a bachelor’s in Sociology—who, while “CEO” of Chicago Public Schools, ran a reputation of militarizing and privatizing the schools, shutting many down abruptly, mass-firing teachers (often entire school staff, including janitors and kitchen staff), and erecting, in their stead, charter, voucher, and other private models, via a program, Renaissance 2010, launched in 2004 to close 60 “low-performing” neighborhood schools and open 100 state-of-the-art replacements.18 Duncan, through all, found ample time to square against teacher
unions, parents, activists, and community leaders, who saw their neighborhoods dilapidating in real time.\textsuperscript{19}

Duncan, though unproductive, had working for him “a style that made it seem like he was listening,” even while deaf to the protests of mothers whose kids were being bused to schools over an hour from home; in addition, a firm relationship with his new boss, with whom he regularly played pick-up basketball for over a decade.\textsuperscript{20}

Besides catchy slangs like “standards” and “up-to-speed” and “high bar,” Duncan boasts a scanty vocabulary to address the pressing problems of today. Yet, in January 2009, Duncan was approved unanimously in the Senate—and with haste. Senators laced him with precious praise. “I think you’re the best,” one gushed; another: “This is a guy who gets it.”\textsuperscript{21} A year later, Duncan hailed Hurricane Katrina as “the best thing that happened to the education system in New Orleans,”\textsuperscript{22} as the floods washed away many regulations that would otherwise have prevented the silent swapping of neighborhood public schools with charters, which sped up while great panic gripped the city.\textsuperscript{23}

In the $787 billion stimulus package passed by Congress February 2009, Duncan received $10 billion to raise standards and rectify dilapidated schools across the country. Of his bounty, $5 billion had no strings attached, meaning, as a PBS report put it, “[h]e can spend it to push for the changes he wants. That’s real power.”\textsuperscript{24} Duncan not only had the power to do as he pleased; he also had the press. Mainstream channels (including PBS) readily set a table before him, even while many Chicago students still reel from the pinch of his seven-year stint; more so those, as reported March 2010 by the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, who didn’t enjoy privileged school placement—which Duncan mercifully bestowed upon students lobbied for by the rich and powerful of Chicago.\textsuperscript{25}

Tasking as it may seem, the struggle ahead must involve, in very significant ways, low-income parents, for though their cause hardly generates much traction in society, it would take the determination and fortitude of parents fed up with the brutally unfair school system to surrender substantive transformation. For years, critics (liberal and conservative) haven’t budged in insisting kids from “at-risk” backgrounds don’t do well because, lack of will aside, parents refuse to invest as much interest in their success as do suburban parents. Unaccounted for are the burdens low-income parents—especially single mothers—shoulder in trying to make ends meet, against insurmountable odds. (The social resources required—time, money, emotional energy, etc.—to attend PTA meetings or track grades or supervise homework assignments don’t flow freely as water from damaged dams.) But their experiences through life evoke crucial reminders why kids must be educated for more than financial freedom—for awareness of our unequal and unjust world, and just what justice requires for fulfillment.

Collective cooperation between family and school can help facilitate a Pedagogy of Redemption, and restore the goals and visions of millions of ingenious, however disenfranchised, children. With respect for students and teachers and parents placed as priority, the knee-jerk, malignant medication of misunderstood minds on Ritalin would cease at once, and teachers would teach with conviction that no child ever
classifies as unteachable or uneducable or unreachable, and poor parents wouldn’t feel forced to acquire unaffordable homes in friendlier districts, just to send kids to better financed public schools; and once devalued and demeaned students would, to paraphrase historian V.P. Franklin, regain their rightful position as leaders and pioneers of the future, aware that, as First Lady Michelle Obama advises, “all that matters is where you are and where you want to be.”26

NOTES

2 Daniels, L. J. (2009, March 19). First it was a cell behind prison walls—Now it’s a seat behind the walls of a military academy: Arne Duncan doesn’t care about black and brown children! Why should he? The Black Commentator (316). Online: http://www.blackcommentator.com/316/316_ror_arne_duncan.html
3 In December 2008, the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics released a report, 1.5 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2007, revealing a 74 percent relative increase in homeschooling since 1999 and 36% increase since 2003. Online: http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009030.pdf
4 Ibid., Teaching community, p. 181.
9 Ibid., Teaching community, p. 45.
CHAPTER 2