POOR LEARNERS, POOR PARENTS, POOR EQUITY:
MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE POOR AND
THEIR ENCOUNTERS WITH EDUCATION

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Dedication

“Do you want to listen to the national ne-ewss?” you used to say, always with a mischievous glint in your eye.

We’d jump up to play.

You’d hold out your hand — each finger a channel. The first station always benign. Weather. We’d switch channels, on to news, delivered with sonorous, mock-seriousness.

We’d squeal with each new station; we knew what was coming.

A minute in, a new station picked, and then it would come: A high-pitched operatic aria. Or an incomprehensible new age melody. Deliciously hideous.

We’d laugh endlessly. This game never got old.

And we’d playfully struggle to change the channel, abusing your poor fingers in our futile attempts to regain control of the radio.

… Dad, how did you do it?

Always there, but not just there — central, a beckoning and a warm and an unmistakable force. For big occasions and for small ones, and for no occasion really, just quiet Saturday afternoons, spent enjoying laughter and each other’s company.

To Dad, to whom I owe so very much — and so much more.
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Abstract

This study seeks to unpack, problematize and re-imagine media discourse of poor families and their encounters with (formal) education, using a postmodern, feminist lens, and drawing on work and theory across education, journalism and political science. The critical discourse analysis conducted for this study draws from a (deliberately) broad source of mainstream newspaper reportage, as part of a two-pronged approach to culling discourse themes. Specifically, the analysis includes newspaper reportage of the poor and their encounters with education during two five-year periods (2002 to 2006 and 2009 to 2013), which coincide with (partially cover) the rollouts of two national education reform agendas — the No Child Left Behind law, put in motion by the Bush administration, and Race to the Top, unveiled by his Democratic successor and considered a centerpiece of the Obama administration’s education legacy. While reportage is not the only source of our knowledge about the poor (and our meaning making around poverty and policy), it is certainly central to discursive formation(s) of truth and reality. Using critical discourse analysis of newspaper stories and reader comments, this study explores how education reportage focusing on poor children and families: perpetuates other-ing and dominating stereo-scripts associated with poverty, including discourses of dependency and deficiency; disappears or ignores poor lives and poor voices; and feeds into (particular educational and social safety net) policy decisions.
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People are very judgmental. … I wish they could walk in my shoes for one day.
And I wonder, Could they do it? Without pulling their hair out by the roots? —
Tianna Gaines-Turner (qtd. in Reese, 2014), a member of Witnesses to Hunger, a
Drexel University-based advocacy group that seeks to share the voices of those
living in poverty and affect national and local policy change.

What does it mean to be poor in America? We can offer no single description of
American poverty. But for many, perhaps most, it means homes with peeling
paint, inadequate heating, uncertain plumbing. It means that only the very lucky
among the children receive a decent education. It often means a home where some
go to bed hungry and malnutrition is a frequent visitor. And for almost all the
poor it means that life is a constant struggle to obtain the merest necessities of
existence, those things most of us take for granted. We can do better. — U.S. Sen.
Paul Wellstone (1999), in “If Poverty is the Question …”

Chapter One: Introduction
In 2013, America’s wealthiest were enjoying a banner year. Corporate profits
were soaring and stock markets hit record highs; the Great Recession was quickly
becoming nothing more than a bad memory. The media closely chronicled this rise from
the ashes, providing frequent (breathless) updates on the newest signs of economic
recovery, offering in-depth analysis, and seeking out pundits to offer optimistic
predictions about America’s future. Things were looking up — all over again — for
America’s power elite. What got far less coverage, advocates contend, was how
America’s poorest families were faring (Sullivan, 2013). Turns out they, too, were having
a record year. Consider this: In 2013, for the first time in five decades, U.S. public schoolchildren from low-income families became *the majority*; they made up 51 percent of all kids in public schools, up from 33 percent in 1995 (Layton, 2015; Rich, 2015). In some states, upwards of 6 in 10 children qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch, a key measure of household poverty. Meanwhile, Census estimates showed 46.5 million Americans — 1 in 7 — were living below the poverty line in 2013, the largest number since the government started collecting the statistic in 1959 (Poverty in the United States, n.d.). Even more alarming, a third of all Americans living in poverty were children.

The jarring dissonance between what the U.S. media was reporting about the (back-in-the-black) wealthy compared to how they were telling the stories of the (growing) ranks of those living in poverty rankled social service advocates. In June 2013, *New York Times* public editor Margaret Sullivan brought to light growing “complaints that poverty was getting short shrift in The Times.” After interviewing reporters, *Times* editors, and nonprofit leaders, Sullivan concluded that the *New York Times* doesn’t ignore poverty; it just doesn’t afford it the breadth and depth of coverage it deserves (to be sure, one could certainly argue she’s making a distinction without a difference here). Sullivan (2013) wrote, “Occasional coverage — no matter how excellent — doesn’t get the job done.” In addition, she continued:

Some advocates for the poor see another problem: News organizations, including *The Times*, tend to treat those in poverty as ‘the other,’ a problem that is ‘over there.’ In a given four-year period, 1 in 3 Americans will experience a spell of poverty. But poverty coverage does not have the regularity or the inclusive tone of *Times* coverage on the opposite end of the affluence spectrum (Sullivan, 2013).
Sullivan’s conclusions undoubtedly fall short of pointing to — or accounting for — the host of concerns one might pursue when it comes to coverage of the poor in *The New York Times* and, more broadly, in the U.S. mainstream press, but her acknowledgment is a worthwhile (and long overdue) one. And it underscores the value — and necessity — of asking tough questions of the media when it comes to poverty. Of asking how much — and *how*. Indeed, there is a rich and growing archive of such academic research across the social sciences, with scholars deploying media (news media and popular media) analysis to uncover disparities in reportage as a way of pointing to larger socio-political, ideological and power(ful) processes at work. Over the last two decades especially, several landmark studies examining U.S. media’s representations of the poor and of poverty discourse have started important discussions about discrimination, oppressive institutions and the frailty of an allegiance to unproblematic/unreflective “fairness” or “objectivity.”

This study is not meant to replicate previous research that looked broadly at media representations of the poor (in the context of the family, the community, government policies and daily life). Rather, I am seeking to add to (/build on) that body of knowledge, focusing on reportage of the poor and their encounters with education. I see this scholarly pursuit as a natural offshoot from broader discussions of media representations of those living in poverty — and the implications of those representations on society and policy. Other researchers have, similarly, delved into such critical offshoots. One popular area of research, for example, focuses on (news) media representations of the poor and their encounters with violence, crime and the courts. Gilchrist (2010) analyzed media coverage of violence and indigenous women in Canada,
finding that their stories are seldom told and, when they are, the narrative is cold, detached and devoid of the rich details (the voices of loved ones, the voices of authorities) that would appear in articles on violence and non-indigenous women. A host of other studies, meanwhile, have examined media representations of the poor and race, uncovering both the subtle and the overt ways minorities are portrayed negatively in reportage. *In toto,* this work strives to strategically point to media discourse and decisions, and how they impact people’s lives. There are critical opportunities along the way for unearthing hegemonic processes and other-ing ideologies that segregate and denigrate and rationalize (quietly or loudly) oppression.

In chapter 3, I’ll point to why critical discourse analysis (CDA) — the approach used in this study — offers valuable and unique sites for examining reportage and for disrupting/problematising oppressive forces hidden under the façade of neutrality or *always there-ness* (natur-ality). Briefly, I’ll argue critical discourse analysis promises possibilities for opening up (creating, finding, noticing) powerful and utilitarian spaces/places of questioning from which to point to harmful representations and identify new dimensions from which to unpack taken-for-granted meanings. Put another way, critical discourse analysis provides a lens with which to unearth the ways, as Hall (Hall, Segal & Osborne, 1997) describes, “class interests and other social forces attempt to interfere in the sphere of signification, to articulate or harness it to a particular project to hegemonize.”
Problematizing Poverty Discourse: Purpose and Scope of Research

With this study, I endeavor to unpack, problematize and re-imagine media discourse of poor families and their encounters with (formal) education, using a postmodern, feminist lens, and drawing on work and theory across education, journalism and political science. While reportage is not the only source of our knowledge about the poor (and our meaning making around poverty and policy), it is certainly central to discursive formation(s) of truth and reality. Using critical discourse analysis of newspaper stories and reader comments, I explore how education reportage focusing on poor children and families: perpetuates other-ing and dominating stereo-scripts associated with poverty, including discourses of dependency and deficiency; disappears or ignores poor lives and poor voices; and feeds into (particular educational and social safety net) policy decisions.

Worth noting: Throughout this study, I repeatedly point to standard pedagogical and professional assumptions, standards or beliefs in journalism that I argue deter reflective practice and perpetuate destructive poverty discourse. My critique of journalism practice is founded on my own experiences as a working news reporter and a college-level journalism instructor, and on feminist theory and pedagogy. With this ancillary project, I am — admittedly — dipping my toe into the water with no intention of diving in (just yet). What is the intention, then, of these academic scenic routes? Simply, by pointing to journalism theory and practice I am seeking to open up possibilities for re-imagining how we prepare young journalists to report on oppression and injustice. I recognize that by doing so I am asking new questions and offering qualified and incredibly limited answers; to truly make the case for a critical feminist
pedagogy for journalism classrooms would require (and deserves) a depth and breadth of inquiry I have neither the time or space for in this study. In pointing to foundational concepts in journalism, and using feminist theory to problematize and unpack them, I am, however, seeking to offer additional contextual dimension to this study, while also paying homage — in a small way — to the feminist pursuit of praxis.

**Description of analysis**

The critical discourse analysis conducted for this study draws from a (deliberately) broad source of mainstream newspaper reportage, as part of a two-pronged approach to culling discourse themes. The analysis includes newspaper reportage of the poor and their encounters with education during two five-year periods (2002 to 2006 and 2009 to 2013), which coincide with (partially cover) the rollouts of two national education reform agendas — the No Child Left Behind law, put in motion by the Bush administration, and Race to the Top, unveiled by his Democratic successor and considered a centerpiece of the Obama administration’s education legacy. My interest is not in the reform agendas *per se* — nor was my article selection confined to articles dealing only with those educational programs. Rather, I selected the two analysis periods because these two reforms both count educational equity — including, importantly, equitable access to education for poor children — as a galvanizing principle. In addition, the chosen periods are appropriate for a pragmatic reason: These reforms generated *more* stories on changes being instituted across education systems and, relatedly, on the problems that exist at every level of schooling. As such, they provide a rich catalog of reporting with which to consider my research.
I was interested in poverty discourse across conversations — including in national, local, and insider dialogues — so I drew reportage from six diverse sources:

- *Education Week*, a specialized publication that advertises itself as America’s “education news site of record.” *Education Week* counts among its audience lawmakers, educators, industry analysts and education reporters.

- *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, two newspapers with national reach that also produce stories on local schooling developments and have multiple reporters covering education. *The New York Times*, of course, is a natural inclusion in this study given its size (with a circulation of 1.9 million), and standing as the nation’s “newspaper of record.” The *Washington Post* has a significantly smaller print circulation reach (475,000 today), but is looked to for policy and legislative trends.

- Two Honolulu daily newspapers and the merged product of the two: *The Honolulu Advertiser*, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, and *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* (launched in 2010). In Chapter 3, when I outline my methodological approach for this study, I also offer a brief scene-setter of sorts of Honolulu’s daily newspaper milieu. I include this additional descriptive plane of context as an acknowledgement of the place where I write this study — Hawai‘i is my local — and in a nod to my own personal and professional background. I was a reporter at all three daily newspapers and covered the education beat for two years at the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*. (To be clear, I did not include any of my own reportage in my analysis.) I had not originally planned to include Hawai‘i coverage in this analysis, thinking myself too close to the story. But
that, I later reasoned, is exactly why I needed to examine reportage in Hawai‘i.

To ignore/look away from reporting closest to home would be a missed
opportunity, not least of which because of Hawai‘i’s unique historical, racial
and class-based realities.

Additionally, for the later analysis period (2009 to 2013), I conducted a secondary
query of poverty discourse meant to highlight public reactions of media actions.
Specifically, I examined online reader comments that correspond to (were generated
around) a sample of stories from The New York Times and the Washington Post. The goal
of this supplementary analysis was to examine discourse on discourse — to consider not
only the what that is shared, but how that what is received, and reflects existing media
representations and broader stereo-scripts of the poor. Examining reader comments in
online forums attached to stories is a growing area of media analysis, providing valuable
insight for the researcher and the researcher’s audience. It can certainly uncover new
themes, or can provide important local or regional context that might be otherwise missed
by an outsider.

**Summary of findings**

In this analysis, I demonstrate how poor parents and poor learners are other-ed in
news media discourse; in particular, I focus on three key themes — how the poor are
rendered invisible/silenced, how they are represented as burden or deficient (violating
social “values” and norms), and how they are constructed in opposition (as different) to
“us.” Notably, first-person poor voices were in short supply across the typical texts —
and across publications — included in this analysis. Poor parents were an especially,
glaringly absent group, given the role of parents in children’s lives. Disappearing poor
parents from stories about *education for their children* is denying them their parental status. In their stead, educators (teachers/principals), advocates/nonprofit players, and the government dominate the discourse, which serves to further distance poor parents from their roles as decision-makers and providers in their children’s lives (an *other-ing* act that essentially represents poor parents as parents in name only).

Representations of poor parents in news discourse analyzed for this study also demonstrated a reinforcement of the stereotype of adults living in poverty as *less than*, burdensome and (at least partly) to blame for their stock in life. Discursive representations of the poor as *in sharp contrast to us* or over-taxing/taking “our” resources are common in text and talk around poverty. Such representations serve as discursive exclusions — discourses of difference — that create opportunities for social distance between those living in poverty and those who are not.

The “us versus them” discourse around the poor and education was found throughout the news discourse analyzed for this study; some examples were inferred, especially those that intimated poor parents and kids were burdening “our” system, an implied middle-class education complex, were among a small number of groups “bringing down” test scores for schools or “failing” to show proficiency, and that poor kids were getting more than what they “deserve.” Finally, several of the articles included in this review were about poor children without being *about* poor children; this discursive disappearing act led to texts that focused not on children’s lives, resilience and hardships, but on the *effects of poor kids* on schools/communities (lower test scores, higher costs for programs), and on other kids (“diluted” teaching, slow progress).

**Critical discourse analysis: Theory and practice**
When first considering critical discourse analysis, it is didactic (though, admittedly, somewhat reductive) to explore what it is not. For starters, critical discourse analysis is not tidy. Its conclusions lack the sweeping, satisfying universality and confident swagger of quantitative approaches, and, arguably, the pragmatic and implicative beauty of its qualitative cousins. Critical discourse analysis is not formulaic, uniform, or prescriptive, but it is also not lawless (Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Rogers, 2004; Huckin, 1997; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). It is not just theory or just method (it is both). Its boundaries are not agreed upon; they are blurry and contested, maturing and expanding (Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Its epistemic aims are not a search for objective T/truth (as if there were such a thing) and fact and what is real. There is no grand hypothesis to prove (or disprove).

Rather, critical discourse analysis is concerned with reflections and representations (with the roaring fire and its shadows), with what our text and our talk — our discourse — say about us, and about society’s institutionalized inequalities and injustices (Fairclough, 1995). About power, hegemony, reproduction, and our understandings of the world and each other. Fairclough, a founder of the modern CDA movement, argues discourse is impossibly wrapped up with (and in) institutions: Discourse is the language of the powerful, it represents a “given social practice from a particular point of view” (1995, p. 56). Critical discourse analysis, meanwhile, can be thought of “as fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent and structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). In other words, critical discourse analysts seek
to critically investigate/unpack/problematize social inequality as it is “expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized … by language use” (2001, p. 2).

To be sure, critical discourse analysis is not the only linguistically-based methodology around, nor is the only way to critically analyze media discourse. So why turn to critical discourse analysis for this study? The answer is not in the skin-deep or the superficial; it is not because CDA is somehow more adept than other approaches at analyzing media discourse. My objective here is not to position CDA in opposition to other perspectives — as a better approach, a more robust approach, a more accepted approach, a more provable or replicable approach. Rather, I posit, CDA offers a particular approach appropriate for the themes I’m investigating, my own positionality, and the institutional power I’m seeking to spotlight. Importantly for my study aims, critical discourse analysis transports both the researcher and the reader from conversations around discourse-as-language to inspections of discourse-as-social practice, recognizing, contextualizing and problematizing power, and embracing a stated goal of addressing social inequities.

‘Language is ideological’

To understand critical discourse analysis as an approach, it’s imperative to start not at its formal birth in the 1990s, but at its germination some seven decades earlier. Indeed, CDA traces its genealogy to the critical social theory that grew out of Germany before World War II (Van Dijk, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In particular when it comes to the nature of language, critical discourse analysts are closely aligned philosophically with one of the Frankfurt School’s most renowned critical social theorists, Jürgen Habermas, who posited “language is also a medium of domination and
social force. It serves to legitimize relations of organized power. Insofar as the
legiminatizations of power relations … are not articulated … language is ideological”
(qtd. in Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 15).

French philosopher Michel Foucault has also had considerable influence on
critical discourse analysis, especially as researchers sought to mediate “between the
social and the linguistic” (Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 16). Foucault’s
explorations of epistemology and discourse offer portals for further discovery along with
foundations on which to build and make meaning. CDA, however, is by no means puritan
when it comes to theory. Indeed, there is no systematic theory formation — no grand
theory — across the CDA’s shared scholastic pool, a matter of some discomfort for some
scholars, who charge critical discourse analysis indiscriminately mixes and matches
concepts and categories to the detriment of their research.

Of course, one woman’s junk and all that. The critical analysis of discourse as
described, as a perspective based on an eclectic, hybrid array of critical theory and
methodologies, is seen as an important asset among CDA practitioners — an opportunity
to emphasize the positionality of the researcher, stress reflexivity in order to avoid
epistemological contradiction, and justify the intended approach for each intended issue
(Graham, 2005, p. 124). Indeed, critical discourse analysts take pains to make explicit
their role in their own research, and their participation in academe (and academic
discourse) and dominated and dominating groups. Van Dijk (2003) describes this state of
meta-awareness eloquently:

Continuing a tradition that rejects the possibility of a ‘value-free’ science, they
argue that science, and especially scholarly discourse, are inherently part of and
influenced by social structure, and produced in social interaction. Instead of
denying or ignoring such a relation between scholarship and society, they plead
that such relations be studied and accounted for in their own right, and that
scholarly practices be based on such insights. Theory formation, description, and
explanation, also in discourse analysis, are socio-politically ‘situated,’ whether we
like it or not (pp. 352-353).

In practice this means recognizing, disclosing and embracing positionality and
intentionality as a researcher. It means rejecting in toto the notion (and possibility) of
scientific objectivity or value-free research. It means articulating a coherent
premeditation, which at once builds a foundation and leads the way, as central to a
scholar’s decisions and reflection around research questions, method and conclusions.

Situating the self

As previously noted, I am an intersectionalist feminist researcher with a
postmodernist perspective. I am a woman, a journalist, and a journalism instructor. My
race and social status — white, middle class — afford me daily privileges that I seek to
render visible, un-innocent, not natural, even as I take advantage of them. I also
recognize that I am writing, thinking and theorizing about a dominated class as a
sympathetic outsider, and that to see, hear and speak on oppressive discourse is to
continuously problematize and reflect on my own perspectives and sense-making.

Scheman (2006) elaborates on this fruitful dissonance — created when knowledge
production among and for the dominant is examined critically — and points to Lugones’s
notion of the “tyranny of common sense, as the expression of what the comfortable can
presume to be obvious” (p. 63). Indeed, science and common sense see particular kinds
of knowledge as “right thinking,” and thus exclude many from the sphere of the commons and of sense/meaning-making. If we are to spotlight social injustice and if we are to argue for change, it will mean acknowledging how we “make each other up” (Lugones qtd. in Scheman, 2006, p. 63); it will mean mapping out new epistemological patterns of understanding the process of mentality. “We can ask about who ‘we’ are, how and why we do what we do,” Scheman writes, “who reaps the benefits and bears the burdens of the practices that give our lives the shapes they have, and who has what sort of power when it comes to issues such as these” (2006, p. 63).

Ultimately, my examination of media discourse of poverty and education is a project meant to spotlight dominating and oppressive discourse, bring into question how we know what we know about the lives of the poor, and how those assumptions play into (and with) the implications of and for educational policy. CDA’s obsession with power is absolutely embedded in and paramount to these pursuits: Power is central to what knowledge (and whose knowledge) is deemed truth(ful), and how we act on that knowledge. My study builds on a rich and growing academic body of work — a minority of which use CDA — seeking to consider media reportage and representations of the under-privileged and the oppressed through a critical lens. Implied in my scholarly pursuit is an appreciation of media discourse and its role in shaping our lives and our notions of reality. While reportage is not the only source of our knowledge about the poor (and our meaning-making around poverty and policy), it is certainly central to discursive formation(s) of truth and reality.
Critical ≠ critical

In 1997, while CDA was still in its early adolescence, Fairclough and Wodak summarized the fundamental tenets of the approach, as follows (pp. 271-80):

- Critical discourse analysis addresses social problems.
- Power relations are discursive.
- Discourse constitutes society and culture.
- Discourse does ideological work.
- Discourse is historical.
- The link between text and society is mediated.
- Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory.
- Discourse is a form of social action.

While these principles are certainly handy in creating a useful framework from which to venture outwards from, they also engender more questions, not least of which: What do we mean by critical? And, what do we mean by discourse? (There is also: What do we mean by analysis? But I will take up that question when describing the intended methodology for my study.) To be sure, these are big and unwieldy queries, and their answers across CDA are nuanced, diverse and eclectic. Consider, for example, that part one of the CDA tome, “Critical Discourse Analysis: Theory and Interdisciplinarity” (Weiss & Wodak, 2003) is provocatively (and frustratingly) titled, “Critical ≠ Critical ≠ Critical.” To address these definitions, I will rely on my own theoretical and philosophical slant, while recognizing CDA has room for divergent opinions.

In exploring the deployment of the term critical, I find it worthwhile to first turn to Fairclough (1995), whose approach I will rely on heavily for my research.
methodology. “What makes a theory critical,” Fairclough writes, “is that it takes a ‘pejorative’ view of ideology as a means through which social relations of power are reproduced” (1995, p. 17). In this context, ideology is the social — the processes and structures vital to establishing and maintaining unequal power relations (Wodak & Weiss, 2001). Indeed, Thompson (1990) writes that to study ideology is to unpack the diverse ways of which, through which and by which meaning is constructed — and conveyed — by symbolic forms (semiotics). Given this, it quickly becomes apparent why clear researcher intentionality is vital to CDA done right. Critiquing ideological operations means pointing to societal injustices, to power relationships that discriminate and sustain inequalities. Weaving a “critical”-ness into research also requires donning a critical presence for both the quotidian and mundane and the fantastical and strange; much in the same way feminists articulate the constant struggle to make oppression knowable. Weiss and Wodak (2003), for example, suggest the researcher’s critical gaze might well consider the neoliberal aims of the modern university, oriented toward cash streams, citation quotas and brand (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). CDA practitioners must also be self-reflexively critically; critical of themselves (their limitations, their biases) and their approach. As Gunther Kress wrote, “all signs are … equally subject to critical reading [for] no sign is innocent (1993, p. 174).

Of course, as noted earlier, CDA analysts also bring a critical-ness to what (discourse that reproduces abuse of power) they study — and how they study it. Van Dijk (2008) argues critical (discourse) studies should meet at least one of these criteria:

- Relations of dominations (abuse of power by a social group) are studied primary from the perspective of, and in the interest of the dominated group;
The experiences of (members of) dominated groups are also used as evidence to evaluate dominate discourse;

It can be shown that the discursive actions of the dominant group are illegitimate;

Or, viable alternatives to the dominant discourses can be formulated that are consistent with the interests of the dominated group (p. 6).

These points implicate researcher intentionality by rendering “neutrality” all but impossible — and inherently unimportant to critical discourse studies. Indeed, critical researchers do not study forms of inequality in society because they are matters worthy of their interest, but because they have an explicit aim of “contributing to specific change in favor of the dominated groups” (Van Dijk, 2008, p. 7). In academia, such an approach — in opposition to “scientific” knowledge production — can be viewed as less than, lacking scholarly rigor or “unbiased” thought. The underlying assumptions of these charges are faulty, as they view scientific thought as somehow devoid of positionality and perspective and free from hegemonic processes. But more fundamentally, such charges miss the point of CDA: This critical analysis is not seeking a conclusion, but a starting point. It is not seeking to end discussion, but to begin it, by unearthing/uncovering/making visible those processes that persecute and abuse dominated groups.

Critical discourse studies accomplishes this by exploring the relationships between language form and function, and seeking to explain — or question — why some patterns of form and function are privileged over others. Rogers (2004) illustrates this point well by comparing the social value and credibility we place on the anecdotal
information a parent shares about a child versus the educational conclusions a child’s special education teacher offers based on testing results. The former is seen as mostly worthless, a parent’s uninformed opinion; the latter is seen as unshakeable (unquestionable), backed up with *objective* tests and informed interpretation.

As Chouliaraki and Fairclough conclude, “The links between particular discourses and social positions, and therefore the ideological effects of discourses, are established and negotiated with the process of articulation within a practice” (1999, p. 4). In other words, it is not enough to study just the language used; critically studying language requires considering its context, including the social positions of those involved. Importantly, Fairclough (1995) argues, this work is about paying attention to the *texture* of texts: to form and organization, not just to content. It is also about exploring how texts talk to each other; intertextual analysis, he writes, offers important insight into not only what is said (in context) but what is *unsaid*.

It is constructive to differentiate here between discourse-as-language and discourse as “more than just language use: language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice” (Fairclough qtd. in Rogers, 2004, p. 5). The discourse in CDA is, importantly and inherently, about the social and the ideological. It has been characterized as “language above the sentence or above the clause” (Stubbs, 1983, p. 1) and as “never just a product, but a set of consumptive, productive, distributive, and reproductive processes that is in relation to the social world” (Rogers, 2004, p. 5). When CDA analysts talk about discourse, then, they are talking about the specific and the contextual. Indeed, Gee (1996) makes a distinction in his writing between little “d” discourse, referring to language bits, and big “D” discourse, as in the ways we represent,
believe, value and participate in language bits. He posits: Big “D” Discourses are ideological, resistant to internal criticism, and intimately related to the distribution of power and hierarchical structure in society.

**Why the news media (still) matters**

The Digital Age has fundamentally changed America’s media landscape. Newspapers, especially, have foundered in the last decade amid declining advertising revenues and circulation numbers. And the boundaries of “the media” have been muddied by a growth in citizen journalism, the blogosphere and social media. But despite its declining economic influence, the media continues to be an incredibly powerful force in American civil society. While there might be fewer journalists working for legacy media companies — newspapers, television and radio — the number of reporters at online news organizations is skyrocketing, and today, Americans are consuming more news than ever. Put another way, there is no debating that the media continue to play a significant part in setting our national agenda — in deciding what’s “important” and what’s not — and in feeding us the reality of realities we are not familiar with. “Media images have the greatest impact on perceptions when viewers have less real world experience with the topic,” wrote the authors of an Opportunity Agenda report, “Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys. “In other words, the ‘media world’ can be mistaken for the real world, unless audiences have sufficient personal experience to counteract its effects. … Distortions in the media are ultimately significant because of the real-world effects they have on black males’ outcomes” (2011, p. 15).

**A word on media ownership**
The health and welfare of a state’s democracy, its peoples and its media are inexplicably intertwined. Active, involved and critical news organizations help foster a more informed civil society. A lame-duck media contributes to societal decay. Therefore, an inspection of America’s news media — and media representations of the poor — wouldn’t be complete without some discussion of the economic realities of media ownership. We cannot and should not isolate media representations from media itself; decisions about what gets covered and how it gets covered are inextricably wrapped up with realities of media ownership.

To be sure, American reporters and newspapers were certainly never un-biased about power, as if such a thing was possible. In the 18th and 19th centuries, politicos and large landowners ran newspapers. Others were run by pro-labor groups. And even the so-called “Golden Age” of journalism at the turn of the 20th century was problematical — and powered by the powerful. However, as McChesney and Nichols (2005) point out, entry into the newspaper market up until about the early 1900s was relatively cheap, allowing more voices to be heard. By the turn of the 21st century, conglomerations had sucked up profit-making newspapers and spurred the shutdown of smaller daily newspapers. As revenues fell, thousands of reporters nationwide were laid off. And newspapers sought out new profit-making opportunities. One particularly disturbing trend: In a bid to attract advertisers, newspapers have been increasingly muddying the demarcations between what have been (20th century constructs of) “traditional news space” and “traditional advertising space” with advertisements made to look like news stories.
What does all this mean for reportage of the poor, especially at America’s newspapers? Tighter bottom lines translate to shorter stories, fewer reporters and, a greater focus on readers who appeal to advertisers. “There aren’t too many publishers who come striding into the newsroom demanding more coverage of the ghetto,” said Walker Lundy, retired editor of the Pioneer Press and the Philadelphia Inquirer (qtd. in Cunningham, 2004, p. 37). “You can’t sell many ads when your readers don’t have credit cards, and thus some readers are worth more than others.”

In addition, few American newspapers have reporters who focus exclusively on poverty and social welfare issues. The Pioneer Press in Minneapolis/St. Paul created such a position in 1998 after completing a large series on poverty, and reporter Maja Beckstrom held the job until 2002, when she went on maternity leave (Cunningham 2004). Upon her return, she learned the beat had been eliminated — a victim, she says, of the paper’s “effort to rethink priorities of coverage given a tight budget.” For her new beat, Beckstrom was given a choice: Cover a lifestyle beat geared toward 20-somethings or one that focused on parenting and families. She chose the latter.

**Imagining alternative possibilities**

Journalists and media institutions propagate and live by fundamental (creation) myths: Good journalism is objective. Truth is achievable. Reporters are unbiased observers. These myths not only inform reportage of the poor, they remain central to formal journalism pedagogy in college classrooms (Munoz-Torres, 2012; McChesney & Nichols, 2011). U.S. journalism schools still stress the importance of forcibly disengaging yourself from the story, getting “both sides,” and implicitly or explicitly privileging power and title in sourcing. All too frequently, journalism school graduates
are left with this message: To exert a critical lens is to be *non-objective* – that is, subjectivity, advocacy and empowering disconnected voices are not journalistic endeavors. As Mencher (2011) writes in his seminal textbook *News Reporting and Writing*, a standard in journalism classrooms, “When journalists talk about objectivity, they mean that the news story is free of the reporter’s opinion or feelings, that it contains facts and that the account is written by an impartial and independent observer. Stories are objective when they can be checked against some kind of record — the text of a speech, the minutes of a meeting, a police report, a purchase voucher, a payroll or vital statistics” (2011, p. 45).

As a journalism instructor and a working journalist, I am intimately familiar with journalism’s myths. And I, too, am guilty of propagating them. It took time and a growing frustration/discomfort for me to question the lessons I had learned as a young reporter, and the lessons I was teaching to young reporters. It also took a fundamental interest in covering issues too often considered non-stories: Among them, poverty, homelessness, the social safety net.

As mentioned, while the central focus of this study is on media representations of poor families and their encounters with education (and the implications of those representations for educational policy), I am also interested in seeking a praxis by re-envisioning journalism pedagogy. Throughout this text, I argue a critical feminist perspective offers not only a robust critique of the (patriarchal) media’s job performance, but alternative *possibilities* for teaching young journalists, offering new ways of giving students the tools to question long-held assumptions, problematize such industry
standards as objectivity and the inverted pyramid, and shed light on the power of experience and the danger of dualisms.

Journalism schools must teach tomorrow’s journalists not only how to write a story, shoot a video and build a social media following, but how to pursue social justice, seek out new voices, embrace nuance, and put theory into practice. Questioning assumptions through feminist pedagogy allows space for new ways of approaching storytelling, for bringing into the light dominating systems and mindsets, while celebrating and encouraging women’s ways of communicating and pursuing activism. We can cover the poor without other-ing them, or leaving them absent from civil(“ized”) society altogether. We can question and offer thoughtful analysis without engaging in the mindless punditry that dominates 24-hour cable news channels.

Fundamentally, as a researcher and as a journalism instructor, I am interested in how stories are covered, what gets covered, and who is doing the covering. Deploying/employing a feminist lens to critique how journalism is taught is critical to broader questions around how journalism is done. Journalism classrooms, after all, reflect the “industry standards” — the accepted practices, the creation myths, the assumptions about identity and self (What makes a journalist? Who gets to be a journalist?). A J-school degree might not guarantee a graduate a job, especially in today’s market, but it will guarantee a graduate knows what the job of journalism is all about.

Organization of this study

The central focus of this study is straightforward: I want to add to the body of knowledge on media representations of the poor and poverty policy, spotlighting the ways in which media discourse on poverty and education denigrates, oppresses and
others poor children and parents. Along the way, I’m seeking a praxis — born out of feminist pedagogy — that aims to imagine new possibilities for journalism education, making room for other perspectives and making way for critiques of journalism’s “creation myths.” My own experiences, as a journalist and an educator, guide me on this journey, which is born out of care and anger, out of empathy and concern. To be clear here, by studying media discourse I am not suggesting the media is the cause of society’s ills — or has the power to solve them on its own. Reporting will not, on its own, end poverty. But the press does have an incredible opportunity — and an incredible responsibility — to influence, shape and change policy and public opinion, especially when it comes to the lives of poor families and children. The media has the power (and an obligation) to shed light on the processes at work that stigmatize the poor and support detrimental policies. “The media have the potential to challenge dominant beliefs about the poor and to generate support for progressive antipoverty movements,” Bullock, Wyche and Williams (2001, p. 243) write. “But for the most part, economic equality, social class and poverty are presented superficially or are rendered invisible by the mainstream media.”

In this chapter, I sought to offer a roadmap to my study, and begin to explain why this study — and why now. Chapter 2 will present a broad review of literature on poverty, educational equity, and representations of the poor in the media. Importantly for this study of discourse, I unpack the term “poverty,” differentiating between poverty (and poorness) as a lack of means and poverty as an oppressive force. In Chapter 3, I explain my methodological approach to this study, pin down the meaning and unique attributes of “media discourse,” and further clarify how I used critical discourse analysis to examine
key themes around news reporting on poverty and education. I also discuss perhaps the most glaring result of my analysis: The dearth of reportage on poverty in education, generally. As part of this discussion, I weave in questions of “news value” and objectivity — and also explore the potential of a feminist pedagogy that seeks to re-cover, un-cover or simply cover non-privileged voices. Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate how media discourse others poor children and parents, contributes to poverty stigma (Chapter 4) and shapes representations of educational policy talk — and what gets talked about (Chapter 5). In Chapter 4, I focus particular attention on framing, backgrounding, omission and insinuation in the discourse, and also weave in reader (re)action, as seen in online comments. Also in chapters 4 and 5, for contextual grounding, I problematize standard (traditional) journalism practices — like “getting both sides” and seeking “official sources” — as part of my thought project around journalism education. Finally, in chapter 6, I offer overall conclusions on my study findings, and discuss avenues and implications for further research. In my final chapter, I also look forward to tying up my feminist critique of journalistic practices and assumptions with a how: considering how to deploy feminist pedagogy in college journalism classrooms as a means to imagine new possibilities for covering poor lives in ways and promote social justice, which is (it’s worth nothing) a key tenet of journalism, education and feminism. As part of this discussion, I consider journalism and Rawlsian ethics, broadly, and consider the unique attributes of feminist ethics for bringing oppressed voices into the commons.

On that note, I would add that journalism in the United States does indeed have a long and rich history of pushing forward positive social change. (It also has a long history of doing the opposite.) And reporters often hold the best of journalism up as a badge of
honor. See what we can do? they say. See what we’ve done? To be sure, I believe strongly (blindly, at times, admittedly) in the power of journalism to make poor lives better, in the power of journalism to spotlight hegemonic systems of oppression. As such, this study, though limited in scope, is ultimately aimed at embracing the feminist tradition of offering both a critical analysis and pursuing praxis, a way forward. It comes from this simple belief: We can live up to the best in education journalism (and journalism education) by doing a better job of covering the poor.
Poverty does not reside exclusively in the external world independent of academic discourse that thinks about it; discourse is deeply implicated in creating poverty insofar as it conceals the social origins of scarcity. Although the experience of hunger and malnutrition is immediately material, “poverty” exists in a discursive materialist formation where ideas, matter, discourse, and power are intertwined in ways that virtually defy dissection.” — Lakshman Yapa, in “What causes poverty? A postmodern view from home” (1996, p. 707)

“Our lives are living minute by minute, and we are scared.” — Iowa resident Sandy Struznick, a 59-year-old grandmother, who found herself struggling to pay for the basics after her husband lost his job (qtd. in Abramsky, 2013, p. 27)

**Chapter Two: A discourse of “prosperity”**

In spring 2015, Kansas Governor Sam Brownback signed the HOPE (Hope, Opportunity and Prosperity for Everyone) Act, approving a host of new, tighter restrictions on how his state’s residents can spend government assistance dollars, and how long they can receive them (Wogan, 2015). The law (re-)ignited a national debate on America’s poor, including how they use/“abuse” government subsidies, and whether strict constraints on welfare aid accomplish their stated goal of promoting “self-sufficiency” or just serve to further stigmatize the poor. Poverty discourse in many states supports the former, tying the mythos of the American dream to the notion that self-sufficiency can be had if you “just try hard enough” and stop wasting money on frivolities. Under the Kansas law, for example, welfare recipients are barred from withdrawing more than $25 from ATMs daily, spending their aid (as if they were!) at
movies, massage parlors, gambling halls, nail salons, theme parks, dog races, strip clubs
or cruise ships, and receiving aid for more than 36 months during their lifetimes — down
from 48 (Holley & Izadi, 2015, “Transition plan for Kansas HOPE Act,” 2015). “We’re
trying to make sure those benefits are used the way they were intended,” state Sen.
Michael O’Donnell, vice chairman of the Kansas State Senate’s standing committee on
public health and welfare, told the Topeka Capital-Journal (qtd. in Holley & Izadi,
2015). “This is about prosperity. This is about having a great life.”

Shortly after the Kansas measure was introduced, a handful of other state
legislatures clamored to take up similar bills. Missouri, for example, considered a
measure that would prohibit people from using food stamps to buy “cookies, chips,
energy drinks, soft drinks, seafood or steak” (Milbank, 2015). The bill’s author, state
Rep. Rick Brattin, told The Washington Post, “I have seen people purchasing filet
mignons and crab legs” with electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards (qtd. in Milbank,
2015). “When I can’t afford it on my pay, I don’t want people on the taxpayer’s dime to
afford those kinds of foods either.” We can, of course, shake our heads at this
stigmatizing policy talk. We can be outraged by its short-sightedness. But we also
recognize its power, its reach, and its appeal to a broad swath of Americans. Notably, a
survey found that 6 in 10 Kansans supported the new sweeping restrictions on how
welfare can be spent. And some 66 percent thought more should be done to limit how
welfare recipients are able to spend their aid (“Survey shows,” 2015).

While these state efforts are new, they’re hardly novel — or surprising. Poverty
discourse in the United States has long been characterized by poor-blaming/shaming,
(patriarchal) condescension and/or deliberate erasure (Schram, 1995; Piven, 1995;
We saw that in the war on poverty, which was reconstituted into a war on the poor; we saw that in the bipartisan (and publicly popular) “welfare reform” of the 1990s (Schram, 1995); and we’re seeing it today with efforts to police, bully and restrict the poor into achieving “prosperity” or, at least, render them invisible, intimating along the way that if they’d just stop spending their welfare checks at the movies, massage parlors and gambling halls, they’d get along fine.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which a postmodern interrogation of discourses about poverty (and those living in poverty) offers important insight into how we communicate about, represent and understand the poor. For the sake of context, I begin this chapter with a broad review of the literature on poverty, bringing in quantitative data that illustrate the scope of the problem and fleshing out research (from across the social sciences) that begins to help us understand the unique obstacles poorness poses (and the poor face). I also unpack the term “poverty,” differentiating between poverty (and poorness) as a lack of means and poverty as an oppressive force. By pointing to the literature on poverty as policy, poverty as news and poverty as oppressor, my aim is to unpack prevailing understandings of “the poor,” consider poverty discourse and begin to examine the media’s portrayal of poverty.

**Poverty as destitution**

Every year, the U.S. Housing and Human Services Department issues its new poverty guidelines in order to determine eligibility for federal government aid. Importantly, HHS’s definition is also used in other arenas, including by states, counties and non-governmental organizations to determine “need” for safety-net programming. In 2015, a family of four in the 48 contiguous states is determined to be living in poverty if
they bring in $24,250 or less annually; the figure for the family of four is $30,320 in Alaska and $27,890 in Hawai‘i. The American Census Bureau also has a technical definition for poverty, which it uses to calculate the number of Americans living below the poverty line in any given year. The Census determines whether a family lives in poverty by comparing their pre-tax cash income against a threshold set at three times the cost of a minimum food diet in 1963, and updated using the Consumer Price Index (“How is poverty measured,” n.d.).

I share these poverty thresholds to briefly bring into relief the difference between poverty-as-defined and poverty-as-discourse. In the United States, our technical conceptions of poverty are narrow, largely confined to cash means. Under the government’s official estimation, $1 separates those who are eligible for assistance and those who are not; but $1 does not separate those who are impoverished in the sociological and discursive sense. Or, notably, in the policy-making sense. Considering the government’s technical definitions of poverty aids us as we begin to render new (and strange) our national discourses about poverty — the ways that we talk about and write about and represent (and other) the poor in discourse. Poverty in the United States, after all, isn’t just about means. It is about race and gender and sexuality. About education, experience and opportunity.

Political philosopher Ashis Nandy (2002) underscores this point by enunciating modernity’s distinction between poverty and destitution — or a loss of dignity and hope — and arguing that our modern notions of poverty are always and ever-expanding (to always include emotionally-draining and opportunity-limiting other-ing stigmatization). “The shifting definition of poverty never allows one to remove destitution,” he writes
(2002, p. 120). “It keeps people like us constantly busy pulling ourselves above an ever-shifting, mythic poverty line into a concept of ‘normal’ life that should look less and less normal to socially sensitive psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts.” In other words, the poor can no longer just be poor; the stigma associated with poverty is unshakeable. Is it any wonder that most poor Americans label themselves middle class (Levy, 2015)? The emotional and psychological burden of knowing poverty — of knowing you’re impoverished — is too heavy to bear. To articulate this point further: The poor would rather erase themselves than bear the scarlet letter of poverty.

Poverty, after all, is something to be whispered about, not admitted to. It is hidden, ignored, other-ed, which notably, contributes to a lack of knowledge in the public sphere about the true scope of poorness in the United States. According to a Catholic Campaign for Human Development survey, a majority of Americans estimate the number of their fellow citizens in poverty at about five million (McChesney, 2003). The actual number is nine times that — and growing.

Indeed, we might consider poverty the biggest story (consciously) hidden in plain sight. The United States has among the highest rates of childhood poverty among developed nations (Buchheit, 2015), and in 2013, more than half of U.S. schoolchildren qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch. Census estimates released in 2013 found that a staggering 46.5 million Americans — 1 in 7 — were living below the poverty line, the largest total since the government first started collecting the statistic in 1959 (Poverty in the United States, n.d.). Even more alarming, in 2013, children made up 24 percent of the U.S. population, but 35 percent of all Americans in poverty and more than one-third of those living in “deep poverty,” with incomes 50 percent below the poverty line.
Meanwhile, in 2013, the number of homeless children reached an all-time high. Some 2.5 million American children were homeless at some point that year, according to a report from the National Center on Family Homelessness (Crary & Leff, 2014). That amounts to about 1 in every 30 U.S. children.

**Considering Poverty Research**

The task of being poor presents innumerable obstacles, challenges and lifelong consequences. It affects emotional and physical health. Has lifelong ramifications. And it is ever-present in daily lived experience. (Again, you can’t shed your poor-ness; it defines you at all times.) In this section, I am not attempting to catalog the myriad studies that contextualize and build on this point. This is not a literature review of poverty studies, per se. However, there is utility in offering a description of important poverty research, some of which will be further examined in my study, as part of a larger project to identify how an interrogation of poverty discourse might help address misrepresentations, stereotypes, stigma, and other-ing in the discourse.

I would note here that pinpointing the “causes” of poverty is the subject of considerable and controversial debate, not least of which because historical research to explain poor-ness was based on biased and discriminatory assumptions, many of which linger in the discourse today. Edelman (2012), author of *So Rich, So Poor: Why It’s So Hard to End Poverty in America*, argues the causes and adverse effects of poverty are nuanced, diverse — and always changing. Some causes of poverty include a lack of jobs with living wages, employment policies that fail to protect mothers, and America’s flimsy social safety net. There are race- and gender-based considerations, too, that deserve scrutiny (Edelman, 2012). As Edelman (2012) writes, “Minorities are disproportionately
poor; around 27 percent of African-Americans, Latinos and American Indians are poor, versus 10 percent of whites. At the same time, whites constitute the largest number among the poor. This is a fact that bears emphasis.”

Further complicating poor lives are the stigmas associated with poverty. These stigmas are oftentimes based on pervasive, *specific* myths, which in some cases have appeared in social science research as “fact.” In 1961, for example, American anthropologist Oscar Sanchez shared his “culture of poverty” theory to widespread attention. His book, *The Children of Sanchez*, included limited ethnographic studies on small communities in Mexico; Sanchez used derisive and derogatory “findings” to develop a universal “culture of poverty” theory. Among Lewis’s conclusions: People in poverty are unmotivated and have weak work ethics; poor parents are uninvolved in their children’s learning; poor people are linguistically deficient; and the poor tend to abuse drugs and alcohol more than the middle class and wealthy (Gorski, 2008). Lewis’s theory — and his findings — prompted a flurry of studies, which proceeded to debunk his biased assumptions and the notion of a “culture of poverty.”

In fact, studies have shown that:

- The poor don’t have a weaker work ethic than the middle-class or wealthy (Iversen & Farber, 1996). In fact, some 8 in 10 children from low-income families have at least one employed parent; notably, poor working adults spend more hours working each week than their wealthier counterparts (Gorski, 2008).
- Poor parents hold the same attitudes about education as wealthy parents (Compton-Lilly, 2003). Poor parents are less likely to attend school functions or volunteer because they have less access to school involvement than their
wealthier peers and are more likely to have multiple jobs, have jobs without paid leave, or are unable to afford child care or public transportation, not because they don’t value education (Parent and family involvement, 2015).

- Varieties of English that are often deemed deficient — for example, Appalachian varieties or Black English Vernacular — are no less sophisticated than “standard English” (Gee, 2004; Hess, 1974).

- Poor people are no more likely than the rest of the population to abuse alcohol or drugs (Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001); notably, Chen, Sheth, Krejci, and Wallace (2003) found alcohol consumption is actually higher among upper middle class white high schoolers compared to their poor black peers.

These counter-points to Lewis’s “culture of poverty” aren’t meant to end the conversation; nor am I presenting them as Truth. Rather, they’re aimed at demonstrating the power of discourse: Though Sanchez’s “culture of poverty” theory has been summarily debunked, its conclusions continue to parade in the discourse as fact. At the same time, we cannot assume these modern studies on poverty are free of their own myths (or researcher values, assumptions and biases). I add this caution given my focus on discursive practices, and my postmodernist misgivings about the notion of an “objective” science or truth. As Longino (1990) has argued, we must deflate the myth of an autonomous, value-free science and instead see specific scientific fields (and science, more broadly) as constructed on their own set of values. Schram (1995) follows this line of reasoning: “No more autonomous than any other discipline, poverty research discourse is no pure unalloyed good, but instead is infiltrated by the prevailing discursive structures
of the broader society” (1995, p. xxviii). The practice of always “looking under the hood” is frustrating, messy, meandering work. An unqualified truth is easier, to be sure. The work of postmodernist scholars, however, demonstrates the value of problematizing “factual” conclusions and adding new dimensions to our discussions about and understandings of each other. I find it valuable to keep that in mind as I consider the discourses included in my study, namely, media discourses about the poor as they encounter education. These discourses, to be sure, will also reflect microdiscourses of poverty and educational research and macrodiscourses of the poor in broader society.

**Poor lives and education**

Implicating poorness in educational failure is vital to better understanding the stakes of media representations of poverty — and illuminating how media representations are not only fed by hegemonic processes of power, but feed into those processes. Before I launch into a review of media representations of the poor, I thought it important to consider the significant body of work that considers the lives of the poor and what happens when they encounter our educational systems.

In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life*, for example, Lareau (2011) sheds a spotlight on the innumerable – and oft-times invisible and *daily* — ways that poor and working-class children and middle-class and affluent children come to grow up in different worlds. Class inequality, she writes, “permeates the fabric of the culture,” informing habits around school and school engagement, after-school activities, parental approaches, discipline, language, expectations and children’s preparation for adulthood (Lareau, 2011). When considered closely, she argues, the lives of working-class and poor families and children bear little resemblance to those experienced by more affluent
families. And, importantly, those differences work against poor children and parents, who are too busy surviving to learn the unwritten rules of educational institutions built for the middle class.

There has also been significant research into the lives of homeless children, and I note it here because of their unique and daunting barriers. The body of social science research shows homeless kids are more likely to struggle in school, experience higher rates of school failure, grade retention and absenteeism and are at greater risk of significant behavioral and emotional problems (Molnar, Rath & Klein, 1990; Shaffer & Caton, 1984). Indeed, recent studies have shown homeless children not only underperform compared to all children but underperform compared to children living in poverty (Samuels, Shinn & Buckner, 2010). They are four times more likely than their housed peers to show developmental delays, and two times more likely to repeat a grade, be suspended from school or be diagnosed with a learning or emotional disability (Tanabe & Mobley, 2011). As the National Center for Homeless Education notes, homeless children must not only cope with the “adversity of poverty,” but with stressors that are unique to homelessness — such as transiency, lack of safety and hygiene issues — which can put them at higher risk of struggling academically (Bassuk, et al., 2011).

Such insight is powerful, particularly when considering the role media representation plays in the lives in the poor. When it comes to a consideration of equity and education policy, we cannot ignore that children from low-income families face incredible obstacles to success – or even to a level playing field. We also cannot ignore that issues of class in education are always already wrapped up in questions of community, race or ethnicity, and gender. As Lareau makes clear, schools (and their
students) can’t be considered in a vacuum. Neither equity nor excellence will be achieved if a student is learning on an empty stomach, doesn’t have a home, or feels unsafe in the classroom or on her route to school. As Berliner, Yeh and Kitzmiller note, “America’s dirty little secret is that a large majority of poor kids attending schools that serve the poor are not going to have successful lives. [T]he facts are clear. Most children born into the lower social classes will not make it out of that class, even when exposed to heroic educators” (2012, p. 2).

Indeed, Berliner, Yeh, and Kitzmiller (2012) are voicing the frustrations of a growing number of educators when they rail against (dominant) neoliberal school reforms (and discourse) that ignore childhood poverty, essentially arguing that in focusing solely on what happens inside schools (test scores, teacher quality and achievement gaps), politicians have set national and local efforts to improve education up for failure. It is no accident of statistics that the poorest-performing schools serve poor kids — these children come to class at a disadvantage, and a new curriculum, a new teacher, a new principal won’t address broader, more fundamental inequalities. “Ignoring the powerful and causal role of inequality and poverty on so many social outcomes that we value, not merely school achievement, is easily as shameful as having educators use poverty as an excuse to limit what they do to help,” Berliner Yeh, and Kitzmiller (2012, p. 7) write, adding that a major reduction of poverty in America might do more to improve schools than any educational improvement effort currently in effect.

Darling-Hammond (2010) has similarly argued that larger societal inequities, which are most times woefully ignored, must be core to any discussion of educational fairness, writing in The Flat World and Education that while U.S. educators and civil
rights advocates have “fought for higher quality and more equitable education over many years — in battles for desegregation, school finance reform, and equitable treatment of students within schools — progress has been stymied in many states over the last two decades as segregation has worsened, and disparities have grown” (2010, p. 8). Put another way, both quality and equity are impossible goals if we fail to recognize the struggles low-income children face inside and outside the classroom. As Darling-Hammond writes, while students in the highest-achieving states and U.S. districts do as well as those in high-achieving nations, “it is our continuing comfort with profound inequality that is the Achilles heel of American education” (2010, p. 8).

Of course, class/socio-economic status does not act alone in stratifying and codifying and determining children’s opportunities when it comes to education (just as it does not act alone in society at large). Rather, we should think of class as part of a broader framework, as intersecting with race and with gender and with other markers of difference (for example, physical or developmental disability). For example, the experiences of African-Americans in schools, at work and in daily life continue to be far different from the experiences of white Americans, and those experiences are further differentiated for African-American youth from low- and working-class families. After all, even six decades after Brown v. Board of Education, a child’s chances of getting equitable access to education — of being assigned to master teachers, of successfully making the perilous jump from middle school to high school and then graduating with a diploma, of turning dreams of the future into college admission and a four-year degree — in no small part depend on (are intimately connected to) whether she is black or Latino or
Asian-American or Native American or white. Whether she is a minority, in the political and socio-cultural sense of the word.

**Postmodernism, Critical Analysis and Poverty Discourse**

Schram (1995), in *Words of Welfare: The Poverty of Social Science and the Social Science of Poverty*, points to the ways that different types of (micro- and macro-) discourses work together to marginalize the poor. There is policy talk, policies themselves, poverty research, and our understandings of the poor in broader society. These discourses categorize the poor, label the poor, make judgments about how the poor should live, and affect poor lives in innumerable, quotidian ways. Recall, for example, how policymakers talked about poverty in the 1990s. Welfare mothers were cast “as the locus of a kind of moral rot,” and charged with the breakdown of the family; President Bill Clinton characterized poverty as ultimately a “problem of family values and individual irresponsibility” (Piven, 1995, xiii). Poverty researchers subsequently focused their research efforts on the impact of welfare and work on family patterns – in no small part because that’s where the funding dollars were available – and succeeded in many cases bolstering the government’s case against the poor. As Schram (1995) argues, “Welfare policy research is insufficiently attentive to how it is implicated in perpetuating the problems of welfare and poverty. The discursive practices of welfare policy research help reproduce the ideological premises of such policies” (p. xxiv).

In this study, I take a similarly critical look at media discourses of poor families and children, unpacking how different texts (newspaper stories, social media posts, and reader comments) represent and ultimately contribute to marginalization of those living in poverty, and conduct a thought exercise in feminist pedagogic approaches as part of a
commitment to praxis. In Lazar’s (2005) words, I attempt to “fruitfully combine” a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) with postmodern (poststructuralist) and feminist perspectives. In order to further clarify my theoretical positionality, I will use this section to elucidate postmodernism as a perspective, and make clear how a postmodernist approach is appropriate for a critical discourse analysis of media discourse, pointing to specific postmodernist attributes that are germane, specifically, to an analysis of news reportage of the poor.

A postmodernist perspective

First off, we can end our journey for the “quiddity” – the whatness – of postmodernism before it begins. Aylesworth (2015) calls postmodernism “indefinable,” while Rikowski and McLaren (1999) say attempts to define it are “fraught with difficulty,” in large part because of the absence of a grand theory. However, it is worthwhile to describe postmodernism, focus on its characteristics, and clarify its “attitude” — a commitment to a social justice that seeks to end social inequalities — that give it form and structure (Rikowski & McLaren, 1999).

Rikowski and McLaren note that postmodernism reflects a conscious and “certain celebration of aimless anarchism” (1999, 2), deploying a set of critical and rhetorical practices that use specific concepts (difference, repetition) to destabilize familiar (and often uncontested) concepts (like identity, historical progress and epistemic certainty) (Aylesworth, 2015). Rikowski and McLaren (1999) explain, “For postmodernists, all concepts are decentered (fragmented, splattered) and all dualisms (such as the Marxist notion of two major social classes) deconstructed. The search for ‘meaning’ within
texts/discourse becomes infinitive; comprising endless academic work for postmodernists” (p. 2).

Importantly, postmodernist theorists posit that the work of making sense of the world — and communicating that sense to others — is a constructed, social process. Schram (1995) describes postmodernism as a cultural sensibility that “takes many forms, but in common is the appreciation that reality as we know it is … discursively constituted” (p. xxviii). Because of this, postmodernism stresses perspectivism, the notion that we always understand our world from a partial, limited and biased perspective (Schram, 1995). Central to this concept is not only that there are alternative understandings of — and systems of beliefs about — our world(s), but that there is no one, authoritative (right) system for determining what is truth, or what is truth-ier.

Relatedly, deconstruction — the pointing-out of how texts are constituted by discourse practices (without which they would collapse) — is vital to illuminating how knowledge is always partial and incomplete, “always produced from a particular perspective” and so confounds the “rigid distinction between subjective and objective knowledge” (Nash, 1994, pp. 69-70). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) note deconstruction does not require, inter alia, “judgmental relativism,” or the assumption that all discourses are equally good. At the same time, to deconstruct a text is not to repudiate it; rather, deconstruction makes visible constitutive practices embedded in all texts. Once un-covered, discursive constitutions of the social can be interrogated in terms of (for example) representations, relationships and identities (Fairclough, 1989).

Nash describes Derridian deconstruction as the aim “to show how every identity is contingent, provisional and incomplete” (Nash, 1994, p. 75). Relatedly, we might
consider a poststructural orientation to postmodernism as a quest to interrogate structures as “prevailing systems of interpretation” in order to dematerialize them (Schram, 1995, p. xxix). Indeed, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), in writing about postmodern narratives in critical discourse analysis, point to a shared indebtedness to poststructuralism in the two perspectives — “both its deconstruction of dominative objectivist and humanist theoretical practices, and its radical contribution to theorizing the social world and the subject from the point of view of discourse” (p. 89). Poststructuralism, then, aims to inspect and problematize the stabilized structures of interpretation that make up daily life (and understandings of daily life); such social structures construct shared values and identities that emerge out of textually constructed differences (Schram, 1995).

A valuable example of discourse deconstruction can be found in Foucault’s expansion of our understanding of power, by making a distinction between disciplinary power (through fields, such as psychiatry) and sovereign power. Yapa (1996) takes up these two conversations about power in relation to poverty discourse, seeking to redefine/reimagine what is meant by seeking a “solution” to the “problem” poverty. He argues, for example, that poverty is represented in academic literature as largely an economic problem, to the detriment of the poor. In the literature, “People are poor because they do not have enough money to command a market basket of basic goods, a situation that can be corrected through investment, growth, job creation, improved education, and so on” (Yapa, 1996, p. 718). And yet, such a discourse does not recognize how the scarcity of basic goods — how poverty itself — is socially constructed. An uncovering of the powerful institutions at work in discourse allows for new conversations; in this case, we can ask, What are the implications of viewing poverty as
socially-constructed? Indeed, how might our views of (and actions toward) the poor change if we understand their conditions in this greater paradigm?

**Poverty as news (or not)**

Every so often, newspapers here or there across the country embark on “special projects” to un-cover the lives of poor families. Readers are given a week-long series of massive stories accompanied by compelling photos, colorful charts and appealing layouts. They are treated to unusually descriptive writing on poverty, chock full of rarely-heard voices. Then, when the series is finished, it is as if the issue(s) disappeared. Rarely are there comprehensive follow-ups, or the kind of relentless reporting other topics (business, for example) attract. Seldom are the questions that were raised in the series pursued in a dogged way. “We bite off a huge project every few years, and that has the effect of reducing the poor to a problem,” says Mary Schmich, a Chicago Tribune columnist who has been lauded for her coverage of the city's public-housing complexes and tenants (qtd. in Cunningham 2004, 35). *Tampa Bay Times* media critic Eric Deggans agrees. “Poverty becomes a sort of ‘very special episode’ of journalism that we sort of roll out every so often,” Deggans told *Nieman Reports*. In fact, a Pew Research Center analysis of thousands of stories from 52 major mainstream news outlets between 2007 and 2012 found only .2 percent were primarily focused on issues of poverty (Froomkin, 2013).

Even as poverty and homelessness is under-covered, reportage on business, Wall Street, and affluence continues to garner ample space. Newspaper readers — the majority of whom are not big investors — are barraged with updates on the stock exchange and the markets. Consider if the situation was flipped. As media critic Ben Bagdikian has
said, “If the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped steadily for 20 years it would be front page and leading broadcast news day after day until the government took action. [When] 32 million of our population have their housing, food and clothing ‘index’ drop steadily for more than 30 years, it’s worth only an occasional feature story about an individual or statistical fragments in the back pages of our most influential news organizations (qtd. in McChesney 2003, 312).

Here in Hawai‘i, bank mergers, the naming of new business executives and bankruptcies are often given front-page coverage. However, these stories rarely elicit contextual questions. New hotels, for example, mean new jobs and new opportunities, not new problems. How much housekeepers at the Hilton Hawaiian Village make — and how many other jobs they must get to pay the rent — is considered irrelevant, despite the toll these low-wage jobs take on families. Rohter, for example, argues the tourism industry has been unkind to Hawai‘i’s poor — the state’s offshored economy, he writes, has created “a vast number of low-paying jobs (and few others) for workers in tourism and its ancillary services,” while leading to an inflated cost of living (2002, p. 27). And yet Hawai‘i’s reporters would never dare miss an announcement about a new airline, new plans for Waikiki or new tourist counts — all the while ignoring how the industry affects poverty.

A central objective of my research is unpacking and interrogating other-ing representations of the poor that feed into stereotypes and inform/re-form the public discourse in ways that have lasting and quotidian effects for poor families and children. Briefly here, I’ll offer highlights of the (growing) body of research into media reportage
of the poor, before pointing to ways a postmodernist, poststructuralist perspective presents opportunities for further unpacking tactics of other-ing poor-ness.

• An expansive study using media framing methodology concluded that media discussions of the poor shifted from the 1960s, from a focus on the structural causes of poverty to a focus on the danger of having too many people in poverty and to the “strain” the poor put on taxpayers and government programs. “Slowly, elite conversations shifted to focus on the poor exploiting the welfare system for undeserved financial gains and the dysfunctional nature of poverty assistance programs,” the authors write (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013, p. 32).

• Kendall (2012) also conducted an exhaustive analysis in her book, *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, in which she examined popular and news media, including articles in the *New York Times* dating back to 1850. In her book, Kendall argues that the media rarely discuss class explicitly, but rely on representations to tell the story — members of the upper class are framed positively, as generous or caring or as living beautiful lives; the poor and working class are ignored and, when present, are discussed in terms of statistics. Those who get welfare and the homeless are cast as violating middle-class sensibilities; a more empathic tone is taken when the discussion involves children and the elderly.

• Bullock, Wyche and Williams (2001) analyzed media depictions of the poor in the wake of welfare reform, using existing research around media framing of welfare recipients to inform their thematic foci for a corresponding pilot study. The researchers looked at 412 newspaper articles about poverty and welfare
published during a three-month period in 1999, and found similarities with previous studies, including a contrast in reportage between those who we see as to blame for their poorness versus those we consider victims of fate. They also found reporting paid little attention to the structural systems that create and perpetuate poverty, but put a focus on welfare reform success stories, which profiled individuals who had “triumphed over poverty” and reinforced the theme that “hard work pays off.”

- Van Doorn (2012) analyzed photos with stories on poverty in U.S. news magazines and found that blacks and Hispanics were overrepresented in pictures by more than a factor of 2, while non-blacks/non-Hispanics were dramatically underrepresented. Meanwhile, blacks were significantly overrepresented in photos with stories on welfare during a broad analysis period (1992-2010), which included coverage of “welfare reform” under the Clinton administration. Overall, white were more likely to be pictured as elderly, eliciting sympathy as the “deserving poor.”

These studies illustrate that the work of deconstructing representations of those living in poverty is a worthwhile, academic goal. How, then, might a postmodern perspective accomplish this goal in new ways? Schram (1995) offers an illuminative roadmap for this work. In *Words of Welfare*, he is concerned with social science research on poverty, which shares important commitments with reportage on the poor, including a stated commitment to objectivity. He argues that a postmodern perspective is not just critical, but is concerned with unpacking discursive practices in order to implicate powerful institutions (whose role in representations of the poor is repressed). ““Self-
sufficiency’ versus ‘dependency’ and other dichotomies are ratified in contemporary welfare policy discourse that reinforces institutionalized practices that work against those who are considered ‘dependent’ or in some other way undeserving,” writes Schram (1995, p. xxxi). Schram (1995) points to, for example, the “feminization of poverty,” which was framed as a new problem in the 1990s worthy of state intervention and public concern. In fact, he notes, the feminization of poverty is an example of how welfare policy created its own reality — stigmatizing female-headed families in order to reinforce two-parent families (Schram, 1995).

Critical to Schram’s analysis is the work of going beyond the words on the page to emphasize how (socially-constructed) discursive practices structure our understandings, in this case of the poor. To be sure, identities emerge out of created textually constructed differences, and society’s preferences of one identity over another converts this difference into other-ness. Solidifying this point, Schram (1995) points to Derrida’s well-known postmodern maxim, “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” or “There is no outside-text.” As Aylesworth (2015), we can take this to mean that language is, functionally, a system of differences; differences between any “inside” or “outside” of the text. Put another way, “there is no realm of autonomous textuality. Discourse versus structure. Discourse versus institutions, and the like become falsified binaries” (Schram, 1995, p. xxix). Attentiveness to how these structures impart meaning is central to a deconstructive enterprise, and is the first step in highlighting the power of discursive practices in influencing our meaning-making of the world.
**On representation**

Postmodernism works to denaturalize general conventions and specific forms of representation. In exploring notions of truth and knowledge, Hutcheon (2002) takes Roland Barthes' notion of *doxa* — as public opinion — and suggests that the postmodern serves to *de-doxify* or denaturalize the inherent politics of our cultural representation. Put another way, the aesthetics of postmodern texts demonstrate the political dimension of our representations (and ultimately serve to critique them). This allows us to recognize that everything we experience is “cultural”; in other words, “mediated by representations” (Hutcheon, 2002). According to Hutcheon's (2002) definition, then, postmodernism is the means by which we question our reality, our representations; and our meanings.

Relatedly, political theorist Roxanne Lynn Doty argues political relationships among international, state and local actors are “inextricably bound up” with discursive practices that create, proliferate and perpetuate “representations,” which are then taken as “truth” (1996). And the main purpose of analyzing and unpacking such representational practices, she continues, is not to uncover some sort of “meaningful” reality buried among reams of historical and political context. Rather, researchers should undertake that daunting task to recognize and call attention to the “play of power” — indeed, the tendrils of power — used in building and maintaining the representational structures of humanity and human relations (Doty, 1996).

Doty’s theory of scripting offers a powerful lens through which to view media representations of the poor. After all, a critical analysis is not about determining how people “really act” or “really live” — those conclusions are impossible to make. Rather,
this media critique is about uncovering and problematizing the ways in which representations further false assumptions about the poor bound up in discourse.

In *Durable Inequality*, social structures researcher Charles Tilly writes that humans organize each other using “scripts” – stereo-roles aimed at naturalizing socially-constructed differences and compartmentalizing the world for ease and efficiency (2000). Scripts — and scripting — engender(s) oppositional relationships, Tilly continues, that support media dualisms: homeowners as opposed to renters, the sheltered as opposed to the homeless, the middle class as opposed to the poor, minorities as opposed to whites.

Similarly, Said argues the formation of a (political or social) self is constituted in relation to the other. “Representations have purposes,” he writes, “they are effective much of the time, they accomplish one or many tasks. Representations are formations, or as ... [are] all the operations of language, they are deformations” (1994, 273).

**Seeking Social Change**

A common criticism of academics from postmodernism and critical discourse analysis perspectives is their seeming disconnection (in some cases) and willful disinterestedness (in others) from the *real* problems of daily life. Indeed, there is a significant danger of Ivory Tower syndrome here. Of pondering for no one’s sake. Of *action* paralysis — or, worse, apathy. Guattari (2012), who embarked on a number of postmodern adventures to re-conceptualize thought, writing, and subjectivity, criticized postmodernism for this tendency, writing: “Does it follow that we are henceforth condemned to stand around like idiots in the face of the growth of the new order of cruelty and cynicism that is on the point of submerging the planet, with the firm intention, it seems, of staying? It is this regrettable conclusion that numerous intellectual
and artistic milieus effectively seem to have reached, in particular those who invoke the fashion of postmodernism” (1986, p. 36).

But as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) note, a growing number of postmodern CDA researchers are distancing themselves from the “extremes” of postmodernism — such as Lyotard’s impossibility of knowledge or Baudrillard’s impossibility of the real — in order to articulate a postmodern problematic with a political project of resistance and social change. Feminist studies have shown particular promise in this regard, drawing on poststructuralist themes to challenge representations and interrogate meta-narratives. I situate my own study in this tradition, and view my research as an opportunity to start a conversation and promote possibilities for reimagining reportage of the poor. Schram (1995), in his study of welfare policy discourse, offers insight into the beauty of an elegantly-constructed postmodern critique, writing that postmodernism allows us to see society’s greatest problems (including poverty) as created rather than preexisting. “Interrogating discourse provides a way to challenge structures of power that constrain what is politically possible,” he writes (1995, p. xxiv) “Highlighting the ways in which discourse helps construct what is taken to be real, natural and true creates resources for working toward alternative arrangements.”

Postmodernism tells us: poverty-as-discourse isn’t really about poorness (a scarcity of means or material) at all. Rather, poverty in the discursive sense is about our conceptions, assumptions, representations, and conclusions about the poor. It is about historic injustices made modern, and then made invisible. It is about alleged/imagined individual (ir)-responsibility, laziness, moral depravity, about a lack of go-get’em-ness, ingenuity, mental faculties, grit. It is downright un-American to be poor, and that is
(absolutely) no accident (Abramsky, 2014); every day, in so many ways, we tell the poor, If you really loved your country you would stop being dependent on us already. You would go get a job, save up, live the American dream, (and leave us alone). Never mind that you already have a job (or two or three). Never mind that you’ve tried to dig your way out. Never mind that the deck is stacked against you, and that “saving up” is an impossible goal, especially when just yesterday you had to decide whether to buy food or pay the rent.

Poverty debases people because we debase poorness, argues writer Jeanine Grant Lister in a recent Washington Post commentary. Lister describes her experiences as a disabled mother living on food stamps, writing, “In America today, being poor is tantamount to a criminal offense, one that costs you a number of rights and untold dignities. When I drive my 19-year-old car, with its drooping bumper, peeling paint and loud muffler, the police follow me. Utilizing American safety-net programs requires that I relinquish my privacy multiple times” (2015).

A critical discourse analysis with a postmodern perspective offers opportunities for looking anew at our social discourse(s) around poverty. We can begin to see past the text to institutionalized power. We can deconstruct the discourse to problematize its assumptions and uncover discursive practices that other the poor. And we can use conclusions to pursue social change. I reject the notion of a postmodernism of paralysis, and instead instill this perspective in my positionality in order to prompt an always-discomfort in media discourse of poverty.
Regardless of locale or status, humans come primed with words and – if you’re particularly lucky – a pen and an audience. Given how many of them we squander on pleasantries, you’d be forgiven for forgetting their universal import. In syllables and scribbles we transmit feelings and meanings; utterances paint frescoes in the minds of others. Soft synonyms ease consciences and incline us to consider things less problematic, making us feel better and unfairly shunting matters to the bottom of the priority pile. When we discuss social exclusion, by interchanging “poverty” and “deprivation” with “inequality” we muddy the issue. We displace a word that conjures images of suffering for one with statistician-like sterility. We lose the juxtaposition of poor against rich and settle in a no man’s land of figures, studies and linguistic relief that frees us from facing a rather ugly reality: poverty exists in Britain. — Social activist, journalist and editor Vonny Moyes (2014), in “Let’s not muddy the language of poverty.”

**Chapter 3: The Power of Language; the Language of Power**

By the fall of 2015, civil war in Syria had been raging for four years. Citizens were facing ruthless attacks by the terrorist group known as the Islamic State, indiscriminate and brutal military offensives by the Assad regime, and a U.S.-led bombing campaign meant to beat back both sides. In the relentless fighting, 250,000 Syrians had been killed, most by chemical weapons, ballistic missiles and barrel bombings (Sly, 2015). Daily, thousands were fleeing to the European continent, triggering the greatest migration of people to Europe since the Second World War (Sly,
The journey to Europe was a treacherous one: Families crammed into small boats to cross the turbulent waters of the Mediterranean; they trekked hundreds of miles with little food or water; they filled railway cars and buses for grueling journeys across the European countryside. Infants and the elderly. Fresh-faced teens and conflict-weary adults. Professionals and civil servants and laborers. Everyone wore their lives on their backs — all the belongings they could carry stuffed into backpacks and duffels. One man told The Washington Post he climbed three mountains with his pregnant wife to make his way across the Turkish border from the Syrian city of Aleppo. “Everyone I know is leaving,” he said. “It is as though all of Syria is emptying” (Sly, 2015).

As the crisis worsened, xenophobia — and Islamophobia — fanned concerns about those crossing into Europe. And European leaders fretted over the economic fallout of sheltering the hundreds of thousands of people seeking refuge. A debate stirred over whether those risking their lives to enter Europe were primarily refugees — those forced to leave their homes because of war and, as such, entitled to protections under the 1951 Geneva Convention — or primarily migrants — those who choose to leave their homes to escape war or oppression, or to seek a better life or economic opportunity (Lind, 2015).

News outlets favored the broader term “migrant,” which — while not technically wrong — was also increasingly charged. By choosing to describe those crossing into Europe as migrants, the media was making a particular political statement — that those fleeing to Europe might not be entitled to Geneva Convention protections — and adopting a term that was layered with negative connotation, hate speech and discrimination. Consider this excerpt from a speech, for example, by France’s president Francois Hollande: “We must differentiate between refugees and migrants — migrants
who are coming for other reasons such as escaping poverty in their countries cannot be welcome under this regime” (qtd. in Garfield, 2015).

An observer of this debate might wonder what all the fuss is about. Does it really matter what we call these people who need our help? Isn’t this linguistic sideshow distracting us from the crisis at hand? Why waste effort considering (or re-considering) the crisis — and our response — through the words we use? Al-Jazeera English online editor Barry Malone took up those questions, after announcing in late August that the news organization would be describing the events occurring in the Mediterranean exclusively as a “refugee crisis,” arguing that “migrant” had evolved beyond its dictionary definition into a “blunt pejorative” (Malone, 2015):

It already feels like we are putting a value on the word. Migrant deaths are not worth as much to the media as the deaths of others — which means that their lives are not. Drowning disasters drop further and further down news bulletins. We rarely talk about the dead as individuals anymore. They are numbers. When we in the media do this, when we apply reductive terminology to people, we help to create an environment in which a British foreign minister can refer to “marauding migrants” and in which hate speech and thinly veiled racism can fester. We become the enablers of governments who have political reasons for not calling those drowning in the Mediterranean what the majority of them are: refugees.

In other words, by failing to consider the implications of the term “migrant” — and its connotations about those people — the news media were (knowingly or unknowingly) making a statement. Using one word or the other is a political act; it names the motivations of those crossing into Europe, and suggests a particular reaction.
Governments are obligated to come to the aid of refugees; they are free to round up, turn away or deport migrants — and are more likely to have the political support to do so.

I point to this case study to illustrate in stark relief the incredible power of language — indeed, in this case, the power of a single word. Language is not neutral, static or disconnected from powerful institutions or the goings-on of daily life (Fairclough, 2007; Fowler, 2007). Rather, it is wrapped up in social dynamics, in power relations, in social control, in hegemony (Fairclough, 2007). Communicative power abuse (van Dijk, 2008), to be sure, is not the only way domination and inequality are acted on/out, perpetuated, and reproduced. Violence against oppressed peoples — daily acts of hegemonic aggression — don’t require words to make their point heard. However, discourse is absolutely part of the equation: It can feed into or be fed by oppressive — and abusive — processes. Language helps us make sense of the world, helps us understand ourselves and others, and solidifies/supports power relationships, and therefore plays an incredibly significant role in formulating social phenomena, including domination, oppression and inequality (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As van Dijk (2008) writes, in Discourse and Power, “Much of the definition of the (il)legitimacy of text and talk is framed in terms of the negative mental consequences of discursive domination — disinformation, manipulation, stereotypes and prejudices, lack of knowledge and indoctrination — and how these may mean or lead to social inequality.”

In this chapter, I further explore the relationship of language (and/or discourse) to power and knowledge, consider the unique attributes of media discourse, elucidate my own methodological approach to this study, and demonstrate how critical discourse analysis offers valuable and unique sites for examining reportage and for
creating/offering sites from which to unpack and problematize discriminatory representations, question assumptions, and unearth/re-discover linguistic manipulations. Finally in this chapter, I discuss the earliest result of my analysis: The dearth of reportage on poverty (and poor encounters) in education. As part of this discussion, I weave in questions of “news value” and objectivity — and also explore the potential of a feminist pedagogy that seeks to re-cover, un-cover or simply cover non-privileged voices.

**Justification of the project**

As discussed previously, my focus in this study is concerned with the revealing/uncovering of powerful and hegemonic structures that have been disappeared. In so doing, I strive to point to the myriad, “complex and subtle ways in which taken-for-granted social assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, perpetuated, negotiated and challenged” (Lazar, 2005, p. 3). With my analysis, I seek to illustrate how representations of the poor in stories on education ultimately other them, marginalizing and stigmatizing poorness while failing to contest discourses of poverty — or implicate it as something that is socially constructed. I’m considering discourses of the poor at the intersection with education in order to uncover and problematize what we know about poor parents and poor learners (see Chapter 4), and about education policy (see Chapter 5). On a final note, I am focusing on news media discourse because of its significant, authoritative reach in society, and its social, political and educational role in all of our lives. As Caldas-Coulthard (2003) puts in well when she writes, “By being exposed to news, people make connections and try to understand and explain how events reported in the media relate to the whole” (p. 273).
What’s in a Name?

In *Words of Welfare*, Schram (1995) writes about the “politics of euphemisms” — the process of renaming for political correctness, or for the comfort that whitewashed (scrubbed clean) language brings. He describes a social work conference he attended, during which a state legislator addressed the group to suggest that the well-accepted *children at risk* be dropped — as pejorative — in favor of a politically correct euphemism, like *children under stress*. Considerable discussion ensued about the importance of categorizing clients with terms that neither patronized nor marginalized them. However, no one “mentioned the reifying effects of all categorization, or how antiseptic language only exacerbates the problem by projecting young people in need onto one or another dehumanizing dimension of therapeutic discourse,” Schram (1995, p. 21) writes. “No one suggested that although isolated name changes may be a necessary part of political action, they are insufficient by themselves. No one emphasized the need for renamings that destabilize prevailing institutional practices.” In other words, renaming for peace of mind or political correctness or a show of empathy appeared to displace a politics of linguistic interrogation; correcting the *terms* (and nothing more) used in interpersonal communication appeared to replace structural inquiries or an interest in broader discursive structures. After all, renaming is the easy part — and, arguably, the part that gets the most notice. While renamings can certainly be politically important, indicating respect, empathy, greater understanding, or a reconsideration/resistance of biases, they are hardly cure-alls of discrimination and injustice. Isolated acts of renaming do not guarantee better treatment, or the breaking down of oppression. “Exclusive preoccupation with sanitizing names overlooks the fact
that names often do not matter to those who live out their lives according to the institutionalized narratives of the broader political economy,” Schram (1995, p. 22) writes. “What is named is always encoded in some publicly accessible and ascendant discourse.” And so, “the homeless” carries the same stigma as “street people,” “welfare” connotes the same notions of dependency as “on the dole” (or, for that matter, government aid), and “the poor” are considered deficient, even when dubbed “underprivileged” or “low-income.”

I offer this unpacking of sorts as a way to tease out the rich and thick complications of language and discourse, and to begin to point to the power of a critical discourse analysis in offering robust inspections of discourse as social practice. As is clear, it is not enough to consider the most narrow and literal sense of discourse — it is not enough to ponder word usage or renaming, for example, alone and for their own sakes. Social power (the relationship between groups) manifests in not only what is said (or unsaid), but who does the talking, and whose voice is heard. It exists not only in (and through) discourse, but behind it; power is implicit and (strategically) wholly or mostly masked/made invisible — in everyday social practices and interactions, across all aspects of life (van Dijk, 2008; Fairclough, 2010).

Indeed, the Foucauldian notion of power is more complex than the “old monarchical” form — something leveled upon our heads from above (Feder, 2011). Rather, power should be understood as taking multiple forms and issuing from anywhere — and everywhere. Power is not imposed but developed, “working” through cultures and customs, institutions and individuals (Feder, 2011; Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2008). In
this way, its effects are varied, not only positive and/or negative but, as Foucault puts it, “productive,” in the sense that it reshapes and retools those subject to it (Feder, 2011).

Foucault’s oft-cited composite, “power/knowledge,” builds on this notion: Spivak (1993) suggests that a fuller and more contextual translation of the term from the French — pouvoir/savoir — would be “being able to do something — only as you are able to make sense of it” (p. 34). The type of knowledge Foucault directs us to with this composite, then, has no clear origin (and no clear ownership); there is no authoritative body “from on high” that decrees what is knowledge (Feder, 2011). Rather, knowledge is perhaps best described in the passive voice; it is “recognized as true” and “known to be the case” (Feder, 2011). And it can only exist through and with dispersed power (through and with power that is dispersed) working from unknown places — coming from no single body or institution (Feder, 2011; Fairclough, 2010; Corker, 1998).

Discourse and language, then, enter the equation as central to modern social processes; to unpack institutional/organizational power is to analyze discursive practices (Fairclough, 2010). As disability theorist Mairian Corker writes, to Foucault:

[P]ower is held by those who are able to draw upon discourses which allow their knowledges to be represented in the light of “knowledges” currently prevailing in society. Knowledge is power over others because it is the means by which others are defined¹. Thus access to different discourses is critical to understanding meaning in context as well as to power, because knowledge refers to the particular construction that has the stamp of normalcy (1998, p. 226).

Feder (2011) underscores this point with an examination of (prevailing) Western understandings of sexual difference, broadly considered natural — a matter of “common

¹ Emphasis my own.
sense” and fact that nonetheless “requires enforcement” (p. 57). In her essay, “Power/knowledge,” she takes up the example of four-year-old Nathan, the subject of one of the first published psychiatric cases of “Gender Identity Disorder” in the 1970s. Nathan, writes Feder (2011), “is teased by his classmates because he enjoys playing ‘like a girl.’ … Perhaps we could say that the boy suffers the teasing of his preschool classmates because his play violates the other children’s common sense. ‘You can’t be a little girl,’ the other children tell Nathan” (p. 57).

Feder (2011) argues Nathan’s experiences exemplify Foucault’s panoptic organization, namely of the notion that while power generally appears to be focused on one individual, it is actually “distributed” up and down the social structure — so everyone is at once both an “object” and a “subject” of that power. In other words, power is not exerted as we typically conceive it be; rather, it can come from unexpected places (like your peers at preschool). And because power is productive, Nathan’s “violation” of social norms does not end there: His diagnosis, treatment and social relationships are didactic experiences not only for him, but for those around him, who will all create new knowledges and truths for Nathan — and all the other Nathans diagnosed with “Gender Identity Disorder.” Such a diagnosis is proof, they learn, of an individual defect — an illness to be cured; it is Nathan who is sick and needs psychiatric help. Of course, resistance is also part of the equation: Knowledges can be challenged; truths can be shown to be faulty facades; understandings can be unraveled. For example, rather than seeing those diagnosed with GID as “faulty,” we can see the system as intolerant, discriminatory, and oppressive and the suffering it causes distressing — and needless. As Foucault said, when we resist norms and T/truths and fact, we can “show people that they
are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes, which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed” (1988, p. 10).

**Hegemony and Ideology and “Common Sense”**

The notion of hegemony, as articulated by Gramsci, offers an important framework with which to analyze ideology, cutting across politics and power, intersecting with inequality and class and discourse (Fairclough, 1995: van Dijk, 2008). As van Dijk (2008) argues, hegemony is given “substance” by a real world or explicit — as opposed to a strictly philosophical/imaginary — analysis of how ideologies are reproduced and how people act out, on their own accord, in the interests of power (pp.14-15). Indeed, hegemony is not about wielding absolute power (absolutely), but about power exerted through alliances and social practices, through integration and knowledges, through concessions or “through ideological means, to win their consent” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 76). Hegemony works to define particular ideological and/or political agendas as normative, while it suppresses, devours or disappears others. In this way, as Hall argues (1997), ideology dictates what is “sayable” (and not sayable) or “thinkable” (and not thinkable) about a topic. It makes the rules: Governs how we talk on some things — and how/why/when we remain silent on others. As Hall (1997) elaborates, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*: “Power and knowledge find their articulation in the form of ideology and it is through ideology that knowledge linked to power assumed authority of the truth” (p. 49). Indeed, our articulated knowledges and suppositions of truth are enacted in text (and talk) through ideology (Foucault, 1972).
Importantly, however, hegemony should not be viewed as static. Rather, hegemonic processes exist in a constant and never-ending struggle (in other words, the war is never won). Power can be produced (can be productive) against ideological representations; resistance can weaken the seemingly unshakeable foundations of truth. Hegemonic processes can also gain new ground, expand and shift and change. As Fairclough (1995) notes, Gramsci saw common sense as a particularly robust site for exploring the notion of hegemonic struggle. Common sense, Gramsci argued, is composed of knowledges and truths, a “depository of past ideological” debates (Fairclough, 1995). Across societies, common sense ideologies become naturalized; they’re the way things are. However, common sense is also under uninterrupted contestation. And this conflict is not uniform or universal or even. It takes place across institutions (in families, the education system, the courts); and it looks and feels and acts differently across “different levels and domains” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 76).

A Note on Discussions of Discourse

Let’s be honest: When delivered in academic speak, all this talk of hegemonic processes and ideologies and discursive practices appear mostly unattached from (irrelevant to) daily life — from lived experience. One might rightly ask, why do these theories matter to real people (to me and to my loved ones and to my friends)? What do they have to do with poor children and parents; how do they help us illuminate encounters of the poor with the educational complex? These are valid and necessary questions. We cannot make critical analyses of discourse matter if we remain in the tower, pondering for the sake of no one. In later chapters, I’ll delve further into the implications of the discursive practices I shine a light on in my analysis (and attempt to
answer the question — as often as possible — Why should we care?). For now, I’ll note briefly that the point of examining hegemony and ideology is to illuminate the processes at work in discourse, and to underscore its importance to all of us. Discourse has real effects, has life-long effects, has life-changing effects. Discursive practices further discrimination, oppression, other-ing; they create and undergird and strengthen social injustices. Questions of ideology and hegemony are questions of discourse-in-action, how discourse colonizes, (re-)creates, or silences particular social practices (Fairclough, 1995). As van Dijk (2008) articulates, “The exercise and maintenance of social power presupposes an ideological framework. This framework, which consists of socially shared, interest-related fundamental cognitions of a group and its members, is mainly acquired, confirmed, or changed through communication and discourse” (p. 30). Discourse, then, both follows rules and teaches us rules — it tells us who belongs in what group; it tells us about that group’s social standing. It leads to/supports particular knowledges and truths about particular groups. And it delineates who/what/where/why/how is normal and abnormal — who is “us” and who is “them.”

Why Media Discourse?

The era of inflated egos — the reporter-gods — filling America’s newsrooms is disappearing quickly. Our daily dose of news no longer revolves around what “led” the newspaper that day, what headlines were splashed across the front page, what dominated the nightly newscast. A team of (in all likelihood, predominantly white, male, middle-aged and irascible) editors confined to a news building 10-12 hours a day no longer gets to decide what we should care about — and what we should know. And when we gather around the proverbial water cooler at work, we’re just as likely to talk about a big story
that *The New York Times* broke as we are a trending online listicle; on the bus or on the
subway or while we wait in line at the supermarket, we might pull out our phones to read
the local newspaper or, just as likely, to scroll our Twitter and Facebook “news” feeds.
Put simply, how we get (and consume) our news, what kind of news we get, and the
impact of that reportage has changed in the Digital Age. We’re alerted to breaking news
when it happens, and wherever we are. Crowdsourced feedback is instantaneous. And
stories can go viral without ever touching the legacy news industry.

The digital news revolution has certainly made the news media universe more
complicated — muddy and diverse and *expanded* — but, importantly, it has not
diminished the special status news discourse carries in society. News discourse continues
to be a valid and robust topic of study precisely because it remains a source — and an
authority — for knowledge(s) and for truth(s). Giving people more options for
consuming news (even giving them more options *for* news coverage) does not in itself
alter social practices, though it certainly might offer new possibilities for studying
differences in discourse across news outlets/publications (for example, considering
newspapers geared toward particular groups).

**News as Discourse**

At its most fundamental, news is a *version* of what is said, influenced by powerful
institutional actors (the government, police, corporations), agenda-setting, and social
practices/assumptions/truths. As Caldas-Coulthard (2003) notes, “news is not the event,
but the partial, ideologically framed *report* of the event.” Importantly, news in the written
press (newspapers, in particular) enjoys a prestigious position; the learned, the elite, the
wealthy are prolific print news consumers. More generally, news media of all types
(written, broadcast, online and multimedia) are consumed because people genuinely want to know what’s going on – what’s happening/happened, what’s real and factual, how they should understand their communities and the world. The inference there, of course, is that the more news literate you are, the more “knowledgeable you are about social facts” (Caldas-Coulthard, 2003, p. 274)

Notably, because of its stature in Western society, news and news discourse have frequently been the focus of academic study — and the target of critique from across philosophical, political and ideological spectra. To understand how significantly news discourse affects all our lives, just consider how often mass media touches you in a single day: As van Dijk (1995, 28) notes, “Markets, politics, policies, exploitation, and marginalization all need an ideological basis. Such ideologies require production and reproduction through public text and talk, which — in our modern times — are largely generated or mediated by the mass media” (1995, p. 28). Indeed, in Western societies, people are exposed to media language daily — minute by minute — and, conceivably, more than any other language.

News discourses — indeed, like all text and talk — should be considered “recontextualizations,” a concept worth examining briefly (Caldas-Coulthard, 2003; van Leeuwen, 1993). Put simply, recontextualization is the process of including one social practice in another; when we recontextualize, we juggle social practices and, in doing so, create new or other social practices. As Caldas-Coulthard (2003) elaborates:

Recontextualizations involve substitution, deletion or addition² of elements of a given social practice. Events and people in each new recontextualization are

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² Emphasis is author’s.
represented according to the goals, values, and priorities of that communication.

This raises questions of truth, bias and manipulation (p. 276).

Importantly, recontextualization always adds *evaluation* to the social practices it refers to (grows out of). Given that, we can see how the goal of a social practice can be different than its recontextualization. Also worth noting: In the case of media discourse, there are a relative few recontextualizers producing and presenting news to large audiences.

Finally, news reports also have an *intertextual* (between and among texts) dimension (van Dijk, 2008). News stories are based on the processing of a large number of source texts, including other news reports, press conferences, press releases, interviews, government or academic reports, scholarly studies and so on. Considering these myriad texts is a valuable (though daunting) exercise, since news agencies make judgments about what types of — and whose — source texts are credible, which source texts are heard and which ones are silenced. As van Dijk (2008, p. 112) notes, “It comes as no surprise that newspapers will generally take (white) elite source texts (e.g., of government, scholars, or the police) as being more credible and trustworthy than source texts of minority group members.”

### Methodological Framework

In *Critical Discourse Analysis*, the CDA bible, Fairclough (2014) outlines a three-pronged test\(^3\) designed to differentiate critical discourse analysis from other types of linguistic study. His test is included here, along with brief explanations of how I tackle each in my study:

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\(^3\) Fairclough (2014) purposefully describes these three points as “measures” and “characterizations,” not rules. They include room for interpretation, and for different types of analyses.
1. *CDA* “is not just an analysis of discourse (or more concretely texts), it is part of some form of system transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of social process” (2014, p. 10). While this study involves an analysis of news discourse of the poor as they encounter education, it’s *about* class-based discrimination, oppression and other-ing. I rely on postmodern theory to guide me as I consider representations, notions of truth and knowledge, and hegemonic institutions. Importantly, I also weave in key contextual details about education, including pertinent policies and laws aimed at promoting educational equity.

2. “It is not just general commentary on discourse, it includes some form of systematic analysis of texts” (2010, p. 10). I will clarify my systematic analysis later in this section. However, briefly, my analysis includes a study of macro- and micro-discourses, a study of texts from farther away and closer up. From this analysis, I generated key themes, which I unpack in Chapters 4 and 5.

3. “It is not just descriptive, it is also normative. It addresses social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of righting or mitigating them” (2014, p. 10). As discussed, my researcher intentionality is clear: I argue representations of the poor *other*, marginalize and discriminate. In my analysis, I seek to point to these experiential effects of (news) discourse, which are quotidian and ever-present.

In bringing these three characterizations into my study, I am analyzing “the text” (news stories), discursive practices — and the broader social context that affects the text *and* the
discursive practices (Fairclough, 2000), in keeping with the broad aims of critical
discourse analysis. Indeed, critical discourse analysis broadly consists of three inter-
related methodological dimensions: text analysis (descriptive analysis); processing
analysis (interpretative analysis); and social analysis (explanatory analysis) (Fairclough,
1993). As van Dijk (2003, 2008) notes, text and processing analysis (questions, for
example, about how the text is arranged and what that arrangement means) exist at the
micro-level; social analysis (For what reasons does the text indicate such meaning?)
exists at the macro-level. In other words, language use, communication and discourse
exist at the micro-level, while power, dominance and inequality belong the macro-level;
CDA is required, then, to “theoretically bridge the well-known ‘gap’ between the micro
and macro approaches” (van Dijk, 2003, p. 353).

Huckin (1997) offers a systematic, two-step approach to text analysis aimed at
connecting findings at the micro-level to dimensions at the macro-level. The first step in
textual analysis, he argues begins with understanding text genre: In news discourse, this
means analyzing aspects of the text including the publication itself (its audience, its
history), the nature of news stories (inverted pyramid structure, or putting the “most
important” news first), foregrounding and backgrounding in organization, omission (what
is left out?) and presupposition, or using language in a way to intimate to readers that
certain “constants” or “facts” should be taken for granted (Huckin, 1997). After “having
noticed” genre and framing of the text, Huckin (1997) writes, a researcher should analyze
a text sentence by sentence, word by word. Some important textual cues to look for in
this process include: agent deletions or omissions (for example, “25 people were killed in
an attack,” rather than a “A missile killed 25 people,” presuppositions at the sentence
level (for example, when a politician says, “We can’t keep raising taxes on Americans,” a
sentences that presupposes taxes had previously been raised), insinuations, connotations
and metaphors (for example, describing humans in animalistic terms, like “crawled
across fences” and “taken to holding pens.” As is clear, text analysis quickly transitions
to processing analysis; pointing out arrangements in the text, for example, almost
naturally leads to processing questions about what those arrangements mean. It is in that
interpretative mode that the links between the micro (text and processing analysis) and
the macro (social analysis) become clearer. Social analysis of meaning in media texts
help us explain/illuminate the why and the why of social practices, including how they
are constituted, changed and transformed.

Importantly, and as touched on earlier, CDA dismisses the notion of a universal
theoretical framework to address the mediation between the social and the linguistic;
instead, CDA practitioners consider theories as “tools” — which can be picked up and
put down as the researcher chooses. Indeed, Meyer (2009) describes empirical CDA
research as a “circular process” (see Figure 1) —beginning at theory and moving to
operationalization, then to discourse/text, then to interpretation, and then back to theory
(and on and on). Fairclough, a leader in the CDA community, incorporates an eclectic
collection of theories into his own analyses: He draws from Foucault’s discursive
formations, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (the socially-formed self), and Halliday’s theory
of grammatical description and systemic functional grammar. In my toolbox, I keep
postmodern (and) feminist theories about ideology, knowledge, power and truth, some of
which I have already elaborated on. These tools dovetail nicely with CDA’s own stated
aims — and its theoretical foundations/genealogy. As Jäger and Meier (2009) note, the
preoccupations around discourse theory in CDA are Foucauldian (postmodern) preoccupations. They argue, CDA based on Foucault’s discourse theory centers on the following questions (2009, p. 34):

- What is valid knowledge at a certain place and a certain time?
- How does this knowledge arise and how is it passed on?
- What functions does it have for constituting subjects?
- What consequences does it have for the overall shaping of society?

We can take “knowledge(s)” here to include all of the elements that make up/compose consciousness (Jäger & Maier, 2009), and the myriad historicized meanings people use to make sense of, interpret, and shape — what they know as — reality.

As mentioned, for this analysis I am interested in “fruitfully” (a la Lazar, 2005) combining a critical discourse analysis of newspaper reportage with my own postmodern and feminist perspectives: This study is built on the postmodern notion that the work of making sense of the world — and communicating that sense(-making) to others — is a constructed, ideological, social process (Schram, 1995). Relatedly, it assumes perspectivism from the start — or the idea that our understandings of the world are always partial, limited and biased (Schram, 1995; Fairclough, 2014; van Dijk, 2008). Illuminating the ways in which knowledge(s) and truth(s) are always incomplete — are “always produced from a particular perspective” — confounds the “rigid distinction between subjective and objective knowledge” (that’s no insignificant things when it comes to news discourse) (Nash, 1994, pp. 69-70). Importantly, the postmodern and feminist theories I include in my toolbox play well with the founding assumptions of critical discourse analysis, including that language is a form of social action.
**Conducting the analysis**

The work of doing critical discourse analysis is personal. Each study is as unique as the researcher, who decides which theories to weave into an analysis (and when and how to incorporate them), which aspects of social injustice to problematize, and which themes to spotlight. That said, as critical discourse analysis is adopted more widely in academia, practitioners have offered their own roadmaps for analyzing text and talk — and those differing approaches offer important insight into how to go about building a CDA study’s analytical framework. For this study, I turned to Jäger and Maier (2009) for methodological guidance; their work is based on Foucauldian discourse theory and they offer a straightforward, thorough, and highly malleable — read: make-it-your-own — technique for analyzing news discourse.

The first steps in the discourse analysis begin with a high-level review: Looking at all of the articles in the discourse strand (“flows of discourse that center on a common topic”), identifying sub-topics, considering which groups of people are neglected and which groups are focused on (and, broadly, in what ways) (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 46). From here, a characterization of the newspaper’s discourse position “begins to emerge” (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 54), and the researcher can develop ideas for the coming fine analysis. (For the fine analysis, “typical” or *not unusual* articles (Merriam, 2009) are chosen using purposeful or intentional sampling so “discourse fragments” (Jäger & Maier, 2009, p. 54) can be studied in detail.)

Jäger and Maier (2009) suggest a fine analysis should focus on four key aspects:

- Context, including what is the occasion of the article?
- Surface of the text, including elements such as layout and article structure.
- Rhetorical means, such as inferences and metaphors.
- Content and ideological statements, or the presupposed concepts of humanity.

As Jäger and Maier (2009, pp. 55-56) point out, “In analyzing each of these aspects, the researcher has to ask herself what this peculiarity of the article means, what it implies. For example, what does it mean that a particular image accompanies the text? What effect does this image create?” (Note: For this study’s ancillary analysis of reader comments, I similarly conducted a high-level analysis, selected typical samples, and proceeded with a fine analysis. The detailed analysis was limited given the nature of the text, and so I focused solely on “rhetorical means” and “content and ideological statements.”)

Selection of texts

As noted in Chapter 1, this study inspects reportage of the poor and their encounters with education during two five-year periods (2002 to 2006 and 2009 to 2013), which coincide the rollouts of two national education reform agendas — the No Child Left Behind law, put in motion by the Bush administration, and Race to the Top, unveiled by his Democratic successor and considered a centerpiece of the Obama administration’s education legacy.

The newspaper texts selected for this study were designed to tap into different local conversations, while at the same time putting a spotlight on national discourses on the poor and poverty. I previously offered a short synopsis of each text. For additional context, I offer a richer background here on each of the six texts I selected, including illuminative historical elements.
• **Education Week**: Like many publications geared toward industry circles, *Education Week* is hardly a household name. But to the education community it is America’s “education news site of record” — an absolute must-read for educator, principals, education reporters, policy analysts and legislators. The newspaper, produced by the not-for-profit Editorial Projects in Education, traces its origins to the “Sputnik era, when anxiety over the United States’ ability to withstand a concerted challenge to its technological pre-eminence touched off a wave of initiatives to improve the nation’s schools and colleges” (“Mission and history,” 2015). Today, *Education Week* publishes a weekly edition, and offers daily updates on its website, edweek.org. The mission of Editorial Projects in Education, which also produces books, directories and a magazine, is “raising the level of understanding and discourse on critical issues in education” (“Mission and history,” 2015).

• **The New York Times**: There is no newspaper more recognizable in America — and no newspaper more recognizable as American — than *The New York Times*. As of May 2015, the newspaper’s total average circulation (print and digital combined) was 2.2 million on weekdays and 2.6 million on Sunday (“The Times sees circulation growth,” 2015). In terms of total circulation in the United States, *The New York Times* is second only to the *Wall Street Journal*, a business-focused daily. Meanwhile, *The Times* gets more than 57 million daily unique visitors to its website, nytimes.com, making it the top individual newspaper site in the United States (New York Times, 2015). *The New York Times* was founded in 1851, and its slogan — “all the news that’s fit to print” — has donned its front page since
1897. Its coverage is largely regarded as a booming voice in the news world:

When *The Times* speaks, people listen.

- **The Washington Post**: In terms of total print circulation (average weekday: about 485,000), *The Washington Post* is dwarfed by other large U.S. dailies, including *The Los Angeles Times, The New York Post,* and *USA Today.* However, the newspaper’s proximity to the nation’s capital — and its power players — make it a leader in reportage of policy, legislative trends, and political developments. *The Post,* founded in 1857, was owned by the Graham family for 80 years (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, & Guskin, 2013). In August 2010, in the face of steadily declining circulation numbers (the paper hit its circulation peak in 1993, when the paper went 832,000 households), the paper was sold to Amazon founder and billionaire Jeff Bezos for $250 million.

- **The Honolulu Advertiser, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, and Honolulu Star-Advertiser** (the merged product of the two): I worked as a reporter for all three Honolulu dailies; I covered everything from the police beat to education to social services and enterprise reporting. As I noted earlier, I had not originally intended to include Hawai‘i’s dailies in this review, concerned I was too close to the story. After some reflection, I realized that is exactly why Honolulu’s newspapers should be in this review. After all, CDA is concerned with context, not with researcher impartiality (in fact, it rejects the notion).

I joined *The Honolulu Star-Bulletin* while I was still a senior in college, and jumped to *The Advertiser* in 2006. I was there until June 7, 2010, when the two papers merged (Advertiser owner Gannett company sold the newspaper, the
state’s largest, to the underdog *Bulletin*, owned by a Canadian firm). The combined newspaper, *The Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, included a small fraction of the 500-person *Advertiser* staff; the merger ended a 154-year run for *The Advertiser* and a 128-year run for *The Bulletin*. On its “About Us” page, *The Star-Advertiser* includes this quote from majority owner David Black: “We hope to bring together the best of the people and put out a great newspaper. It’s quite important that the paper continues to have elements from each of the dailies. We want readers to feel comfortable.” In 2013, the latest year for which data was released, *The Star-Advertiser* had a total circulation (print and digital) of 195,000 (“Top 25 U.S. Newspapers,” 2013).

- **Reader comments:** Finally, as noted previously, for the later analysis period (2009 to 2013), I included a limited inquiry of poverty discourse meant to highlight public reactions of media actions. Specifically, I examined online reader comments that correspond to (were generated around) a sample of stories from *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. It bears some mentioning here that newspapers have struggled for years to moderate online comments on their websites: Anonymous trolls delight in leaving sexist, racist, and downright mean comments with no accountability. *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* have moderation policies, and commenters are identified (though they don’t have to use their real names). This is all to say that discourse in comments sections should be considered on the rougher edges of discourse — this is not a filtered conversation, but a raw and reactive one.
Data Collection

I collected news stories\textsuperscript{4} for this study using Lexis-Nexis (\textit{Education Week, The Washington Post}, and \textit{The New York Times}) and ProQuest (\textit{Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Honolulu Advertiser}, and \textit{Honolulu Star-Advertiser}). My search terms were broad — and intentionally so — aimed at netting a diversity of stories that tackled issues affecting the poor and their encounters with the education system. The search for the 2002-2006 period yielded 742 stories; the search for the 2009-2013 period yielded 826 stories. After saving the results in a digital format, I reviewed each story to determine if it should be included in my high-level analysis.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Articles found and used in analysis (2002-2006)}
\begin{tabular}{lll}
\hline
\textbf{Newspaper} & \textbf{Original search} & \textbf{Used in analysis} \\
\hline
\textit{Education Week} & 133 & 21 \\
\textit{New York Times} & 173 & 15 \\
\textit{Washington Post} & 377 & 24 \\
\textit{Honolulu Advertiser/Honolulu Star-Advertiser} & 59 & 32 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{4} My date perimeters were Jan. 1, 2002 to Dec. 31, 2006 and Jan. 1, 2009 to Dec. 31, 2013.
Because this study is focused on news discourse around poverty and education for particular publications (texts), I withdrew from the search results: editorials and opinion articles, wire articles (Associated Press, Reuters), first-person columns, book, dining and other reviews, transcripts, stand-alone interviews, and duplicates for multiple editions (morning, afternoon, regional). I also took out articles that were not germane or illuminative to my topic of study. For example, a number of articles were in my results because they used the adjective *poor* as a synonym for substandard, under-performing or low-achieving. If these articles did not include any references to *the poor* (poverty, low-income, needy), even ever so briefly, they were removed. Finally, there were a limited number of news articles removed from the analysis because they included only a single reference to *the poor* — and only as among a group of “at-risk” students who required special attention, for example under the No Child Left Behind law (which directed schools to track the performance of students in at-risk classes separately, and face penalties if those students did not meet performance benchmarks). Articles where poor students are a quick mention in passing certain tell us something about the discourse, namely about the disappearing of the poor, but they were not useful to include in the analysis proper.

Table 2

*Articles found and used in analysis (2009-2013)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Original search</th>
<th>Used in analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Education Week</em></td>
<td>112</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>211</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once this data cleanup was complete, I was left with 92 news stories from the earlier period (2002-2006) and 91 news stories from the later period (2009-2013), across all publications (Tables 1 and 2, see Appendix A for full list of articles selected). (Worth noting: It is coincidence that the total number of stories included in the analysis for each five-year period is so similar.) These texts were included in a structural analysis, coded for key themes and sub-themes, and it is from this sampling that typical texts were selected for fine analysis. For the later period, I collected and conducted an ancillary critical discourse analysis of online reader comments left in response to three typical texts from The New York Times and three from The Washington Post. In total, I reviewed 813 comments, and selected a small sample to analyze in greater detail, and primarily sought to seek links to the themes identified in the media texts.

**Objectivity, News Values, and the “Norm Against Noticing”**

This study includes no quantitative aspects. I didn’t set out to consider the *numbers* when it came to my data collection. However, it would be a missed opportunity — and not in fitting with the overall aims of this study — to *fail to take note of* (to ignore/look away from) the paucity of news reportage on the poor as they encounter education. In upcoming chapters, I explore omission in (and across) media texts — the *leaving out* of issues in news discourse, and the implications of that silence. But *what’s*
covered is a more general consideration than how it’s covered: And when six significant U.S. media newspapers (The New York Times, The Washington Post, Education Week, The Honolulu Advertiser, The Honolulu Star-Bulletin, and The Honolulu Star-Advertiser) publish just 183 stories about or around poverty and education over a decade, we have a problem. (Keep in mind, too, that not all of these articles were solely or primarily about poverty.) To be sure, media outlets could certainly counter my critique with a question: How much reporting is enough? I don’t have the answer to that — and this study won’t provide it. However, perhaps we can agree that we aren’t where we should be. Indeed, if half of public schoolchildren are poor schoolchildren, and if education research shows poverty has considerable negative effects on learning and academic achievement, is it too much to expect more reporting on education that seeks to problematize, address or point to the daily and degrading and life-altering effects of being poor? At the very least, shouldn’t we expect more than 15 articles from 2002 to 2006, and 21 articles from 2009 to 2013 about poverty and education in The New York Times, the nation’s newspaper of record? Shouldn’t we expect to see more than the four dozen articles over a decade that were published in Education Week, a guidepost for the education community?

To be sure, this dearth of reportage on the poor and their encounters with education shouldn’t be all that surprising. Recall the discussion in Chapter 1 about poverty coverage generally in The New York Times, and its juxtaposition to stories about the goings-on of the affluent and the corporate bounce-back following the Great Recession. Recall the Pew Research Center study, noted in Chapter 2, which found that only .2 percent of stories published by 52 mainstream news outlets from 2007 and 2012 were primarily focused on issues of poverty. And also bear in mind: It isn’t that education
isn’t being covered by newspapers — the education beat remains a mainstay in newsrooms — it’s that certain issues are getting covered and others aren’t. Indeed, reporters and editors make decisions all the time about what to cover based on their notions of “news value” — a matrix that is fluid, contextual and location-dependent. To unpack the dearth of news reportage on poverty and education just a bit, I’ll consider newsworthiness and journalism objectivity using a feminist lens in the concluding remarks of this chapter, and briefly pursue the possibilities for alternatives.

Advocacy and objectivity

I pursued journalism with big plans of covering distant wars and conflict zones. My first job, though, was much closer to home, and that’s where I learned: I didn’t have to leave my community to cover important stories. Shortly after starting at the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, as a cub reporter still finishing up my college degree, I gravitated toward seeking out under-covered narratives. I wanted to write about the people who lived in the big, gaping public housing projects only ever named in print when describing the “where” of a crime; I was interested in covering a homeless population that only ever got attention when their ranks threatened business or tourism. I started covering stories about poverty, our state’s housing crisis, hunger — and my editors didn’t balk: It was a mid-sized paper in a mid-sized town and, as long as got my other stories done, they were happy enough for the copy. But then one day, I was reigned in: I had just started a night shift when my editor called me over to speak with him in the conference room. He asked me why I had decided to write a story about a group of homeless people who were raising issue with the state’s plan to open a homeless shelter in a warehouse. The group said the conditions were inhumane, and I quoted them. I saw it as a straightforward piece, done in
an afternoon for the following day. My editor didn’t see it that way. He accused me of advocacy — an insult to a reporter, I assure you — and he asked me why I wrote the piece. What he said without saying it: Why did we let these voices drive a story?

To be clear, I don’t share this story to publicly reprimand my former editor. Rather, I think this episode is indicative of patriarchal journalistic practices/mindsets/assumptions that discourage free debate, silence dissident perspectives and ignore un-privileged ways of knowing. When my editor told me I was getting too close to advocacy, he was intimating that I had violated one of American journalism’s most revered rules — that I had violated my objectivity. I argued back: I said at a time when homelessness was becoming a significant social welfare issue in Honolulu, it was appropriate to gather a diversity of voices and seek out those who might not agree with the state’s proposed plan to (literally) warehouse the homeless. By giving space to homeless voices of opposition, I believed I was also complicating a story that had been dominated by political jockeying between the city and the state, as each tried to figure out how to make the homeless problem go away. He wasn’t satisfied with the answer.

What I (wisely) didn’t tell my editor was that I was also disturbed at the notion that Honolulu’s solution to a housing crisis (and a poverty crisis and a substance abuse crisis) was to hide the homeless away in a warehouse on the waterfront. I wanted to shine a light on these homeless people, being offered a warehouse for housing, who were not going quietly. I wanted to juxtapose the lives of homeless living in Honolulu, under the shadow of luxury high-rises, to those of my readers. I wanted our residents to know that, no, the homeless weren’t grateful for a leaky roof in an industrial area situated next to a Matson container graveyard; they weren’t grateful for the chest-high cardboard cubicles
erected in the warehouse that offered a smidgeon of privacy. In reflecting on this story over the years, I have realized that my editor was right: *I was not objective* — and even if I could be objective.

Back then as now, I considered it a matter of social justice to offer up to the homeless the most powerful thing I had to give — a chance to tell their story. According to what I learned in journalism school, according to the practices lived and breathed in *Star-Bulletin’s* newsroom and the newsrooms I later worked in, that was at worst un-journalistic and, at best going against the status quo. Media critic Robert McChesney argues that the modern notion of media objectivity emerged in the late 19th century out of dubious and ill-intentioned roots, as newspaper consolidation begun to take hold and the market for varied partisan publications shrank (2003). Some newspapers advertised their “objectivity” to attract more readers. The so-called “penny presses” boomed by promising “both sides of an issue” (McGill, 2004). “Savvy publishers understood that they needed to have their journalism appear neutral and unbiased, notions entirely foreign to the journalism of the republic's first century, or their businesses would be far less profitable,” argues McChesney (2003, pp. 302-303). “To remove the controversy connected with the selection of stories, professional journalism regards anything done by official sources, e.g. government officials and prominent public figures, as the basis for legitimate news. In the overwhelmingly partisan era of journalism, newspapers would stand behind story selection as representing their values, what they thought was important.”

The implicit nature of bias at American newspapers, then, is both more dangerous and more elusive than its explicit cousin of an earlier era. Journalism's notion of
objectivity looks good and sounds good, which provides a solid screen behind which commercial/corporate interests can gain a formidable voice masked as “mainstream” thought. Because of “objectivity,” newspapers and reporters shy away from what are deemed societal “constants” — like homelessness or poverty — because they are wary of taking on the role of “newsmaker.” But even as they are paranoid about appearing un-objective when it comes to the poor, they have a clear, unmistakable bias in favor of big business and big power. The elite set the news agenda with elaborately planned public relations strategies, press conferences and “news releases” (McChesney, 2003). When welfare checks are portrayed as subsidizing the “lazy” lifestyles of the poor, huge subsidies and tax credits for the wealthy and their multi-billion-dollar corporations have largely gone unquestioned (or, at least, have not been questioned systematically). Business leaders, government officials and developers are covered constantly in an overwhelmingly positive light and are provided with countless avenues to be heard. The poor have no such resources and no such opportunities. All too often, they are buried under so much priceless positive press for the elite, whose concerns and opinions about almost everything are solicited regularly, and whose wildly profitable successes are paraded and centerpieced — as unquestionably esteem-able things — on newspaper front pages.

Of particular concern for purposes of this research project: “Objectivity” — though not always called by that name — has become an obstacle to reportage of the poor. Objectivity means reporters are not allowed to be outraged. It means they’re not supposed to take sides, even if that means remaining neutral about family and childhood poverty, homelessness and hunger. It means journalists are to be cold and unattached.
Advocacy is a cardinal sin, even while reporters purport to “afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted.” Indeed, objectivity has increasingly come to mean a (delusional) allegiance to disconnectedness and contrived worldly estrangement, tricking reporters into thinking they are stenographers.

**Newsworthy — or not**

What is news? As Caldas-Coulthard (2003) notes, “Events do not get into the news simply by happening” (p. 276). Indeed, reporters and editors use a complicated calculus (or not) to decide whether something is newsworthy. In 1965, Galtung and Ruge developed a list of conditions applicable to those decisions (qtd. in Caldas-Coulthard, 2003, p. 277):

- Frequency or the time taken by the event
- Threshold or the size of the event
- Unambiguity or the clarity of the event
- Meaningfulness or cultural proximity
- Consonance — the predictability of an event
- Unexpectedness or the rarity or unpredictability of an event
- Continuity or the running story
- Composition — mixture of different kinds of events
- Reference to elite persons
- Reference to elite nations
- Personalization
- Negativity
As Meissner (2015) writes, five decades on the Galtung and Ruge news values still hold credence as a “list of news value factors” that should be considered “cumulative and compensatory.” In other words, the more news value factors a story has, the more newsworthy it is; and a missing factor can be compensated by another one. Let’s consider how objectivity dances with the Galtung and Ruge (1965) list. First off, the list appears official — unbiased and unquestionable — and a reporter or editor using it to determine news value could argue impartiality (i.e., the use of an “objective” tool equates to an “objective” decision). Situation flipped, the same could be argued: When something isn’t covered, media outlets can point to their (prescribed) system of considering news value and argue a lack of newsworthiness. (Remember, if there’s a system, the decisions it produces must be unbiased.) Of course, this is a ridiculous notion: The very idea behind making a call on news value — on what is news — is judgment and bias. There is a decision to be made here, after all.

In “The Other as Object,” social scientists Eric Mark Kramer and Soobum Lee argue that a Nietzschean treatment of media objectivity would liken the notion to a similar search among (mainstream) political scientists to boil human and state political interactions down to precise, scientific calculations, which were — and are, in some quarters — viewed as superior and ultimately more powerful and “truth-based” than qualitative analyses (1999, p. 145). “The modern world values detachment in all epistemological projects from pure science to professional journalism,” they wrote (1999, 145). Objectivity, then, has meant reporters cannot make moral or ethical judgments.

Kramer and Lee argue:
The dream is to aspire to become the passive observer of mere mortal contortions, the ultimate voyeur whose transparency lets pass all information equally. But of course this dream of being absolutely careless is a ridiculously dystopia ideology. It is absurd because the egoism of being above valuation, of having no perspective (omniscience) betrays the most narcissistic of perspectives (1999, 145).

Therefore, the rise of “objectivity” in both journalism and social science has brilliantly served to hide the hegemonic and “coercive power” of white-corporate, neoliberal, patriarchal and hegemonic interests while pretending away (always-already vanishing) epistemic commitments (McChesney, 2003; Shapiro, 2005).

Indeed, as Shapiro writes in Methods and Nations, “The emergence of contemporary, scientifically oriented social science in the 20th century” helped to bolster the West’s so-called “nation-building” in the “Third World” (2005, x-xi). Shapiro also argues that “cognitive imperialism of a state-centric social science has been involved in attempting to universalize and render self-evident its practices of space and intelligibility” (2004, p. xi). American political scientists, then, have hidden the stance, agenda and preservation of the elite and powerful behind “scientific” graphs and “undeniable” theories. Likewise, journalists have hidden elite-preserving power behind their he said/he said variety of balance, which looks so very fair on its face. They have rationalized away outrage, leaving the “news” and news agenda tipped in the favor of the powerful. Ominously absent/invisible or objectified is the other. In political science, theorist Robert Vitalis calls this feigned — forcible, purposeful — ignorance the “norm against noticing” (2000, 332).
Reconsidering ‘News Value’ Through a Feminist Lens

As I’ve discussed, while the focus of this study is on media representations of poor families and their encounters with education(s), I have a commitment to seeking doors to praxis. For me, that praxis comes in the form of a conversation — grounded in feminism. In particular, I’m interested in not only offering a robust critique of the media’s job performance, but considering alternative possibilities for teaching young journalists, offering new ways of giving students the tools to question long-held assumptions, problematize such industry standards as objectivity, and shed light on the power of experience and the danger of dualisms. What better place to start this conversation than with news value, with the question: What is news? And with the follow-up: How does a feminist ethics of care enrich the discussion about news value, and open up new doors to communities?

Firstly, a feminist ethics of care departs from traditional (Western) ethics in key epistemological and ontological ways; most notably an ethics of care critiques traditional ethics’ emphasis on abstraction, universality and impartiality. However, it is not helpful to see these departures as absolutes — as the other end of the spectrum. Feminist ethics has not discarded traditional ethics; it has made it its own, and so has reimagined a justice- and rights-based (deontological) ethics paradigm, reprioritizing, re-placing and framing anew how we might approach ethical problems and seek social justice.

For example, traditional ethics oftentimes begins with the exercise of abstraction — the distancing from the self, and from the human consequences of judgments and actions (Grimshaw, 1986). Abstraction can be found in Rawlsian ethics, and in other traditions (utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, among them). The abstraction device in
Rawls is the veil of ignorance, which strips the individual from her social context and “reduces the (actual) plurality of moral subjects to one (abstract) subjectivity” (Walzer, 1983). Put another way, abstraction strips away personhood. Family, friends and strangers become faceless people. They have no age, no gender, no beauty; they are unrecognizable. Feminist care ethics is not devoid of abstraction; an ethics without distancing would be exhaustive, maddening and reckless. Rather, the distancing is deliberate; measured. As Grimshaw (1986) notes, feminist ethics invite reflexivity, and urge consideration of relationships and community. She makes a distinction between ethical rules, which elicit abstraction (and moral laziness), and ethical principles, which prompt an internal question and self-assessment.

Universality is also a point of contention between traditional ethics and a feminist ethics of care. Rawls, for example, considers universality as central to the work of applying fairness fairly, and in a way that promotes social justice. More precisely, Rawls argued principles should be universal in application; that they “hold for everyone in virtue of their being moral persons” (1971, p. 132). Universality is problematic to feminist theorists because of its tendency to over-stress deontological or self-interested motivations, and render invisible care, love and relationality. Blum (1980) is exasperated by the cold rationality and callousness of universality. He writes that he was not motivated to make sacrifices for his children because of some universalizable law like, “People ought to take care of their children’s physical and psychological needs.” He counters with an ethics of “direct altruism,” which considers an action morally good if it is motivated “by a regard for the good of others” (1980, p. 84). To be clear, a feminist ethics of care does not discard universality, but it re-places it — questioning its utility in
some cases, acknowledging its appropriateness in others. Universality might very well play a significant role in some decisions about news value; in others, it takes a back seat to other concerns, namely moral right-ness, goodness, and empathy.

Perhaps most importantly for this discussion, a feminist ethics of care dismisses the notion of moral impartiality, which requires us to detach ourselves from any human connections (Tong, 1993; Tong & Williams, 2014): We must be objective; we must be bias-free (we must be behind the veil of ignorance). Moral impartiality is problematical to feminist ethics on its face. Feminist theory rejects the notion of a bias-free decision-making; our ways of knowing and how we understand the world are absolutely wrapped up in who we are and how we weigh ethics. Perhaps more importantly, feminist ethics sees moral impartiality as a cold calculus that casts aside care and relationality.

All this is to say that a feminist ethics of care enriches the discussion about news value, bringing in questions of community, social justice, and suffering, questions of impartiality and special care for special populations; it has been described as a “restraining” hand, but I see it more as a guiding one. A feminist ethics of care can help newsrooms discard the notion that objectivity is possible when choosing what to write about – just as it’s impossible when choosing how to write about it. And incorporating a feminist ethics can add much-needed layers of nuance and context to conversations about which populations are under-covered or ignored, why that is, and how to fix it.
Although some many argue that how media depict class does not matter because we can each use our own experiences to balance any inaccurate portrayals that we see on television or read in newspapers or magazines, this contention assumes unrealistically that we can distinguish between the realities of the U.S. class structure as it actually exists and the fictionalized version of a perceived class reality as depicted by the mass media. — Diana Kendall, in *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America* (2011, p. 5).

The “working poor,” as they are approvingly called, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else. — Barbara Ehrenreich, in *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001, p. 221).

**Chapter Four: Poor Parents, Poor Learners**

In “Feminism in epistemology: Exclusion and objectification,” Langton (2006) problematizes the active erasure of women from institutions/bodies of knowledge — from history, economics, medicine, philosophy. When women are left out, they are unknown (deemed *unknowable*); they are *terra incognita*. And the “lazy way out” Langton writes (2006, p. 130), “is to say that the ignorance is not the fault of the ignorant subject, but of the unknown object: woman is a living enigma.” Indeed, the discourse around the *mystery of women* is one of objective resistance (we/women want to be
unknown) rather than subjective deficiency (they/men don’t want to know us); the result: women’s absence/disappearance/silencing from the objects of knowledge appears to be always already inevitable. The same warped, hegemonic processes apply to other oppressed/non-dominant groups, including the poor. “We” tell ourselves and are told: It’s understandable that poor knowledges and voices are absent from/silenced in the discourse; their absence from knowledge is inexorable because they are a mystery to “us” — because “they” won’t make themselves known (and, relatedly, because they won’t explain themselves or be more like us). They are not counted as knowers and knowledge-makers because they lack credibility, and intersubjective authority; as a result, their silence/silencing is unremarkable or goes unnoticed (Langton, 2006).

This chapter unpacks how poor parents and poor learners are other-ed in news media discourse; it explores three key themes — how the poor are rendered invisible/silenced, how they are represented as burden or deficient (violating social “values” and norms), and how they are constructed in opposition (as different) to “us.” I focus particular attention on omission, backgrounding and insinuation in the discourse, and argue such discursive practices serve to de-value poor knowledges and other poor lives. After presenting my discourse analysis, I will wrap up the chapter by briefly considering reporter neutrality as part of my thought project around journalism education.

**The Poor, Rendered Silent**

In Chapter 3, I briefly explored the overall paucity of reportage around (and about) poor lives and education. With this section, I pursue a related theme: The dearth of poor voices/lives in reporting on poor lives. The implications of a silenced and/or invisible poor in news media discourse during the periods of my analysis are especially
noteworthy; consider the significant educational moments under study: 2002 to 2006 encompassed the height of implementation of No Child Left Behind, a federal law whose main aim was educational equity for vulnerable groups (disadvantaged students, minorities, special education students, and English language learners); meanwhile, from 2009 to 2013, the Obama administration sought sweeping educational reforms tied to Race to the Top, a federal grant program whose chief goal was to close the “achievement gap” between white, middle-class students and their non-white and/or poor peers.

When the poor are absent, silenced or talked over in news media discourse on poor lives they are rendered unknowable (fundamentally different) — and unknowable. Those who cannot speak for themselves are deficient, de-abled (they are children, the elderly, the very frail); those who are spoken over/talked about are weak. Voices that have been rendered invisible belong to bodies that have been rendered politically unimportant and socially devalued.

Importantly, postmodernism’s critiques of neutrality, objectivity and unsituated perspective make clearer hegemonic work to render silent — and make more powerful critical projects to render visible. Watson (1994), for example, called the occasion of identifying “gaps in the text” — “seeing who and what has been rendered invisible and unheard by privileged frames of reference” (p. 18) — an opportunity (an invitation) for non-privileged voices to speak, transform and continue the discourse. In other words, by identifying who is omitted from the text (any why), we render their absence strange, noticeable — and unacceptable.
The Poor as Absent

First-person poor voices were in short supply across the typical texts — and across publications — included in this analysis. Poor parents were an especially, glaringly absent group, given the role of parents in children’s lives. Typically in American society, (middle-class) parents are seen as children’s sole/primary caregivers, their mentors and protectors; they are the source of all that is warm and safe in childhood, and play a strong role in who they want their children to be (by weighing in on what they should learn). Disappearing poor parents from stories about education for their children is denying them their parental status. In their stead, educators (teachers/principals), advocates/nonprofit players, and the government dominate the discourse, which serves to further distance poor parents from their roles as decision-makers and providers in their children’s lives (an other-ing act that essentially represents poor parents as parents in name only). Indeed, in the typical texts, it was official sources — sources with titles and community standing — who were the experts on poor children’s lives; they knew what was going on when children weren’t at school, and offered perspectives on how children’s home lives affected their school performance.

Consider, for example, these passages from Education Week, the weekly newspaper geared toward education insiders:

(1) Kati Haycock, the director of the Education Trust, a Washington-based research and advocacy group for disadvantaged students, said … in a place like New Orleans, with many low-income families who tend to move often, some uniformity across schools is a good idea. (‘New Orleans eyed as clean
educational slate; Major reforms urged for a district in crisis long before storm hit,” Sept. 21, 2005)

(2) One of the host parents, the Rev. Joel Sarrault of the local St. John’s Lutheran Church, said there was a “steep learning curve” for both his family members and the student they took in, Gabe, whose migrant farm worker family could not support him. “A lot of our role with Gabe was simply being parents for him, trying to teach him some responsibility and preparing for the future, and he liked the security of knowing, ‘If you say something, you’re going to be there for me.’” (“Schools still see surges in homeless students,” Nov. 6, 2013)

Neither of these stories — both of which were the cover (page one) articles for their respective editions — included any parent/guardian voices. In fact, of the ten typical Education Week articles included in my fine analysis (five selected from the earlier review period, five from the later review period), none included any direct quotes or indirect paraphrases attributed to parents. (Put another way, parents were entirely disappeared from Education Week coverage about poor children and education.)

In excerpt (1), parents are being talked about by an advocate; her title and affiliation are cues that let us know she should be trusted as knowledgeable. From her, we learn that low-income families “move often.” How might the voice of a parent problematize, enrich or broaden the notions of family transience we’re left with from this passage? For one, we might learn why “many low-income families” move more than the rest of “us,” and we might better understand the incredible hardships poor parents must overcome daily. We might also be afforded important context (contextual richness) to
determine for ourselves if “some uniformity across schools” is indeed a “good idea,” or learn how a lack of educational consistency across a region affects poor parents and kids.

Excerpt (2) similarly leaves us with assertions about poor parents and families that we are to take at face value from outsiders (the non-poor). Rev. Joel Sarrault is introduced as one of the “host parents” for a program “modeled after foreign-exchange programs for students” — families take in “unaccompanied” teens so they’re able to complete their schooling. Sarrault is presented as a conscientious, caring, middle-class parent — willing to disrupt his life and the lives of his family members for a poor teenager. He makes clear that when he invited Gabe, the “student he took in,” into his home, he had to do lots of “catch-up” parenting — he had to do the job of parenting Gabe’s parents couldn’t/wouldn’t do (the article doesn’t intimate which we should be led to believe, but their absence in the text leads us to lean toward wouldn’t). Sarrault had to teach Gabe responsibility, prepare him for the future, and support him. Importantly, Gabe’s parents are never named as parents, note the construction used: “Gabe, whose migrant farm worker family could not support him.” And covertly, rather than with overt pronouncements, the reader is offered negative images of these parents who gave up their son and relied on a stranger to help raise him; after all, a “host parent” — a caring reverend — had to come along and teach Gabe responsibility and offer him support. Gabe’s parents are never given a chance to speak, they are never given credit for the support they previously provided, or any hardships they endured for their son; we don’t even hear from Gabe about them. They are actively erased; their voices don’t matter.
The Poor as Talked About

The selection of 20 typical texts from the two large national newspapers I reviewed, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, did periodically include parent/guardian voices, but never as *central* to the narrative — they were not official or authoritative, on par with (treated with the same deference and authority as) “the experts.” Consider this *New York Times* excerpt from a Nov. 9, 2010, article, which featured the headline, “Proficiency of black students is found to be lower than expected,” and was based on a report published by an advocacy group:

(3) The report shows that black boys on average fall behind from their earliest years. Black mothers have a higher infant mortality rate and black children are twice as likely as whites to live in a home where no parent has a job.

Take note of how authoritative the second sentence in the excerpt reads: There is no attribution, no qualification, just a *talking about* in which the author is completely comfortable linking together two unrelated “objective facts” (and, in doing so, making a larger point about the deficiency of black parenting). As Huckin (1997) argues, such presuppositions are difficult for a reader to question because they are taken (and presented) as unwavering fact/truth by the author. In this case, critical questions might include: Higher infant mortality than which populations — and why? (As is, readers are left to guess the causes of higher infant mortality, and since the cause—poverty and its many insidious injustices — is absent, “black mothers” become the agents.) And what is meant by “job,” does that count going to school, temporary work, collecting cans and bottles for recycling, caregiving, or taking care of the home? We can turn to Foucault and Said for further guidance on this discourse; both saw racialized
knowledge/representations of the Other as deeply implicated in power (Hall, 1997). Indeed, such (racialized and gendered) representations of difference infer an “us” and a “them,” and play into/play with familiar (comfortable) stereotypes. With this excerpt, black mothers and fathers are represented as unlike white mothers and fathers.

For particularly illuminating effect, we can contrast this treatment of poor, minority parents in the discourse with how middle-class parents are represented — as knowledgeable and authority figures in their children’s lives. In this excerpt from a Feb. 15, 2002, New York Times article on budget cuts, middle-class parents drive the narrative, and are depicted as worried and concerned and frustrated, terms that connote heavy, daily involvement in their children’s lives:

(4) Since the first days of school last September, parents at Public School 87, the quintessential middle-class school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, have brought reams of paper so teachers can photocopy homework assignments. They have taken up collection to pay the salaries of classroom assistants in kindergarten and to help pay for the school librarian. That is not even counting the animal crackers, pencils and tissues that they pay for day in and day out. … At Middle School 51 in Park Slope, almost every penny in classroom expenses is going to teacher salaries, said Jeanette Lee, so the seventh-grade class of her son Patrick Flaherty, has no science textbooks and the art teachers have to raise money for materials. At the Neighborhood School in the East Village, the math teacher of Lily Sacharow, a sixth grader, has only one textbook, which she copied for her students, said Lily’s mother, Barbara.
Note what’s happening here: Middle-class parents are repeatedly *named* and quoted in this piece; their contributions are *specifically* and painstakingly pointed to — and portrayed as going above and beyond what’s expected. Their anger and concern is treated with deference, and elevated as legitimate (the article did focus on these parents, after all). Poor families (parents and the schools their children attend) make their way into this story as an after-thought — as not having it so bad because they’ve always had it bad (they’re used to it!), and as being part of the reason why “quintessential” middle-class schools are being “cut to the bone.”

Unlike “middle-class schools,” the writer notes, schools in low-income neighborhoods can weather budget cuts better because they have the “cushion of city, state and federal antipoverty and remedial money to fall back on.” The piece continues: “But even in schools with poorer populations, the cuts wiped out many small innovative programs intended to give failing black and Hispanic children an academic edge and a chance at success, like Saturday mathematics classes and after-school reading programs.” In a story that focuses on parent voices, poor parents are actively erased in this selection; unlike the middle-class parents who contribute to their children’s educations to *ensure success*, poor “failing black and Hispanic children” must be offered “innovative programs” (by the government/taxpayers) to get an edge and a “chance at success.”

As Huckin (1997) argues, omission in discourse can take two forms. At the textual level, omission is a *leaving out*. This type of omission is “often the most potent aspect of textualization, because if a writer does not mention something, it often does not enter the reader’s mind and thus is not subjected to his or her scrutiny.” Omission, however, can also emerge in an analysis of sentence structure, as in the omission of
agents, those doing the acting on. In that way, poor parents were omitted from this selection in two ways: because of their absence in the text and because their work as “agents” was stripped from them. Poor parents were relegated to the shadows; backgrounded in their children’s lives. In their place, “innovative programs” stepped in to give their kids “a chance.”

A similar other-ing representation, in which poor parents were talked about/constructed as failing on the job, is exemplified in a October 17, 2013, Washington Post article, “Poor children become majority in the South, West.” No parent voices were included in the piece. The only allusion to parents — any parents — was with this excerpt, which paints poor parents (“home”) as uncaring and uninvolved:

(5) In a large swath of the country, classrooms are filling with children who begin kindergarten already behind their more privileged peers, who lack the support at home to succeed and who are more than likely to drop out of school or never attend college.

Consider what’s being said without being said here: In a sentence, all the myriad dimensions of modern poverty — all the policies, laws, and societal factors that cause poverty, reinforce poverty, expand poverty, and prevent families from getting out of poverty — are disappeared in favor of a lack of support in poor homes. Poor parents are blamed for things out of their control — when poor kids struggle, they’ve only got their parents to blame. And a reader might also infer the opposite of the Other: That middle-class kids succeed because their parents do provide support at home. When the discourse is made strange in this way, we can see more clearly it’s denigrating and oppressive effects. By talking about poor parents rather than talking to poor parents, news media
discourse can reproduce negative representations of the poor in their encounters with education; poor parents aren’t able to rebut the allegations made against them, or add nuance and complexity to broad, generalizing statements.

The talked about parents discourse was also found in the Honolulu newspapers reviewed for this study, as seen in this excerpt from *The Honolulu Star-Advertiser*’s March 25, 2013, article, “Chains of poverty shackle more keiki,” which described a newly-released report about childhood poverty in the islands:

(6) The report stressed the need to assist parents, as well, saying that “early childhood strategies alone will not successfully reduce disparities among children; we must assist their parents.”

The excerpt is particularly interesting for the questions it asks about parents (and kids) living in poverty, but fails to answer. The reader is left wondering how we might “assist” poor parents, and how those efforts might go hand-in-hand with work to improve education. Of course, no one thinks to ask poor parents about the matter. Imagine the same being said for an issue affecting middle-class parents — such a story without middle-class voices would appear incomplete. In other words, we expect middle-class parents to (be given a chance to) weigh in on issues that affect middle-class kids; the same expectation isn’t afforded to poor parents. (Of course, the article goes farther than others, by at least recognizing that poor parents exist.)

To be fair, the three Honolulu newspapers included in this analysis did include more poor parent voices than the articles in the national and industry-facing press; indeed, two of the 10 articles included in the fine analysis of Honolulu newspapers were based wholly on the responses of poor parents to educational policy, a laudatory
accomplishment given the dearth of poor voices in the national press. These two articles were not *un-problematic*, however, which I’ll discuss in a later section.

**The Poor as Burden**

Across the education news discourse analyzed in this study, the poor were constructed as pathologized/abnormal bodies — in their difference to our *healthy selves*, they were a deficient and burdensome Other. They were the takers, the *needy*; they violated normative notions (social “values”) of family, schooling and opportunity — they were the subjects of our clinical/prescriptive gaze, gearing up to fix the poor.

We can understand these representations in context by recalling the hegemonic discourse around “poverty culture” — stereotypes of the poor as lazy, selfish, unmotivated. Schram (1995) explores these discursive practices, writing that economic/policy considerations (the decline in real wages, a lack of educational opportunity, and so on) have been backgrounded in discussions about the causes of poverty in favor of a focus on:

[C]ultural arguments suggesting that the flight of the black middle class, the absence of fathers as role models, the loss of moral standards, the overall deterioration of culture, and the ready availability of welfare. … Symptoms become causes; coping practices become a ‘culture of poverty’ and justifications arise for not directly confronting how an emerging postindustrial economy disadvantages the poor in general and poor minorities in particular (p. 120).

The discourse around poverty also typically alludes to a “deterioration of the family”/family values; the feminization of poverty is a particularly salient notion here. Indeed, as Schram (1995) notes, in welfare discourse mother-only families are portrayed
as “undeserving” because it is less likely they’ll reach self-sufficiency (the stated goal of welfare in our society), and because they’re seen as at fault for their situations.

As Levitas (1998) argues, it’s vital that we implicate “culture of poverty” discourse in shifting our collective attention away from the structural causes of poverty (the political decision to allow poverty to exist) to “moral” and “cultural” character conclusions about the poor themselves. In doing so, we begin to see how our constructions of poor-ness as “cultural” deficiency de-value and other those living in poverty, rendering as inferior their contributions as parents, workers and citizens.

“When Home Life Disintegrates”

Dependency in poverty discourse is a common theme; it connotes at best an inability to make it, a failure to embrace the “American dream” and “make something of yourself.” At worst, it embodies the stereotypical notion of the poor as lazy, un-knowledgable, unmotivated; as “criminal, sinful, producing too many children, greedy for social support” (Oyen, 2002, p. 2). The poor are on “welfare,” they need “public assistance,” they benefit from “poor relief” programs; and rather than being seen positively, these social safety net efforts are considered obscene crutches — or as generous and abundant gifts. A Honolulu Star-Bulletin story about a new preschool program aimed at helping kids living in poverty (“Preschools launched for needy kids,” January 15, 2002), for example, breathlessly declared: “Needy toddlers would get a chance at a preschool education that their parents cannot afford.”

Representations of poor parents in news discourse analyzed for this study also demonstrated a reinforcement of the stereotype of adults living in poverty as less than, burdensome and (at least partly) to blame for their stock in life. Consider this example: In
2003, amid a rise in homelessness nationally, *The New York Times* wrote a front-page story, headlined “School is haven when children have no home.” The piece began with the story of Mariah Miller, a first-grader who was homeless and living in a shelter:

(7) WICHITA, Kan. — The public school system helps Mariah Miller, a first-grade pupil at Park Elementary here, survive homelessness.

(8) Mariah lives with her parents and little brother at a Salvation Army shelter in downtown Wichita. This fall, a school social worker outfitted her with the school’s red and blue uniform, a notebook, pencils, glue and other supplies, and recently gave her a new winter coat. A school volunteer tutors her after classes end.

Excerpts (7) and (8) — the first two paragraphs in the article — revolve around a young girl’s school stepping in to ensure she has educational necessities (which most middle-class children would take for granted). Note how Mariah’s parents are backgrounded in these paragraphs — we do not even know them by name — while the role of her school in helping her “survive” homelessness is foregrounded. Backgrounding and foregrounding are powerful tools in discourse; in reportage, they typically indicate levels of importance (Huckin, 1997). Readers are given more important details first, less important details later, creating a *focus* (a lens) through which to view an issue. In this article, the unnamed parents are portrayed as burdensome/bad — unable to provide for their daughter: It is her school helping her survive, outfitting her with school supplies and a coat, tutoring her after class; by omitting any contributions from her parents (failing even to name them), the insinuation is clear — their contributions aren’t worth noting.
These notions are reinforced by a standalone quote from Sue Steele, homeless student program coordinator for Wichita: “Schools are often the only safe haven these students have when home life disintegrates.” We are left to infer what “home life” means, and what disintegration entails. (Note the absent agent here: who/what did the disintegrating? There’s no clarification provided.) The A1 Times article continues with its inspection of family homelessness — plowing through nearly 1,000 words — before we meet up with Mariah again, in the final three paragraphs of the piece:

(9) Ms. Steele (the school’s homeless liaison) visited Mariah’s parents. Because Mr. Miller is disabled, Mariah’s mother, Althea, was the sole breadwinner, earning $13.52 an hour at a Cessna plant here until her layoff in February, Ms. Miller said. Unemployment benefits ran out in May, forcing the Millers out of their rented home, in with relatives for a time, and finally into a shelter. Ms. Miller has found a job as a security guard, making $8.25 an hour, but the family owes car payments and back rent, so although she would like to spend more on her children, there is little hope of that anytime soon.

(10) Homelessness seems to be taking its toll on Mariah, said her teacher, Debbie Mendoza. Mariah often arrives at school seeming a bit dazed, partly because she has difficulty sleeping at the shelter, and she falls asleep at her desk. She completes most of her homework but often forgets to turn it in. Still, the Salvation Army and her school have protected Mariah from much of the harshness of homelessness suffered by adults.
(11) As Mariah walked out of the shelter on her way to a free breakfast at Park Elementary early one morning, she waved across the street to a dozen men. Broke and homeless, they huddled against a bitter wind off the Kansas prairie.

Some key discursive elements to take note of: We finally learn more about Mariah’s parents, but her father — who is disabled — is never named. He is a quick mention, and quickly becomes an after-thought. Indeed, consider the construction of the sentence where he’s introduced and speedily put away: “Because Mr. Miller is disabled, Mariah’s mother … was the sole breadwinner.” The inference here is clear — Mr. Miller should be the breadwinner (or at least should be a breadwinner), but he is not up to the job because of an unnamed disability. His work at home or any other familial contributions are erased; he is not a wage-earner, so he is a burden (to his family and to society). Mariah’s mother had to step in for the family, and look how that turned out. Importantly, we never hear directly from Mariah’s parents — there are no direct or paraphrased quotes. Instead, the reporter speaks on their behalf, describing their situation as a series of unfortunate events, rather than the result of economic and policy decisions.

In keeping with the notion of burdensome parents (requiring a caring government/public response), the presupposition in the final sentence of excerpt (9) is that Ms. Miller should, indeed, be spending more on her children, but will have to rely on others to do so for the foreseeable future. And that bad parent theme is continued in excerpt (10), where Mariah’s teacher remarks on her “dazed” appearance, and the reporter makes clear who is to thank for Mariah’s continued protection — the shelter where she’s living and her school. The inference here is clear: Her parents have failed — have contributed nothing of value — and others had to step in. Insinuated here, too, are
dominant discourses of the deserving poor: Mariah is a member of the deserving poor; she is juxtaposed against the stereotypical image of hobo — homeless men — in the final paragraph who, “broke and homeless … huddled against a bitter wind.”

**Poor Parents as Bad Parents**

Representations of poor parents as bad/deficient/other-ed parents were especially stark in discussions around school transfers (oftentimes called “school choice”): In particular, the No Child Left Behind law included a provision that allowed students attending schools rated poorly to transfer to better-rated schools. Reportage introducing this provision and its rollout depicted a potential free-for-all; there was open fear voiced by policymakers and school districts about *those kids* transferring to *our schools*. One *Honolulu Advertiser* story on the issue (“Transfers from failing schools start in October,” July 15, 2002) included this passage:

(12) Board member Donna Ikeda … said that moving poor-performing students to higher-achieving schools could bring down that school’s performance, since resources will have to be reallocated to accommodate the new students. “What you’re doing in effect, is not raising standards, but everyone down to the same level,” Ikeda said.

Ikeda’s quote ended the article, and was left to stand unquestioned. Certainly, however, the message is clear: Poor kids will dilute the education more affluent kids get. It’s important to consider that context (that thorny welcome mat!) when analyzing how poor parents were represented when they *didn’t* transfer their kids to more highly-rated schools — and in doing so, essentially, went against popular expectations that poor parents would
absolutely want to move their kids to (“our”) higher-rated schools, even if they wouldn’t be warmly received if they did.

Interestingly, both *The Honolulu Advertiser* and *The Honolulu Star-Bulletin* focused on the same poorly-rated school, Kalihi Kai Elementary, whose campus serves a low-income Honolulu neighborhood, in stories on why parents weren’t taking advantage of transfer options. The *Honolulu Advertiser* story, which appeared on July 27, 2002, was headlined “Kalihi-Kai parents say they will support the school despite a new law.” The headline for the *Star-Bulletin* (December 28, 2003) piece: “Isle parents stick with underachieving schools.” The insinuation in both of these headlines is a blind (ignorant/uninformed) support; an *in spite of* support that appears misguided, and against children’s best interests (even though, interestingly, the *Advertiser* ran an article on July 15, 2002, quoting the Parent Teacher Student Association as saying parents shouldn’t transfer their children, and instead work to help improve their child’s school).

While the headline and lead of the *Advertiser* article portrays parents as making a deliberate (and assumed *bad*) choice — against moving their kids to a “better” school — the third paragraph indicates that few parents the reporter talked to “were aware of the law.” Then, about half-way into the story, the reporter points out that the population Kalihi-Kai serves is not only poor — “about 74 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches” — they’re also the minority Other — “seventy percent are of Filipino ancestry.” One could certainly ask: What does Filipino ancestry have to do with anything? We are obviously supposed to infer *something* from the statement, though the inference itself is never made transparent. How does the ancestry of a school’s children help us understand the issue of school transfer policy? Indeed, what does “Filipino
ancestry” even mean? Are they newly-arrived families; do many students speak English as a second language? In not clarifying, the reporter paints the parents she’s spoken to in difference-ing terms, and then leaves it unsaid what that difference might mean — and whether that difference might begin to explain parents’ lack of interest in transferring their children to higher-rated schools.

To be sure, the reasons parents give in the article for wanting to keep their children at Kalihi-Kai are familiar to any parent: it’s the neighborhood school, and parents wanted their kids to be able to walk to class; their children are comfortable and familiar with the school; changing schools would be a disruption that could affect their learning. These familiar explanations, however, are colored differently in the discourse, painting these parents as bad parents for not wanting to move their children to a more highly-rated school. For example, consider these excerpts:

(13) Distance is everything for Rolly Madayat, who can walk his 6-year-old son to school in four minutes.
(14) “We live close,” he said. “We cannot go someplace else.”
(15) The sentiment was echoed by several other parents, who said they would not be interested in moving their children.
(16) “It’s close to my house. It’s very convenient,” said Lourdes Whiting.
(17) Lilibeth Domingo fretted that as a single mother she would have a difficult time getting her children to any other school. In any case, she said she is pleased with the progress that her children have made since moving to Hawai‘i from the Philippines last year.
Notice how the reporter focused on the notion of *convenience*: The parents are represented as lazy (and uninformed), rather than as caring and sensible, for wanting to keep their children at the neighborhood school. “Distance is everything,” the article reads, for the father of a 6-year-old who can walk to school. The statement serves to diminish an important factor for a father — the ability to walk to school with a child, something all parents would find of value — down to a selfish issue. The reporter also doesn’t explore related issues of transportation: What’s the nearest school with a higher rating? How would a parent take a child there and still get to work on time? In doing so, the complex issue of school choice — and where a parent enrolls a child — is boiled down to simplified terms that represent poor parents as *not like us*. Similarly, excerpt (17) forwards the representation of the *ignorant bad parent*, the parent who doesn’t know better. Note how Lilibeth is identified as a “single mother,” an identifier rife with inferences (no other parents in the article are identified as married or otherwise). Lilibeth is represented as harried, uninformed, and *fretting* the idea of transferring her children to another school, something she wouldn’t be interested in anyway.

When *The Honolulu Star-Bulletin* spoke to parents at Kalihi-Kai Elementary, on why parents weren’t transferring their kids to higher-rated schools, similar themes emerged. Parents were said to be keeping their children in their neighborhood schools because it’s “inconvenient” to move them, or because they “flatly reject” the notion that their children’s schools aren’t performing well. Consider these excerpts:

(18) Emma Wallace, a single parent whose son Taylor attends Kalihi-Kai School, said moving him to a different school would be too much hassle since she doesn’t have a car — and she wouldn’t want to, anyway.
“The teacher he has is really good. I wouldn’t transfer him in the first place,” she said before corralling the rambunctious third-grader in the school yard.

“Second, it’s more convenient here. I don’t drive. I catch the bus.”

Note that the topicalization of excerpt (18) — its key idea — is that Wallace couldn’t be bothered to move her child to a better-rated school: it’s “too much hassle.” Foregrounding this idea brings into question Wallace’s parenting — does she really value education if she can’t be bothered to endure a longer commute? Her lack of a car is portrayed as a relatively small barrier — a hassle — to overcome in moving her child to another school; but the reporter never describes what Wallace’s public transport commute would look like if she were to transfer her child. Notably, Wallace’s quote does not appear to jive with the reporter’s paraphrase: Wallace first remarks on her child’s teacher and her belief that her son is getting a quality education at the school. Her secondary comment touches on the difficulty that would be involved in transferring her son given her transportation constraints.

Other articles included in the fine analysis for this review also touched on school transfers and other NCLB provisions designed to help students at the poorly-rated schools, and several portrayed students as agents — the ones doing the seeking, the choosing, the declining. Parents were almost completely absent from a New York Times article headlined, “Few students seek free tutoring or transfers from failing schools” (April 6, 2006). Instead, it was students (as in the headline) portrayed as initiating action (exerting power) on their own behalf. Consider these two excerpts from the piece:

The department, in a wide-ranging assessment of student achievement under President Bush’s signature education law, No Child Left Behind, found that
only 17 percent of eligible students signed up for free tutoring in the last school year. And of the four million students who could have transferred out of struggling schools, only 38,000 — fewer that 1 percent — did.

(21) The No Child Left Behind law requires consistently failing schools that serve mostly poor children to offer their students a choice if they want it a new school or tutoring for private companies other groups, paid for with federal money.

The headline clearly positions students who attend poorly-rated schools as the central actors in their education, while omitting their parents and painting the actions of education systems as passive; students are deemed responsible for “seeking,” which requires not only a doing, but a knowledge that something needs to (or does not need to) be done. Similarly, excerpt (20) portrays students (and not their parents) as the main decision-makers when it comes to their education — they are signing up (or not) for free tutoring, and deciding whether to transfer to more highly-rated schools. Portraying students as agents accomplishes two things: It erases parents, demoting them to an invisible/unimportant status in their children’s lives; and it takes heat off schools systems (and society). These kids were given a chance — “a choice if they want it,” as in excerpt (21) — to get more help or to go to a better school, after all, and they didn’t take it.

It’s “Us” Versus “Them”

Discursive representations of the poor as in sharp contrast to us or over-taxing/taking “our” resources are common in text and talk around poverty. Such representations serve as discursive exclusions — discourses of difference — that create opportunities for social distance between those living in poverty and those who are not.
Consider, for example, how welfare, food stamps and other government assistance are popularly understood in the United States: Rather than seeing government-funded aid as a valuable social safety net for all — a public good — we worry that it promotes their dependency on us (Schram, 1995). The “us versus them” discourse around the poor and education was found throughout the news discourse analyzed for this study; some examples were inferred, especially those that intimated poor parents and kids were burdening “our” system, an implied middle-class education complex, were among a small number of groups “bringing down” test scores for schools or “failing” to show proficiency, and that poor kids were getting more than what they “deserve.”

A New York Times article that exemplified the “us versus them” texts, “In Scarsdale, wary reactions to state financing report” (April 4, 2004), profiled a “quintessentially privileged” district concerned about “stirrings out of Albany … that recommended improving chronically poor-performing schools by spending billions of additional dollars on New York’s most impoverished districts.” The article reproduced/deployed what van Dijk (2008) calls “positive self-representation” — a denial of discrimination with an “I’m not biased, but” construction. The article is written from a non-poor perspective — the concern is that more money going to under-funded schools that serve the poor will impact the privileged community profiled in the piece. The central character of the article, Dr. Michael V. McGill, Scarsdale’s schools superintendent, is paraphrased in this excerpt:

(22) Dr. McGill seemed to express the conflicting feelings of many of the people involved in Scarsdale’s schools. He said he thought the proposed new aid for poor school districts was not just necessary, but long overdue. He also said
that he was afraid that a mandate to come up with new billions for education
could further increase budgetary pressures in Scarsdale, I turn making it more
difficult for the school system to continue to ask the community for the money
it needs to maintain its current high standards.

McGill’s statements, which essentially amount to “we’d love to help, but we need to
consider our own problems,” are left to stand unquestioned — aren’t considered so
different from the norm as to warrant further context or rebuttal. In fact, the article
includes no perspectives from those schools that are chronically under-funded; it also
doesn’t include voices of proponents seeking more funding for those schools. By framing
a resources debate this way, under-funded schools that serve poor kids (in poor
neighborhoods) are represented as taking from wealthier schools (making “our” lives
harder), rather than getting their fair share/what’s due them.

**Poor (Poor) Kids**

Several of the articles included in this review were about poor children without
being about poor children; this discursive disappearing act led to texts that focused not on
children’s lives, resilience and hardships, but on the effects of poor kids on
schools/communities (lower test scores, higher costs for programs), and on other kids
(“diluted” teaching, slow progress). Consider this example:

(23) The scores also indicate high-poverty schools have trouble mastering
reading and math skills at the same time. Schools tend to do well in one or the
other, but not both. (*Honolulu Advertiser*, “High-poverty schools battle odds,
history,” October 4, 2002).
Note the anthropomorphizing here: schools — not children — are described as learning (or, rather, as *not* learning). This discursive distancing from the object — from kids — desensitizes us to the issue: Kids are struggling at these schools.

To be sure, the most common context for poor children to be *brought up* in the news discourse was as the group or as one of the groups of students (along with minorities, special education students and English language learners) who failed to meet proficiency standards on reading and math assessments. By reducing groups of poor children to mere mentions of “difference,” these news reports served to paint kids living as poverty as *the problem* — as barriers to schools being rated more highly.

Particularly notable: Even reportage mostly or entirely about increases in childhood poverty focused on negative “effects” of poor kids, rather than on poverty and poverty policy (or what’s *causing* poverty). For example, a Southern Education Foundation report that concluded poor children had become the majority in schools in the American South generated a *New York Times* piece that zeroed in on what growing poverty childhood poverty rates *meant* for schools and states. *The Times* wrote:

(24) The South, desperate for a well-educated work force that can attract economic development, will face an enormous challenge in tackling on such a broad scale the lower achievement rates among poor and minority students, who score lower than average on tests and drop out more frequently than whites. (“Minorities and the Poor Predominate in the South’s Public Schools, January 7, 2010).

Take note of how the very future of the South is at stake here — all resting on the shoulders of poor and minority students who “score lower than average.” What is not
implicated here or in the rest of the article: the systems that create and reproduce poverty, or the systems that allow substandard schools (which, surely, have something to do with how kids perform on standardized assessments) to suffice in poor neighborhoods.

Interestingly, in 2013, The Washington Post wrote about a similar report, which concluded the majority of public school students in the American South and West came from low-income families (“Poor children become majority in the South, West’’). The text is notable for its word choice and metaphors, which evoked imagery of a spreading and unstoppable disease: “Children from low-income families dominated classrooms,” “Southern states have seen rising numbers of poor students, “the trend spread west in 2011,” and “schools must adapt to the new low-income majorities.”

The Hawai‘i context

Said argued all representations have voices erupting from the historical and the modern. We must be prepared to pick apart representations; to understand not only what they are saying, but what they are not saying — what is unsaid just below the text (1994). Scripts and representations, then, are at once about meaning-making and re-employing or deploying pre-fabricated/ready-made discourse. The so-called “welfare queen,” for example, is not hard to find in articles about welfare. She has taken on a slew of permutations — children from various relationships, unemployed, former drug addict. In the continental United States, she would likely be African-American or Hispanic/Latino. In Hawai‘i, she is more likely to be Pacific Islander.

Indeed, in Hawai‘i, the poor become Pacific: Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander women are associated with “native” hyper-fecundity; men with displaced/castrated warrior-ness. In these representations, there is both a forced ignorance of Hawaiian
history — the overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom, the genocide and dispossession of native Hawaiians by white business tycoons (that similarly took place elsewhere in the Pacific) — and a warped nod to bygone eras.

The failure to cite (or at least point to) the complicated structures of the Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander governments/civil societies — and racist, hegemonic processes that created and further their poverty — renders these racial groups always to blame for their poor-ness. (Poorness is expected of these groups, too). It has also helped silence critics of “welfare reform,” providing neo-liberal and corporate-minded discourses on social service programs with a dominant voice.

Indeed, across typical texts found in the Hawaii publications, there was little effort to offer contextual cues that at least complicate notions of Pacific Islanders as always poor or rooted in a culture of poverty. Interestingly, there were also suppositions in the text that intimated the Pacific poor-as-strange, especially around educational decisions. Poor parents, many of them whose ethnicity was overtly named, made educational decisions, including keeping their children in low-performing schools, “despite the fact that” test scores were below expectations or because it “would be too much hassle.”

Avery and Peffley discuss the potential consequences of the media’s tendency to over-cover minority groups (depending on region) in stories on the poor (2000). They argue the over-representation of minorities in stories on poverty perpetuates their otherness, and solidifies representations of brown faces as lazy and lesser. Relatedly, Bullock, Wyche and Williams point out single mothers are often depicted as “immoral and
neglectful, responsible for their own poverty as well as the breakdown of the nuclear family” (2001, p. 235).

Creating space for poor knowledges

Gene Demby, the lead blogger for NPR’s Code Switch team, a group of journalists charged with covering the “frontiers of race, ethnicity and culture,” had just about had enough. He was ready to resign, he thought. Tap out. Give in. For months, throughout 2015, he’d been covering the deaths of black, young, mostly men and boys — people he identified with, who he saw as so much like himself, his friends, his neighbors, his relatives — killed by police in cities across the nation. And he was burning out.

For once, the stories — and their fallout — seemed to be getting the play they deserved in national publications. For once, people were paying attention. But the coverage was taking a toll on him — and on other black reporters. “I’ve come uncomfortably close to handing in my resignation, asking to cover anything but this,” Demby wrote, in NPR Code Switch blog post. Part of that fatigue was linked to grief — to seeing such strife and anger and mourning in neighborhoods that felt so familiar; and part of that fatigue was relational — in seeing people just like you and your loved ones suffering, of “dealing with the double vision” (Demby, 2015). Demby struggled with what was expected of him: He was a black reporter being asked to simultaneously wear and shed his blackness. And he wasn’t the only one who was conflicted. After interviewing other black journalists, Demby (2015) wrote, “Many of us are puzzling out what it means to be black reporters reporting on black death in an industry that’s traditionally operated like this: Some people tell the tough stories (white, upper middle class, mostly male), and other people have tough stories happen to them.”
Demby’s blog post, “How black reporters report on black death,” was widely read, shared and talked about when it was published online in August 2015; in a subsequent segment on NPR’s Morning Edition, host Steve Inskeep asked the reporter whether his race and personal proximity to the stories he was covering conflicted with the notion of reportorial objectivity: “Are you able, in your mind, to meet whatever your standard of objectivity and fairness is when you’re covering this story?” Demby replied:

I think the idea of objectivity is separate from the idea of truthfulness or fairness — right? — because I think objectivity is often sort of characterized as not having a point of view. And I don't think that's necessarily truthful though, right? I mean, the idea that black journalists are bringing a different set of skepticisms, a different set of assumptions, a different set of experiences into the reporting of policing is an important part of the story of policing. I mean, if we're talking about the people who are being policed in this country, they tend to be people of color. A lot of our conversations about newsroom objectivity and editorial objectivity start from the position that whiteness is neutral, that white people do not have racialized experiences and that white people do not bring a set of racialized assumptions into situations. And so we’re having these conversations in which I think probably more than ever the voices of people of color are — or at least the perspectives of the people of color are — sort of framing much of the conversation. And I think that's part of getting to truthfulness.

Demby’s point about assumed neutrality is important to consider: What are the implications of whiteness as neutral on reportage, and on representations of people of color? Given the purposes of this study, we might instead ask here: What are the
implications of *middle-classness as neutral* in reporting? And relatedly, how do we go about creating space for poor voices to enter the discourse; to be re-presented in affirming and positive ways. How do we begin to see poverty — and not the poor — as the problem? In previous chapters, I’ve touched on the journalistic notion of objectivity, including around decisions about “what news is.” To continue my critical project to seek praxis by *thinking through* how a feminist pedagogy and ethic might offer possibilities for re-imagining journalism education and practice, I’ll use this space to consider *experience* in a reporting context. This discussion builds on the results of my analysis, and jumps off from the reportorial discussion of “normal” as “neutral.”

As I’ve argued, the allegiance to “fairness” née objectivity in U.S. journalism schools creates spaces and places where experience (including poor knowledges) is considered *lesser*, unworthy or unimportant. Feminist pedagogy offers a salient response, and a feminist journalism pedagogy would seek to weave experience into the classroom in order to deconstruct “fixed truths,” including around oppressed peoples, contextualize and bridge theory and practice, build stronger relationships between teacher and student and *build on* the power of personal narrative in teaching and learning.

To be sure, introducing experience into the college classroom is far from easy: For one, a professor must get over – and must assist her students in getting over – the notion that experience “doesn’t belong” in academia; secondly, a professor must guide discussions so that the “authority of experience” does not silence critical debate (Boler, 1999). This “getting over” phase could, arguably, be more difficult in journalism than in other fields; J-schools are *practical* places, where students are being *taught to learn a profession*. There has long been a pushback in J-schools to the introduction of theory,
much less critical theory. On top of that are the identities J-schools have formed for themselves: J-schools advertise as places where students are given the tools with which to “seek out truth.” Experience is not Truth, the argument might go, and so it has no place in J-school. A potential solution, Boler (1999) writes, can be found in using experience as an ideological window into theory, which can be argued and critiqued. This approach fits well with the feminist pursuit of doing away with dualisms, and of rejecting the experience/emotion vs. intellectual rigor/theory paradigm.

Relatedly, it’s important to consider how emotion might be brought into the journalism classroom — and, for that matter, into journalism practice — how a professor might assist her students in building emotional literacies — and justify such a pursuit to her students and to her superiors. Boler (1999) writes eloquently on the emotional investment required for the creation of community, and a journalism classroom would be no exception. As Boler makes clear, it is incredibly difficult to approach the global and the historical in classrooms, to address repetitive trauma, to move people not just to empathize but to active empathy, to a place where they are inspired, moved, engaged, propelled to seek out opportunities for social justice-making. Such a pursuit would be even more difficult in an emotion-less space.

In this way, feminist journalism pedagogy must also embrace the notion of feminist instruction as a “pedagogy of discomfort.” As Walker writes, “[F]eminist education – the feminist classroom – as hooks says, is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we are together as teachers and students” (2009, pp. 179-180). Indeed, feminist critiques of always existing knowledges are grounded in a larger project to end
traumatic silencing of de-privileged/oppressed voices and to deconstruct the false barrier between theory and practice (praxis). A feminist journalism pedagogy must seek to incorporate these goals together with efforts to value experience and investigations into “how we know what we know.” Thayer-Bacon (2003) was pursuing a Deweyan epistemology when she wrote about modern pragmatists as “qualified relativists” who maintain that all inquiry is rooted in culturally-bound philosophical assumptions. No one, Thayer-Bacon argues, is free of those bonds; no one is objective; no one can philosophize from nowhere. However, “we can compensate for our cultural embeddedness by opening our horizons and including others in our conversations” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 419).

We can begin to consider who we are as writers and as journalists; as scholars and citizens and students. We can acknowledge, embrace and, sometimes, keep at bay our own experience, in order not to be blinded by it.
Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. And overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. While poverty persists, there is no true freedom. — Nelson Mandela (speech as reprinted by BBC News), in a 2005 speech in London’s Trafalgar Square.

The struggle of classifications is a fundamental division of class struggle. The power of imposing a vision of divisions, that is, the power of making visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is the political power par excellence: it is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society. — Pierre Bourdieu, in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (1990).

**Chapter Five: Poverty, Education and Policy**

On a rainy, winter night in 1894, in the middle of a worsening economic depression and as the country was gripped by fears of the “tramp menace” — growing numbers of the poor filling cities — author Stephen Crane dressed in “an aged and tattered suit … to eat as the wanderer may eat and sleep as the homeless sleep” (Shocket, 1998; Crane, 1984, p. 538). Crane’s experiences in New York’s Bowery, where he figuratively and literally shed his identity to become someone else, provided the basis for his *New York Press* sketch, “An Experiment in Misery,” in which he urged readers to reconsider their assumptions about the poor as worthless and lazy and ne’er-do-wells — as hobos and bums. As a snippet of dialogue in Crane’s piece reads, “You can tell
nothing of it unless you are in that condition yourself. … It is idle to speculate about it from (a) distance” (qtd. in Shocket, 1998, p. 109).

Now, to be sure, we shouldn’t/needn’t discard our wariness of Crane’s fictionalized account of a middle-class young man’s incognito journey into the world of the impoverished; there is a certainly a danger, as with much undercover reporting or “viewing,” for Crane to aestheticize/fetishize poverty, to turn accounts of the poor into sordid tales that frighten or disgust, and to essentialize/boil down “the poor” into a flat composite. But importantly, and as Shocket argues, Crane is not seeking to demonstrate “how the other half lives” in his narrative, but how, as Crane writes, the “misery” of poverty shapes perception. Consider Crane’s closing passage, in which the class lines between his protagonist, the middle-class impersonator, and the other-ed poor are now unrecognizable: “In the background a multitude of buildings, of pitiless hues and sternly high, were to him emblematic of a nation forcing its regal head into the clouds, throwing no downward glances; in the sublimity of its aspirations ignoring the wretches who may flounder at its feet. … He confessed himself an outcast” (1984, p. 548).

Shocket (1998) dubs Crane’s “Misery” (and similar works, from the likes of Nellie Bly and Annie Laurie) a “class-transvestite narrative,” a term meant to embody storytelling that offers both a physical and an epistemological closing of the gap between the poor and the middle-class. Class-transvestite narratives involve an important act/acting of the body — a dressing up (or down) — to “pass” as someone living in poverty; but they are distinguished from prurient “disguised” adventures into the strange lives of others. Rather, these narratives explicitly seek to resist dominant discourse around/about the spectacle (sideshow) of the Other; importantly, class-transvestite
storytellers consider their appearance a tool for better understanding a popularly misunderstood group (they can better understand how the other is treated, further narrowing the distance between them and us). As Shocket (1998) writes, “Underneath the clothing and sumptuary habits of the economic ‘Other,’ according to the class transvestite, lies an essential sameness, a common humanity that requires only recognition for an inevitable amalgamation. The class transvestite’s journey ‘down’ ultimately serves to echo and circumvent other journeys ‘up,’ reducing mobility to a mere play of cultural signs” (1998, p. 111).

I point to Shocket’s work, and to his notion of the “class-transvestite narrative” because of its power to pin the problem of poverty on poverty, not on the poor — and to hold such “class transvestite narratives” in contrast with modern news discourse on poverty. In Chapter 4, I explored news discourse around poor parents and poor learners, seeking to demonstrate how they are other-ed by being rendered invisible/silenced, represented as burden or deficient, and constructed in opposition to “us.” I continue my analysis of news discourse in this chapter, but focus largely on policy discourse instead of people. I also include an ancillary analysis of online comments left in reaction to stories about the poor and their encounters with education, and wrap up the chapter with a journalistic side-trip, asking: Who gets to speak about poverty policy in the media?

When Poverty Isn’t What Plagues the Poor

As Schram (1995) elucidates — and as was discussed earlier — poverty discourse in the United States is rarely about poverty per se. Rather, it is about self-worth (worthiness) and deserving-ness, about dependency and self-sufficiency, about free markets and capitalism. (This is especially apparent when you consider that many
Americans see welfare “dependency” as a bigger problem than U.S. poverty rates.) When unpacking poverty policy discourse in news discourse, it is helpful to first investigate the behaviors/characteristics of public policies themselves, which (unavoidably) employ narrative, rhetoric, metaphor and other discursive practices to suggest implied understandings of the problems they purport to address (Stone, 1988).

In other words, policies do not offer conceptions of society’s problems; rarely is there consensus about the existence, much less the definition of a problem. Instead, policy solutions — proposed, set in motion, or otherwise — serve as the foundation for discussions; discussions that define problems in particular ways in order to support particular policy approaches. Indeed, in policy discourse (and news discourse of policy discourse), we are presented not with a problem’s definition(s), but with a selected problem — or with a strategic re-presenting of a policy problem (Stone 1988, Schram, 1995; Shapiro, 1987). In this way, it is illuminative (if, somewhat tongue in cheek) to re-frame policies as “problem creators” rather than as “problem solvers”— each policy engenders a specific understanding of a problem in order to forward a specific policy approach.

As noted, policies are embedded with discursive practices — symbols, metaphors — that not only narrate a particular understanding of a problem, but preclude other possible understandings of the problem. Put another way, discursive practices reinforce the notion that one possible/dominant understanding of a problem is the only way to understand a problem — the depiction becomes natural and “real,” rather than interpretation and conjecture. Importantly, Stone (1988) notes, quantitative inquiry and cold, hard numbers in public policy are particularly powerful metaphors in problem
formation/creation — they are considered the antithesis of symbols (they are seen as unequivocal and precise and objective; one, seemingly, cannot refute them) even as they require fundamental decisions about what will count for something, what is worth attention, and what behaviors and actions and people are similar or different. Indeed, as Schram (1995) maintains, it in this way that we see ostensibly different things (for example, different jobs) treated as the same type of thing, while ostensibly similar things (for example, “housework” and work outside the home) are treated as very different things (and placed on a hierarchy of importance).

Discursive dimensions of poverty policy can be similarly unpacked: Consider how our particular understandings of welfare, dependency and work reinforce the popularly-held problem(s) of poverty — who is poor and why they’re poor (and what needs to happen for them to become not-poor). These understandings are in part based on a numerical semiotics: For example, as Schram (1995) notes, when we focus on employment rates and earnings, without considering (among other things) labor market conditions and broader policies that affect women and families, the numbers we produce — and count as irrefutable — “reinforce the implied understanding that poverty is an individual problem best solved when the welfare-dependent person is counted as failing to take what employment the job market has to offer or whatever man the marriage market has made available” (p. 126).

A richer understanding of how specific problems are absent or identified/represented in public policy discourse is vital to a discussion of poverty policy and education. Most notable for this study, across the typical texts analyzed, news discourse on policies affecting the poor and their encounters with education failed to
implicate *poverty as the problem*, or they framed/positioned poverty as natural — as a constant or an assumed state that had more to do with individual deficiencies (see Chapter 4) than with political decisions. Parents, learners, neighborhoods and their schools were *simply poor*; put another way, they were an unproblematic poor — an always poor — and their state of poverty, rather than being the source of problems, *caused* the problems. Indeed, poverty was portrayed as something of a birthright disadvantage for children, not a constructed failure of society, but a characteristic to be considered similar to “disabled” or “English language learner.”

Indeed, across the typical texts, news discourse largely failed to complicate, humanize or problematize poverty — to point to *poverty as the problem*, consider the countless (and quotidian) barriers families living in poverty face, or consider the political failures that sustain or worsen those barriers. In fact, even stories about the growing numbers of poor children across particular regions or across the country framed poverty as something immutable (*a la* it is what it is) rather than as a political actor/agent, a *cause*; as a result, the problem was the poor — and the poor were the problem (for example, stories focused on what more poor kids and more poor families would mean for schools and states). Consider this *Education Week* excerpt:

(1) Despite rapid gains in some Southern states in recent years, the region lags behind the rest of the country on most measures of education success, the report says. The growth in the numbers of minority and low-income students — groups that both score below average on standardized tests and drop out more often than white and more-affluent students — threatens to widen the gap between the South and the rest of the nation, according to the study.
(“Poor, minority pupils are now a majority in south; The region’s demographic shift foreshadows a national trend, report says,” January 20, 2010)

Notice how poverty itself is backgrounded (made feckless, inconsequential) in the selection; the public policy problem — the issue worthy of our gaze — is an increase in minority and low-income students who “threaten” to bring down test scores in the South. A New York Times story on the same demographic trend framed poverty similarly, as illustrated in the following excerpt. Indeed, “poorness” was represented as something that was behind the scenes, something that was constant and immutable:

(2) The shift was fueled not by white flight from public schools, which spiked during desegregation but has not had much effect on school demographics since the early 1980s. Rather, an influx of Latinos and other ethnic groups, the return of blacks to the South and higher birth rates among black and Latino families have contributed to the change. (“Minorities and the poor predominate in the South’s public schools,” Jan. 7, 2010.)

Take note of what is unsaid here: Minorities are assumed to be poor; and that poverty is natural/uncomplicated. To be sure, the symbols of white flight, African-Americans returning to the South, and higher birth rates are presented as the problem. Put another way, the problem is not poverty per se, but those living and working in poverty, getting pregnant in poverty, and sending their kids off to school in poverty.

Importantly, throughout the discourse the inclusion of racial and ethnic identifies was quietly informational — symbolic. It told the reader who the poor kids are; and intimates who the middle-class kids (and their parents) are. One such discourse was
found in a *Washington Post* front-page article on a school integration debate, “In N.C., a new battle on school integration.” The story, from January 12, 2011, chronicled moves by Republican politicians to do away with school economic integration policies. The piece has racial fault lines, not surprisingly, because (as the author notes) minority children tend to be poorer, and so an economic integration policy has the effect of creating racially- and economically-diverse schools. There are three parents quoted in the piece:

One in support of efforts to do away with integration, and two against these moves:

(5) “I want these kids to be culturally diverse,” said Clarence McClain, who is African American and the guardian of a niece and nephew who are doing well in county schools.

(6) “Basically, all the problems have roots in the diversity policy,” said Kathleen Brennan, who formed a parent group to challenge the system.

(7) “I don’t want to go back to racially isolated schools,” said Shila Nordone, who is biracial and has two children in county schools.

Recall that North Carolina’s school integration policy is based on economic background, and then take note of how race alone is brought into the equation when the two parents/guardians — Excerpts (4) and (6) — who are against abolishing the integration policy are identified. By contrast, the lone parent quoted in support of doing away with the policy, Excerpt (5), is neither identified by race or economic status. The reader is to infer that because Kathleen Brennan is not identified as a minority and/or poor that she must be white and middle-class (recall that middle-classness and whiteness are not only neutral in discourse but the default perspective). Importantly, Brennan is identified as an authority figure, an organizer of a parent group — and with that authority
comes clear motive. She is taking a stand for her kids, and for the school system. The parents/guardian identified by their races are clearly against the policy, but we are left to guess at their motivations.

Poverty was also back-grounded/not implicated in discourse around student achievement. Poverty wasn’t the problem, but “struggling” and “low-performing” poor students were; the implication: schools that served poor kids were “failing,” “at-risk” and “the worst” because of their poor students and the neighborhoods they served, not because of inadequate policies around poverty, school and government resources and government obligations. Consider this excerpt, from a Washington Post article on the achievement of poor kids compared to their wealthier peers:

(7) The gulf in academic achievement separating public schools in the District’s poorest neighborhoods from those in its most affluent has narrowed slightly in some instances but remains vast, an analysis of 2011 test score data show. Children in Ward 7 and Ward 8 schools trailed their Ward 3 peers in reading and math pass rates by huge margins — from 41 to 56 percentage points — on this year’s D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System exams.

Interestingly, while the article is chiefly about the achievement gap between poor children and their affluent peers, poverty (and poverty policy) is never considered in the piece. The effect of that omission is an other-ing of poor children: Poor kids don’t struggle on tests because of poverty, they struggle on tests because they’re somehow different.
Considering Educational Equity: A Contextual Backgrounder

There is a long history in the United States of portraying education (and educational opportunity) as the key to our nation’s egalitarian system — as the ticket to prosperity not only for all individuals, regardless of background or means, but for the nation. As history books would have it, Thomas Jefferson believed greater access to education (granted, at the time, for the chosen few) was central to the creation of a merit-based “natural aristocracy.” And educational reformer and politician Horace Mann famously described education as the “great equalizer.” “As citizens of a liberal and meritocratic state, Americans have always perceived public education as a ladder which the ablest children of all backgrounds can climb toward occupational and economic success,” Fritzberg (2003) writes. That fundamental belief — that every child deserves a fair chance at opportunity — certainly spurred educational reforms during the civil rights movement, and was the uniting impetus behind landmark legislation requiring educational access for disabled children and kids who are homeless.

The underlying aim of these reforms (by and large) was equity, an issue I explore briefly in this section, which, while seemingly a tangent of sorts, allows a more intertextual and contextual discussion of educational equity in news discourse. Equitable access is, of course, a noble goal — even as it remains elusive. The civil rights movement certainly spurred considerable changes in public schools, and Brown v. Board of Education, the focus of a long, bitter campaign by the NAACP to address segregation in schools, resulted in one of our nation’s most important Supreme Court decisions. On the other hand, of course, we might right ask: How much did Brown v. Board of Education truly accomplish? Balkin argues that the case fits nicely into the popular myth that “sees
America as continually striving for democratic ideals from its founding and eventually realizing democracy through its historical development” (2001, p. 5). Indeed it does. Pushing against this narrative is difficult (in some people’s eyes, un-American); and suggesting that Brown v. Board of Education was actually deleterious to African-Americans is similarly provocative.

But it is also resistant to a powerful American notion that oversimplifies our problems and ignores historical injustices, allowing by default those injustices to continue. Sunstein (2004) points to Derrick Bell’s arguments as proof that not everyone believes Brown v. Board of Education has improved the educational opportunities — and, by extension, the lives — of African-American children. “If Brown was destined to fail, as Bell believes, what would he have had the Supreme Court do in 1954? Surprisingly, he argues that the Court should have reaffirmed Plessy and permitted segregation to continue – but should have insisted that separate must be genuinely equal” (2004, p. 105). Bell is making a salient — though difficult to swallow — point here. That is, why set Brown v. Board of Education on an untouchable pedestal when it has not resulted in the equity the Supreme Court promised?

Similar arguments could be made for other equity-based mandates and policies, which might have opened the doors a bit wider for under-privileged students, but certainly didn’t undo historic harms, rectify modern injustices or even achieve their fundamental goal — giving students a fair shot at succeeding in school. For example, the McKinney-Vento Act was passed nearly three decades ago to address growing concerns about America’s homeless crisis and the educational opportunities of a class of students who advocates and researchers agreed required special protections. And while there is
widespread acknowledgement that McKinney-Vento has made a difference, chiefly by pushing schools to work to identify homeless students and offer them special supports, the mandate by and large has failed to result in equitable education experiences for homeless youth, or spurred greater academic achievement.

Cunningham, Harwood and Hall (2010) note that recent data suggest “schools may under-identify homeless students by a wide margin” (2010, p. 1). Resource allocation is also worth considering in relation to implementation. Hawai‘i, for example, ran afoul of McKinney-Vento mandates in 2008, when a federal judge ruled it was improperly denying homeless youth transportation to and from school (Moreno, 2008). Hawai‘i was also ordered by the courts to improve how it identifies homeless youth, track them, and ensure they are not denied access because of documentation or residency requirements.

Similarly, states have struggled to deliver on the promise of a “free, appropriate public education” for students with disabilities, mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There is little argument that the legislation has made a significant difference in the lives of children who qualify for special educational supports, and given parents recourse if the law’s minimum standards are not met. Under IDEA, all disabled children are entitled to research-based interventions, regular progress reviews and the “least restrictive environment” in which to learn. These are fundamental protections — which, arguably, we now take for granted — that have served to safeguard the rights of IDEA-identified students from a “general education” system where they might have been lost.
But the education IDEA students get today is far from equitable; among the greatest concerns: that special education students are getting a watered-down version of the curriculum, rather than getting the supports they need to reach their highest potential. Those concerns can’t be taken lightly, especially when considering the disproportionality of minorities in special education. Disproportionality persists nationally at much the same rates as it did in the 1960s (Reschly, 2003). In fact, Arizona State University’s Equity Alliance found that in most states, African-American students were twice as likely or more as white students to be classified as having an emotional or intellectual disability (Rebora, 2011).

Achieving educational equity was also a key concern of the Congress when, in 2002, lawmakers from both sides of the aisle came together to try to address gaping inadequacies in an educational system that was (and is) allowing too many kids — especially economically disadvantaged children and children of color — to fall through the cracks. The product was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which would become one of the most scorned pieces of educational legislation ever and would kick off a fervor for standardized testing that has fundamentally changed how schools operate.

NCLB was aimed at transforming America’s public school system to: 1) improve school accountability, 2) close persistent achievement gaps among “subgroups,” including minorities and low-income children, 3) give parents better information about their child’s school — and offer those in “failing” schools broader educational options, and 4) ensure that schools are using research-based instructional strategies (Byrnes, 2011; Guilfoyle, 2006). More than a decade after its passage, even strong opponents of the law (and there are many) acknowledge that NCLB succeeded in bringing needed attention to
the glaring gaps in achievement (and inequities in access) for disadvantaged youth and minorities and ensured a more equitable representation of “highly qualified” teachers in schools that serve low-income areas.

The law, though, fell woefully short in its “one-size-fits-all” execution, and by relying on standardized assessments as the cure for all the ills — including educational inequity — that plague America’s education system. Under the Obama administration, some (ridiculous) elements of NCLB have been relaxed, and states have sought waivers in order to develop their own accountability systems. But the core of the law remains, and Obama’s signature education legislation — Race to the Top — is hardly an embrace of equity and excellence. Rather, the state grant program supports more of the same. As Apple (2010) writes, “We still have corporate-style accountability procedures, the employment of divisive market mechanisms, the closing of schools, an uncritical approach to what counts as important curricular knowledge. Overall, these policies still bear some of the hallmarks of the neoliberal agenda that has pushed on schools for years.”

**Educational Equity as ‘Saving’ Poor Kids**

As is clear, educational equity — for the poor, for minorities, and for disabled youth — remains a goal unachieved. That’s a point worth making before jumping into an inspection of news discourse around educational equity. The context of educational equity in the United States also underscores its significant role in the myth of the American education system: In the United States, or so the myth goes, every child is entitled to an equitable education — to an equal education before the law.
After all, a free, appropriate education is a right, not a gift or a benefit. It’s important to keep those points in mind when considering discourse around educational equity policy in news discourse. In particular in the news discourse analyzed, educational reform and improvement efforts — programs ultimately aimed at fulfilling the promise of educational equity — were represented not as programs aimed at making good on a pledge or efforts designed to ensure children’s rights were met.

Instead, such programs were represented as supplementary, as above and beyond, as altruistic, as unique. States and the federal government were portrayed as saviors for poor communities and poor children — as rescuers; two things are assumed in such a relationship: 1) the poor need saving and, 2) in order to be saved they are ascribing to dominant social and political norms and ideologies. In several typical texts highlighting school turnaround efforts, parents were either absent or backgrounded; policymakers knew best how to save under-achieving kids. The discourse around reform efforts also included incredibly powerful imagery and metaphor: “clean educational slate” (Education Week, Nov. 21, 2005); “crucible of change” (The New York Times, April 3, 2013); “battle odds, history” (Honolulu Advertiser, Sept. 22, 2002).

Perhaps most illuminating about the discourse around education policy and educational equity was its significant focus on school choice, school vouchers and other avenues for escapism. A significant number of articles included in the broad and fine analyses for this study focused on school choice discussions, including vouchers programs and a school choice provision under NCLB.

The predominance of this conversation in the texts was telling: School choice — programs that allow a small number of poor kids (“the worthy few”) break free from
their failing schools — assumes not only a failure of community schools, but it assumes a failure of communities. Even in Hawai‘i, where school vouchers are a political non-starter, school choice dominated educational policy discourse around poor children. As mentioned in Chapter 4, there was significant fear in the Hawai‘i articles over the possibility of parents in poorer neighborhoods using school choice under an emerging NCLB provision, then later discourse showed other-ing when those parents opted not to participate in it. From a policy angle across the typical texts, however, school choice was portrayed as viable option to ensuring educational equity.

**Ancillary Analysis: Reader Comments**

As discussed in previous chapters, an ancillary interest of this study is **public reactions to media actions**. Indeed, how does media discourse around/about the poor and their encounters with education resonate with readers? Does this public discourse reflect/mirror — or deflect — news discourse, and what can be learned from this intertextual dialogue? One could certainly argue that an inspection of public comments (in online and other forums) in response to the news reports I’m inspecting is a subject worthy of a standalone study. I wouldn’t disagree, nor am I contending that my peek into public reader (online) comments as part of this study is by any means definitive, complete or exhaustive. Rather, I sought to include this qualitative tangent, so to speak, because of a commitment to context, an interest in intertextual richness, and as an argument that such public comments (that such public forums) in response to news
discourse warrant attention, reflection — and further research.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, for this brief (test the waters) analysis, I limited my examination of online reader comments to those generated around a small sample of stories (written during the 2009 to 2013 period) from *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The six articles (three from each national publication) I pulled comments from were included in the broad analysis for this study; not all were included in the fine analysis. (It’s worth noting here, too, that not all of the 2009-2013 articles included in the broad analysis had reader comments.) I gathered comments from the newspapers’ native online platforms, and conducted a pared down critical discourse analysis, focusing on rhetorical means (the way things are articulated) and content and ideological statements.

The goal of this supplementary analysis was to examine talk on texts — to consider not only *the what* that is shared, but how that what is received, and reflects existing media representations and broader stereo-scripts of the poor. Examining reader comments on social media and in online forums attached to stories is a growing area of media analysis, providing valuable insight for the researcher and the researcher’s audience. It can certainly uncover new themes, or can provide important local or regional context that might be otherwise missed by an outsider. As mentioned, such an analysis could certainly be the subject of a stand-alone future study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Number of articles whose comments were pulled</th>
<th>Used in analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>813</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key themes in comments

In my analysis of online comments left in response to articles on the poor and education, I identified three key themes: 1) poor parents as deficient parents, 2) poor children as problem children, and 3) poor families as requiring saving, rather than poverty policies needing fixed. Of course, these themes are familiar — they are similar or identical to themes that emerged in my analysis of news discourse. That shouldn’t come as a surprise, given the nature of discourse (as something that feeds and is fed upon); more interesting, in my opinion, is the frequency and dominance of these themes in particular, which are uniformly negative and paint poor parents and children as burdensome. Also noteworthy, several typical texts in my fine analysis included two or more of these discursive themes. Consider these examples:

1(a): Commenter: SW

This nation has implemented Head Start programs, has put a police liaison in many dangerous schools to curb violence, has bilingual teachers, has provided thousands of laptops for kids in poor schools, has provided free afterschool tutoring and daycare programs, and more. Apparently, none of these programs are enough in underperforming school districts. Perhaps, just perhaps, the problem lies with parents who are not involved in either parenting their children (i.e. teaching discipline and respect) or in educating them. No amount of money is going to turn an uninvolved parent into one who actively supports education. Without that, these schools are doomed to perpetual failure.

— Comment left in response to “Crucible of change in Memphis as state takes on failing schools,” The New York Times, April 3, 2013
2(b): Commenter: Realityofitis

… Failing schools are the result of poor parenting. Which (sic) leads to behavioral problems in the classroom.

— Comment left in response to “Crucible of change in Memphis as state takes on failing schools,” The New York Times, April 3, 2013

3(c): Commenter: A_G

I grew up in a poor neighborhood … (sic) but my parents were wed, and saved to make sure I went to a good Catholic School (sic). None of us at St. Pat’s were in gangs, got into fights, did drugs … (sic) we stayed on the straight and narrow, because our parents were involved. You can’t say it was because of the comment, because the community around us didn’t care. It was the Church (sic) and the parents who cared. — Comment left in response to “Focus in Chicago: Students at risk of violence,” The New York Times, Oct. 7, 2009

4(d): Commenter: dcheritic

All of the government spending will be for naught unless parents are held accountable for fostering a home environment that values learning and educational achievement. The African-American community in particular needs to support a massive public advocacy campaign to encourage, cajole, and convince black parents that they need to start reading to their children and

5(e): Commenter: Desertdiva1

These children don’t have appropriate role models to emulate. Oprah’s “it takes a village” fits in perfectly in this area. … When all you have ever seen is unemployed, uneducated, addiction prone adults it doesn’t take much to attain those pathetically lower goals. Comment left in response to “A move to lift W. Va. Schools, county out of poverty, pain,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 2011

6(f): Commenter: tnowak

don’t (sic) have a child unless you will have (sic) a 2 parent household and expect to be able to financial (sic) support your family. This (sic) will end ALL the problems in DC.

I include these online comments in whole to point to several issues that emerged, and to offer a flavor for the tone and tenor of online comments. To put it mildly, they are far from politically correct, which is not all that incredible for online commenters who are allowed to remain anonymous. What is worth pointing to is the uniformity in the types of concerns referenced, and the negative discursive representations offered of poor parents and children. Notably, several of the commenters referenced “government spending” or government programs that benefit poor children as the reason for their open and public disdain for the poor as parents; their overt statements or covert intimations
clearly asked the question, “If we’re spending all this money, why aren’t you doing your part?”

The “bad parent” theme was particularly apparent throughout the texts, and can be seen in several of the comments reproduced in this section. In the discourse, bad parents weren’t doing their part, were to blame for educational failure, and for kids getting into trouble. Poor communities were also targeted as culprits in the discourse, as were poor children, who were characterized as not applying themselves, not disciplined or falling pretty to bad influences.

**Who Knows Poverty (Policy)?**

I conclude this chapter with a question, rhetorical perhaps but nonetheless worth considering given the analytical issues raised around poverty and policy and the poor: How do we know what we know about the poor? Whose knowledges about poorness are counted, and which are discounted/ignored? National studies and even this research reviews demonstrates that the poor rarely get to talk (are given opportunity to talk) about themselves; their intimate understandings of poverty and living poor isn’t considered knowledge. Indeed, the people who talk about (or for) the poor — government officials, advocates, journalists — are rarely poor.

Additionally, as Sterling (2009) notes, the poor are rarely quoted — or, for that matter, much more than one-dimensional characters or statistics in news discourse. Sterling (2009) points to one recent study, for example, that showed three major U.S. news networks aired fewer than 60 stories — in total — about the poor or poverty from September 2004 to October 2006; that’s despite 2005 U.S. Census estimates that showed there were more than 37 million Americans living below the federal poverty line. “Most
of the stories rarely showed the poor, but rather relied more heavily on sources other than those living in poverty,” Sterling (2009, p. 1099) writes.

The fact that journalism’s “official sources” about poverty are rarely — if ever — poor shouldn’t be all that surprising. A host of critical theorists have pointed to the problematical nature of the journalistic “official source,” not least of whom feminists, who point out that about 85 percent of official sources quoted in news stories are white men (Cuillier, 2014).

The disappearance of the poor from poverty discourse is most assuredly a complicated issue. But surely, it is at least partially attributable to the journalistic notion of “official sources,” commonly defined as government, business or community leaders. “Official sources” are considered trustworthy, can speak for others; notably, they also have resources. They have the ability to reach out to the media with stories, to be where the media needs them to be, to explain their interpretation of the problem as truth.

I point to the concept of official sources in journalism because they speak so dominantly for and about the poor, and because they are largely responsible for constructing the truth about poverty. As Royce (2009) explains, established official sources determine the “main message” of the story; if poor people are included in a story about poverty, it as wall art. Poor people are the “color” in stories about poverty. Indeed, one recent analysis of welfare reform stories found that compared to welfare recipients and advocates, official sources were more frequently cited, more prominently cited, cited at greater length, treated with more respect, and presumed to be credible (Royce, 2009).
What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore —
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over —
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

— Langston Hughes, “Harlem” (1994)

Poverty is not an immigration problem, nor is it a single-mother problem. It is a poverty problem. — John Marsh, in Class Dismissed, (2011, p. 44).

Chapter Six: Wayfinding, Knowledge-making and Pedagogic Possibilities

I was an undergraduate at the University of Hawai‘i, with a hopelessly romanticized notion of what it meant to be a journalist, when I first met Professor Beverly Ann Deepe Keever, who would become my mentor. Keever, a widely-lauded Vietnam War correspondent (she had worked for The Christian Science Monitor, Newsweek, and other publications), taught me (by telling and by doing) about the tradition of watchdog journalism and about the importance of empathy, about remaining “conflict-free” but never assuming yourself to be free of conflict. Not all of her lessons were pretty or overt or apparent to a 19-year-old who had a lot left to learn, but they were all (always) delivered with a warm smile and no shortage of patience.
When I think about Keever, one lesson in particular comes to the fore. She didn’t write it on any blackboards or any graded paper; it was purely intimated, *alluded to* with her questions and her guidance. To put it rather simplistically, Keever taught me to ask, “So what?” In story formation, in reporting, in writing — “So what?” To be sure, the question itself might seem hostile and callous (there’s a danger of that) and it might appear similar to the query news editors throw their reporters: “Who cares?”

But “so what?” isn’t just a query about the broad importance, and the implications, and the context of a story. It is also “so … what?” — “now what?” “So what?” offers a place to pause — that is both presently-placed and forward-looking; it is back and to the future. “So what?” offers a conscious scene-setting (a cataloguing) of place and time — (where are we now?) — but it also prompts an interrogation. “So what?” asks “Why should we invest ourselves in this problem?” but also “What should/could/will we do, now that we care?”

Years after graduating, as a working journalist at a daily newspaper, I was reading Keever’s *News Zero: The New York Times and the Bomb*, and I looked for her “So what?” I wasn’t disappointed. Keever wrote about the failures of *The New York Times* (America’s newspaper of record) in chronicling the human implications — and the grave and lasting toll — of America’s atomic bomb “testing” in Micronesia, which went on for decades and stripped islanders of their homelands, permanently disrupted their way of life, and contributed to deadly diseases that still plague the population. The newspaper, she argued, trumped up the scientific, political and military importance of (and need for) atomic testing, and ignored (looked away from) the incredible human cost — what
nuclear testing meant for generations of Micronesians and their way of life, and for scores of military production workers and unsuspecting low-level servicemen.

In her final chapter, Keever took a step back and asked the big question: “So what?” If we can agree that The Times’ reporting promoted stereotypes, forwarded propaganda, and fed into a national discourse that heralded nuclear testing, what’s next? To answer that question Keever laid out eight specific recommendations for moving forward; they ranged from “establishing a news audit on critical issues” to “diversifying newsroom and management personnel” and “broadening religious and cultural perspectives” (2004). Her recommendations were based on her research and intelligence gathering, but also on her experiences as a journalist and as a journalism academic.

And so, with a hat tip to Keever, I dedicate this concluding chapter to wayfinding, to searching for possibilities for change, and to thinking through the difficulties in overcoming the problems I’ve posed; to considering the possibilities and ways forward. A quick aside: Wayfinding is a term imbued with symbolic, genealogical and deep historical meaning in Hawai‘i and across the Pacific — and so I borrow it as a metaphor with a light touch and a deep appreciation. The notion of wayfinding in the Pacific voyaging tradition is particularly powerful because the act of finding your way requires knowing where you’ve been in order to figure out where you’re going. Nainoa Thompson (n.d.), Polynesian Voyaging Society president, is known for helping to bring about a renaissance in the islands of ocean voyaging using ancient navigational practices — the stars and the sun and the waves; he describes wayfinding this way: “You cannot look up at the stars and tell where you are. You only know where you are in this kind of navigation by memorizing where you sailed from. That means constant observation.”
Philosophically, of course, constant observation is a state of discomfort; *always observing* — always remembering where you’ve been as a way of determining where you’re going — taxes the mind and leaves one weary and spent. But conscious wayfinding is also affirming and reflective and satisfying: conscious wayfinding can lead to consciousness raising, and to alternative possibilities — educative moments — that promote social justice. Feminist philosophers recognize this; as mentioned in Chapter 4, feminist pedagogy is a “pedagogy of discomfort.” As Boler writes:

> The path of understanding, if it is not to “simplify,” must be to tread gently. Yet if one believes in alternatives to the reductive binaries of good and evil, “purity and corruption,” one is challenged to invite the other, with compassion and fortitude, to learn to see things differently, no matter how perilous the course involved (1999, p. 175).

It is not particularly easy or all that intuitive for us to embrace and *learn from* our quotidian, uncomfortable states of “moral distress” (Callan, 1997) — our “cluster of emotions that may attend our response to words or actions of others or our own that we see as morally repellent” (1997, p. 200). It is easier to look away; to ignore the dissonance. But these emotional, visceral, personal and public moments are sites not only *of* discomfiture, but *for* engendering moral and ethical dialogue, for broad conversations about where we’ve been — and where we’re going.

I offer this preamble of sorts as a way to lead into my “so what?” — to make clearer my intentions and to lay the conceptual groundwork for this final chapter, which will offer my overall conclusions of this research study, possible avenues and implications for future research, and the potentialities for academic praxis in journalism.
pedagogy. On the third point more specifically, I seek to bring together the feminist critiques of journalistic practices — sprinkled throughout this text — while imagining a new way forward: considering the deployment of feminist pedagogy in college journalism classrooms as a means to imagine new possibilities/alternative possibilities for covering poor lives and poverty. As part of this discussion, I consider how feminist ethics can build on, work with or supplant Rawlsian-based journalism ethics in ways that promote social justice and bring oppressed voices into the commons.

**Situating News Discourse, Poverty and Education**

With this study, I sought to demonstrate how U.S. news discourse (across a diversity of mainstream newspapers, and during two separate politically active periods in America’s modern history of education reform) rendered invisible and other-ed poor children and poor parents in their encounters with education, and ignored issues of poverty in questions of educational equity. Using a postmodern, feminist lens, I showed how news reporting employed various discursive techniques — at the macro and micro level — to solidify stereotypes, denigrate and further oppress poor parents and poor children, portraying them as burden or dependent/deficient and representing them in opposition to the middle-class “us” (Chapter 4). I also pointed to the glaring disappearance (the rendering invisible) of poverty discourse around reportage on reforms and policies that wholly or disproportionately affected the poor and education; its absence serves to solidify poor families and poor students themselves — rather than poverty — as the problem that needed to be fixed (Chapter 5).

Importantly, my analysis showed that representations of poor families and children in their encounters with education were fundamentally negative and that, in
discourse around policies that wholly or mostly affected the poor, poverty itself was assumed natural or un-political or immaterial; those conclusions agree with broader studies across disciplines and with varying methodologies that looked at representations of the poor in the news media. Given the body of knowledge around representations of poor in the media, the harmful ideologies and discursive practices elucidated in this critical discourse analysis should certainly come as no surprise on their own. However, this study was not about proving a hypothesis, but about making visible discursive practices that serve to other and oppress poor parents and children as they encounter the U.S. educational complex. In addition, this study was highly specific — its focus purposively held narrowly on news discourse around formal education; future research might well broaden the sites of inspection.

Clearly, though, there should be significant cause for concern when news discourse about poor families and children as they encounter education is so problematical. As noted, more than half of American children are considered poor; and schooling plays a significant role in the lives of children, to put it mildly. Education can determine future opportunities; schooling and learning fills most every day of a child’s life. Schools are also community centers, hubs for social interacting and local policymaking. To be sure, it is next to impossible to track specific implications of negative representations in news discourse. Can we attribute particular oppressive, discriminatory or other-ing text and talk and action to news discourse? I certainly am not attempting to do so in this study (that one-to-one correlation might not only be impossible but short-sighted, given that news discourse does not simply happen). However, as van Dijk (2008) notes, negative representations in news discourse can be said to have an
overall negative effect, and do contribute to public knowledge(s) — and to oppression. (They are not just words.) “There can be little doubt that of all forms of printed text, those of the mass media are most pervasive, if not most influential,” van Dijk (2008, p. 54-55) writes. “Besides the spoken and visual discourses of television, newspaper texts play a vital role in public communities.”

As noted previously, this study is an offshoot of a body of social science research into representations of the poor in news reporting. Other such offshoot research has focused on minorities, indigenous peoples, and women. This study also joins a growing body of CDA investigations of news discourse. There are myriad opportunities for expanding and adding to this study: A researcher might examine different types of media (alternative print, TV, online, radio), hone in on different regions of reportage (or, perhaps, consider only metro or rural reporting), or focus on different periods. In further research, critical discourse analysts could also concentrate on other discursive practices and/or linguistic turns in news reporting on the poor and their encounters with education, or could deploy alternative methodologies. Computer-assisted CDA is particularly popular, and could help a researcher root out qualitative and quantitative trends during the broad analysis, such as word usage and word use frequency.

This study was, to be sure, an examination of news reporting; but more specifically, it was interested in discourse. The distinction is worth noting here, when considering implications and next steps. As noted, news discourse does not simply happen in a vacuum — rather, news discourse is intertextual, it reflects and reproduces dominant and powerful ideologies (van Dijk, 2008). In previous chapters, I have discussed such concepts as newsworthiness, “official” sourcing and the pitfalls of
“objectivity.” These concepts are vital to a discussion of news discourse because they recognize journalist agency and the powerful actors, institutions and processes at work in dominant discourse. As van Dijk (2008) notes, media is at once a “mouthpiece for the elite,” an “inherent part of the societal power structure, of which they manage the symbolic dimension,” and a dizzying array of institutions whose power is dispersed and exercised and embodied by media professionals.

The question then becomes: How do journalists reproduce or challenge the ideologies they are confronted with, especially when it comes to an oppressed group? With this study as a backdrop, and given my research interests, perhaps the more specific question of concern here is: How can journalists work against negative representations of poor families and children, including in their encounters with education?

Notably, critical media theorists generally agree that journalists, in part because of their class membership and socialization, tend to reproduce the dominant ideologies of the elite (Hall, et al., 1980). While journalists and media organizations might very well push against elite ideologies in some regards, media practices are typically characterized as remaining “within bounds” (van Dijk, 2008). That is not to say that journalists are mindless drones or fawning followers or gullible neophytes, but their skepticism and criticism as a whole is likely to remain “within the boundaries of a flexible, but dominant consensus, even when there is room for occasional dissent and criticism” (van Dijk, 2008, p. 56). Put another way, the media will seldom challenge fundamental norms, values and power arrangements (van Dijk, 2008). But that is not to say such challenges are impossible or improbable, if journalists employ the right tools. Surely, we can take heart in the progress of the last half-century — discourse (and news discourse) around
oppressed groups is certainly less harmful today than it was in the past, if we are speaking purely pragmatically. At the very least, we can recognize journalist agency — the power and utility and ability of a single media voice — even as we also accept discourse is socially-constructed, of a size and scope that, even with constant vigilance, still pervade our text and talk in ways that are harmful to oppressed groups.

**An/On Education Philosophy**

Before considering the stuff (the preoccupations) of feminist journalism pedagogy, it is important to root this concluding argument in an education philosophy camp — to not only enunciate/speak to an approach clearly, but to pinpoint its fundamental concerns. After all, “feminism” is a broad, many-layered, and politically-fraught term; and while I have referred to “feminist pedagogy” rather unproblematically up until now, it’s critical to note its fundamental/foundational philosophical diversity — and that feminist pedagogic methods across academia are not always congruent. As Grumet and Stone (2013) note, “feminism is not a single project or discourse” (loc. 8761). That in itself should not be all that surprising to most academic onlookers. Over the last several decades in particular, feminism has become feminisms, new voices have focused on new approaches, and critical feminist projects have asked new questions, problematized assumptions and re-examined the key formations and discursive practices of social relationships and understandings.

What is referred to in popular discourse as “feminism” is typically liberal feminism, a central interest in gender parity programming (but little interest in problematizing gender itself) in the pursuit of equality — the essential sameness — of men and women. Donovan (1985) summarizes the central tenets of liberal feminism
(perhaps best summed up in the 1848 Seneca Falls resolution — “woman is man’s equal”), which formed the basis of feminism in the 1970s: a faith in rationality and that men and women rationalize similarly, confidence in individual conscience, a belief in education as a force for social change, individual independence, and a doctrine of natural rights. Liberal feminism assumes women want the same as men — want men’s lives; it holds up as positive’s men’s rationality, individualism, and the ways they conduct themselves in public activity.

There is no doubt: Liberal feminism deserves credit for making the lives of (some) women better, but those strides have hardly been universal, especially among minorities and the poor, and liberal feminism itself has been criticized as a movement for white, middle-class women. Still, we have liberal feminism to thank for fundamental changes in how women are treated in society, including at school. As Grumet and Stone (2013) note, “The efforts of liberal feminism in education – providing girls with the resources extended to boys – have produced changed represented in the U.S. federal legislative, i.e., Title IX. In addition to access and rights, the feminist agenda in education, influenced by the social psychology that stressed role theory, also began to attend to the images of women and girls available in readers or textbooks” (loc. 8784).

Importantly, the diversification of images of women was not simply about parity, but about role theory, which rests on a behavioral approach to learning. The idea: If images of women are diverse, engaged in all sectors of public work and life, then women could see themselves in the doing and behaving and being of male labor. As Grumet and Stone (2013) explain, in unpacking the implications of liberal feminism on education, role theory (or modeling) makes key assumptions about how people learn — and go
about their lives. They argue: “What role theory relies on is a very limited set of rewards to explain how people come to select their work and place in society; it does not encompass the complexity of human motivation rooted in reaction and negation as well as its proactive desires” (loc. 8799).

Thus, while liberal feminism certainly gave women and girls more choices and supported their access to a greater range of professions and rights, it failed to problematize status quo patriarchal processes and institutions or consider the conditions and limitations women find in that “man’s world.” Instead, it continued to rely on the sex/gender system, which places women in a subordinate position seeking to be equal and embraced the dualism of gender.

Problematizing the notion of duality is central to the poststructuralist agenda -- and key to the feminist journalism pedagogy I see as transformative. Duality pervades the modern human experience, often unfettered. In education, duality tells us to see what happens at school as curriculum and learning, and what happens elsewhere as removed from the educative experience — from the experience(s) relevant to education. Overcoming the destructive and limiting nature of duality — blowing duality out of the water — helps us to gain a new vision of our surroundings.

Deconstructive feminist pedagogy, which grew out of a tradition of poststructuralists, focuses on assumed differences, on what is natural, on unknowns, the unconscious, and on language. Butler (1990) is a modern testament to the power of such a philosophical underpinning: Her unpacking of gender categories are central to not only modern thought, but to modern movements around gender, sexuality and transgender identity. Perhaps most fundamentally, this arm of educational philosophy questions —
makes known and strange — the societal categories that are rendered invisible by powerful structures. Education becomes something that is experiential and whole-bodied and *daily*: “Curriculum is everyday life. It is a gathering of social practices, of relationships, events, coming and goings, inscriptions and erasures. … The new synthesis in curriculum requires incorporating the denied values of reproduction that have been split off from its self-understanding. And, because learning requires both intentionality and reflexivity, it cannot advance without understanding its own structures and lenses” (Grumet & Stone, 2013, loc. 8934. Indeed, when we begin to *see* categories, we begin to question them, including socio-economic categories, which can determine a girl’s opportunities in life from the day she is born.

In situating the education philosophy approach of this study — in questioning dualities and reimagining new possibilities for understanding and unpacking our world — I am not ignoring the tension that exists in such a project. We can, of course, think big thoughts about how such a project (seeking new possibilities for journalism pedagogy) would unfold; but such a project *unfolds* in a world of dualisms. We tend to compare things, to contrast things, to think things through by thinking about them in terms of *what we know*. That state of discomfort is not something new for feminists, but it is no less frustrating.

**The Ethics of Representations**

As Berube (1996) notes, representation is an *ethical* issue; it is central to how we understand/know — how we create — one another. Representation, in particular, is how we come to acquire knowledge about those with whom we have little contact with, and this “knowing” is particularly problematical for those living in poverty, who are
stigmatized, ostracized and other-ed in innumerable quotidian ways. Importantly, and as shown in my analysis, representations of the poor in news discourse often fail to reveal the complex and unique barriers they must overcome every day; their bodies are considered problematic, their knowledge is considered inferior or not useful.

As mentioned, negative representations and harmful news discourse of the poor and other oppressed don’t merely happen. And importantly, a number of journalistic practices (deciding what is news, what “objectivity” looks like, and who is an “official source” — or not) are deployed in ways deemed unproblematic, even as they from the start favor the discourse of the elite. In a series of discourse analytical case studies, van Dijk (2008) analyzed how subordinate social groups are represented in the news and I share his findings here because they so closely mirror what I found in my own study. Van Dijk found outgroups (minorities, the poor, women and other disenfranchised populations):

1. Tend to have less access to the dominant mass media
2. Are used less as credible and routine sources
3. Are described stereotypically if not negatively, primarily as a “problem,” if not as a burden or even as a threat to our valued resources
4. Are assumed to be “deficient” or “backward” in many ways, as compared to our norms, goals, expertise, or culture and, therefore,
5. Need our altruistic help, understanding or support, assuming they adapt to our social and political norms and ideology.

If we recognize these as problems worth our fixing, then so what? How can journalists begin to recognize the valuable contributions of the poor, the unique and important
knowledges? What can journalists do to not merely give voice to the poor, but to ensure the poor as the same access to voice as the middle-class “us,” especially when it comes to the education of their children? And how can pedagogy in journalism schools reflect these critical changes?

I argue such a discussion begins with ethics. We can begin to think through where we should be going in journalism — and at journalism schools — by taking stock of where we are. That’s what I intend to do in this section, beginning with a look at Rawlsian ethics, which forms the foundation of much of modern journalism ethics, and moving to a consideration of feminist ethics, before thinking through next steps in pushing against negative discursive practices when covering the poverty and the poor in their encounters with education.

**Rawlsian Ethics**

John Rawls is one of the most important American political philosophers of the 20th century for his theory of justice as fairness, and his principles of justice to govern modern social order (Garrett, 2005; Katzner, 1980; Blocker & Smith, 1980; Wenar, 2013), and his influence on U.S. ethics — and, in particular U.S. journalism ethics — is widespread and definitive. In particular, Rawls’s notion of social justice was a vigorous and groundbreaking philosophical counter to utilitarianism, which places the maximization of “utility” — pleasure, economic well-being, lack of suffering — as its sole and universal moral principle (Wenar, 2013). Indeed, Blocker and Smith (1980) write that Rawls triggered nothing less than a philosophical renaissance when he problematized the means-end orientation of utilitarianism. Rawls did so by supporting the priority of individual rights and freedoms without making an “appeal to reason” in
matters of social contention. (Utilitarians see such appeals as inherently subjective, subject to fickle whims and unsubstantiated assumptions.)

Rather, Rawls placed individual rights in a two-part decision-making paradigm. At the heart of a just society, he argued, are two principles:

1. **The equal liberty principle**: “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (1971, p. 60).

2. **The principle of democratic equality**: “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” (1971, 83).

With these principles, Rawls is attempting to reconcile the social contract tradition (which emphasizes the rights of the individual) and egalitarian ideals (Blocker and Smith, 1980). As Buchanan (1980) writes, Rawls’s aim is to serve as a mediator in a longstanding dispute; to articulate an alternative to utilitarianism in the pursuit of social justice. His focus is on the basic structure of society, on a system that creates inequalities at birth that continue throughout life.

Critical to Rawls’s theory is the notion that social justice is, fundamentally, about fairness — and not about equality (Katzner, 1980). Rawls (1971) argues in *A Theory of Justice* that when free and rational people agree cooperatively to a social order (to the basic rules of a society), their agreement will be characterized by fairness and thus the principles they agree to will be just. Justice as fairness, then, speaks to the just arrangements of a society’s major political and social institutions, of the bodies that govern our lives — the government, the economy, the family (Wenar, 2013). Because
these institutions make up the basic structure of a society, Rawls writes, they should be considered important sites of justice; loci for daily examples of fairness, doling out the quotidian “benefits and burdens of social life” in just ways (Wenar, 2013).

It is in his consideration of the basic structures of a just society that Rawls introduces his powerful notion of the “original position,” or the conditions under which agreements around the basic rules of a society are reached (Katzner, 1980; Wenar, 2013). The original position is meant to make concrete those ideas that have heretofore played in the abstract. It prompts us to ask, as Wenar (2013) enunciates, what are the terms of cooperation that free and equal citizens would agree to under fair conditions? In other words, how do free and reasonable people go about defining fairness in principles that govern society?

Importantly, Rawls argues that the work of instilling fairness in governing structures can be achieved by doing away with “the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage” (1971, p. 136). And so he introduces the “veil of ignorance,” a system that prevents arbitrary, personal facts about citizens from influencing agreements that shape the basic structure of society. Such facts might include a citizen’s race, class, gender, weight, age or sexual orientation. When (representatives)/parties are behind the veil of ignorance, Rawls (1971) writes, they are blind to their own bodies and to their worldly standing. They are ignorant of themselves.

In Rawls’s view, the veil of ignorance is absolutely pivotal to realizing the fairness-minded principles that will translate into (universal) social justice. The veil creates a social structure where fairness is our core imperative; where decision-making is
based on what is fair for all, when the all are veiled from view. As Katzner (1980) explains:

Rather than having a group of individuals with competing interests coming together to hammer out a compromise agreement which will give each of them part of what they want, the veil of ignorance, by denying all knowledge of particulars, has the effect of totally obscuring individual differences. Unable to evaluate competing principles in terms of how well they further the interests of those who find themselves in their particular circumstances, the parties in the original position are required to choose those principles which will work to their advantage regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves (1980, p. 56).

It’s worth noting here that Rawls’s veil of ignorance (or, at least its necessity) assumes the worst of people, a point the philosopher made clear. He argued that people are not inclined to act fairly (and seek fairness) naturally; rather, they have to feel/be invested in a system that they know requires particular behaviors to protect their self-interests (Rawls, 1971).

Representatives behind the veil of ignorance seek fair (and universal) principles, then, because they are just as likely to unknowingly be the peasant as they are to be the lord, and so must develop a social order that is just as just if they leave the veil to find their clothes tattered, their frame slight, and their circumstances wanting as if they leave it with a full stomach and considerable means. Rawls writes, in justifying the need for a veil of ignorance, “Acting fairly is not in general each man’s best reply to the just conduct of this associates. To ensure stability men must have a sense of justice or a
concern for those who would be disadvantaged by their defection (from the rules), preferably both” (1971, p. 435). Importantly, fairness is the goal behind the veil because a decision that pursues equality for the peasant and the lord is likely to be unequal (the peasant would find significant obstacles to equality that the lord would not experience); but a decision that is fair, Rawls argues, is inherently just.

Practically speaking, of course, the veil of ignorance is nothing but a thought experiment — fascinating in theory, impossible in practice. Even so, it contains important ontological and deontological elements, which spur us to ponder our actions and their consequences (Patching & Hirst, 2013). And because of its elegant simplicity, Rawls’s notion of justice as fairness has had significant practical applications, including in media ethics (and, relatedly, has greatly influenced journalism pedagogy). Rawls’s original position, for example, invites media professionals to consider just (fair) treatment of the subjects of news stories. It begs journalists to ask themselves, How would I feel/fare if this story was about me?

Embedded in this ethical question, there are moral judgments to be made; in considering fairness behind the metaphorical veil, a journalist must stay true to her pledge to “do no harm” and abide by the golden rule. Journalists weigh these considerations against the public good of an informed citizenry — against the social justice that can come of news stories and the social justice of news for news’ sake (in other words, news can spur justice and the existence of news — the pursuit of truth(s) — can be just in its own right). In this way, the original position doesn’t preclude aggressive, investigative reportage; being fair and just does not mean being nice or a pushover. It means setting a
standard of ethical conduct based on Rawls’s principles of equal liberty and democratic equality.

The original position also helps to create a fairness that is situational, that is context-aware. Plaissance (2013) presents the scenario, for example, of covering a large natural disaster. What would fairness look like to all citizens considering media ethics behind the veil of ignorance in this case; how might citizens envision fair (and just) treatment of the most vulnerable when they don’t know if they are to be the reporter, the victim, or among those spared? They might, Plaissance (2013) writes, insist on coverage that gives victims and families more control of news coverage (raising the question of what that control would look like), and they might ask that the greatest respect be paid to those most adversely affected.

Finally, in considering social justice and the news media, it’s worth noting here that Rawls did indirectly take up the notion of fair access to the media, supporting a public forum that is free and open to all, but that is also protected from the whims (and megaphones) of the rich and the powerful. Journalists and journalism institutions in the United States largely support this ideal; many see themselves as giving voice to the voiceless, and providing a counter-point to the words of the elite (though, of course, there is question whether these ideals are sometimes more ideological than practiced). Indeed, Rawls first principle — “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (1971, p. 60) — can be seen as a staunch defense of freedom of speech (and thus, freedom of the press). The veil of ignorance, relatedly, is a tool with which to consider how to exercise these freedoms
justly and, in doing so, create a robust media ethic (and a responsible and accountable press) with which to pursue social justice.

**Feminist Interpretations of Rawls**

There is a tendency to see Rawls’s theory of social justice and a feminist ethic of care as a dualism. That is unfortunate. After all, there is much to be gained from considering Rawls through a feminist lens (even if the product of those inspections is a more robust feminist ethics of care). In that spirit, I will briefly investigate feminist appraisals of Rawls’s work that are, on the whole, positive, and think through opportunities for bridge-making between a Rawlsian conception of social justice and a feminist ethics of care.

It should be noted first, however, that even Rawls’s feminist supporters cringe at his tendency to render women and children invisible in his works, most notably in *A Theory of Justice*. In his later works, he did address some feminist critiques, though not as fully as was hoped. In the interest of time and space, I will not venture into an examination of his later work, which in some ways supported and in some ways departed from his original views, most significantly around the basic social structure (of the family). By focusing on his *A Theory of Justice*, his opus so to speak, I am keeping with other feminist considerations of his theoretical framework.

Feminist engagement with *A Theory of Justice* dates back to 1977, with Jane English’s article “Justice Between Generations.” In it, she criticized Rawls’s attempt to address intergenerational justice by arguing that the parties in the original position should be heads of families, rather than individuals (Abbey, 2013). This is problematical for a number of reasons, she argues, not least of which because it could legitimate and
reproduce sexist principles in the original position. However, English and others also point out that Rawls’s assumptions about the family in the original position appear to make room for a sphere of love and affection, not just justice.

It is Carol Gilligan, in her 1982 book *In a Different Voice*, who is first to powerfully articulate the connections (and disconnections) between a feminist ethics of care and a Rawlsian ethic of justice, and who forwarded the notion that an ethics of care is rooted in women’s ways of being and knowing (Tong, 1993). Okin (1987, 1989) both builds on and diverts from Gilligan’s seminal text, arguing that while Rawls appears prime facie to be a member of the ethic of justice camp, seeing moral decisions as rationalist, individualist and abstract, in fact at the center of Rawls’s thinking about justice is “a voice of responsibility, care and concern for others” (1989, p. 230). She contends justice as fairness is built on a foundation of empathy and benevolence, and that the emotional intelligence required in the original position includes a capacity for empathy, imagination, considering difference, listening to others, and thinking about our fellow citizens as moral equals worthy of care and concern (Abbey, 2004; Okin, 1989).

In her 1987 essay, “Justice as Gender,” Okin notes that it is regrettable Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* avoids entirely the injustice of the gender schema. And she repeats concerns voiced by other feminists about Rawls’s belief that heads of households should serve as representatives in the original position (serving on behalf of, what would be assumed to be, a traditional family unit). Since most households are “headed” by men, she asks, what of women? What of wives (and children)? “The ‘head of family’ assumption, far from being neutral or innocent, has the effect of banishing a large sphere of human life — and a particularly large sphere of most women’s lives — from the scope
of the theory,” she writes (1987, p. 50). Okin attempts to mediate these concerns by elaborating on the consequences of a veil of ignorance that would render its representatives sexless (something Rawls did not make explicit in *A Theory of Justice*).

She also argues that to read Rawls as a feminist is to take seriously his requirement that, in her words, “the family and the gender system — as basic social institutions — are to be subject to scrutiny” (1987, p. 52).

Considering justice as fairness in a feminist paradigm, then, demands close attention to Rawls’s second principle (“the principle of democratic equality”), Okin (1987) argues, which would seem to indicate that a characteristic like sex could no longer legitimately dictate social roles, either inside or outside of the family. Rather, social structures — including the family — would be ordered based on what is considered fair in a just society. Notably, not all feminist theorists agree with Okin on this point. Munoz-Darde (1998), for example, argues the veil of ignorance itself is enough to ensure gender equality as an issue of social justice.

Perhaps the most fertile ground for an assessment of the compatibility of Rawlsian justice with an ethics of care can be found in what is required of free and reasonable/responsible citizens in the original position. As noted earlier, Okin (1989) has argued parties operating behind the veil of ignorance would not (and could not) render their sweeping moral judgments based merely on cold rationality and egoism. As humans, even behind the veil of ignorance, they would have the capacity for empathy and caring — and, Okin (1989) argues, they would be inclined to use those capacities in conceiving *what is fair*. McClain (1991) echoes this belief, enumerating the ways in
which Rawls portrays individuals as connected to, caring about and eliciting concern for one another.

It is important to make clear here that the veil of ignorance masks personal characteristics; it does not mask societal ones. And so, Schwartzman (2004) notes, those parties considering fairness behind the veil of ignorance would know broadly about systemic injustices embedded in the basic social structure; they would know, for example, about institutional inequalities based on gender, race and class. That knowledge, Okin (1989) writes, is pivotal to promoting empathy and caring in the original position. With an awareness of society’s injustices, the parties would be prompted to act out of “equal concern for others,” and would pay special attention to the least well off among us (Okin, 1989b, p. 246). Recall, Rawls characterized concern behind the veil as one driven by self-interest. Okin does not, writing:

The only coherent way in which a party in the original position can think about justice is through empathy with persons of all kinds in all the different positions in society, but especially with the least well-off in various respects. To think of a person in the original position … is to think from the point of view of everybody, of every ‘concrete other’ whom one might turn out to be (1989b, p. 248).

How, though, are we to think and act with care and empathy behind the veil? How are we to consider the lives of our fellow free citizens if we do not know ourselves?

Okin (1989b) and others argue empathy in decision-making in the pursuit of social justice need not be crudely ferretted out; it need not be forced. Rather, they argue, caring occurs naturally, as part of discussions around inequality and injustice in society (or, around discussions about what is just). As part of attempting to craft (universal)
principles based on fairness, then, those in the original position would demonstrate concern for the ways in which peoples, including women, are oppressed in the basic social structure. The parties behind the veil would care. In deciding what is fair, they would be empathetic about the varying situations they or others might find themselves in.

**Feminist Departures from Rawls**

Critiques of Rawls’s justice as fairness — and of feminist support for his work — have taken many forms. There have been concerns, for example, about how the veil of ignorance ever could succeed in stripping us of our gender when being a woman is something that extends beyond the anatomical and is not exclusive to those born female. Woman-ness is also reflected in psychological and cognitive ways (Russell, 1995). We might make similar arguments about the fundamental-ness of being of a particular race or of a particular sexual orientation. The germane question being, then: How does who you are contribute to how you think about fairness? And how do we reason (ethically) without these essential fibers of our selves? Many would argue our unique ways of knowing are integral to our conceptions of social justice.

There are also questions about whether parties emerging from the veil of ignorance would truly embrace the principles they crafted when they did not know their societal standing — when they did not know their gender or their income or their race. Schwartzman (2013) argues Rawls’s failure to deal with inequalities based on gender and race is a critical flaw. Rawls argues that distinctions based on race, sex or other non-economic differences would not be politically relevant positions — would not matter — in a well-ordered society (Schwartzman, 2013). Put another way, in a just and fair society these differences would not be of import because their existence would not result in
inequalities and injustices. Rawls does, however, posit that some class differences are justified, and that members of lower economic classes would receive the highest protections under his fairness as justice paradigm. Schwartzman (2013) writes that the problem with ignoring other distinguishing differences is it appears to suggest and/or assumes silencing discussions of sex and race ensures sexual and racial equality. She continues, “Although an abstract ideal can — and should — posit a world in which sex and race no longer categorize people into socially subordinated groups, a theory that makes no (or very little) reference to these social categories effectively suggests that they are unimportant in theorizing about justice and equality” (2013, p. 44).

Relatedly, we might ask whether Rawlsian theory is so wrapped up in its situatedness — with 20th century liberal-democratic capitalism as its backdrop — that it normalizes existing inequalities by assuming there is actual equality before the law. As Patching and Hirst (2013) write, “Inequalities based on ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation are endemic and integral to capitalist society, as are power differentials based on income and class status” (p. 11). The centrality of these inequalities to society pose another powerful critique to Rawls’s veil of ignorance, or rather a critique about what representatives would know behind the veil. Rawls affords those in the original position knowledge about “general facts” concerning society; these facts include only basic, generic information about how society is organized. Okin (1989) posits knowledge of the gender-structured nature of society would be available to representatives behind the veil, but Schwartzman (2013) counters this thesis, noting Rawls specifically excluded from the veil — as “particular circumstances” — current or historical patterns of domination and oppression based on race, gender and other difference. For feminists and other critical
theorists, this poses a considerable challenge to the efficacy of Rawlsian theory: If representatives behind the veil of ignorance do not have access to fundamental information about how a just society justifies structured inequalities, beyond a skin-deep understanding of class differences, how might they produce conclusions truly congruent with projects pursuing social justice?

Gilligan’s work to propose an alternative to justice as fairness, articulated *In a Different Voice*, helped re-frame, reimagine and significantly broaden our modern discussion about ethics and social justice (Tong & Williams, 2014; Koehn, 1998). Her suppositions were built on the work of 18th and 19th century feminist thinkers — among them, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman — who contributed to a diversity of feminist approaches to ethics. On the whole, these thinkers pondered the possible similarities and differences between a “feminine” and “masculine” ethics (Tong & Williams, 2014), and prompted new ontological and deontological questions about the nature of ethics, and the nature of these different ethics.

Importantly, as Tong and Williams (2014) note, early “feminine” ethics were the first to problematize the assumption that to be fully developed (to be a moral adult) is to be separate from others, to be individual and detached. They also challenged the notion that reality and reasoning can only be found in the universal, the impartial, and the “rational.” Modern feminist ethicists continue to build on these theories, including in the tradition of a feminist ethics of care and as part of communitarianism, which promotes “caring human relationships as an essential part of human flourishing” (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009).
Gilligan (1982), in *A Different Voice*, made her case for a feminist ethics of care by deconstructing a moral development test created by her former mentor Lawrence Kohlberg. The test, based on “a formal logic of fairness” and principles found in traditional ethics, had six stages (Tong, 1993, p. 52):

- **Stage 1**: Punishment and obedience orientation; to avoid the ‘stick’ of punishment or to get the carrot, a child does as she is told
- **Stage 2**: Instrumental relativist orientation; the child adopts a “you scratch my back” approach to satisfying personal needs
- **Stage 3**: Interpersonal concordance orientation; the adolescent conforms to societal mores in order to seek approval from others
- **Stage 4**: Law and order orientation; the adolescent begins to fulfill her duty, show respect for authority, and maintain the given social order in order to be considered an honorable person
- **Stage 5**: Social contract legalistic orientation; the adult adopts a utilitarian moral point of view, doing as she pleases as long as she does not harm others
- **Stage 6**: Universal ethical principle orientation; the adult has an essentially Kantian point of view that provides a moral perspective universal enough to serve as a critique of any conventional morality

Housewives specifically and women generally were more likely to score lower on the scale, as were minorities and the poor (Gilligan, 1982; Tong, 1993). Is that a reflection of women’s capacity for “moral development,” Gilligan asked, or is that a reflection of the assessment, and its author’s assumptions about what (and who) is ethical?
In articulating a feminist ethics of care, Gilligan did make several missteps, argues Tong (1993). For one, she characterized her care ethics as novel, rather than placing it in a tradition of “feminine” ethics. She also pitted care and justice against each other — as oppositional and incompatible objectives. Subsequent theorists, notably Nel Noddings, challenged this paradigm. In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Noddings (1984) argued that rather than framing care and justice in a dualistic relationship, we should consider care as foundational to ethics and see justice as complementary or as a corrective (Noddings, 1984; Tong, 1993). For her part, Noddings (1984) sought a feminist ethics that is relational — and that remedied the historic undervaluing of caring. Noddings argues that ethics is about particular relations, where a “relation means a set of ordered pairs generated by some rule that described the affect — or subjective experience — of the members” (1984, pp. 3-4). She also suggests ethics does not spring forth from our intellect, with an analysis of the concept of goodness, but from our hearts, with a desire to be good people (Tong, 1993).

Both Gilligan and Noddings can be placed in the long tradition of “feminine” ethics; they both argued that traditional ethics not only fails to take into account women’s values, but that women have a special and unique disposition to care. I believe there is much to be learned from feminine ethics, as a branch of feminist ethics, but I am not arguing for an ethical approach that is gender-specific. I am uneasy at the suggestion that all women are caring or all men are incapable of putting caring first, and I share the concerns of feminist theorists who worry that feminine ethics is mistaking a societal value (women should be caring) with a fact (women are caring).
That said, I do appreciate feminine ethics as part of a significant and rich body of knowledge, and acknowledge its capacity for presenting new possibilities for understanding women’s ways of knowing and women’s moral experiences. Notably, feminine and feminist ethics both critically forward a political agenda — a commitment to eradicating the subordination of women and of other oppressed people. Importantly, “a feminist approach to ethics asks questions about power — that is, about domination and subordination — even before it asks questions about good and evil, care and justice, or mothers and fathers” (Tong, 1993, p. 160). Jagger, for example, points out a power discussion prompts ethicists to look anew at purported masculine terms associated with what is moral and right in traditional ethics.

**A Feminist Journalism Pedagogy**

Much has been made of the ways in which a feminist ethics of care diverges from Rawlsian fairness-as-justice. And while an ethics of care does differ from Rawls’s principles in important ways, there is also common ground on which to build a more nuanced, expanded and inclusive approach, especially in the context of journalism ethics. In this section, I argue feminist journalism pedagogy might operationalize this new approach by consciously placing an ethics of care in the first position in an ethical consideration, and then moving to consider social justice in the Rawlsian sense. More broadly, I contend that a feminist ethics of care in journalism is a crucial first step in creating a feminist journalism classroom and in helping young journalists build toolboxes that better equip them to cover other-ed populations.

After all, and perhaps nowhere more than in journalism, care is often undervalued; it is seen as driven by whims and lacking in reason and objectivity. But care
offers us important new ways of re-considering our positionality and our responsibilities to those around us. In fact, as articulated, I argue that a care ethic should be considered first, before weaving in Rawlsian principles. This is not out of a shallow motive to broaden feminism’s reach. Rather, I believe considering an ethics of care first will have two consequences: 1) it will start conversations in different places, problematizing our assumptions about ethics, which are often based on fairness as justice, and 2) it will have as its greatest objective feminism’s greatest objective — that is, a project to address oppressions based on gender, race, class and other markers of difference.

The body of research around feminist journalism pedagogy is, probably unsurprisingly, not expansive. However, it is growing. And it is building on the work of other feminist traditions. Indeed, I believe it will be enriched in coming years, with new perspectives and as digital native mediafeminists begin to consider the questions that have stumped the rest of us for so long (or begin to ask the questions we have not thought to). Importantly, I believe a critical feminist pedagogy offers alternative possibilities for teaching young journalists, offering new ways of giving students the tools to question long-held assumptions, problematize such industry standards as objectivity and the inverted pyramid, shed light on the power of experience and the danger of dualisms and pursue journalism in the interest of social justice. J-schools must teach tomorrow’s journalists not only how to write a story, shoot a video and build a social media following, but how to pursue social justice, seek out new voices, embrace nuance, and put theory into practice. Questioning assumptions through feminist pedagogy allows space for alternatives, for bringing into the light dominating systems and mindsets, while valuing other/ed ways of communicating and pursuing activism.
The Feminist Classroom

I am offering a critique of journalism pedagogy – and calling for a new approach – at a time of soul searching and incredible change for the industry and for J-schools. In our fluid and ever-changing modern media environment, journalism schools have sought to remake themselves. By and large, their focus has been on creating young journalists who are tech-savvy, comfortable with telling stories in multiple media formats and able to “swing with the punches” of an evolving workforce (Walker, Geertsema, & Barnett, 2009; Mensing, 2010). There has been little interest in focusing on the constructs and assumptions hidden within journalism pedagogy itself: In unpacking not only what and how we teach young journalists, but why – and whether there’s a new way forward.

It’s also worth noting that enrollment in journalism schools nationwide continues to rise, despite the sketchy job prospects (Streib, 2009); and citizen journalism — the power everyone now has to tell their story — is threatening the untouchable primacy of the mainstream media in the news landscape. To be sure, journalism is evolving. We are getting our news differently, and reporters are delivering it differently. Even legacy companies have had adapt.

The point of a feminist journalism classroom, then, is not simply to incorporate feminism elsewhere in academia, but to re-consider, re-think, and re-imagine how journalists tell stories — and how they can challenge negative discourses of the oppressed in a new generation. To incorporate consciousness-raising and critical theory and divergent knowledges into the work of storytelling. As Maher and Tetreault (2001) write in *The Feminist Classroom: Dynamics of Gender, Race and Privilege*, feminist pedagogy is “not about teaching techniques, divorced from content, but rather the whole
process of knowledge construction, in the classroom as everywhere. Positional pedagogies attend to the complex social dynamics of difference and inequality as an integral part of the process.” In the following sections, I explore some key themes that could emerge in a feminist journalism classroom (some key attributes in which a feminist journalism classroom would make the difference), and which would absolutely grow out of a commitment to feminist ethics and an interest in problematizing and adding dimension to representations of oppressed peoples in news discourse.

**Embracing a relational ethic**

It is worth noting that there are many ways to approach a feminist critique of journalism and journalism pedagogy. One could certainly stop at the numbers alone. After all, America’s newsrooms continue to be predominantly male-centered and male-dominated places, even though female students have for years been in the majority in journalism schools, and make up majorities in many smaller newsrooms (Women’s Media Center, 2014). However, I believe it is not enough to simply have more women in newsrooms, or more women running or funding newsrooms. Women operating in patriarchal spaces often have no other choice than to become male-lite – to assume or assent to hegemonic practices.

Given this, there is considerable utility in the possible applications — the possibilities — of employing relational instruction in college journalism classrooms, of befriending and mentoring future female journalists, of building a “sisterhood” (hooks, 2000). Befriending, as described by Laird (2003) and Thayer-Bacon (2011), underscores the importance of relationships, of mentorship and of consciousness-raising among women and girls as part of an educative life-practice. Befriending (and self-befriending)
serves as a foundation on which to question popular notions of journalists as thoughtless, brash, cold, and with which to create organic feminist journalistic identities and relationships.

More broadly, feminist pedagogy provides opportunities for turning journalism classrooms into transformative spaces — safe spaces for teaching and learning, for sharing cultural knowledge and connecting with peers, for pushing back against policies, practices and institutions that fail to meet the needs of individuals and communities. Our goal as journalism educators should not be that students walk away with a working knowledge of AP style, grammar and the ability to tell a breaking news story in a succinct way. We need to invite our students to think, re-think, reflect – and to act. To do so, we can deploy/employ a relational ethic – that is, a commitment to relationality in teaching and in learning that prompts “generative and not deadly” dialogue and praxis (Grumet & Stone, 2013).

In considering a relational journalism pedagogy, it is important to briefly touch on the implications of raising feminist critiques within academia broadly and within J-schools more specifically. Boler (1999) notes scholars who invoke feminist theory and pedagogy are (still) at risk of being marginalized, seen as weak or interested in “touchy-feely” research and not taken seriously. Academia largely operates in patriarchal ways, and a feminist politics of emotion could be seen as “other.” I fear the professional journalism community would not impress with their response. For journalism professors, questioning the way it’s always been done is a risk – one that could have real-life implications. But Boler (1999) also suggests that there are ways to pave the way for alternative ways of thinking, for making space, bit by bit. For example, we might
demonstrate how feminist theory is perfectly suited to modern questions, how it helps to frame old questions in old ways, how it debunks dualisms. Easier said, to be sure. But as hooks (2000) notes, we cannot be content with keeping feminist theory to specific classes or courses of study. We must be bold. She writes, “The future feminist movement must necessarily think of feminist education as significant in the lives of everyone. … If we do not work to create a mass-based movement which offers feminist education to everyone, females and males, feminist theory and practice will always be undermined by the negative information produced in most mainstream media” (p. 24).

Problematising ‘t/Truth’

The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics tells reporters their primary duty is to “seek truth and report it.” This is oft-repeated in journalism classrooms. And the code of ethics is something young journalists keep handy. It’s kept in their binders, printed in their textbooks. It’s referenced often, but usually superficially as in: Our job as watchdogs is to report the facts and get the t/Truth. There is less discussion – or none at all – about what is meant by “the Truth,” whether there can be/are multiple truths, whether seeking truth should indeed be a primary goal, and how one even goes about seeking truth in a theoretical framework (Reavy, 2013; Walker, Geertsema, & Barnett, 2009). A feminist pedagogy not only allows for these questions, but requires them – by problematizing “Truth” and questioning positivist notions of assumed constants and the ways things are (Siegfried, 1996 & 1999).

Indeed, placing alleged constants on shaky ground is vital to feminist theory in two central ways: It allows for questioning the notion of seemingly natural hierarchal and hegemonic frameworks, which oftentimes are used to solidify patriarchy; and it gives
voice to theories that chip away at positivist conceptions of our societies, our systems and our social relationships, dominant representations of which so often fail to take into account the experiences of the oppressed or non-dominant classes.

Thayer-Bacon (2003) turns to Dewey in considering positivism, noting that the American philosopher rejected any theory of Truth, and argued that more important than agreeing on any universal constant was devoting critical inquiry to the process by which we examine epistemic claims. Such inquiry allows us to recognize our own central role in constructing the experiments, the labs and the scientists by which we test and consider truth. As feminist journalists, we can begin to place quotation marks around and assign footnotes to “truth” to signify its fallibility, its fluidity and its subjectivity, and concern ourselves with the forces of power at play in knowledge creation and construction (Thayer-Bacon, 2003).

In addition, core to critical feminist pedagogy for journalism courses is a never-ending interest in questioning assumptions and thinking through positionality. Walker, Geertsema, and Barnett (2009) write eloquently on this in “Inverting the Inverted Pyramid: A Conversation about the Use of Feminist Theories to Teach Journalism,” arguing that, “to talk about a feminist classroom in journalism is to talk about a classroom that challenges traditional methods of teaching and makes students aware of the social construction of knowledge. It is one in which critical theory must come to the fore – critical theory in which the experiences of groups other than the dominant forces in society are taken into consideration and in which dominant discourse such as that found in the mainstream media is questioned” (p. 178).
The trio further note that journalism in academia has long struggled with the self-imposed dualism of *theory versus practice*. Journalists-in-training need to learn practical tools, the argument goes, and J-schools can leave the theory to the professors and the graduate students. Thus, students learn about the importance of objectivity, but rarely question the notion; they learn about the importance of “getting both sides” but never ponder what a two-sided world actually looks like (or whether any argument actually only has two sides). Feminist pedagogy has the power to turn classrooms, including college journalism classes, into sites for consciousness-raising (hooks, 2000).

Questioning assumptions allows space for alternatives, for bringing into the light dominating systems and mindsets, while celebrating and encouraging women’s ways of communicating and pursuing activism, something Walker (2003) dubs *mediafeminism*.

Core to Walker’s notion is rethinking and/or remodeling journalism “objectivity,” which is actually anything but, favoring elite and powerful and “official” voices and rendering invisible or silent other-ed groups. Rethinking objectivity Rethinking objectivity is vital to problematizing negative representations of the poor. Rather than striving for unbiased/unattached coldness (and futilely attempting to subtract themselves from the world they write and live within), journalists should work towards fairness, care and justice. “Journalists (and journalism) must acknowledge, humbly and publicly, that what we do is far more subjective and far less detached than the aura of objectivity implies - and the public wants to believe,” wrote Brent Cunningham in the Columbia Journalism Review (2003, 31). “If we stop claiming to be mere objective observers, it will not end the charge of bias but will allow us to defend what we do from a more realistic, less hypocritical position.”
In addition, in feminist journalism pedagogy it is important to dismantle/disrupt/reimagine language and the rules of language, since those rules so often de-privilege the oppressed and privilege patriarchal structures. Geertsema (2009) writes about “using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house” – giving journalism students the confidence to see themselves as knowledge creators, and validating personal experience and the development of voice. Indeed, feminist journalism classrooms should be places where students grow to understand, appreciate and participate in their worlds, and in activism and pursuits to seek social justice.

This approach dovetails well with Cixous’ writing about writing – with her appreciation of the craft of writing, and the importance of meaning making. To write with one’s own voice is to sing. Considering these words in the context of journalism is indeed eye-opening: “To write is to note down the music of the world, the music of the body, the music of time” (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 68). Put another way, there is a rhythm to the world, there are inflections and realities that are inherently, quickly, speciously heard. We write with our ears by hearing spaces, vibrations of sentences, capital and lower case letters. We write with our ears by hearing the world, by hearing shouts and whispers.

Valuing experience

In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire saw education for adults as the means by which citizen-learners can not only garner skills but freely exchange ideas and engage in “critical consciousness” (qtd. in Johnston, 2011). As Johnston writes, “Freire’s model of emancipatory adult education rejects what he referred to as the ‘banking’ system of education in which preselected data is deposited in the mind of the adult learner. Instead,
Freire invites learners into the process of examining their experiences from a critical perspective and, through discourse, challenge the contradictions they may have experienced” (Johnston, 2011, p. 4). Freire’s notion of freeing adult education is a sharp critique of the neoliberal approach to teaching and learning – and, for purposes of this review, to the belief that the practical art of journalism would not benefit from theoretical depth and emotional and experiential breadth.

Indeed, as Thayer-Bacon argues, qualified relativism offers us a panoramic view of “communities-always-in-the-making” where we are embedded, limited and embodied, but where we are also “striving to communicate with a plurality of others” (2003, p. 429). Qualified relativism provides a locus from which to question assumptions of manmade constructs and frameworks as natural or always already in existence. Thayer-Bacon eloquently enunciates this notion: “Feminists as qualified relativists begin and end with experience. This is because in an androcentric world much of women experience remains unnamed and cannot be reduced to its articulated meanings. … For feminists, the indeterminacy of experience is what makes ‘experience’ so important to their world” (p. 428).

How might we operationalize this in a journalism classroom? It might begin with dialogue. In “Informing and Educating the Media — a Hopeful Perspective on the Media and the Homeless,” New Mexico homeless shelter founder Jeremy Reynolds writes that reporters can better cover and un-cover the lives of the poor and homeless by simply engaging them in regular conversation. Advocates can also play a role by offering suggestions and criticism to coverage. “As part of my attempt to inform and educate the media, I also try to reinforce positive images about both the shelter and the homeless, and
overcome negative images,” Reynalds writes in his essay. “Our stories need to be well-told. ... They must suggest that the homeless need help and that they have the potential to benefit from that help” (1999, p. 93). When journalists begin to acquire new understandings of the poor, when they begin to see the lines between us and them dissolve through dialogue, and when they begin to reconsider and problematize their assumptions about poor families, then stigmatizing discourse of the poor always topple, it will always fall.

**Conclusion(s)**

To be sure, with its heady maxim to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” the media treasures a tradition of pursuing social justice (even if those pursuits appear to be, at times, in name only). Geertsema (2009), writing in *Feminist Teacher* on the possibilities feminist theory brings to higher education journalism pedagogy, notes that, “Muckraking journalists of the 20th century worked passionately for social change. So do contemporary journalists who believe in interventionist journalism models, such as public journalism, development journalism, emancipatory journalism, and advocacy journalism” (p. 186).

I undertook this study to bring light to deleterious and stigmatizing news discourse of the poor in their encounters with education. With a critical discourse analysis of diverse newspaper texts, I demonstrated how news discourse others the poor in education coverage, renders them invisible, or paints them as problem. My analysis also showed poverty policy was rarely pursued in stories about poor families.

In *Framing Class*, Kendall laments about the state of journalism, pointing to a Pew Research Center poll (among other things) that found journalists are concerned
about the lack of depth in news reporting, and about the media’s failure to take on tough issues (p. 24). But she also sees glimmers of hope, including in “civic-minded journalism,” which breaks the mold of traditional journalism in that — among other things — it doesn’t require official elite sources or a news peg. She continues:

Rather than pitting the middle class against the working class and the poor, for example, the media might frame stories in such a way as to increase people’s awareness of their shared concerns in a nation where members of the upper class typically get portrayed as more important and more deserving than the average citizen (p. 224).

I, too, see opportunities for optimism in our journalism landscape, not least of which because of the explosion of online journalism and new avenues for the poor to find voice online.

Fundamentally with this study, I wanted to seek praxis after unpacking a problem; I wanted to explore, however briefly, how journalists can do a better job of covering the most under-covered story of our time. Every day in the richest country in the world, millions of children go without food, without shelter, without health care. Parents must make impossible choices: Rent or groceries. Prescriptions or gas. America’s poor live incredibly difficult lives; they are industrious, skilled, intelligent, resourceful because they have to be. They face socially-constructed barriers, and yet when they fail to overcome them, they are deemed deficient. If journalism wants to live up to its tradition of muck-raking, if it truly wants to “afflict the comfortable,” it must get serious about challenging and re-writing negative representations of the poor, especially in the context
of coverage of education, our nation’s “great equalizer.” A feminist journalism classroom offers exciting inroads to making that happen.
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Appendix A

List of articles used in analysis
Articles also used in fine analysis are italicized

Analysis period: 2002-2006

Newspaper: Education Week

“The Big Easy Revisited; On Katrina anniversary, Bush lauds charter plan in New Orleans”
September 6, 2006

“Project to Seek High-Poverty Schools’ Best Practices”
November 29, 2006

“Bill to Expand Milwaukee Vouchers May Be Headed for Veto”
February 2, 2005

“Federal Report Examines Charter Schools; Test Scores in Five States Found to Trail the Results in Regular Public Schools”
December 1, 2004

“Bill Would Bar Cuts in Schools' Medicaid Reimbursements”
August 30, 2006

“Movement Afoot to Reframe Finance-Adequacy Suits”
October 26, 2005

“Task Force Urges Billions More in Federal Aid”
August 31, 2005

“Leadership Changes Roil St. Louis District; State's education chief names panel to study troubled school system”
August 9, 2006

“Fla. Court: Vouchers Unconstitutional; Ruling will end Opportunity Scholarships program for students in state's lowest-rated schools”
January 11, 2006

“Dips in Enrollment Posing Challenges for Urban Districts”
March 2, 2005

“NCLB Transfer Policy Seen as Flawed”
April 20, 2005
“Dual Orleans Systems Grow in Storm's Wake; Complex 'overlapping circles' of governance, prevalence of charter schools mark landscape”
June 7, 2006

“Ohio OKs Vouchers for Pupils in Low-Rated Schools”
July 13, 2005

“The Heart of the Matter; With an unusual systemwide approach, the Jefferson County, Ky., school district is tackling poor reading skills among high school students”
May 24, 2006

“Chicago to 'Start Over' With 100 Small Schools”
July 14, 2004

“Urban Students Fold Under Basic Science; Inadequate teaching and standards cited for poor NAEP scores”
November 29, 2006

“Kinder and Gentler; Instead of cracking down on low-achieving schools, the San Francisco school district offers them a helping hand”
April 12, 2006

“Weighted' Funding of Schools Gains Favor”
November 3, 2004

“U.S. Orders Alabama District to Offer NCLB Transfers”
January 4, 2006

“Conferees Mull Best Uses of NBPTS Teachers; Few Now Work in Schools That Are Low-Performing”
March 23, 2005

“New Orleans Eyed as Clean Educational Slate; Major reforms urged for a district in crisis long before storm hit”
September 21, 2005

Newspaper: The New York Times

“A Patron of the Poor in Schools Extends His Vision to Harlem”
July 16, 2004 Friday

“Rough Start for State's Effort to Remake Faltering Schools in New Orleans”
August 21, 2006

“In Newark, Graduates Ace the Final”
June 13, 2004
“Trying to Lift Performance By Shrinking City Schools”
May 3, 2005

“Chicago Has a Nonunion Plan for Poor Schools”
July 28, 2004

“Judge Steps In To Prod State On School Aid”
August 4, 2004

“Colorado's New Voucher Law Is Struck Down in State Court”
December 4, 2003

“Federal Spending Increases, but More Schools Will Get Less Money for Low-Income Students”
July 4, 2005

“School Is Haven When Children Have No Home”
November 27, 2003

“Middle-Class Parents Say Schools Have Been Cut to the Bone”
February 15, 2002

“In Scarsdale, Wary Reactions to State Financing Report”
April 4, 2004

“Wealthy Schools Shun Fair-Aid Meet”
November 23, 2003

**Newspaper: The Washington Post**

“Montgomery Schools At Diversity Landmark”
October 14, 2003

“Failing Schools Find Hole In Law; Ark. Shows Bush Initiative's Limits”
August 29, 2002

“Md. Sets Standards For Student Exams; Rates for Special-Ed, Poor Pupils Lag”
July 22, 2004

“Most County Schools Hit Targets of 'No Child' Law”
August 21, 2005

“Poor, Others Fall Short On New Md. Test”
August 23, 2003

“19 Schools Miss Testing Targets; But Majority Meet Progress Goals”
July 1, 2004

“More Pr. George's Students Transfer Under U.S. Law; 1,400 Leave Schools That Fail State Standards”
November 10, 2005

“Court Upholds Ohio School Vouchers; Ruling Says Program Offers Poor Families Freedom of Choice”
June 28, 2002

“Detroit Still Skeptical About School Vouchers And Who Really Profits; Despite Failing Classrooms, Voters Rejected Move”
July 28, 2002

“County Launches Pre-K Program for At-Risk Students; 2 Schools to Offer Classes to 36 Kids”
July 30, 2006

“Students at 3 St. Mary's Schools Eligible to Receive Transfers”
June 6, 2002

“Senate Backs Off D.C. School Vouchers; Republicans Regrouping After Threat of Filibuster”
October 1, 2003

“Churches Pitch In to Bolster Student Skills; In Western Kentucky, a Drive to Narrow the 'Gap' Among Public School Pupils”
September 26, 2004

“Voucher Plan Draws Hundreds; Parents Attend Orientation Session on Aid Program for D.C. Students”
April 29, 2004

“GOP Unveils School Voucher Plan; $100 Million Proposal Targets Low-Income Students”
July 19, 2006

“House Panel Approves Plan for D.C. Vouchers; Norton Says Member's Absence Affected Result”
July 11, 2003

“Test Score Drop Raises Doubt; Questions of Cheating Loom Over SE School”
February 1, 2004

“Students Score High On Tests; Three Schools Warned On Poor Exam Scores”
November 14, 2002
“D.C. Auditor to Probe Shortage of Textbooks; Schools Had Said Problem Was Solved”
December 1, 2005

“D.C. Schools Targeted for Outside Help; Lowest Achievers Could Get New Staff”
May 4, 2005

“Montgomery Schools At Diversity Landmark”
October 14, 2003
Length: 796 words

“Failing Schools Find Hole In Law; Ark. Shows Bush Initiative's Limits”
August 29, 2002

“Md. Sets Standards For Student Exams; Rates for Special-Ed, Poor Pupils Lag”
July 22, 2004

“Most County Schools Hit Targets of 'No Child' Law”
August 21, 2005

“Poor, Others Fall Short On New Md. Test”
August 23, 2003

Newspaper: Honolulu Star-Bulletin/The Honolulu Advertiser

“Most high-poverty schools fail in student achievement”
Honolulu Star-Bulletin
January 29, 2003

“Some kids lag from the start”
Honolulu Star-Bulletin
Publication date: Jan 26, 2003

“Most Hawai‘i kids are not proficient on state test”
Honolulu Star-Bulletin
February 7, 2003

“More schools eligible for Title I”
Honolulu Star-Bulletin
February 14, 2003

“Geographic exceptions available”
Honolulu Advertiser
February 20, 2003

“Island schools trail in computers”
Honolulu Advertiser
May 8, 2003

“DOE lowers Title I threshold”
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*
June 20, 2003

“Report: Half of students at-risk”
*Honolulu Advertiser*
July 18, 2003

“Waianae exceeds expectations with media program”
*Honolulu Advertiser*
August 25, 2003

“Beating the odds”
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*
December 28, 2003

“Maili school hasn't lost hope”
*Honolulu Advertiser*
April 27, 2004

“Waianae helps freshmen focus”
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*
June 1, 2004

“Committed to education”
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*
February 27, 2005

“Control of schools doubted”
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*
March 5, 2005

“Restructuring of 24 schools wins an OK”
*Honolulu Advertiser*
April 29, 2005

“66% of Isle schools miss No Child goals”
*Honolulu Advertiser*
August 19, 2005

“Easy to get lost at biggest public school”
*Honolulu Advertiser*
October 9, 2005
“Aiea student beating odds”  
*Honolulu Advertiser*  
April 20, 2006

“Schools weigh free lunch costs”  
*Honolulu Advertiser*  
May 9, 2006

“Poor isle schools lose best teachers”  
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*  
August 21, 2006

“Day-to-day survival haunts childhood Demands of school are even tougher for kids living without the basics”  
*Honolulu Advertiser*  
October 22, 2006

“Preschools launched for needy kids”  
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*  
January 15, 2002

“PTSA wants isle kids to stay put”  
*Honolulu Advertiser*  
July 15, 2002

“Transfers from failing schools start in October”  
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*  
July 19, 2002

“Kalihi-Kai parents say they will support the school despite a new law”  
*Honolulu Advertiser*  
Publication date: Aug 1, 2002

“Isle parents stick with underachieving schools”  
*Honolulu Star-Bulletin*  
February 16, 2004

Analysis period: 2009-2013

**Newspaper: Education Week**

“New student-poverty measures proposed for national tests; proposed indicators go broader, deeper”  
December 12, 2012
“President environs anti-poverty efforts like Harlem’s ‘Zone’; Budget outline calls for ‘Promise Neighborhoods’”
March 11, 2009

“N.J. funding decision leaves few satisfied”
June 8, 2011

“Schools falter at keeping ELL families in the loop”
October 2, 2012

“Concerns raised about impact of stimulus on equity; studies see structural changes in state funding, as federal officials defend impact”
February 24, 2010

“Private firms run two Mich. districts”
May 8, 2013

“All but 3 urban districts trail nation on national science assessment”
March 2, 2011

“Texas district goes door to door to find dropouts”
February 6, 2013

“Study: Urban charters outdo those in nonurban areas; Massachusetts study chalks up learning gains to ‘no excuses’ approach”
September 14, 2011

“Scholars identify 5 keys to urban school success”
January 27, 2010

“Backers of magnet schools question charter push; some scholars, activists are calling for increased attention to diversity”
February 24, 2010

“Tight leash likely on turnaround aid; Radical steps proposed as price for Title I grants”
September 2, 2009

“La. School choice options expand after sweeping education overhaul”
April 18, 2012

“Disparities found in N.Y.C.’s system for matching students to schools; scholars cite pipeline disparities”
March 27, 2013

“Chicago school closures punctuate challenge for urban districts”
June 5, 2013
“Louisiana vouchers, desegregation case prove volatile mix”
September 18, 2013

“Federal funds fuel high school improvement plans; Education department adds millions to curtail dropouts”
November 3, 2010

“Philadelphia seeks salvation in lessons from model schools”
September 25, 2013

“Poor children are now a majority in 17 state’s public schools; Study finds poverty rising in every state since 2000”
October 23, 2013

“Schools still see surges in homeless students”
November 6, 2011

“Poor, minority pupils are now a majority in south; The region’s demographic shift foreshadows a national trend, report says”
January 20, 2010

“Pioneering Louisiana voucher model faces uncertain future”
December 12, 2012

“States creating new districts to steer turnarounds”
December 14, 2011

**Newspaper: The New York Times**

“Despite money and attention, it’s not all A’s at 2 Harlem schools”
October 13, 2010

“Wealth gap for schools in New Jersey is the highest”
February 18, 2010

“Public schools violence plan in Chicago focuses on potential victims”
October 7, 2009

“Groups may sue over billions owed to poor school districts”
November 29, 2012

“4 decades after clashes, Boston against debates school busing”
October 5, 2012

“Ambitious new model for Newark schools”
July 26, 2010

“2 city schools get Washington mayor’s attention”

April 4, 2009

“Charter schools and public ones align in valley”

December 3, 2010

“Chicago makes it official, with 54 schools to be closed”

March 22, 2013

“Cheating inquiry under way at 2 top-rated city schools”

May 23, 2012

“With data backing smaller high schools, city’s larger ones fret over their fate”

February 2, 2012

“An ailing school system sees a fraught path to solvency”

December 31, 2012

“State’s dropout rate shows positive signs”

July 22, 2012

“Work cut out for him, a schools chief dives in”

June 12, 2011

“School district in North Carolina considers ending busing for economic diversity”

February 28, 2010

“Crucible of change in Memphis as state takes on failing schools”

April 3, 2013

“Proficiency of black students if found to be far lower than expected”

November 9, 2010

“School layoffs about to fall heaviest on the poorest and most struggling”

October 3, 2011

“Minorities and the poor predominate in the South’s public schools”

January 7, 2010

“A mission to transform a city’s beaten schools”

December 2, 2010

Newspaper: The Washington Post
“Superintendents worried about new grade scale”
June 27, 2013

“Dinner bell follows class bell at some D.C. schools”
October 19, 2010

“A changing student body; Report shows record enrollment, more-diverse population”
June 1, 2009

“A move to life W.Va. schools, county out of poverty, pain”
December 16, 2011

“Rocketship prepares for its big launch”
July 30, 2012

“Leadership key to D.C. school’s gains”
August 11, 2013

“Fund boost for at-risk students advances”
December 4, 2013

“Panel seeks more school choice for poor students”
July 30, 2013

“Bush praises results of ‘No Child’ law; president cites a ‘closing’ achievement gap, increased school accountability”
January 9, 2009

“Expulsion rate higher for charter students”
January 6, 2013

“D.C. has widest race gap on tests”
December 8, 2011

“Similar kids, pass-rates apart”
April 18, 2012

“Progress stalls in closing gaps in D.C. schools”
August 27, 2010

“Duncan delves behind grim statistics; Detroit students go face to face with education chief on what they need to succeed”
May 16, 2009

“Cuccinelli’s K-12 plan would let parents take over failing school”
August 14, 2013
“Quality control on D.C. school vouchers? ‘A blind spot’”
November 18, 2012

“From education chief, a No Child alarm”
March 10, 2011

“A plea from parents, activists: Stop closing schools”
January 30, 2013

“Va. to revise student goals”
August 30, 2012

“Taking baby steps toward charter schools; In Montgomery county two groups apply to be education pioneers”
April 29, 2010

“Sousa Middle’s march of progress; Principal’s hands-on, data-driven tack is transforming D.C. school but also ruffling feathers”
July 6, 2010

“Successes and hurdles”
December 23, 2011

“Scores on math tests up in D.C.”
July 27, 2012

“D.C. leads urban school systems in reading gains; Despite improvement, the city still trails in achievement”
May 21, 2010

“Poor children become majority in the South, West”
October 17, 2013

“In N.C. a new battle on school integration”
January 12, 2013

“School study sees benefits in economic integration”
October 16, 2010

“Panel issues an education blueprint”
February 20, 2013

“D.C. schools’ achievement gaps persist”
August 7, 2011
Newspaper: Honolulu Star-Bulletin/The Honolulu Advertiser/Honolulu Star-Advertiser

“Poverty drags kids down”
Honolulu Star-Advertiser
August 17, 2011

“Educators, students turn up heat in push for air-conditioned schools”
Honolulu Star-Advertiser
September 4, 2013

“Help for homeless children noticed”
Honolulu Advertiser
March 11, 2009

“Chains of poverty shackle more keiki”
Honolulu Star-Advertiser
June 24, 2013

“At Aiea, engagement is key”
Honolulu Advertiser
August 18, 2009

“Teacher turns kids into runners”
Honolulu Star-Advertise
June 6, 2011

“Disadvantaged kids get quality wave time”
Honolulu Star-Advertiser
February 6, 2011
Appendix B

Study analysis outline

1. Data collection
   a. Articles reviewed
   b. Taken out were articles that didn’t fall under the “news” category
   c. Also taken out were a small handful of articles that had no tie-in with poverty

2. High-level review
   a. All articles read through once for sub-topics
   b. Considered which groups of people are neglected
   c. Considered which groups are focused on (broadly and in what ways)

3. Typical texts identified
   a. “Not unusual” texts identified using purposeful sampling
   b. In total, 20 typical texts identified

4. Typical text analyzed, based on Jäger and Maier (2009) aspects:
   a. Context, including what is the occasion of the article?
   b. Surface of the text, including elements such as layout and article structure.
   c. Rhetorical means, such as inferences and metaphors.
   d. Content and ideological statements, or the presupposed concepts of humanity.