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Jon Lewis

*Responsible Pedagogy* is examination of contemporary education in the United States. Responsible educators are dedicated to being representative, responsive, and respectful. These three principles guide the best teaching and learning that are taking place in classrooms across the country. Launched in 2003, *Shakespeare in American Communities* is the most ambitious project in the history of the National Endowment for the Arts. The Shakespeare initiative's logo, depicting Shakespeare on an American flag, succinctly invokes a discussion of the juxtaposition of the politics of literature, art, and education in contemporary culture and symbolizes the battle for political and ideological superiority on a national level and the debate academic world about how what we should be teaching our students. *Shakespeare in American Communities* presents an outstanding opportunity to examine the role NEA as a political tool of the Right under the George W. Bush administration in the wake of the American "Culture Wars" of the 1980s and 1990s.

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*Responsible Pedagogy: (Re)Framing Contemporary Educational Theory and  
American Cultural Politics*

by  
Stephen Rust

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Stephen Rust, Author

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~ For Alice and Donovan. My love for you is radical. There are not words to  
express my deep thanks for your love and support.

# ***Responsible Pedagogy: (Re)Framing Contemporary Educational Theory and American Cultural Politics***

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: A Classroom, a TV, and a Flag**

Prior to spending the past year as an instructor and graduate student at Oregon State University, I taught high school English and media studies for five years in Albany, Oregon. Each morning, as I entered my classroom at South Albany High School and turned to walk behind my desk, I was greeted by the sight of two objects that were firmly mounted side-by-side to the wall above the chalkboard – a television and an American flag. In my memories the TV and the flag will be eternal companions, juxtaposed images representing the contemporary American experience. For me and the thousand or so students who I taught during my time as a secondary school teacher, the TV and the flag were our most tangible link to the reality and idea we knew as the present day United States. Ours is an age of global media conglomerates but the media continues to define culture for us as American, not global.

It was through the lens of being American that my students viewed and made sense of the world. We had our literature to connect us to the past, to innumerable cultures vastly different and strikingly similar to our own – all of the Americas contained in our textbooks, novels, and in the various additional poems, essays, newspaper and magazine articles, films, and songs I would bring in to enliven discussion and enrich the classroom environment. It was a constant struggle to grab and hold students' attention and attempt to stimulate critical analysis of the works of



literature we would study together. In the course of a year of eleventh grade American literature, we would read and discuss how the America experienced and represented by such writers as Seneca chief Handsome Lake compared to the Americas of Anne Bradstreet, Phillis Wheatley, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Ray Bradbury, and, when the situation seemed to call for it, Michael Moore and Donald Rumsfeld. We'd talk about their Americas, my America, and your America. But any time I really tried to step back and think critically about *our* America, politically and culturally contentious present-day America, and to understand myself as an American, I would look no further than to some of the defining symbols of our era – the TV and the flag, and my experiences in the classroom with so many bright and challenging students.

My students and I looked to the same symbols but in unique ways that reflected our own attitudes and opinions as well as the changing political and social climate of our times. I began teaching full time in the fall of 2000 as the Bush-Gore presidential campaign was in full swing. I quickly realized the importance of the role the individual teacher plays in the education system and the need to be aware that everything I said and did as a teacher could be considered for its political implications. It is nothing new to argue that it is impossible to sever the intricate ties between such important aspects of a society as the histories of its literature, politics, and individuals. Certainly, it is important to learn how the structural aspects of a literary text contribute to an increased understanding and appreciation of the work as a whole. But to teach that great works of literature somehow exist only as universal masterpieces, utterly transcendent of history and politics, is absurd. No text is ever produced, distributed, read, or taught in a vacuum. Of course, the balancing act of teaching literature and

media comes in acquainting students with a variety of political views while minimizing the temptation to suggest that the view of the teacher is the only one that matters. If such aphorisms seem obvious it is because they have become the hallmarks of training in literary analysis since the latter half of the twentieth century.

Like works of literature, the contemporary classroom also does not exist in a vacuum. The classroom is, by its very nature as a site of systemized human interaction, a politically charged intellectual space. Cultural theorists widely accept the notion that, "every social or cultural relationship is a political one" (Group Material 1). What we discussed and how we discussed it and how we responded to the flag and the TV in the classroom were political acts. Nevertheless, I have been determined throughout my career to encourage and respect the ability of students to reach their own conclusions in their writing and speaking.

A teacher's mission is to help students learn to think for themselves so that they may determine the course of their future. It is an immense but essential challenge for every teacher to develop a set of classroom practices that are designed to give students the tools they need to make sense of the world around them as it really is, not merely as it is presented and represented to them by the media, politicians, teachers, preachers, parents, and peers in this era in which every social interaction is regarded as an act of persuasion. Whether analyzing a character's development in a story, debating the approaches to civil rights taken by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., or giving a persuasive speech on a research topic of their own choosing, my students, like those in the classrooms of my fellow teachers, were graded on their

ability to develop and sustain critical arguments and to improve on that ability over the course of a term.

For all of us, the flag represented our attitudes about America and its role in the world even more intensely after September 11, 2001. Through our televisions, those of us living thousands of miles away from New York watched as events unfolded. We felt such public compassion for the victims because of the scale of the attacks and found pride in the outstanding courage of those who risked their own lives in the rescue operations. Americans were also frightened and angry because the victims were primarily Americans and because the nineteen hijackers had attacked such profoundly American economic and military symbols.

Suddenly the flag was everywhere. As the days after 9/11 have turned into months and years, the flag has continued to represent the intense conflict over the direction our nation has taken. Noam Chomsky explains that our connection to a flag represents our feelings about a particular nation at a particular moment: "To the extent that you feel good about the way things are going, you'll say, 'I like the flag'" (Moyers 126). Some responded to the flag by feeling powerful waves of patriotism, others reacted with deep cynicism, while still others seemed to feel nothing at all. As we witnessed post-9/11 reality unfold between 2001 and 2005, many of my students in the conservative city of Albany regarded the flag as the penultimate symbol of American freedom and democracy, a call to unified and dutiful patriotism, support of for the President and troops in their defense of freedom, and a symbol of conservative moral values. This feeling was strongly reflected in broadcasts on Fox News, the station to which these students expressed a powerful fidelity. A smaller, but equally

passionate number of students saw the flag an indicator of all things corrupt and repressive in America, a jingoistic call to unthinking nationalism and military action that would result in the death of more innocent civilians, the squashing of dissent, and a symbol of corporate and individual greed. Henry Giroux is among those critical observers who notes the myriad examples of commercialized patriotism present in the media as America's communal grief for the victims of 9/11 was exploited for profit by corporate America:

Red, white and blue flags adorn a plethora of fashion items, including hats, dresses, coats, T-shirts, robes, [lapel pins], and scarves. Many corporations now organize their advertisements around displays of patriotism—signaling their support for the troops abroad, the victims of the brutal terrorist acts, and, of course, American resolve—each ad amply displaying the corporate logo, working hard to gain some cash value by defining commercialism and consumerism as the ultimate demonstration of patriotism. (*Abandoned Generation* 26)

In individually responding to the flag from the perspective of how we think things in our country are going, we are playing a part in defining the flag as a symbol with universal meaning.

For many in 2006, the flag represents the effort to liberate Iraq from a cruel tyrant and protect American civilians from further terrorism, while for others, the flag represents the torture of prisoners and campaign of public deception that has led to a unnecessary and bungled military campaign in Iraq that has led to the loss of thousands of Iraqi and American lives at the cost to American taxpayers of “\$410 billion to \$630 billion” according to University of Chicago economist Steven Davis and colleagues (Wolk 2). The flag can thus represent either the broadly held belief that, as Paulo Friere explains, “the special mission of America is to teach the whole world how to be free” or the understanding that “when such myths become global

crusades, then they are instruments for manipulation” (Shor 103). Currently, the American flag is a symbol not of a single view of America but of multiple views at once, the embodiment of our society’s struggle over the future roles our government and culture will play in the world, a symbol of the politically charged nation in which we live and participate.

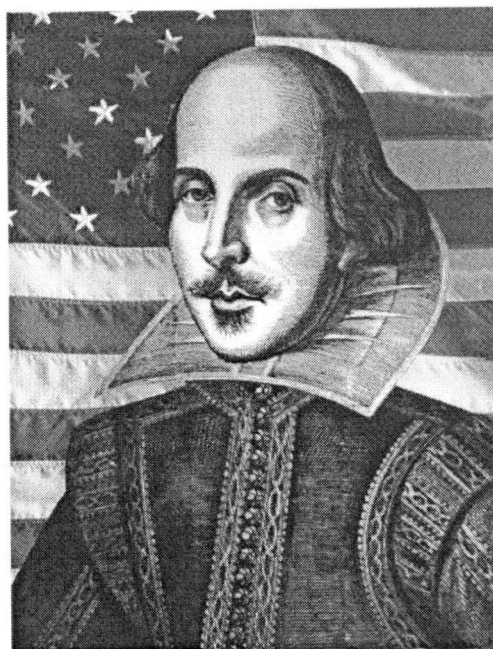
In the fall of 2004, I received one of 28,000 copies of an educational resource packet that has been sent free of charge to teachers across the nation to accompany the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) program *Shakespeare in American Communities*, introduced in 2003. Gracing the cover of the educational packet is the initiative’s logo, an image of Shakespeare superimposed on an American flag (see image below). The logo is used on the program’s website, [www.shakespeareinamericancommunties.org](http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunties.org), on posters posted at performances, and in the video and print materials sent to teachers. Leslie Liberato, NEA Program Manager for *Shakespeare in American Communities* answered my email request for information on the program’s background and pedagogy. I briefly mentioned that I was interested in the creation and symbolism of the logo. In her response, Liberato explained:

I’m afraid you’re reading more into the logo image than you should. It’s Shakespeare (shown with the iconic image of him) in American Communities (represented by the flag). It’s really that simple. Our designer toyed around with other ways to convey the American idea, such as Pop Art Warhol-style Shakespeare or an Uncle Sam Shakespeare, but we opted for what we thought most clearly and most elegantly illustrates the concept. (Liberato 1)

However, though perhaps not as bold as the Warhol or Uncle Sam options mentioned by Liberato, the logo certainly does more than simply illustrate the NEA’s concept.

There is indeed significant symbolic meaning in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* logo, especially given the historical context of the NEA's role as a unique federal agency which serves paradoxically to further the efforts of independent American artists and the efforts of those in Washington who seek to shape the direction of American culture. What the NEA may not realize is that the logo illustrates not only the basic concept of the initiative but the conservative ideology behind the concept as well, as I will explain in detail.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS  
PRESENTS



SHAKESPEARE  
IN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

The depiction of Shakespeare superimposed on an American flag succinctly invokes a discussion of the juxtaposition of the politics of literature, art, and education in contemporary culture. Just as the flag is symbolic of the battle for political ideological superiority on a national level, Shakespeare, as the center of Western literary canon, is the center of conflict in the academic world about how and what we should be teaching our students in English classes from elementary schools to college. As a project of the National Endowment for the Arts, *Shakespeare in American Communities* presents an outstanding opportunity to examine the role of the arts organization as a tool of the federal government in the wake of the Culture Wars of the

1980s and 1990s. As an educational outreach project, complete with free teaching materials sent to teachers across the country, *Shakespeare in American Communities* presents teachers with the occasion to examine material provided to them directly from the federal government and the opportunity to discuss such material and its implications for and with students. Indeed the simple and elegant logo portraying the sixteenth-century English playwright William Shakespeare on a waving United States flag (available for download without charge at [www.shakespeareinamericancommunties.org/press/press.html](http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunties.org/press/press.html)) symbolizes the role traditional literature plays in American society and education, and symbolizes the changes that have occurred at the National Endowment for the Arts – the only federal agency dedicated to promoting American artistic, literary, and theatrical endeavors – as the balance of power in American politics at the national level has shifted to the Right in the years since a Democratic Congress and President Lyndon Johnson created the arts organization in 1965.

## Chapter 2

### *Responsible Pedagogy*

**Shakespeare to the Rescue.** On April 23, 2003, the 439<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth, the National Endowment for the Arts, under the direction of current Chairman Dana Gioia, presented the American public with what it dubbed, "a gift of immeasurable value" when it launched "the largest tour of Shakespeare in American history" ("The National Endowment for the Arts Launches" 1). Produced in cooperation with Arts Midwest and the Sallie Mae Fund, *Shakespeare in American Communities* is the most ambitious, centralized initiative in the history of the NEA. At the time of the program's launch, First Lady Laura Bush and Motion Picture Association of America President (now former) Jack Valenti served as honorary chairs, and celebrated figures in the worlds of entertainment, such as Angela Lansbury and James Earl Jones, and academics, Harold Bloom, served on the project's advisory panel and were instrumental in the creation of the educational resources sent out to teachers to promote the project and introduce Shakespeare to American students ("Report: Phase One" 1). The support of these high profile figures, the carefully orchestrated management and promotion of the program, and the remarkable cultural cache of the Bard have made *Shakespeare in American Communities* one of the most successful initiatives in the NEA's history.

As an indicator of the success and importance of the program to the NEA, the Shakespeare initiative was the primary project highlighted by Gioia (pronounced Joy-a) in his 2006 appropriations request, delivered in March 2005, to the House of Representatives subcommittee that oversees NEA funding (Gioia, *Fiscal 2006* 1). The



goal of the project is to bring Shakespeare's plays to the broadest possible cross-section of Americans, bringing live theatrical performances and educational outreach to urban and rural theaters, high schools, military bases, and Native American reservations in all fifty states. This goal is reached by providing NEA grant money and corporate sponsorship at the national and local levels to participating theatre companies (generally theater companies that focus primarily on Shakespeare), who travel to performance locations. Through May 2005 the NEA reports a total audience of more than 433,000 for live performances and that more than 2 million students have been exposed to the educational materials ("Report: Phase Two" 2). The initiative has recently entered its fourth year and both the NEA's National Council and the Congressional subcommittee overseeing the organization have requested that the program become permanent (Campbell 1).

In his book *Cultural Democracy*, David Trend observes, "Increasingly, people across the political spectrum recognize the strategic role of the arts and humanities in shaping human identities and influencing politics" (1). *Shakespeare in American Communities* is representative of a number of NEA programs launched over the past decade that illustrate the dramatic shift in the way the organization now operates to promote a conservative view of culture. This change is apparent when considering how the NEA has shifted its focus away from promoting the funding of independent artists, as was the case between from the 1960s through the 1980s. In the wake of public censorship scandals in the 1980s and 1990s the NEA now primarily promotes its national programs. Examples of such centrally controlled efforts underway currently include: The Big Read, Poetry Out Loud, Great American Voices, NEA Jazz

Masters, and American Masterpieces. The NEA's current catchphrase, "A Great Nation Deserves Great Art" is indicative of a trickle-down approach to arts in which the NEA decides what 'great art' is and then funds groups willing to meet prescribed guidelines to distribute that art to the populace. Additionally, the NEA has increased its educational outreach initiatives into public schools. Thus, not only is the organization being driven by a less democratic and more conservative view of the arts, it is simultaneously introducing this conservative ideology to young people at an expanding rate. Under the direction of Dana Gioia, the NEA has managed to reframe its image and the way it promotes art. And the primary result for the organization has been to earn it the support of conservative lawmakers, newspaper columnists, and arts supporters, something that seemed impossible a decade ago when the newly elected Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives voted to eliminate funding for the organization (*The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000* 54).

While the National Endowment for the Arts and *Shakespeare in American Communities* are the focal points of this thesis, it is my contention that they are indicative of larger trends in politics and education that result primarily from a national political shift toward the right since the organization was founded in the 1960s, as evidenced, for example, by the results of the 1994 elections, when the Republican party gained majority control of both the U.S. House and Senate for the first time since the 1950s. Media scholars Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess, and Julia Lesage are among the multitude of educators who take issue with the Bush administration's education policies dictated by the No Child Left Behind Act. Kleinhans, Hess, and Lesage argue in a 2006 editorial in the journal *Jump Cut*, "The

Right's attack on education is broad and multi-faceted" (1). There is great fear among the nation's educators that the Republican education agenda will have a profoundly negative impact on students, schools, and communities.

I contend in this analysis that the Right, as represented by the practices and principles of Republican politicians, conservative academics, and Right-wing media pundits, is using its political muscle to attack the efforts of responsible educators and to shape public education according to its moral and economic vision. As I will show, the most vicious attacks have been launched against teachers, students, schools, and communities in a crusade to promote a narrowly defined curriculum, increase standardized testing at all levels, and persuade the public that teachers dedicated to training students to become independent, critical, and media savvy thinkers are somehow working against the public good. Unable to convince teachers to promote an educational agenda that works against their own rigorous training and professional experience, the Right has instead engaged in a two-pronged approach to achieve its aims. It has employed the rhetoric of fear in attempting to convince the public that the progressive and critical approach of public school teachers and university professors has been ineffective in addressing student achievement and improving public literacy, while simultaneously offering its own vision of one-size-fits-all standardized testing and a hegemonic conception of culture as methods to ensure student success and, more broadly, a 'literate' (to borrow E.D. Hirsch's term) culture dedicated to the preservation of a white, patriarchal view of society and history.

Since its inception, the NEA, as a publicly funded agency, has been a political tool of the federal government. What is new is the extent to which the organization

now centrally controls and attempts to culturally codify art as the organization is brought in line with the larger scope of the conservative movement. There is little question that *Shakespeare in American Communities* was designed with the intention of regaining wide support and to appeal to those in power in order to keep the NEA visible and funded, in fact Chairman Gioia has called the initiative a “Hail Mary pass” (“*Othello* and the NEA” 1). These efforts have not gained the agency significant funding increases, but have brought it renewed public visibility and the support of political conservatives. There remains for the Republicans the paradox that by keeping the organization running, the opportunity exists for future leadership to renew the agency’s commitment to communities and artists as the primary force in generating art remains a distinct possibility, one which moral conservatives fear. They don’t want another Robert Mapplethorpe on their hands. This paradox helps explain why the organization has not received substantial funding increases during the years of the George W. Bush administration. However, as a political weapon, Gioia’s ability to promote cultural conservative artistic initiatives at the NEA earned him the praise of Republicans. Through Gioia’s leadership and savvy promotion, the Bush administration has been blessed with exactly the kind of NEA it wants, one that is funded at low levels and delivers politically safe art that allows Republican politicians the opportunity to appeal to voters at the center of the political spectrum.

At the level of instruction, the educational materials provided by the NEA to promote *Shakespeare in American Communities* provide contemporary educators with an outstanding opportunity to help students understand that decisions about how and what they learn are not determined in a vacuum, but instead are the result of complex

interactions between communities, teachers, administrators, and governments. However, such understanding is possible not by accepting the materials merely at face value, but by examining them through a broader sociopolitical lens. An examination of these NEA materials would make a suitable addition to a college level course in pedagogy or Shakespeare, a high school Shakespeare unit centered around a particular play, a middle school introduction to Shakespeare and the role his works play in our culture, or any number of secondary or college level courses examining the confluence of education, politics, and the arts in society.

The question "What's wrong with the NEA's choice of promoting Shakespeare?" is the one that has most often arisen when I've discussed with people my interest in contextualizing and analyzing this program. The short answer is that Shakespeare hardly needs further promoting and that already limited NEA funds would be better spent more visibly promoting American artists working in urban, suburban, a rural communities as well as increasing support for public art projects by and for public school students. Gioia's explanation for choosing to launch the Shakespeare initiative centers on fear that public interest in classical literature and performing arts is eroding. As he explained to National Public Radio's Elizabeth Blair, "We're even perhaps in danger of losing Shakespeare. So I felt that if we wanted to help all theater, all drama, Shakespeare was the place to begin" (Blair 1). Such statements belie the fact that public and government interest in Shakespeare has actually risen over the past several decades. In 1975 there were 26 summer or year-round festivals or touring groups in North America dedicated primarily to performing Shakespeare's works (Loney and MacKay 3), there are now around 80 such festivals

or touring groups (Tedford 1). High school, college, community, and professional theater groups also perform the Bard's work and Hollywood continues to produce cinematic adaptations and spin-offs. Shakespeare continues to be taught at multiple grade levels in all fifty states and government funds are already spent developing methods for engaging today's students. The NEA's sister organization, The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) has, for the past twenty-two years, funded the Folger Shakespeare Library's Teaching Shakespeare Institutes for secondary teachers, which often result the publication books and materials such as *Shakespeare Set Free*, a performance based approach to Shakespeare that will presented at the 2006 conference of the National Council of Teachers of English ("Workshops" 31). Clearly, Shakespeare does not need the NEA's help to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Of course, this is not to suggest that every act of teaching or promoting Shakespeare is inherently conservative. Shakespeare continues to be taught at multiple grade levels in every state the union by teachers whose personal political leanings span a broad spectrum. John Guillory writes in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, "Literary works must be seen rather as the vector of ideological notions which do not inhere in the works themselves but in the context of their institutional presentation, or more simply, in the way in which they are taught" (ix). It is by critically analyzing how and why Shakespeare is advocated and elevated, and in what contexts, where one can determine the political motivations at stake. Thus, the questions I am interested in addressing are "Why is the NEA promoting Shakespeare?" and "How is the NEA promoting Shakespeare?" Those two questions serve as the jumping off points for chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis. In chapter

3, I examine *Shakespeare in American Communities* in the context of the NEA's history and role in the government. The answer to the question, "Why Shakespeare?" lies primarily in the NEA's attempts to reframe its public image through appeals to a conservative idea of culture. In chapter 4, I analyze the two documentary films provided to teachers in the educational resource packet to examine how the NEA is promoting Shakespeare. The films, *Shakespeare in Our Time* and *Why Shakespeare?*, promote a vision of Shakespeare as universal literary figure with the power to transform lives. They are the product of only one side in an ideological debate about the role of Shakespeare, the cultural icon as opposed to the dramatist, plays in contemporary culture. I argue that a responsible approach to these films requires teachers to help students develop situated readings of these and other media texts. By approaching the films through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of dominant and oppositional decoding positions, the teacher and students engage in a discussion that leads each student to his or her own carefully reasoned, or situated, interpretation of the films.

In the remainder of this first chapter, I explain my philosophical approach to teaching – informed primarily by proponents of critical pedagogy – and analyze current trends in education that are in need of change. In moving in this thesis from a broad-based analysis of education to a specific close reading of individual media texts, I assert that active pedagogy must be informed by theory and developed with practical application. The pedagogy developed here has implications in its methodology for use beyond the teaching of just this one NEA project. That said, it is not my intention to offer step-by-step methods or lesson plans for teachers. It is the responsibility of each

teacher and community of teachers to determine the needs and abilities of particular students in order to best develop, carry out, and assess a unit of study. Teaching, as a dynamic act, involves both pedagogy and practice. And while it is important to develop such pedagogies as the one offered in this essay, improving as a individual teacher really occurs at the confluence of pedagogy and practice.

In *Teacher Man*, his recent memoir of thirty years as a public school teacher, Frank McCourt reflects on the most important lessons he learned after his first eight years of teaching at New York's McKee Vocational High School:

I still struggled to hold the attention of five classes every day though I was learning what was obvious: You have to make your own way in the classroom. You have to find yourself. You have to develop your own style, your own techniques. You have to tell the truth or you'll be found out. (113)

As McCourt's account attests to, little has changed for teachers in terms of the daily struggles of discipline and classroom management since 1966, when he left McKee. Though the idea that each teacher must develop as an individual through practice seems obvious, the lessons one learns teaching students in the classroom are the building blocks of all effective pedagogy, and they are those most often forgotten as we struggle to find the "right" pedagogy to understand and approach public education on a broad scale, the "right" answer to each of the thousands of decision a teacher makes in the course of each day that can impact students, and the "right" balance between preparing students for the demands of standardized tests that reward rote learning with our determination to help them develop critical and capable thinking, reading, writing and speaking skills.



***Responsible Pedagogy.*** Teaching and learning do not exist independently from individual beliefs, political systems, or historical conditions. Every teacher holds political views of the events that have taken place in our country's history and continue to unfold around us. Yet it is crucial recognize that political views are also personal views - products of upbringing, education, philosophy, and experience. In order to best serve students, pedagogies should reflect attempts to reconcile personal attitudes and politics with the duty to a larger civic community. In the classroom, teachers have a responsibility not to treat individual cultural and political views as if they should be universally held. A teacher also has the right not to act merely as an official mouthpiece for the government or a particular political party. Public school teachers deserve far more credit for their efforts in helping students make sense of world around them and preparing for the future than is routinely offered by the media and politicians. Responsible educators utilize their training and experience to keep their teaching focused on service to students, parents, and the communities that support and fund our education system – imperfect and frustrating though it may be. The best educators practice a style of teaching that is predicated on the understanding that students that they have the right know that there exists a great diversity of opinions and that as citizens in a democracy they have the responsibility to make informed use of the freedom they have been born with or immigrated into in order to ensure that those freedoms are sustained for theirs and future generations. It is my primary intention in this chapter to illustrate those practices and theories that promote responsible education and those that are antagonistic to effective public schooling in a democratic and free society.

Teachers, administrators, and policy makers can best serve our students and communities by engaging in *Responsible Pedagogy*. Responsible educators are dedicated to working within the American educational system in order to change the system into one that is focused on students, not tests; knowledge production and critical thinking, writing, speaking, and problem solving skills, not merely the rote reproduction of facts and figures; and increased conversation among teachers, administrators, education policy makers, and the public in order to ensure that schools and teachers are adequately funded, that funds are spent wisely, and that decisions about what is best for students, communities, and the nation are made in a spirit of cooperation, not coercion. Responsible educators are driven by the belief that the system of publicly funded education in this country is worth saving and improving and that the people and ideology running the system are what need to be changed. Responsible educators recognize that there is work that can be done outside of the system as well, for indeed a child's education does not stop at the school doors. Consequently, by developing a system of education dedicated to promoting, training, and adequately compensating teachers, by encouraging administrators to treat teachers not as employees, but as professional partners, and by challenging local school districts and state departments of education to reorganize and streamline their bureaucracies, the voting public can indeed be convinced that America's public schools and colleges are worth providing with secure and stable funding. Of course, this will only be possible when those in positions of power in education and politics stop blaming teachers for the problems with public schools and open a dialog to work

with teachers in order to develop better management plans, assessment strategies, and school environments in which both teachers and students feel respected as individuals.

Effective teachers are those whose practices are guided by philosophy and whose philosophy is in turn altered and transformed through practice. In the classroom, engaging in responsible pedagogy means recognizing that the most effective instruction comes when a teacher is able create as synthesis between a critically informed philosophy of education that guides the creating meaningful lessons and assignments and a flexible approach to classroom management and instructional delivery in which the teacher adapts lessons and assignments to fit the needs and abilities of individual students as well as serving the needs of a classroom of thirty or more students. Naturally, balancing such demands is extremely difficult and needs constant fine-tuning. Teachers that care about what they do spend an exorbitant amount of time developing and reflecting on their methods, strategizing about how to reach students struggling academically and/or psychologically, rethinking and reorganizing lessons or units of study that could be approached differently to better engage students, rewriting worksheets, homework, and test questions to provide students the opportunity to display what they have learned, discussing professional and classroom issues with fellow educators and gleaning information about ideas that work and getting help when a lesson has flopped. Many teachers lay awake at night wondering what they can do differently to get through to just one more student, occasionally forgetting, because of their passion to help students succeed, that they are never expected to solve all of their students' problems on their own and over the course of a single term of study.

Since one of aims of teachers is clearly to encourage stronger support among taxpayers for public education at the local, state, and national levels, educators have a responsibility to the public to explain that their appreciation for the strong support for the education system that already exists in the country and why we deserve increases in funding that will go to improve the learning conditions of America's students and to raise teacher salaries to the level of other professionals in order to encourage the best and brightest of America's students to consider teaching as a viable profession.

Responsible educators are dedicated to being representative, responsive, and respectful. These three principles guide the best teaching and learning that are taking place in classrooms across the country. It is my contention that if the education system at large were to focus its principles and practices on those of its best teachers and educational theorists, by engaging in and promoting the 3 R's of *Responsible Pedagogy*, that the potential exists to reinvigorate the system, achieve lasting success among students from elementary to college levels, and to elevate the status of educators to the level of respect and compensation awarded doctors, engineers, and other public service professionals.

**Responsible pedagogy is representative.** bell hooks argues for a pedagogy that must, "engage students in a learning process that is 'more rather than less real.' In my classrooms, we work to dispel the notion that our experience is not a 'real world' experience" (hooks 76). The people who dedicate their lives to educating children and young people tend to be motivated by a commitment to justice, equality, and the sincere desire to help individual students make sense of the intricacies of the adult world. For literature teachers, this means teaching how literary texts represent the

historical and political contexts in which authors live and write. Science teachers will explain how complex chemical equations are representations of molecules that exist in the real world. The conception of the 'real world' that students most often bring with them into the classroom is that which has been mediated for them by corporations who are driven, not by the pursuit of knowledge, but by the accumulation of profits. To say that the classroom is more real than the real world means that teachers are able to more closely represent the world as it actually is, not as the media chooses to represent it. Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe explain, "To many of our students, reality has been formulated through corporate sponsorship. . . . Indeed, what our students designate as knowledge emerges from a media-saturated cultural landscape" (3). The result for teachers who are sophisticated enough to understand that either/or logical constructions, such as President Bush's assertion that one unquestioningly supports U.S. military efforts or is a defender of terrorism, deny the complexity of social and political interactions is that they struggle to engage students whose conceptions of reality are skewed by media and people in power that paint the world as being composed of dichotomies rather than fine gradations. What shows up on the evening news or on the front page has at least as much to do with the battles between corporations for ratings and sponsorship dollars as it does with the unbiased coverage of important world events. The classroom provides students with one of their only opportunities to receive unmediated information and lessons on how the media operates. As Trend explains, "A critical approach to learning asks one to question and reevaluate the legitimacy of knowledge forms, theoretical positions, ideological postures, and the presumed grounds on which arguments are based"

(*Cultural Pedagogy* 3). From a very young age, students are encouraged to 'read between the lines.' This is the basis of a critical approach to literature and is a key building block for a critical approach to understanding the world we live in.

Teachers have a responsibility to (re)present the media by contextualizing it for students. According to David Sholle and Stan Denski, authors of "Critical Media Literacy: Reading, Remapping, Rewriting," teachers must not simply teach to students to understand a text but to encourage students to confront a text; "this entails reworking the traditional practice of ideological critique, which tends to locate meaning in the text as an *isolated object* of interpretation" (21). Students examining music videos, for example, should be taught not only how to analyze how the parts of a music video contribute to an understanding of the video as a whole, but to understand the ideology of a video as the combined influence of artists, audiences, and the corporations that produce, promote, and present the videos.

Media texts remain the dominant forms of public communication and art in the twenty-first century. It is essential then that teachers become media savvy and receive extensive training in media literacy so that they can understand how the media operate and engage in the "reproduction of dominant culture and dominant practice" in order to then help students develop the skills to effectively decode media texts (Sholle and Denski 8). Because society is composed of both dominant and marginalized voices, responsible educators work to balance their instruction between texts that reproduce the dominant cultural ideology as well as "the opening up of new spaces from which traditionally marginalized and excluded voices may speak" (7). Teachers who relegate the media to the realm of popular culture, deeming it unworthy of serious academic

inquiry, are denying students the right to understand those texts that have the most influence on their everyday lives. Students who are able to critically analyze and interpret media texts minimize the power of those texts to manipulate them. We are bombarded by information and efforts to persuade us. Yet if teachers can help students attempt to understand how systems of power and representation operate, then we give students the ability to take part in improving those systems so that more voices are represented. Through this process, perhaps, hope and justice can triumph over fear and oppression.

Individual educators and the educational system as a whole must also encourage testing and assessment strategies that require students to effectively represent their understanding of topics and processes to the best of their abilities. Assessment is a vital part of any classroom since effective testing measures a student's ability to explain his or her own understanding of a subject area's key topics, concepts, or processes. An ineffective test measures only a student's ability to repeat back to an instructor only the instructor's understanding of the subject area. Standardized multiple-choice tests are ineffective because they do not call upon the students to represent their ability to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize information. Responsible educators believe profoundly in the importance of carefully planned and executed assessment of students. Giroux explains:

I am not arguing against forms of assessment that enhance the possibility for self and social empowerment among children, forms of assessment that promote critical modes of inquiry and creativity as opposed to those that shut down self-respect and motivation by instilling a sense of failure and humiliation. On the contrary, assessments are important to get students to reflect on their work and the work of others ... as a measure of deliberation, critical analysis, and dialogue. (*Abandoned Generation* 89).

Multiple-choice tests that are part of a comprehensive assessment strategy can be an effective measure of student ability. But when such tests are the only measure of success for entire schools, districts, states, and nations it is proof that policy makers and the public are making uniformed choices that affect the lives of students. Effective teachers use a variety of testing strategies (actually relying least on multiple-choice and true/false tests) in order assess what students are understanding and struggling with in order to plan future instruction. Effective assessment involves such methods as asking students to write in a variety of formal and informal modes, engaging in active and directed conversation in the classroom, assigning meaningful reading and homework assignments, and completing projects related to the subject matter. Clearly, the government does have important reasons for assessing student learning on a wide-scale. And yes, cost-effective methods of assessing students can be found if the government is willing to think outside of the multiple-choice box. If policy makers and the public truly want to find out what students are and are not capable of before spending millions of dollars to make improvements, they will first need to develop more effective methods of assessing the nation's public school students, not increasing the reliance on standardized, multiple-choice testing.

**Responsible pedagogy is responsive.** Teachers understand the importance of staying up to date on local, national, and world events, attempting to sift through the debates in order to understand situations and conflicts to the best of their ability. Our decision to teach is often the result of our own response to the world. But our own understanding of the world is different from that of our students, and thus we are motivated to give them the tools to navigate a course to success in these turbulent



times. Teaching begins with listening. We listen to our students to find out what they know and how they know. An effective teacher does not tell students how to interpret every story, but helps students develop the skills to analyze and interpret on their own. Giroux views the classroom as a borderland where students and teachers can come together to achieve remarkable success. As he explains:

By being able to listen critically to the voices of their students, teachers become border-crossers through their ability to not only make different narratives available to themselves and other students but also by legitimating difference as a basic condition for understanding the limits of one's own voice. ("Resisting Difference" 206).

For a teacher, crossing the border means reaching out to students. As I have stated in several ways, a responsible educator does not dictate to nor attempt to indoctrinate students into a particular ideology. Rather, a responsible educator creates a welcoming environment for students in which their particular backgrounds and abilities are valued for what they are. Teachers respond to students by first understanding where they are coming from and second by showing them where they can go. We understand that our time with students is limited by the many demands on them, so we value every moment we have.

As educated professionals and part of the government funded education system, teachers are representatives of critically thinking adults as well as the dominant cultural ideology. Teachers legitimate the dominant ideology by choosing to work for and thus represent one of its primary institutions – the public school. As critical thinkers and compassionate individuals, effective teachers are models for their students of what a remarkable world can be achieved in a spirit of cooperation and dedication. With the help of outstanding teachers, students can cross the border into

the complexities of the adult world with the ability to see things as they are and the preparation to respond constructively to the conflicts that are part of that adult world.

In working to help students cross the border from childhood into adulthood, teachers have a duty to address adult issues with their students. Clearly, adjustments must be made for the grade level of the students and the makeup of particular classes, but students do have the right to know what adults are arguing about and why they're having those arguments. Writing on the battle to shape the future of literature education, Gerald Graff argues, "For some time I have been trying to persuade my fellow teachers that one of the best responses we can make to the increasingly heated conflicts that have erupted over American education is to teach the conflicts themselves" (v). Teaching students that disagreement exists over how they should be educated seems natural. As an example, an appropriate response to the current War on Terrorism should be to teach students the point of view of the government as well as that of those who oppose such efforts as fruitless. Only by responding to current events, scientific debates, questions raised by and about literary texts, and such teaching materials as those provided by the NEA, and by teaching students how to do the hard work of critically reading and analyzing media and printed texts while conducting effective research to understand those texts within broader contexts can teachers fulfill their responsibility to offer students the best possible education.

Of course, teachers cannot respond to every conflict that arises in our society and subject teachers do have a lot of information to pass along. Yet teachers in various subjects should all be introducing their students to the conflicts that arise in the field. *Shakespeare in American Communities*, for example, provides one way for

literature, government, art, education, and cultural studies teachers to introduce students to the conflicts over the politics of arts and culture that exist among experts in the field. The materials included in the resource kit are reflections of scholar Harold Bloom's view that Shakespeare, "has become the universal canon, perhaps the only one that can survive the current debasement of our teaching institutions, here and abroad" (17). Bloom argues that when reading, performing, or teaching Shakespeare "what does not work, pragmatically, is any critical or theatrical fashion that attempts to assimilate Shakespeare to contexts, whether historical or here-and-now" (10-11). Students would never know it from the *Shakespeare in American Communities* educational materials, but many of Shakespearean and cultural studies scholars disagree adamantly with claims such as Bloom's. Students exposed to these materials would never dream of knowing that professors disagree about Shakespeare. Stephen Greenblatt, for example, explains how Shakespeare's works are indicative of political and social conflicts in the English Renaissance, "It is very difficult to argue that *The Tempest* is *not* about imperialism. (It is, of course, about many other things, as well, including the magical power of theater). The play . . . is full of allusions to contemporary debates over the project of colonization" (289). And while Greenblatt proves that Shakespeare can and should be historicized, in his essay "Shakescorp Noir," Douglas M. Lanier points out that Shakespeare continues to be used today for his value as cultural icon. Analyzing such corporate-management manuals as *Shakespeare on Management: Leadership Lessons for Today's Managers*, Lanier makes the case that "Shakespeare remains by and large an emblem of cultural legitimation for the existing social and economic order, an order dominated at this

moment in history not by nation-states but by a global hegemony of corporate multinationals” (161). It is not incumbent upon teachers to agree with Greenblatt or Bloom but it is essential that students be informed that such scholarly conflict exists. By responding to students, as well as by modeling for them a responsible response to contemporary society and politics educators can encourage them to do the same for the next generation when they are adults.

**Responsible pedagogy is respectful.** The building of shared respect between instructors and pupils is a key to all effective instruction. Responsible teachers respect students for who they are, not for how high they score on a state assessment. A teacher who respects her or his students’ right to learn how to think and respond critically, even despite the best efforts of some students to forgo that right, is there for the right reasons. If a teacher is going to respond to students by listening to their voices, with the goal of teaching them how to represent their ideas and opinions more effectively, they must first have an inherent respect for students. Responsible educators do not merely tolerate racial, gender, or class differences. Instead they actively respect these differences as essential to a viable community. One of the best pieces of advice I ever got was from a vice-principal who I worked with during my first year at South Albany High School. Though she expected the schools students to respect their teachers and work their hardest, she taught me to remember that “every kid has a story.” Students in today’s world bring a lifetime full of experiences with them into the classroom that can have positive and negative consequences for their learning and behavior. Teachers respect the difficult situations in which many students find themselves. Teachers respect parents and communities by challenging

students to meet the highest standards of academic and personal success. Teachers respect the nation by dedicating their lives to the service of the public. Teachers respect their profession by engaging in professional development workshops, taking additional courses in their subject area, and by working to improve the unions that represent them at bargaining tables and in the halls of power at the state and national levels.

One of the most important ways in which teachers show respect for their students, communities, and democracy is by challenging them to think critically about the world. By teaching students how to analyze both the content and context of books, films, television and other written and media texts they are promoting critical literacy. As Douglas Kellner explains, "Critical literacy gives individuals power over their culture and thus empowers them, enabling people to create their own meanings, identities, and to shape and transform the material and social conditions of their culture and society" (xiv). Given the proper tools and knowledge of how the media work to create images and promote products, students can develop their own understanding of their role in the larger culture.

Respecting the ability of students to think for themselves, and understanding that people learn best when they are active in their learning and not merely passively receiving information from a teacher the way they would from a TV documentary, effective educators do not spend all of their time in class simply providing information. This respect creates another balancing act for teachers. It is one thing for a teacher to write a thirty-page journal article or longer book carefully analyzing films, literature, or forest policies. It is another thing entirely to teach students how to

develop their own analytical skills. Respecting students means not only (re)presenting the world to them, it also means allowing the space to respond. Respecting students means engaging them in dialogue, allowing them to articulate a different position than the one you have, encouraging them to find their own examples to share with the class, and teaching them how to articulate their own analysis of texts. In order to avoid hypocrisy a responsible educator must certainly practice his or her own pedagogy. It is not enough to simply tell students about the world; it is essential to talk with them about it. According to Paulo Friere, a teacher must be “radically democratic and responsible and directive. *Not* directive of the *students*, but directive of the *process*, in which the students are with me . . . the liberating teacher is not doing something *to* the students but *with* the students” (104). Friere’s comments clarify the importance of understanding that working with students is considerably more difficult than simply talking at them all day and explaining your own prowess at critical analysis. Given that a typical middle or high school class may have thirty or more students, it remains essential that a responsible educator not engage in practices that merely serve to undercut her or his insistence on promoting democracy, compassion, justice, and conversation. What is remarkable about Friere’s comments is the suggestion that in order to practice instructional methods that respect students a teacher must be ‘radically’ democratic. For those who appreciate the Socratic/democratic model, such methods do not seem to be at all radical, but fair, well reasoned, and in the best interests of students and communities.

**Education in Crisis: Culture Wars and Teacher Terrorists.** Unfortunately for students, parents, and communities, the current ideology driving American education is not dedicated to responsible education. Instead, the Republican education agenda, marked by the passage and implementation of the severely underfunded No Child Left Behind Act, has come to dominate American education at the administrative level. In the classroom teachers are still blessed with a good deal of freedom as they seek to practice their profession but more and more teachers are being pushed to abandon responsible education and succumb to the pressures imposed by state officials and school administrators obsessed only with increasing scores on standardized tests. The ideology and practices currently driving American education are rigid repressive, and radical. As in many states, the situation has progressed to the point that in Oregon eighteen school districts, “backed by the state PTA, superintendent, and teacher and school board associations” filed suit against the state legislature, arguing that “state school funding is inadequate in violation of two sections of the Oregon Constitution” (Pittman 12). Similar lawsuits have been filed in thirty-eight other states. By changing education policies at the national and state levels, and encouraging the election of politicians dedicated to supporting responsible pedagogy rather than more testing, perhaps the public can be convinced of the need to support education in positive ways so that schools do not have to resort to lawsuits in order to get the funding they deserve. Simply electing Democrats to office will not solve the problem since Democrats have been unwilling to confront the Republican education agenda. While Democrats are clearly more interested in increasing funding to public education they need to articulate an approach to students that does not reproduce the

commitment to big business. Progressive politicians must also articulate the ways in which they will improve education funding by working with teachers and administrators, not corporate executives, to find a more accurate way to assess students' ability to think critically and creatively.

I have worked both as a scorer for the Oregon state writing assessment and on a panel with fellow English and reading teachers that reviews passages and questions for the Oregon state reading assessment. Without question, the writing assessment provides a more accurate reflection of a student's ability to articulate complex ideas. Multiple-choice questions are inherently limiting in the way in which they are constructed. If teachers are going to be driven to teach to the test, and the public is certainly not willing to give up standardized tests, let us at least work in the short term to find more responsible ways of measuring student achievement.

The conservative approach to education is rigid in its adherence to a narrow view of culture that it has promoted as part of a wide spread campaign to dominate American politics and attempt to shape education according to its own moral vision. In 2006 Americans continue to be engaged in what is widely referred to as a cultural civil war. Evidence of this war pervades the American political, social, and media landscapes. The most pitched battles in this war have centered on the highly contested presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, both tightly-contested, single-state Electoral College victories for George W. Bush. In both elections, 'moral values' ranked among the most important issues for voters. According to the cognitive scientist George Lakoff, in order for the radical Right "to gain and maintain political power, disunity is required. . . . Their method for achieving this has been the cultural civil



war—a civil war carried out with everything short of live ammunition” (Lakoff 87). The term ‘culture war’ first gained popularity in 1991 with the publication of *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* by James Davison Hunter. Also in 1991, conservative columnist George Will went on the offensive against the Modern Language Association, which had opposed the nomination of conservative Carol Iannone to the National Council on Humanities:

In this low-visibility, high intensity war, Lynne Cheney [Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities] is secretary of domestic defense. The foreign adversaries her husband, Dick [Secretary of Defense], must keep at bay are less dangerous, in the long run, than the domestic forces with which she must deal. Those forces are fighting against the conservation of the common culture that is the nation’s social cement. (Will 288)

That Will’s article appeared in the widely circulated magazine *Newsweek* and was subsequently reprinted in anthologies of cultural theory are indicative of broad attack against responsible educators. The following year, failed presidential candidate Pat Buchanan used his primetime speech on the opening night of the Republican National Convention to proclaim, “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the nation we will one day be as the Cold War itself” (“Culture War” 1).

Using the dominant form of cultural reproduction, the mass media, and effectively merging the corporate Right with the religious Right, the Republican Party has managed to secure the reins of power in all three branches of the federal government. Neoconservatism, or the New Right, may be characterized as the dominant political and social ideology in contemporary America. As Paulo Friere contends, “from the point of view of the ruling class, of the people in power, the main

task for systematic education is to reproduce the dominant ideology” (Shor 99-100). For the Right, the reproduction of its ideology and attempts to achieve victory in the culture war take on two primary forms in the classroom: the promotion of a narrow and disproportionately white, patriarchal, and Christian conception of culture and a reliance on standardized testing.

The conservative approach to education is evident in multiple subject areas. Attempts to promote a fundamentalist, abstinence only, teaching of sex education, and the pitched battles over whether educators should be forced to teach a religious theory of intelligent design alongside of the scientific theory of evolution taking place in such states as Kansas are examples of the conservative influence on science education. In the humanities, conservatives primarily focus their effort on advocating a curriculum based in the Western canon. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. effectively sums up the conservative approach to culture in his best-seller, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. According to Hirsch, “Only by piling up specific, communally shared information can children learn to participate in complex cooperative activities with other members of their community” (xv). Culture, in Hirsch’s definition is thus a concrete noun, a specific set of texts and information that educated or ‘literate’ people know. Defining standard written English as the stable instrument of communication used by educated Americans, Hirsch argues that “the chief function of literacy is to make us masters of this standard instrument of knowledge and communication” (3). In other words the ultimate goal of humanities instruction should result in the mastery of the language by students and that such mastery is attainable only when students know all of the ‘things’ that educated people know. This conservative approach to

literacy appears to be altruistic. Hirsch argues that culturally illiterate people are condemned to poverty and “knowing that they do not understand the issues, and feeling prey to manipulative oversimplifications, they do not trust the system of which they are supposed to be masters. They do not feel themselves to be active participants in our republic and they do not turn out to vote” (12). In order to combat cultural illiteracy, teachers should forget about discussions of issues such as race, gender, and class and focus simply on teaching students as much as possible of the information that ‘literate’ people know.

If you want to talk to those in power, Hirsch’s model suggests, you have to talk their language. And the role of public school teachers should be to pass along as much of this pile of specific information to students. Hirsch’s book has since become a franchise. Originally published as a list in *Cultural Literacy*, the piling up of specific information that is supposed to represent educated Western culture became the material of Hirsch’s *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch has subsequently developed his list of culturally important names, places, titles, and dates into a series of grade-level specific books for parents and educators. Where the conservative definition of culture breaks down is to think that the List signifies culture, when in fact it is the historical context in which the list is created as well as the act of choosing specific information to go on the list and the act of promoting that specific list that must also be considered when attempting to define culture.

In its attempts to project a common culture into education conservatives are explicitly telling students that they must become like those in power to have a voice in our democracy. As Peter McLaren explains:

Conservative multiculturalism wants to assimilate students to an unjust social order by arguing that every member of every ethnic group can reap the economic benefits of neo-colonialist ideologies and corresponding social and economic practices. But a pre-requisite to 'joining the club' is to become denuded, deracinated, and culturally stripped." (93-94)

The conservative conception of culture articulated by Hirsch and other conservative scholars creates borders. Cultural literacy and the ideology that represents is an either/or conception of reality that characterizes the rigid approach to foreign policy, economics, and social issues. There are two other problems with expecting responsible educators to engage in teaching such material to the exclusion of media texts, a diversity of voices, and critical analysis.

First, this conservative approach to education stresses 'what' literate people know, not how they know. Truly literate people are able to critically analyze what they read, listen to, and watch, not merely regurgitate a list of facts. According to Hirsch, "Literate people know who Falstaff is, that he is fat, likes to eat and drink, but they can't reliably name the Shakespeare plays in which he appears. . . . In short, the information that literate people dependably share is extensive, but limited" (126). There simply isn't much sense in promoting a system of education based on such reasoning. The only conceivable reason for needing to know who Falstaff is would be to drop the name at a cocktail party so people think you are smart and will perhaps let you in to the club. I simply can't imagine standing in front of a group of students and telling them, "you need to know who the major characters of the play are but you don't need to try to understand what motivates them or what kinds of themes Shakespeare is asking you to consider. You should know about the 'To Be or Not To Be' speech from Hamlet but don't worry about trying to understand it as a reflection

on life and death.” I certainly would not want to go to a doctor who knew what a thyroid was but not its function in the body or to a mechanic who knew what a distributor was but not how it functioned in conjunction with the rest of the engine. Students need to learn how information functions as part of a context. To reason critically means to understand how information is related. To know information without knowing how to effectively situate and analyze that information may serve one well on a game show such as *Jeopardy*, but serves little useful purpose in making sense of the world or applying problem solving skills to a new challenge at the workplace.

The other issue with a rigid conception of culture is that it accepts a definition of culture as a concrete set of specific information – a Western tradition handed down from generation to generation. If there is a common culture it is that which we call popular culture, not the mere subculture of a group of elitist intellectuals. The attempts by conservatives to make their specific definition of culture become the dominant and given definition of culture serves as an attempt at hegemony. As Dick Hebdige explains,

the term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert ‘total social authority’ over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by ‘winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural’ (Hall 1977). (Hebdige 365).

The white, Anglo-Saxon culture is merely a subculture, though it is clearly the dominant subculture in our contemporary civilization. Culture theorists tend to understand culture as a substance that is produced as the result of interaction between people in different positions of power. According to Trend, “Although produced in

differing circumstances and regimes of legitimization, the generalized substance we call culture is something that all of us fashion in the course of our daily lives as we communicate, consume, and build the world around us. We make it as it makes us” (*Cultural Pedagogy* 9). Trend’s conception of culture alters Hirsch’s definition by accounting for active nature of culture. By narrowly defining culture as a mere list defined by specific groups, Hirsch and other conservatives inaccurately portray the complex ways in which elements of culture are, to borrow Stuart Hall’s terminology, produced, circulated, consumed and reproduced (Hall 91). That Hall’s terms are all verbs is a key element to understanding culture more fully. Culture is composed both of substance and of action. Culture signifies the vast number of ways in which people share their ways of life (an diverse and nearly innumerable amount books, artworks, political debates, celebrations, etc. that are common to some but never all members of societies) as well as the processes that determine what aspects of culture a person experiences and passes on to others over the course of a lifetime. A definition of culture must reflect the sense of motion by which culture is constantly created, changed, and forgotten as people interact with one another socially. Like the marsupial duck-billed platypus, which is neither a mammal nor a reptile yet shares characteristics of both, or light, which is neither a particle nor a wave yet shares characteristics of both, Culture, to describe it linguistically, is neither a noun nor a verb yet shares characteristics of both.

Along with promoting its own rigid definition of culture, the Right has also served to repress poor and minority students by subjecting them to tests that reinforce racial and class divides in schooling. In Oregon, for example, students are subjected

to standardized testing at nearly every grade level. If they don't pass a test on the first attempt they are generally expected to take the test up to twice more in an effort to pass. With multiple-tests in multiple subject areas, an enormous amount of classroom time is taken up by efforts to prepare students for tests and to then administer the tests. Many politicians and scholars, such as former president of the Association of Literary Scholars, Roger Shattuck, endorse efforts to make passing such tests a requirement of high school graduation (Shattuck 21). The Idaho State Board of Education, for example, has recently implemented a plan requiring all students graduating in 2008 to pass state achievement tests in order to earn a diploma and the board has further proposed forcing all students to take a standardized college entrance exam (the SAT, ACT, or Compass) regardless of their post graduation plans ("Board Refines" 1-2). Idaho and other states claim that such efforts are necessary to prepares students to compete in a global economy. According to National Public Radio, efforts are underway in Washington, D.C. to require standardized testing at America's public colleges and universities. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings recently appointed Charles Miller, a longtime advocate of standardized testing for colleges, to head a commission looking into the possibility of requiring standardized tests at all of the 3,706 publicly funded institutions of higher learning (Sanchez).

If cultural hegemony represents the attempts of social conservatives to manufacture consent and maintain a position of social dominance, standardized testing represents the attempts of corporate conservatives to maintain their position of economic dominance. According to reading scholar Bess Altwerger, "the types of knowledge, skills, and dispositions desired by business and demanded by the world

economy presupposes an industrial model of standardization that stands in direct opposition to . . . critical literacy” (Altwerger 37). Steven Strauss has analyzed the corporate view of schooling by examining publications of the Business Roundtable, an organization of corporate professionals. According to Strauss, “Corporate America wants schools to be thought of as ‘workforce development systems,’ whose function is to churn out a new breed of ‘knowledge workers.’ . . . To avoid straying from this agenda, it has demanded that it be tested repeatedly to monitor progress” (71). Driven by a model of education meant to favor the desires of corporate America rather than the right of students to learn the skills of critical analysis and self-awareness, our increasingly standardized system of public education is harming students and is antagonistic to any American claim to endorse freedom, justice, and the rights of individuals to achieve success.

Not only are standardized tests the instruments of big business, such tests also perpetuate racial and class divides that public education is inherently opposed to. According to Giroux, “Researchers have found standardized tests to be racially biased. . . . Standardized tests have always favored the rich and powerful, [with] their origins in the eugenics movement in the earlier century” (*Abandoned Generation* 87-88). In his defense of cultural literacy, Hirsch agrees that the “the verbal SAT is fundamentally a vocabulary test” (142). That the SAT inherently favors white, affluent students who come to the test with a higher degree of white literacy and are also more often able afford to take expensive SAT preparation courses presents a clear problem for a great many students. As Hirsch concedes, “the verbal SAT remains a dark mystery to disadvantaged students and an obstacle to and a subverter of



confidence and hope” (142). Unfortunately, Hirsch is unable to reach the conclusion that it is the tests that need to be changed to offer a fairer assessment of students’ abilities. Instead, Hirsch falls back to his contention that if we teach disadvantaged students to be more literate (read – to use the language of educated white people), they will have a better chance at success. Conservatives want students to change and fit the mold of the dominant order. Responsible educators understand that testing should measure a student’s ability to think critically and should not simply be a measure of their ethnic and class background.

In their drive to control education, those in power have pursued a radical agenda. By persuading the public that standardized testing is needed to ensure national security and simultaneously attacking teachers as enemies of the public the Right is continuing down a path that has led critics such as Giroux to argue that “the United States is at war with young people. All youth are targets, especially those marginalized by class and color” (*Abandoned Generation* xvi). According to the education historian Gerard Giordano, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, researchers and critics worked to expose the nature of standardized testing as and “accused pro-assessment groups of cultural insensitivity, elitism, unrestrained ambition, conflicts of interest and greed. They especially remonstrated against the large assessment companies” (Giordano 223). That the public would support standardized testing in the face research that demonstrates their shortcomings seems counterintuitive. Yet conservatives have been able to actually increase public support for standardized testing since World War II. According to Giordano, they have accomplished this increase in support by linking standardized testing to national

security in reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) in which the conservative authors, “equated educational decline with military and economic vulnerability. To protect the nation from disaster, they demanded that educators emphasize basic academic skills. They also insisted that they monitor learning through systematic testing” (Giordano 223). According to Giordano, conservatives were faced with the dilemma of figuring out a way to maintain public support when the nation was not at war.

Driven by the radical desire to maintain power, conservatives have resolved to use wartime rhetoric when the country was not at war. To instill the public with the sense of constant danger, Republicans, according to Giordano “portrayed incipient international threats as substantive dangers. They then represented conservative education programs as the best defense against those dangers . . . [and] they demanded compliance with national standards and mandatory testing at all schools” (235). Today conservatives continue to use national security threats as a way to steer students away from the humanities by enacting large scale cuts to federal student loan funding while increasing specific funding for sciences. In February 2006, on a close, party-line vote, the House of Representatives approved “a \$12 billion cut to federal student loan programs – the largest cut to the programs in history” to help pay for billions in tax cuts for the nation’s wealthiest citizens (Traylor 1). While cutting broad based funding, the House bill also directed a portion of the cuts back to students, spending \$3.7 billion to fund the creation of the National Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent (or SMART) grants (Traylor 2). According to the federal student aid website, eligible students include only those majoring in “physical, life, or computer sciences, mathematics, technology or engineering or in a foreign language determined

critical to national security” (“Message from Secretary Spellings” 1). Providing funding to students passionate about science is one thing, but when one examines the context in which the SMART grants have been created it is clear that they are the product of a conservative military and economic strategy that seeks to quell the dissent that arises most strongly from students in the humanities who encouraged to think critically and speak out against conservatives.

Driven by their ideology rather than a sincere dedication to American children, parents, and communities radical conservatives will stop at nothing to achieve their goal of political and cultural hegemony. Because educators tend to be politically liberal and have not been shy to voice their frustration with radical conservatism they have remained a primary target of those in power. According to reading professors Leslie Poynor and Paula M. Wolfe, those who stand in the way of Republican tactics have been under increased scrutiny since the election of President Bush. Poynor and Wolfe explain, “We experienced disdain, insults, even outright intimidation when we tried to criticize current research and policy in our own state of New Mexico” (1). They accuse G. Reid Lyon, President Bush’s former reading czar and now head of the National Institute of Child Health and Development, of manipulating data and public opinion to support his conservative views (3). Poynor and Wolfe also contend that teachers unwilling to go along with conservative educational agenda “have been and are being threatened and removed from their jobs. University faculty are being blacklisted. And in a recent speech to the Coalition for Evidence Based Policy, G. Reid Lyon made the shocking statement that if he had one piece of legislation he could pass it would be to ‘blow up colleges of education’” (5). Giroux also claims that

conservatives have sought to quell all forms of dissent among educators, pointing out that “across the United States, a number of professors have been either fired or suspended for speaking out critically about post-September 11 events” (*Abandoned Generation* 23). It is a frightening time to be a public educator.

America’s system of publicly funded education has always been the site of important political, ideological, and social conflicts since its inception. Important battles over such issues as segregation, censorship, sexism, and curriculum development have forced us to constantly reassess and improve our strategies for helping students achieve success. But at no point since the dark days of McCarthyism has the attack on America’s public school teachers and professors been as pointed as it is today. As George Will’s above comments attest to, the attack is nothing new, of course. But the rhetoric has become nothing short of terrifying. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 rocked American consciousness into a new sense attention to political rhetoric. President George W. Bush has been at the forefront in articulating the conservative frame of reference in response to world events. On September 20, 2001, in his “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” President Bush offered a rhetorical frame that has since dominated the language of American public discourse. Poised in front of an American flag, Bush made the rhetorical move of explaining the specific events of 9/11 by linking them to a broadly conceived military threat against the United States: “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated” (Bush 1). Bush was effectively calling for American armed forces to be mobilized to find and destroy not a single group of terrorists, but an entire

ideologically driven threat to the United States, *every* terrorist group. As his speech progressed, Bush invoked the language of Christian religious fundamentalism, claiming “Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them” (1). Since 9/11, the word terrorist has come to symbolize the ultimate evil threat to democracy, bent on killing innocent civilians and destroying the American way of life.

In 2004, then Secretary of Education Rod Paige, speaking to an important meeting of the National Governors Association, called the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teacher’s union with 2.8 million members, a “terrorist organization” (King 1). *CNN* reporter John King’s article includes statements from the NEA and Democrats; Republicans either chose not to respond or were not interviewed for the story. Though he was later obliged to apologize for his comments, by linking teachers to terrorists Paige created a rhetorical frame that typifies the ways in which American educators (and workers unions in general) have been characterized by the radical Right. Since the individual members of a terrorist organization referred to as terrorists, the individual members of a terrorist teacher’s union may be easily referred to as teacher terrorists.

Due to the nature of his position as the highest figure in American education, Paige’s comments forced those on both sides of the political spectrum to answer the question, “Are teachers terrorists?” Obviously there were those out there ready to answer that question in the affirmative. Brandon Howse, author of *One nation Under Man: The Worldview War Between Christians and the Secular Left*, answered the question in the affirmative, claiming, “If the NEA had its way . . . every teacher

leaving the training institutions and entering the profession [would] be an anti-American socialist with the goal of becoming an ‘agent of change.’ . . . What does that make them? I think Secretary Paige knows” (Howse 6). If Paige had said teacher deserve to make \$100,000 a year, bloggers and columnists around the country like Howse would have been asking, “Do teachers deserve to make \$100,000?” Again, verbal attacks on teachers are nothing new, but in an era in which teacher are already being punished for daring to dissent, and in which those suspected of terrorism have been routinely rounded up and subjected to physical and mental abuse, it is hardly a stretch to wonder what the future holds if such vicious attacks are not replaced by a respect for educators as professionals dedicated to the best interest of students.

**Don’t Think of a Radical: (Re)Framing Pedagogy.** The full effect of comments such as those made by Bush and Paige comes from the creation of frames. As Lakoff articulates in *Don’t Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, “Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. . . . They are part of what cognitive scientists call the ‘cognitive unconscious’—structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense” (xv). When a writer or politician makes the conscious effort to frame an issue, it means he or she uses the language to promote specific ideas and ideologies. Lakoff argues that Republican’s conceive of politics in terms of narrative frames based on a “strict father model” of family values and that they then manipulate facts to fit their ideological worldview (6). When Democrats respond to Republicans without adjusting the frame, the frame is perpetuated and the

language of Republicans becomes the language of political discourse. Lakoff points out that “it is important to recognize that many of the ideas that outrage progressives are what conservatives see as truths—presented from their point of view” (17-18). The rigid conception of culture that makes little sense to critically minded teachers makes perfect sense from the conservative mind-set. Setting culture up as a list of specific items fits the strict father morality conservatives believe in. Recognizing their own dominance of American politics and economics, conservatives seem to sincerely believe that the way to help the disadvantaged is to train them to be more like those with power and influence.

Clearly, progressives understand that the Republican approach to education is rigid, repressive, and radical, but they have not yet been able to effectively reframe the debate in order help the public understand what is going on. According to Lakoff, “a lot of liberals believe that the facts will set you free ... that everybody is a rational person, all you have to do is just tell them the facts, they’ll reason to the right conclusion. It’s false” (Brancaccio 1). Lakoff makes a very strong argument for why, in the face of such obvious facts attesting to their manipulation of the public with such Orwellian programs as the Clear Skies Initiative or Healthy Forests Act and repression of disadvantaged Americans in the cutting of student aid, welfare programs, and taxes for the wealthy elite, Republicans have been able to manufacture consent through carefully chosen language and framing of political and social debates.

My development of *Responsible Pedagogy* is a reframing of a number of educational theories that share the common goal of a profound dedication to engaging students as people who are engaged in their own struggle to define themselves and

make sense of their role as both free individuals and members of a collective society. The pedagogies I refer to generally as 'critical' are known variously as critical, cultural, feminist, liberatory, and radical, and are most widely associated with such scholars as Henry Giroux, David Trend, bell hooks, Paulo Friere, and Peter McLaren. I share with Jennifer Gore the experience as a teacher that "it was through critical pedagogy that I first found a language with which to name my frustrations with dominant approaches to education" (xiii). Indeed my own analysis in this chapter of key problems facing education is possible only through the language of critical pedagogy. Yet critical pedagogy has been unable to make significant inroads into the mainstream education system. In her 1993 book *The Struggle for Pedagogies*, Gore explains why the influence of critical pedagogy continues to be marginal among teacher education institutions. "Framed as they so often are, within modernist concerns for universal explanations and for progress, I argue that these radical pedagogies are doomed to fail" (xii). I offer my own undergraduate training in secondary education at Idaho State University and a graduate course in Literature and Pedagogy at Oregon State University as further evidence that these critical thinkers continue to receive attention only on the fringes of mainstream pedagogy. Though the term 'critical' in critical pedagogy is meant to signify the practice of assisting students in the task of developing critical thinking and writing skills, the language of critical pedagogy is such that it engages quite effectively in disparaging analysis of the problems with contemporary education, but has not managed to inspire changes on a wider level.



The problem with critical pedagogy is that it gives teachers the language to carefully articulate what they are *against*, but it fails to offer a satisfactory answer of what effective teachers stand *for*. Trend defines a critical approach to learn as encouraging students to “question and reevaluate the legitimacy of knowledge forms, theoretical positions, ideological postures, and the presumed grounds on which arguments are based” (*Cultural Pedagogy* 3). Such an approach is clearly important when making sense of the complex connections between power and freedom in our world. However, as Lakoff’s explanation of frames makes clear, critical pedagogy gives us the tools to respond to frames, but has been unable to frame pedagogy in such a way as to have broader impact on education. Parents and communities deserve to know that teachers stand for something rather than against something. Yet in articulating what they stand for, writers of critical pedagogy define themselves as radicals and subversives, further alienating them from teachers and administrators interested in adopting a responsible approach to educating students. bell hooks goes perhaps the furthest from the mainstream, arguing “Feminist pedagogy can only be liberatory if it is truly revolutionary because the mechanisms of appropriation within white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy are able to co-opt with tremendous ease that which merely appears radical or subversive” (hooks 76). In an era when teachers are already being referred to as terrorists, such language plays right into the hands of conservatives. Paulo Friere explains that liberatory educators, working to demystify the reproduction tactics of the dominant ideology, are “swimming against the current” (Shor 100). However, I contend that if we frame critical education according to our

values, by explaining that critical thinking is responsible and should be the mainstream approach to education, we bring ourselves one step closer to achieving that goal.

I do not conceive of my dedication to training students to think critically as radical or subversive but instead as a profoundly responsible approach to helping students achieve personal and professional success. Responsible pedagogy is an attempt to frame a discourse in education based on the values of effective educators and backed up by facts about how students learn best. As Giroux asserts:

The first responsibility of public schools is not to test students as if they were empty containers to be measured, stamped, and processed, but to address what it means to provide them with the critical reading, writing, language, technological skills, knowledge, social experiences, and resources they need—in order to enhance their capacity to understand, comprehend, engage, and when necessary to transform the world in which they live (*Abandoned Generation* 89).

In framing this responsible approach to education as representative, responsive, and respectful, I am attempting to avoid the negative connotations associated with a pedagogy that is subversive or radical. The words radical and subversive carry with them negative connotations. According to the Microsoft Word Thesaurus, which I refer to as an indicator of the general connotative meaning of words in usage, synonyms for the word 'radical' (when used as a noun) include: extremist, militant, revolutionary, and fanatic. Such words all connote an inflexible, fundamentalist way of perceiving the world. Fanatics do not engage in conversation, but in indoctrination. In this way, pedagogy that refers to itself as radical undermines a commitment to the process by which students and teachers construct meaning by cooperating, working together to make sense of the world around us. The parents and communities who fund education and to whom educators are ultimately responsible do not want their

children to be subjected to the tactics of radicals determined to use public schools in an attempt to manipulate children to conform to a teacher's fundamentalist ideology. Unfortunately, that manipulation is the case today as the Right continues to use implement its strategy to secure dominance in American culture. By promoting a responsible pedagogy perhaps we can shift the focus of education back to its primary mission of serving the best interests of students, parents, communities, and the nation and away from the efforts to serve only the interests of corporations and cultural extremists.

### Chapter 3

#### ***Shakespeare in American Communities: How the National Endowment for the Arts is using the Bard to Secure its Future and Save America***

The National Endowment for the Arts plays a pivotal role in the promotion of publicly funded art in the United States. As a lightning rod for cultural debates, the NEA's political fortunes are an indicator of the health of arts funding nationwide and attempts by those on both sides of the political spectrum to shape American culture. When contextualizing arguments about the role the NEA plays in American culture, it is easy to bemoan the fact that arts funding represents only a tiny fraction of the federal budget. For fiscal year 2006, the United States Congress provided the arts organization with a budget of \$125.6 million ("Federal Funding" 1). Former NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer points out in his memoir *Leaving Town Alive: Confessions of an Arts Warrior* that even when the NEA budget was at one of its highest points, around \$169 million in 1988, it was still less than the cost of a single low-tech military aircraft (Frohnmayer 11). Others put a more positive spin on the budget figures. Current Chairman Dana Gioia argues that the NEA has a greater financial impact than its budget suggests. According to Gioia, "Even though public funding represents only a small portion of total arts funding in America . . . every dollar the NEA gives tends to raise \$7" (Peterson 1). It is also possible to suggest that as it has managed to improve its public image since the censorship controversies of the 1990s the NEA has helped to increase overall funding for arts organizations in the country. The group American's for the Arts released a study in 2002 that claims, "America's nonprofit arts industry generates \$134 billion in economic activity every

year . . . [including] \$53.2 in spending by arts organizations (“Arts & Economic Prosperity” 1). The \$53.2 billion spent by nonprofit arts organizations represents a 45% increase from 1992. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in reshaping its image, the NEA has promoted a conservative view of culture, appealing to Republicans in Congress and the media in an effort to maintain funding. By analyzing *Shakespeare in American Communities* in the context of the NEA’s historical role in the government, it is possible to understand the political nature of arts funding in the United States. In the end, even if nothing new can be said of the NEA, we can at least see the power of Shakespeare, not as a writer, but as a cultural symbol, to influence the debate over the role of art and literature in society. Because of the Bard’s immense appeal to those on both sides of the political spectrum, the NEA’s choice to tie its public image to arguably the most beloved writer in the history of the English language is a savvy move that if anything proves the immense cultural clout the Bard holds in the twenty-first century. Any initial criticism of the Shakespeare initiative has since abated, and the NEA’s politically conservative educational materials continue to make their way into American classrooms. Framing their ideology through Shakespeare has proved very successful for the cultural Right.

Chairman Gioia has articulated two primary motivations behind the promotion of *Shakespeare in American Communities*: one is the need for the NEA to reshape its public image in order to secure funding increases after facing complete elimination in the mid-1990s, while the other is an attempt to take a first step in what the organization characterizes as “an imminent cultural crisis,” namely “accelerating declines in literary reading among all demographic groups of American adults”

("Reading at Risk" vii). In a 2003 speech to the National Press Club, titled "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?", given shortly after he took office, Gioia argued that the NEA has a well-documented record of "transforming American culture" and that the agency's proper role is "leadership, stability, and advocacy" (Gioia, "Can the National..." 1). In promoting *Shakespeare in American Communities* the NEA believes that it can use Shakespeare's popular appeal and literary value to secure its own future, while doing what it can to have a positive impact in what Gioia characterizes as a battle over the future direction our culture will take. And although the NEA has not received significant budget increases, the move to promote Shakespeare is paying off in terms of a renewed image. Shakespeare is helping the NEA secure its own future, but whether or not the initiative will have any lasting impact on literacy trends in the United States will be more difficult to judge.

In order to understand the ideology behind *Shakespeare in American Communities* it is necessary to first summarize the history of federal arts funding in the United States and the development of the NEA over the last forty years. I will then turn my attention to the Shakespeare program itself, explaining how it is closely linked to a debate about cultural literacy and the impact of the mass media on American's reading habits. The rhetoric of NEA's current report on literacy, "Reading at Risk," follows in the footsteps of such conservative reports as "A Nation at Risk" (1983) which claimed that a review of standardized test scores reflected a massive crisis in American education, "To Reclaim a Legacy" (1985) in which then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) William Bennett "promoted a return-to-excellence agenda that effectively narrowed the humanities to

the history of dead, white, Western men,” and “Toward Civilization” (1988) in which then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts Frank Hodsoll “did his bit in implementing a conservative cultural agenda” by also promoting an arts education agenda dedicated to the study of narrow list of Western art (Lord 77-78). The Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s have not been forgotten. As the nation’s standard-bearer for publicly supported art, the NEA remains in a tricky situation. As both a political tool of those in power, and a force for encouraging positive change in society, the organization plays a complex role in American politics.

**Born in Paradox: NEA History.** By understanding both the formative goals of the NEA and the controversies that surrounded it in the 1980s and 90s, one can more fully grasp the role that the Shakespeare initiative plays in the historical context of a government arts organization that is funded by American taxpayers. The act that created the NEA and the NEH charges the organization with serving seeming contradictory roles. One of the act’s key declarations of purpose states:

The world leadership which has come to the United States cannot rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the Nation’s high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit. (“National Foundation” 1)

The government’s broad mission for the NEA, paradoxical as it seems, is for the organization both to help the United States become a more enlightened and wise society through public participation in the arts, and to increase its global domination through cultural imperialism. As the first permanently funded federal arts

organization, the NEA was conceived at the crossroads of American attempts to find a balance between democracy and imperialism.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the federal government provided minimal support for the arts. The first instance of federal support occurred in 1817, when John Turnbull was commissioned to paint Revolutionary War scenes to hang in the Capital Rotunda (*The National Endowment for Arts, 1965-2000* 6). In 1859, President James Buchanan appointed a National Arts Commission that was “disbanded two years later because of a lack of Congressional appropriations” (6). At several other points over the next several decades, individual members of Congress and Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft proposed various government funded arts councils, none of which ever resulted in sustained funding (6-7).

The first sustained period of federal arts support occurred under the administration of Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt. Part of Roosevelt’s New Deal program, his plan to bring the country out of the Great Depression, was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Through the WPA the government funded a Federal Writers Program, Theater Project, Art Project, and Music Project. During 1935, for example, 40,000 artists were directly employed by the government (Raven 11). According to Arlene Raven, “During the 1930s . . . the desire for social change spawned public programs” (11). It is important to note then that such desire for social change was encouraged by a Democratic administration. Indeed the Right has worked diligently since the Reagan era to dismantle the social democracy advocated by Roosevelt. But social change was far from the only thing on Roosevelt’s mind.



Economics clearly motivated the government to act as well. Clearly, several conflicting factors, such as economics and cultural politics, were at play during these early days of government funded art; factors that would play pivotal roles in the story of the NEA's birth and the public arts funding in the country to the present day.

World War II and the Republican dominated McCarthy era were characterized by the government's refusal to spend public funds on public art. The outbreak of World War II put a virtual halt to New Deal federal arts funding. Artists were employed by the government to create propaganda for use in the war effort, but the government stopped funding the kinds of projects that gave artists the freedom to design and create art according to their own visions. According to the film historian Leonard Maltin, the government basically took over Walt Disney Studios to create propaganda films (both cartoon and live action films) to convince the public of such things as the evils of Nazism, the importance of buying war bonds, and the need to conserve gasoline (Maltin, video). Despite President Dwight D. Eisenhower's advocacy of a Federal Advisory Commission on the Arts in his 1955 State of the Union address, the proposal did not get through Congress (*The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000* 8). Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, American artists worked without financial assistance from the government.

President John F. Kennedy championed the arts, but no federal programs were created during his years in office. Kennedy, like many liberals, advocated a view that supported the efforts of individual artists to create works of art. Kennedy felt that funding artists would reflect the true talents of American society. In a 1963 speech at Amherst College, Kennedy declared, "I see little of more importance to the future of

our country and our civilization than the full recognition of the place of the artist" (*The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000* 9). Kennedy appointed August Heckscher as his special counsel on the arts (Brenson 2). Kennedy's approach to arts may be characterized as a trickle-up approach. Liberal arts advocates in Kennedy's mold believe that an official definition of great art serves only the interests of those in power, while allowing working artists the opportunity to create public art can inspire and empower a people.

Fulfilling Kennedy's legacy, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the National Arts and Cultural Development Act of 1964, which included a \$50,000 appropriation (*The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000* 9). Then, in 1965, Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act, which created the NEA and the NEH. The organization is headed by a chairperson who is nominated by the President, confirmed by the Congress, and serves a term of four years ("National Foundation" 3). A political environment that allowed passage of the bill, and the funding appropriations that followed, were possible because the Democratic Party held overwhelming majorities in both Houses of Congress. In the 88<sup>th</sup> Congress (1963-1965), Democrats held a 259-176 seat majority in the House and a 66-34 seat majority in the Senate. In the 89<sup>th</sup> Congress (1965-1967), which passed the National Foundation Act, Democrats held a 295-140 seat majority in the House and a 68-32 seat majority in the Senate (Office of the Clerk and United States Senate websites).

In his book *Visionaries and Outcasts*, Michael Brenson argues that dual factors were at work in the Johnson administration's push to create the NEA and NEH. In one respect, government officials believed profoundly in the importance of artists to

help lead the nation out of the troubled times of the McCarthy era, in which left-leaning artists, writers, and educators were intimidated, fired, and blacklisted. In a 1965 paper presented at a government panel created to discuss a responsible approach to arts funding, Gillford Phillips discussed the importance of an influential 1963 report in which Heckscher concluded that a renewed interest in art in American culture could be traced to three factors: "An increasing amount of free time, not only in the working week but in the life cycle as whole; a new sense of the importance of cities; and a recognition that life is more than the acquisition of material goods" (Phillips, qtd. in Brenson 3). Brenson claims that "for the first time, respectable people in high places were coming to believe that the country needed artists *because* they were outsiders" (3). The same artists who had faced the real fear of communist witch hunts if they presented anything that could be construed as un-American or dissenting of free enterprise were now sought out by a government responding to a perception that the public was now viewing capitalism through a more critical lens (4). Artists were needed because they presented a view opposing conservative attempts to impose cultural and political domination.

The irony that the federal government was now embracing liberal artists was not lost on the artists themselves, who were naturally skeptical of the new public arts organization. Many artists worried that the NEA would be little more than a propaganda tool of the government that would function in response to, and similarly to, the system used by Soviet Union, which maintained strict official control of art (Brenson 8). However, the framers of the NEA went to great lengths to assure artists that the new system would support artistic freedom, not stifle or manipulate it.

Federal officials spoke personally to many artists and invited a number of them to attend government meetings to provide input and direction as the arts council developed from proposal to reality (8-9). Artists had scored a major victory; it seemed the days of having to worry if their art would brand them as un-American and land them in court had ended.

In another respect, the attitudes of some members of the government did not represent the views of Lyndon Johnson, without whose staunch support the NEA could not have come into being. While important figures in the government seemed eager to promote the arts for their ability to inspire the citizenry and promote cultural awareness, Johnson clearly had other reasons for signing the National Foundation Act into law. As Brenson explains, "Johnson never felt at ease with the arts, but he had good reasons for supporting this act. He knew . . . that culture had become an American Cold War weapon soon after World War II ended" (1). As I noted above, the language of the National Foundation Act echoes Johnson's reasoning. The United States government saw itself in a fierce battle to prevent the spread of communism that had manifested itself in such countries as the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba. Johnson viewed the spreading of American cultural and political ideology that represented individual freedom, civil rights, and artistic creativity as a way to increase American influence and moral authority internationally. On one hand, the government would spread democracy by convincing the world of its dedication to enlightened wisdom and artistic flowering; on the other, it would put a stop to the spread of communism through military force. The Domino Theory, the fear that that communism would rapidly spread if not held in check at every opportunity, was a key

argument in the case for invading Vietnam. Yet Vietnam was not proving to be popular with the public. Johnson was aware of "how much good press" Kennedy had received for supporting the arts and was "looking for support from East Coast liberals opposed to Vietnam" (1). Since many arts supporters were among those most adamant in their disapproval of the war, Johnson was supporting the arts in order to deflect criticism of his military policy, thus using the NEA as a tool of both foreign and domestic policy. Forty years later, George W. Bush continues to play the same political game as Johnson, seeming to support the arts in order to gain support from arts supporters otherwise opposed to his military and economic agendas. The creation of the NEA helped Johnson develop what he saw as an important weapon in the ideological war with communism, while at same time playing to his political base for support during troubled times.

The purpose of this discussion of the NEA's origins has been to clarify the point that, from its inception, the NEA has played paradoxical roles as an instrument of the federal government in that it has simultaneously been a public service and tool of imperialism. For forty years, the NEA has funded the work of a multitude of creative artists, even, at times, funding art subversive of the dominant cultural order. At the same time, though, it has functioned as an effort by the government to convince the world of the inherent greatness of democracy and capitalism. As Bill Ivey, NEA Chairman from 1998-2002, has noted, through 2000, the NEA had distributed 111,000 grants (*The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000* 5). Between 1965 and 2000, the number of local arts agencies rose from 400 to 4000, nonprofit theaters from fifty-six to 340, symphony orchestras from 980 to 1800, opera companies from 27 to 113,

and the number of dance companies increased eighteen-fold (5). However, while the NEA has clearly contributed to the spread of public art, Arlene Raven argues that “at the same time it has inevitably codified and limited the category” (15). That such codification would happen as a natural result of government arts funding is understandable. As both Brenson’s research of the NEA’s origins and the act that created the organization make clear, the NEA was never intended to be merely an altruistic endeavor to support American artists. A clearer understanding of the dual nature of the NEA helps explain why the organization must be characterized as functioning in American culture to both encourage and undermine genuine artistic freedom. That said, since the 1990s especially, such efforts to undermine artistic freedom have clearly increased. In today’s NEA such codification is an integral part of the conservative approach to culture.

Before delving fully into the arguments surrounding *Shakespeare in American Communities*, it is important to bridge the gap between 1965 and the late 1980s by touching on key historical aspects of the early years of the endowment and move toward the controversies that engulfed the organization in the more recent years.

Early in its history, the NEA budget reflected the notion that the organization was more a political gesture than anything else. Yet the organization proved early on to be adept at funding projects that would have lasting influence. The NEA was appropriate a budget of less than \$8 million for its first year. It awarded its first grant to the American Ballet Theater and spent its largest amount, \$1.3 million to establish the American Film Institute (AFI) (*The National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000*

13-14). The AFI continues to this day to be a leader in film preservation, demonstrating how a little initial funding can go a long way.

With the election of Republican President Richard Nixon in 1968, one might expect decreased interest in federal arts funding. But the opposite proved true of Nixon's tenure and that of his replacement, Gerald Ford. By 1970, the NEA budget was still only \$8.25 million, but the organization continued to broaden its range of influence by incorporating grants to influence education. In a move that would have implications in the standardized testing debate, the NEA awarded a grant to the College Entrance Examination Board to support the establishment of three innovative Advanced Placement courses, two in the visual arts and one in music (18). In 1971 two important changes were made. Congress nearly doubled funding to \$15 million and Nixon appointed Nancy Hanks as chair (19). By the time Hanks' two terms as chair ended in 1978, the NEA budget stood at just under \$124 million, much higher than today's budget given inflation, and a fourteen-fold increase over her tenure (28).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the NEA proved itself adept at funding organizations and individuals that would play prominent roles in the world of arts and letters. It also enjoyed a positive public image. Some key grants of the time include a Promising Writers' grant to Alice Walker in 1970 and a grant to Garrison Keillor in 1974 which he used to create *Prairie Home Companion*, a show that celebrated its thirtieth anniversary in 2005 (18, 22). Other key grants include one that created *Live from Lincoln Center*, a fixture on public television, and a grant in 1981 to support the creation of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. (28, 33).

During the Reagan years, budget deficits caused by massive spending on military and nuclear weapons development led to the first cuts in the NEA's budget in 1982. (34). The Reagan years also saw the publication of "Toward Civilization", mentioned above, and an increase in efforts by the Right to stifle artistic creativity and promote a conservative view of Western culture. According to David Trend:

The now all-too-common practice of censoring government-sponsored artists can be traced to the Reagan administration's 1981 Mandate for Leadership transition document prepared by the Heritage Foundation. Foreshadowing campus pc/multiculturalism debates, it argued that the National Endowment for the Arts had grown 'more concerned with politically calculated goals of social policy than with the arts it was created to support.' . . . the result was a disproportionate reduction of support to community-based arts organizations, many of which served constituencies comprising people of color, sexual minorities, the elderly, or the infirm. (*Cultural Pedagogy* 32).

Funding increases did return however, and while they slowed to so-called liberal causes, the organization remained popular. In 1985 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences went so far as to award the NEA an honorary Oscar, "in recognition of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and dedication to fostering artistic and creative activity and excellence in every area of the arts" (Awards Database). Despite its best efforts, the Right had been unable to sway public opinion toward its conservative view of culture. The NEA remained dedicated to funding the efforts of individual creative artists and community arts organization. But then, in 1989, Republicans got their wish when all hell broke loose at the NEA.

Conservatives in Congress and the media had a field day attacking the NEA over several controversial artistic displays that had received NEA funding. According to Trend, congressional staff scrutinized 95,000 NEA grants and fewer than 20 of these grants became the focus of a national controversy (*Cultural Democracy* 32).



Republicans were able to successfully frame the debate as one over obscenity rather than religious politics. The most prominent attacks surrounded the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, which depicted gay men in sexual positions, and a photo by Andres Serrano entitled *Piss Christ*, which depicted a crucifix immersed in urine (O'Connor 4-5). Controversy erupted in the early 1990s over the work of such artists as David Avalos, Mel Chin, Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, Tim Miller, and David Wojnarovitch (Trend, *Cultural Democracy* 31). Republicans such as Jesse Helms and Pat Buchanan exploited the controversy to further their own political ambitions. The NEA has never fully recovered from the episode. During his 2000 presidential bid Buchanan was still relying on the controversy to attract fundamentalist Christian voters. In an ethical appeal to conservative moral authority, Buchanan continued to insist on the elimination of NEA funding. He argued, "We must dump the cult of Robert Mapplethorpe and replace him with an American Michelangelo" (Buchanan 1). Of course, it should be pointed out here that while historians debate the exact nature of the Michelangelo's lifestyle, it is widely acknowledged that Michelangelo was homosexual ("Michelangelo"). Though ironic, Buchanan's statement is indicative of the Right's efforts to conflate religion, art, and politics in order to win votes and remain in power.

Appointed NEA Chairman in mid-1989, John Frohnmayer was at the center of the storm that raged over definitions of nature of art and role of arts funding. Frohnmayer's begins his memoir by recalling the day in early 1992 he was called into the White House and asked to resign from his position two and a half years into his terms (2-3). According to Frohnmayer, the George H.W. Bush administration had no

interest in his opinions or approach to art and wanted nothing more than to avoid controversy (99). Attacked by conservatives as “the government’s official smut purveyor” Frohnmayer received little support in attempting to stave off a public relations nightmare that and protect the integrity of the NEA from a conservative attack that nearly toppled the organization (1). Frohnmayer’s experience illustrates again that politicians were interested in the NEA as a political symbol rather than for its value in promoting artists. In this case, supporting the NEA was not going to serve the interests of the Bush administration. Republicans have managed to frame the public debate very effectively, and Bush risked alienating conservative voters. The administration distanced itself from the organization rather than defending it.

The “Culture Wars” continued unabated through the 1990s. In 1990, Congress amended the act that established the NEA, adding that it would have to abide by standards of decency deemed acceptable to the American public (O’Connor 1). In response to the measure, artists around the country were outraged and more than \$1 million in NEA grants were refused (Robinson 37). Calling the legislation, “unacceptable, reprehensible, and insidious” New York Shakespeare Festival producer Joseph Papp refused a NEA grant of \$323,000 that had been awarded to the company (37). An NEA challenge to the law made it to the Supreme Court in 1998. In her majority opinion, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor argues that the restrictions imposed on the NEA by Congress did not violate the First or Fifth Amendment (10-11). Between 1990 and 1995, things went from bad to worse for advocates of a responsible approach to publicly funded art.

In the early 1990s, the Republican National Committee published its 'Contract with America' in *TV Guide*, the nation's most widely-read magazine. Trend explains that "as academic liberals scoffed at conservative pandering and clichés, the GOP was engineering the biggest political coup in recent memory" (*Cultural Democracy* 41). The Republican Party swept into power in Congress in 1994 and the result was devastating for the NEA. Prior to the November elections, Democrats held a 258-176 seat majority (with one independent) in the House and a 56-44 seat majority in the Senate. Republicans began the next session of Congress with a 230-204 seat majority in the House and a 53-47 seat majority in the Senate (Office of the Clerk and United States Senate). In 1995, which the NEA's literature characterizes as a "pivotal year," the House succeeded in passing a bill to eliminate funding for the organization (*National Endowment for the Arts, 1965-2000* 54). Only a carefully crafted compromise with the Senate avoided the suspension of funding. The compromise resulted in a 39% reduction in the budget for fiscal year 1996, slashing the budget from \$162.5 million to \$99.5 million (54). The NEA survived, but was significantly chastised and kept under close watch by conservatives waiting for another chance to gain power by exploiting public unease with contemporary art.

Appropriations for the NEA remained steady for 1997 and began to rise slightly between 1998 and 2002 during the tenure of Bill Ivey. However, the NEA's budget has not recovered to pre-1996 levels over the past decade. While concentrating his efforts on balancing the budget, Democratic President Bill Clinton did not risk a challenge to Republican efforts to stifle the NEA's efforts to fund artistic production. Trend argues that Clinton's NEA Chair, Jane Alexander, "performed more as public

relations figure than as advocate of free speech" (*Cultural Democracy* 33). Concentrating their budget on tax cuts for the exceptionally wealthy and increases in military spending, Republicans during the Bush administration have little interest in funding art, with the exception of acceptable conservative programs such as *Shakespeare in American Communities*.

In 2002, Michael Hammond, who initiated the promotion of a Shakespeare tour, took over as NEA Chair. However, Hammond passed away after serving eight days ("Othello" and the NEA" 1). Hammond was replaced by Dana Gioia in 2003. Gioia was nominated with the support of First Lady Laura Bush (Garment 1). Gioia is a former marketing executive, managing the Jell-O account at General Foods. In 1992 he gave up business in order to pursue a full-time writing career (Palatella and Kass 1). Gioia is a poet, an editor of literary anthologies, and has been a commentator on American culture for the BBC. He is the first poet to be named NEA Chair. Among his literary accomplishments, Gioia won the National Book Award in 2001 with his poetry collection, *Interrogations at Noon*.

**Appealing to Conservatives: the New NEA.** Dana Gioia first made waves in the arts world in 1991 when the *Atlantic Monthly* published "Can Poetry Matter?" his scathing attack on contemporary poetry. Gioia argues in the essay that "poetry had shifted from mainstream artistic and intellectual life into a subculture of poets writing for other poets" and he called for "increased conversation between poets and the public" (Sofer 1). Gioia caught the attention of the arts community with such claims as "Today most readings are celebrations less of poetry than the author's ego. No wonder the

audience for such events usually consists entirely of other poets, would-be poets, and friends of the author (Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?). Launching his attack directly against creative writing professors working for universities that grant fine arts degrees, Gioia claims that "like subsidized farming that grows food no one wants, a poetry industry" was functioning to "serve the interests of the producers and not the consumers" (Palatella and Kass 1). Critics claim that Gioia "appointed himself a proxy of the popular will" with such phrases as "most readers now assume" and "to the average reader, the proposition . . . may seem self-evident" (Palatella and Kass 1; Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter? 2).

In their 2002, article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "10 Years After, Poetry Still Matters," John Palatella and Leon R. Kass analyze the events surrounding the publication of Gioia's essay. Palatella and Kass point out that "the magazine received about 200 pieces of mail in response," and that although Gioia's book, *Can Poetry Matter?*, "became a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism and received many favorable reviews," they remain, like many writers, "still irritated by Gioia's argument" (1). Palatella and Kass agree that such projects as poet laureate Billy Collin's "Poetry 180," a poem-a-day syllabus for high school students published in 2002, are examples of "verse with a very narrow emotional and linguistic range" of the type Gioia attacked (2). But they point out that Gioia's essay involves faulty reasoning and that the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Can Poetry Matter?* was "commemorating not longevity but obsolescence" (2).

As NEA Chair, Gioia is in a position to put his ideology into practice. Gioia's vision is perhaps best summed up in the conclusion of "Can Poetry Matter?":

It is time to experiment, time to leave the well ordered but stuffy classrooms, time to restore a vulgar vitality to poetry and unleash the energy now trapped in the subculture. There is nothing to lose. Society has already told us that poetry is dead. Let's build a funeral pyre out of the desiccated conventions piled around us and watch the ancient, spangle-feathered, unkillable phoenix rise from the ashes. ("Can Poetry Matter?")

Gioia holds a grandiose vision of the death of literature appreciation in the United States and the ability of those with romantic sensibilities to rescue it where academics are doomed to fail. Yet Gioia does not celebrate those who encourage others to write poetry, even if they have to take university courses to find the time and motivation to pursue their passion. Instead he celebrates an attitude similar to Hirsch's by creating a border between art that matters and art that doesn't.

So why would this seemingly fiery romantic, who just prior to agreeing to serve as NEA chair was teaching in Sonoma, California, "at the Teaching Poetry Institute, which conducts writing workshops – yes, workshops – for teachers and writers" decide to join forces with a president generally considered to be even more uninterested in supporting arts and literature than his father (Palatella and Kass 3). Despite the fact that First Lady Laura Bush is a former teacher, George W. Bush has been the target of an onslaught of attacks from educators and writers, who are outraged by this resident whose signature education initiative "No Child Left Behind" is constantly attacked for damaging American education as an unfunded mandate forcing ever more standardized testing on American children and stringent standards on educators. Under the Bush administration's direction states school funding for arts has declined and funding for math has increased. In the past year alone, more than ten states have raised their requirements in math and science ("Board Refines" 2).

Increased requirements in math and science inevitably lead to a reduction in elective offerings in art and other subject areas. The point here is that Gioia is in a position of working to support the arts while serving as part of administration that is reducing arts funding in schools.

Perhaps as chair of the country's most influential arts organization, Gioia now has the chance to fulfill his pledge to help rescue society from supposed literary collapse. He seemed to suggest this sense of mission and at the same time distance himself from the president in explaining why he took the position, "I didn't want this job, I was having a very successful career as a writer . . . [but] I felt that, you know, if somebody had to come here and rebuild the endowment, unfortunately, it was going to be me" (Brown 1). To trust or not to trust Dana Gioia, that now seems to be the question for many following the efforts of this poet and former marketing executive as he turns to Shakespeare's cultural cache to help rebuild the organization. The choice of Shakespeare can't help but put one in mind of Richard III's 'acceptance' of the crown from the Lord Mayor and Buckingham in Shakespeare's play when thinking of Gioia's description of his own rise to power.

In 1991, Gioia lamented of poets that, "as individual artists they are almost invisible" and it seems ironic that the essay would lead him down a path of notoriety that would bring him to the place where he would even be considered for nomination to such a high-profile job ("Can Poetry Matter?"). Given his background in business Gioia must realized that being NEA Chair will hardly do lasting damage to his ability to succeed financially as a writer after leaving office. He cannot fail to see how the more recognizable he is the more books he will sell. Of course, such knowledge also

makes him astute enough not to admit that in an interview about why he took the job. But we must acknowledge that his attacks on poetry and his role at the NEA have helped to make him the kind of visible poet he argued did not exist in 1991.

Whatever his motives for accepting the president's nomination, one cannot fail to notice how Gioia has used his skills in marketing to great advantage as NEA Chair. According to Michael Phillips, theater critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, "the best thing Dana Gioia's done for the NEA is get people thinking . . . that the existence of the NEA should not be questioned" (Blair 1). It is important to note that the Shakespeare initiative is only the most public of the organization's many grant programs. For example, in an interview with Marianne Combs of Minnesota Public Radio in late 2003, Gioia noted that "last year, in addition to the beginning of the Shakespeare program, we sponsored 138 new plays – including a play that ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize" (Combs 1). Of course, Gioia did not mention a single author or title by name. Only Shakespeare gets mentioned by name. Shakespeare is also the only individual artist mentioned by name in Gioia's request for funding given before the House subcommittee (Gioia, "Fiscal 2006" 1). The NEA's website also does not feature individual artists. Although he quotes Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and reads a brief poem of his own, Gioia also does not mention a single contemporary artist in his 2003 speech to the National Press Club (Gioia, "Can the National" 1). At first, this seems strange given that elsewhere Gioia has said, "while the agency has made 120,000 grants to artists and arts organizations . . . most of those grants are invisible to everyone except the recipients" (Gewertz 1). Looked at from another angle, it is a safer bet for Gioia not to mention the names of any artists who could



arouse even the slightest bit of controversy. But such tactics underscore the NEA's willingness to bend to the pressures of Republicans at the expense of promoting contemporary artists on a broader scale. If Gioia believes in increasing the visibility of contemporary artists he has not put this belief into practice as NEA chair.

Perhaps the best example of just how much Shakespeare has been able to accomplish for Gioia is the fact that the NEA has enjoyed the renewed support of political conservatives, including one of the most influential conservative publications in the country, the *National Review*. According to the *Review*'s Roger Kimball, "After a couple of decades of cultural schizophrenia . . . the NEA has become a clear-sighted, robust institution intent on bringing important art to the American people" (qtd. in Winn 1). Appealing to Republicans with such programs as *Shakespeare in American Communities* is a shrewd maneuver that has paid huge dividends for the NEA in terms of its image with the powers that be in Washington, namely the Republican Party and conservative journalists. A celebration of the initiative on Capitol Hill in October 2003 seemed more of a public relations photo opportunity for lawmakers rather than a true honoring of the effectiveness of Shakespeare in promoting literacy. Republican Representative Tom Petri of Wisconsin who took part in the celebration of the success of Shakespeare in American Communities has a press release about the event on his congressional website. According to Petri's press release promoting the event to his constituents, "Among the highlights was a Congressional skit with excerpted lines from *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure*, and other Shakespeare plays . . . Petri identified his costume as 'some Bishop of something or other,' and said that he enjoyed celebrating Halloween a few days early" ("Cong. Petri Takes Stage" 1).

Certainly, this is another ridiculous, but apparently successful example of lawmakers' use of the NEA to appeal to voters. Gioia is giving Republican lawmakers exactly what they want, a way to appear to be making a grand gesture to support the arts. However, a gesture is all it appears to be. Congressman Petri clearly seems to show no interest in Shakespeare's value as an artist. These statements appeared on Petri's website. Congressman Petri does not worry that his constituents will be utterly appalled that he did not bother to find out the name of his character nor characterized public participation in the theater as being of any more value than playing dress up for Halloween.

Gioia seems to be playing right into the hands of conservatives in Congress, who could care less about Shakespeare's ability to inspire great thinking, than in the fact that he does seem a safe enough choice to allow them to appear to be great supporters of great art. As recent elections have proven, every vote counts. Statements in the NEA's reports and by Gioia demonstrate the lengths to which they are going to ensure popular support for the initiative. For example, some of the cities chosen for Phase Two of the project seem like they were chosen for name value rather than anything else. The Phase Two report includes the following in its introduction:

From Rome, Georgia to Moscow, Idaho; Avon, Connecticut to Belgrade, Montana; Florence, Kentucky to Edinburgh, Indiana; Monaco, Pennsylvania to Armenia, New York; Orleans, Massachusetts to Cuba City, Wisconsin, the Arts Endowment is helping to reinvigorate theater presentations and strengthen arts in communities across the country (2).

True to this NEA marketing strategy designed to catch public attention, the first Shakespeare in American Communities performance in 2003 took place in the symbolically selected New London, Connecticut ("*Othello* and the NEA" 1). Gioia

makes grandiose claims about the value of Shakespeare in order to persuade people to support the effort. In his overview statement on the initiative's website he claims, "In order to understand American culture or American theater one must first understand Shakespeare." Elsewhere he has claimed, "The Shakespeare program has come to symbolize the new National Endowment for the Arts, which is one that's really dedicated to reaching people" (Blair 1). However, it is difficult not to see such appeals to the popular as being attempts at marketing rather than a true sense of reaching out. Such affected language, makes it all the easier to understand how even the organization's attempts at developing programs with popular appeal are underscored by political maneuvering by the Bush administration in using the renewed popularity of the NEA as a political weapon.

The most heated debates about the Shakespeare initiative arose in early 2004 when President Bush proposed an \$18 million increase in NEA funding in his budget request to Congress. The decision was widely covered in the media as the proposed increase would be the largest for the organization since its heyday. In his 2005 appropriations statement to the Congressional Subcommittee, delivered on April 1, 2004, Gioia presented the president's request for an NEA budget of \$139.4 million (Gioia "Fiscal 2005" 1). While the request was attacked as mere political maneuvering by such left-leaning arts supporters as Susan Medak, managing director of the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, it was praised by conservatives such as Roger Kimball (Winn 1). The budget increase received nationwide attention. And perhaps it did help Bush secure a few swing voters in a very tightly contested presidential campaign against Massachusetts Senator John Kerry. One strong indicator of the

political astuteness of Bush's move can be seen in a Wall Street Journal Op-Ed from February 3, 2004 by Leonard Garment. Garment, a former civil rights counselor to President Nixon, is a New York lawyer and chairman of the Jazz Museum in Harlem. Garment's essay demonstrates how difficult it was for liberal opponents of the president to attack him on the arts funding increase. Garment claims that in late 2003, he delivered a lecture to the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University, in which he argued that "the culture wars of the 1980s had flattened government support for the arts for the foreseeable future," but that the Bush administration proposal had breathed new life into hope for government funded support for the arts and that it would be difficult for anyone to find fault with the increase (Garment 1). Many advocates and even opponents were quick to credit Gioia for improving the organizations public image and giving Bush a way to show support for the arts without provoking a moral outcry.

There was far less coverage of the fact that in 2005, after winning the election, Bush proved that his supposed support for the arts had indeed been a political gesture. In his 2006 appropriations statement to the Congressional Subcommittee, Gioia presented the Bush administration's request for an NEA budget \$121.3 million, almost exactly \$18 million less than the previous year (Gioia "Fiscal 2006" 1). These budget figures indicate Bush's support for the organization was nothing more than a campaign tactic. Clearly, Gioia has managed to secure a much greater popular image for the NEA, but the sustained funding increases that one assumes would come along with such powerful taglines as the Shakespeare initiative's motto, "A great nation deserves great art," have not yet taken effect. Perhaps progressive funding increases

will be in the NEA's future; it seems inevitable that they will if politicians on both sides of the spectrum see the opportunity for political gain by supporting the organization's achievements. Clearly the organization has gained a lot by simply avoiding the ire of the Right. Perhaps Gioia has accomplished more for the organization than it appears. With a future free of controversy, the NEA is sure to enjoy at least the nominal support of Congress.

Given Gioia's dedication to promoting Shakespeare rather than contemporary artists in interviews with the press, it seems unlikely that he valiantly does what he can to play the game because he sees it as the best he can in a no win situation to support the arts and try to resuscitate the NEA so that future generations of Americans be inspired to renewed excitement about art that asks its audience to think critically. Can one work for a president like George W. Bush and truly be dedicated to the kind of romantic vision of arts adoration and love of critical literacy that Gioia espouses? As someone who has dedicated his own life to education and promoting great literature, I want to believe that Gioia truly believes in his mission and that liberal critics such as me are merely put off by his ties to Bush and his obvious uses of marketing strategies to further the organization's efforts. But, on the other hand, his rhetoric is so politically affected that one cannot help but be suspicious. In his 1991 essay, Gioia was completely unafraid of upsetting his audience with challenging statements that really seemed to be shot from the hip, such as "Poets must regain the reader's trust by candidly admitting what they don't like as well as promoting what they like. Professional courtesy has no place in literary journalism" (Gioia, "Can Poetry Matter?"). Yet now he carefully avoids frank and open discussion of whether or not he

believes in funding for art that will challenge, and yes occasionally upset audiences. The obscenity controversies are not more than a decade in the past and Gioia has had enough time in his term to speak frankly about his ideology once more. In a 2004 interview *Business Week*'s Thane Peterson challenged Gioia to explain his position on funding controversial art. In promoting the Shakespeare project Gioia claimed, "The purpose of art really is to ensure the completeness of humanity, to cover every human possibility" (Peterson 1). Suggesting that controversial art was necessary to cover every human possibility, Peterson asked, "Could we get something like the Mapplethorpe exhibit funded today?" Gioia replied:

You've asked me a question I've been asked 500 times. Let me give you a frank answer. There are people in this country who are obsessed with fighting the cultural battles of the previous century. My goal . . . is to compel America to answer the following question: What do we see as the future for the 60 million American kids who have been born since the Mapplethorpe exhibition? What role do we want art to play in their communities and their education? (Peterson 2).

As a poet and educator, Gioia is well aware of what the word frank means. But when asked to answer a straightforward yes or no question, he dodged it. Either Gioia is interested in tempering his comments in order to risk his appeal with conservatives or he is unwilling to be more open about his conservative conception of culture and alienate progressive arts supporters. It is this all too carefully crafted political side of Gioia's public persona that makes him hard to trust, even if, like Gioia, one wants to see poetry and a love of all literature rise "like a phoenix from the flames."

**"Reading At Risk": Is There a Literacy Crisis?** Before turning to the program's outreach into education, it is necessary to discuss the controversial report "Reading at

Risk” that seems to have prompted the shift toward educational initiatives. Conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the survey had a sample size of more than 17,000 adults and was comprised of questionnaires making it, according to the NEA “one of the most comprehensive polls of art and literature ever conducted” (“Reading at Risk” ix). A 1997 NEA survey, which, while it reported more favorable statistics, used less reliable survey methods, relying on a random-dial telephone survey” (1997 29). The executive summary for “Reading at Risk” reports ten key findings, summarized here:

- 1) the percentage of American adults reading literature (classified as any work of poetry, drama, or fiction in print or electronic format) declined from 56.9% in 1982 to 54% in 1992 to 46.7% in 2002;
- 2) the percentage of adults reading “any book” declined from 60.9% in 1992 to 56.6 % in 2002;
- 3) “the rate of decline is accelerating;”
- 4) women read more than men but both groups are declining rapidly;
- 5) “literary reading is declining among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics;”
- 6) “literary reading is declining among all education levels;
- 7) literary reading is declining among all age groups;”
- 8) the steepest rate of decline, 28%, occurred among adults age 18-24;
- 9) “the decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion of cultural and civic participation,” 43% of literary readers perform volunteer and charity work as opposed to 17% of non-literary readers; 49% compared to 17 % attend performing arts events; and 45% compared to 27% attend sporting events;
- 10) “the decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices.” (ix – xii).

In its executive summary, the report argues, “If one believes that active and engaged readers lead richer intellectual lives than non-readers and that a well read citizenry is essential to a vibrant democracy, the decline of literary reading calls for serious action” (ix). Like other conservative reports such as “A Nation at Risk,” “Reading at Risk” invokes the rhetoric of fear in order to simplify results that require critical

analysis and give Republicans fodder to manipulate public opinion so that the party can more easily pursue its ideological agenda to remake culture in its own image.

Given what he said of the death of poetry in 1991, it is not surprising that Gioia's response to figures released in "Reading at Risk" would be equally dramatic. As I noted earlier, critics have charged Gioia with presenting himself as a "proxy of the popular will." Such charges seem justified again when analyzing his introductory statement to the report, as Gioia claims, "The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain" (vii).

Yet, although there is much to despair about, the report also includes information that "contrary to the overall decline in literary reading, the number of people doing creative writing – of any genre, not exclusively literary works – increased substantially between 1982 and 2002" (22). This increase may well be due to the availability of creative writing courses at universities and community colleges. One of Gioia's key claims is that an increased use in electronic media are a key factor in the rates of decline and his worries about the future of a nation of people who consume electronic media:

Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice. By contrast, most electronic media such as television, recordings, and radio make fewer demands on their audiences, and indeed often require no more than passive participation. Even interactive electronic media, such as video games and the Internet, foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification.(vii)

This statement is especially interesting given that the report debunks one of the American's primary cultural myths, and one of Gioia's own claims, by pointing out that a person's television viewing habits had no statistical effect on reading habits (14-



15). Why would Gioia make a claim about television that he knew would be contradicted by the very report he is introducing? Did he make the mistake many in Congress do and not bother to read the report? Or is it instead that he wanted the report to prove something that he already believes?

Why would Gioia go to such great lengths to decry the rise of electronic media and yet have the leading figure in the world of cinema, Jack Valenti, act as honorary chair? Is it merely that his audience for "Reading at Risk" would likely be teachers and librarians while the audience for the Shakespeare is larger and perhaps less ready to denounce electronic media? Perhaps the romantic literary side of him is clashing with the politician and businessman role he must play at the NEA, but that's giving him the benefit of the doubt. And what is even more telling, given what he says of television, is that the educational resources packet produced to accompany the initiative relies heavily on electronic media, since it contains a DVD, VHS tape, and audio CD. 25-minute, VHS documentary, *Shakespeare in Our Time*, uses almost exclusively video clips from Hollywood film adaptations in order to reach out to students. Of the video clips used in the documentary, only a handful are from theatrical productions. I was able to contact Al Hillmann, at Hillmann-Carr, the company that produced the documentary. According to Hillmann:

We used film clips rather than stage production clips because we wanted to cover a lot of teaching points . . . Also it was painfully obvious that stage production clips were 1) difficult to learn about, 2) more costly to license . . . 3) often very poorly taped, 4) played by relatively unknown (thus not high-Q actors, especially for captivating teenage audiences) and thus, 5) inferior to the movies in general effectiveness. Dana Gioia and we fully agreed on the desirability of including more theater scenes, and we did use as many theater clips as we could manage to get (Hillman 1).

Hillmann's comments suggest that while Gioia may not be a great fan of television and videos, he sees their value as pedagogical tools in shaping young minds.

The significance of "Reading at Risk" as it applies to the Shakespeare initiative and the conservative approach to culture, are apparent by looking deeper at the report and discovering that a completely negative portrayal of literacy is inaccurate. The fact that television viewing had no impact on literary reading forces one to wonder if the same is not perhaps true of other electronic media. As someone who has been critical of attempts by those like James Paul Gee to tout the learning principals embedded in video games, I have to take a step back and reevaluate my position. People in contemporary civilizations are bombarded with new information and media texts in ways we are only beginning to understand. According to a study conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, "Print, film, magnetic, and optical storage media produced about 5 exabytes of new information in 2002" alone, "equivalent in size to the information contained in 37,000 new libraries the size of the Library of Congress book collections" (*How Much Information?* 1). The report further claims that the amount of new stored information "grew about 30% a year between 1999 and 2002" (1). An important point to consider as well given that the NEA's report focuses on American literacy is that "the United States produces about 40% of the world's new stored information, including 33% of the world's new printed information" (1). Certainly in an environment in which we are bombarded with new information, people trying to make sense of their world will be spending more time reading electronic media and less time reading literary texts. But while one can see that there are more factors at work when evaluating literacy, literature reading and how they effect our

overall development as a culture, Gioia tends to portray issues like a politician, not an educator. That Gioia wants us to see a picture of literacy in black and white, when in fact it contains more shades of gray, is misleading. Is it that he doesn't see the complexity of the issue or is there a reason why Gioia continues to portray the future of literacy with such a doom and gloom mentality? The puzzle of why people are reading less is simply more complicated than Gioia wants to have us believe. A more critical approach to understanding literacy, and its importance to education and a population actively involved in civic events, is necessary given the changes in information production taking place in the country.

The "Reading at Risk" report unleashed a flurry of commentary. According to Mark Bauerlein, Director of the Office of Research and Analysis at the NEA, by December 2004, around 500 stories had already been issued about the report (Bauerlein 1). Though many, like *Chronicle of Higher Education* critic Carlin Romano, do not disagree with the fact that we live in a culture that does not readily encourage private reading, they do not agree with Gioia's interpretation of the data. Romano argues:

Headlines like 'Fewer Noses in Books' or 'Literary Reading Declines in America' may thus distort the more profound finding of *Reading at Risk*: that literary reading, like all reading, may not be so much in quantitative decline as shifting from a recreational to work-oriented activity full of challenge, difficulty, and potential achievement. (Romano 2)

Of course, there is no small bit of irony in the fact that the editors at the *Chronicle*, chose to give Romano's piece the title, "Who Killed Literary Reading?" Others, such as Francine Fialkoff, editor of the *Library Journal*, argued that while Gioia pointed to electronic media as a major culprit, there is much to be gained from increased access

to technology. According to Fialkoff, "As computer use in libraries has soared, so has circulation and author programs, among numerous other activities" (1). Fialkoff also quotes Richard Reyes-Gavilan who, while participating in a panel discussion that took place immediately following Gioia's presentation of the report, described a New York Public Library campaign designed to get teenagers interested in going to the library. The program is called Teen Central, and uses, according to Reyes-Gavilan, "all of the technology . . . that may be killing reading. Eventually they get bored with computers, CDs, and DVDs, and the only thing they haven't explored are the books . . . We're creating a reader where otherwise we might not have the opportunity to do so" (Fialkoff 2). Angela P. Dodson, executive director of the *Black Issues Book Review*, suggests that perhaps African Americans are doing other kinds of reading that were not covered by the report, such as nonfiction biographies and autobiographies like Bill Clinton's *My Life*. In discussing younger readers, Dodson writes:

I do not always know what to make of urban lit or erotica, but I do know that young adults are eagerly buying and reading these books. Isn't it better that our young people are at least reading something . . . My hope is that this unconventional point of entry into the world of books will lead young readers to more substantial literary choices in the future and a lifetime of enjoyment and enrichment. (Dodson 1)

Clearly, we must admit that while Dodson may have a valid point, Gioia could hardly appear justified if the NEA were suddenly to support the publication of erotic literature as its more public nationwide effort to fight literacy. No, the NEA will stick with Shakespeare because it is both a popular choice and there are few who can successfully argue that giving kids their first chance to see a live professional theatrical production is a bad thing.

Like him or not, there is no arguing that Gioia has fostered steady support for the Shakespeare project. The choice of tying the NEA's image to Shakespeare has not only appealed to political conservatives; actors and educators have also gotten on board. Prominent Hollywood actors, not usually thought of for having connections to Shakespearian drama, such as Tom Hanks, Christina Applegate, William Shatner, Michael Richards, and six other American TV and film stars signed up to appear in Lawrence Bridges' documentary *Why Shakespeare?*, which is included in the education resources kit and consists of a series of brief monologues by popular culture icons interspersed with those of adolescents from various ethnic backgrounds, each explaining the cultural importance of Shakespeare and what his verse has meant in their lives. Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University and arguably the most prominent contemporary Shakespeare scholar, agreed to serve on the initiative's advisory panel. After the success of the first year's performances, and in the wake of "Reading at Risk", the NEA decided to more specifically target school-aged audiences. The organization reports that it reached nearly 196,000 children at 1,054 schools between June 2004 and May 2005 ("Phase Two Report" 2).

In an essay that has taken a fairly critical approach to looking at the situation, it is important to mention the positive feedback the program is receiving, especially from educators. NEA Programs Manager Leslie Liberato reports that "Our fulfillment house reports that 99.6% of teachers who use the kit feel that their students have a better understanding of Shakespeare as a result" (Liberato 1). Along with performances, theater companies that wish to receive funding must also provide educational outreach opportunities to schools. Many schools receive a "day of

professional development . . . and post-performance talk backs” (“Report: Phase Two” 81). Seemingly in direct response to Gioia’s mission to promote literacy, the Yale Repertory Theater’s feedback form to the NEA stated:

The program engages both educators and students in a thorough study and understanding of the dramatic text and theatrical production, assisting students in developing their critical thinking skills as well as their reading, writing, and communication skills, and introducing students, through theater, to a variety of cultures, traditions, and ideas (“Report: Phase Two” 81).

While one may wonder if the theater company is telling the NEA what it wants to hear, there are find other examples of teachers touting the benefits of the program.

Perhaps in response to claims such as the one made by the editors of the *Dallas Morning Star* that a result of the Shakespeare initiative “could be collateral damage for the theatergoers of the future, who may choke on the resulting cloud of toxic boredom,” the program is going to great lengths to ensure that it works to find ways to engage students (“Funding Conscious 1”). Along with the educational resources that seem to suggest a pedagogy of reaching to out to students through what they know, movies, and in order to teach them to appreciate live theater, the NEA is also asking theater companies to conduct teacher training. In one such workshop, held for teachers in rural Washington State, members of the Seattle Shakespeare Company “looked at characters from an actor’s viewpoint and gave the teachers tips on how to hook teenagers on the work of a man who made his mark in the 1590s” (Carraway 1). The NEA is also broadening the scope of the project by involving acting companies aside from the large organizations involved in the first year of the project. In Alaska’s remote Hoonan City, Shakespeare’s plays were performed by native actors, leading

teacher Susan Baldwin to claim, "Being involved in this initiative has given students a broader perspective of the world and their part in it" (Campbell 1).

The successes of the program help to highlight the paradoxes inherent in it. President Bush, like presidents before him, has given token support to the NEA because of what he thinks it can do for him politically. The choice of Shakespeare to become the focal point of the NEA's efforts has at least as much, if not more, to do with Gioia's efforts to improve the image of the organization. Yet for all that, the program has displayed an ability to engage educators and students to think more positively about Shakespeare. Unfortunately, the greater the outreach into schools the more opportunity there is for the NEA to influence students and teachers to buy into the conservative definition of culture. Additionally, according to Gioia, the NEA continues to function as a supporter of talented, innovative, new, American artists; yet, as mentioned previously, he does not use his position to promote them in publicly and does not seem to be doing much to make those invisible poets more visible, especially for students.

*Chicago Tribune* critic Michael Phillips exclaims, "Funding for the arts should often be a leap into the unknown" (Combs 1). Contrast this with Gioia's exclamation, "I refuse to believe that arts funding is controversial," (Gewertz 1) and you get a clear picture of the two sides surrounding the Shakespeare project. There are also those that take a more moderate approach. Joe Dowling, director of Minnesota's Guthrie Theater Company, which received one of the first Shakespeare grants, says he would rather spend his time telling politicians to "free the NEA up" than attack the agency for making the best of a bad situation (Combs 2). And in the end, making the best of a

bad situation may be the best way to sum up what Dana Gioia has been able to accomplish at the NEA. No one who follows politics in this country should really be surprised that President Bush would raise the NEA's budget for a single year given his record. It is not surprising that despite his efforts to appeal to the Right the NEA budget for 2006 remains roughly the same as it was in 2003 when Gioia took over.

As mentioned above, when *Shakespeare in American Communities* was launched, Gioia called it his "Hail Mary pass" as an attempt to revitalize the NEA and restore its image with the public ("*Othello* and the NEA 1). There remains, however, a great deal more work to be done if the agency is going to have a true impact on the nation's literacy rates. Only a much greater cultural shift away from the Right will create the potential for a genuine focus on critical education and appreciation of the talents of contemporary artists to engage the public in meaningful reflections on our society. As I mentioned earlier, the NEA budget for 2006 is \$121 million. At the same time the government is spending \$200 million each day to fund the occupation of Iraq, a country that did not attack the United States (Wolk 2). And in early 2006 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice requested "an extra \$75 million from Congress to promote democratic change inside Iran" (O'Toole 1). Thus, while the NEA may go to great lengths to tout the success of bringing Shakespeare to a culturally deprived nation, there are much bigger issues at stake. The scale of U.S. efforts to spread its ideology across borders, through force if necessary, is astounding. Understanding how the NEA functions as a political and cultural tool in contemporary America helps explain the scope of the Right's efforts to spread its ideology on a domestic as well as international scale.



## Chapter 4

### Selling Shakespeare: Marketing Cultural Politics in the Classroom

Looking a little like Laurence Olivier peering directly into the camera in the opening scenes of *Richard III*, National Endowment for the Arts Chair Dana Gioia descends a staircase in the opening shot of the 2004 NEA documentary *Shakespeare in or Time* (Al Hillmann) and addresses the viewer, saying, “William Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest playwright who ever lived as well as one of the finest poets in English. Even today, 400 years after his death, he remains the most popular playwright in the world.” In 1956, Olivier’s film version of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* premiered on NBC television on the same afternoon that it opened in theaters. The event typifies Shakespeare’s role in contemporary media culture. Through small, black-and-white television sets, “62.5 million viewers—more than the number of people who had seen performances of the play since its premier in 1592—had tuned in to watch” (Eder 2). Cinematic adaptations and spin-offs of the Bard’s work were few and far between, however, during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Yet over the past two decades, according to Barbara Hodgdon, “filmed Shakespeare has risen to prominence not only within the mass-culture entertainment market but also within a global Shakespeare industry” (Hodgdon iii). In 1989, Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* sparked a period of renewed interest in the Bard. The film relies heavily on cinematic tropes borrowed from mainstream action films and was developed with the specific intention of becoming a “popular film that would reach a wide audience” (vi). A host of Hollywood adaptations followed and in 1998 *Shakespeare in Love* won the Academy Award for Best Picture. The same year, another depiction of Renaissance England,

*Elizabeth* was also nominated. Actor and co-host Wallace Acton explains in *Shakespeare in our Time*, “Film directors have been putting William Shakespeare’s work on screen almost as long as movies have been around. He’s one of the most successful writers Hollywood has ever known.” And ever since directors have been adapting Shakespeare’s plays on film, teachers have been using those films both to help students visualize the plays in order to develop adoration for the Bard’s work, and also helping students contextualize the role Shakespeare and plays in contemporary culture.

*Shakespeare in Our Time* and *Why Shakespeare?* (2004)—the two documentary films included in the National Endowment for the Arts teacher resources kit distributed to promote *Shakespeare in American Communities*—are designed to convince American school children that Shakespeare’s appeal is universal, that he remains profoundly significant in contemporary American (media) culture, and that if they fall in love with his work it can change their lives. The films are intended for screening in public school classrooms.

**Universality Meets Cultural Literacy.** *Shakespeare in Our Time* was produced for the NEA by Hillmann-Carr, whose client list includes the Smithsonian; the National Park Service; the Library of Congress; the J. Strom Thurmond Dam & Lake, South Carolina; the African American Research Center, Denver; the Olympic Games, and the United States Information Agency (Hillmann-Carr, “Clients” 1). According to the Hillmann-Carr website, “As of June 2005 *Shakespeare in Our Time* has been distributed to 889,700 viewers” (Hillmann-Carr, “News” 1). Unfortunately, the

company did not respond to my request for information on what it was paid by the NEA. The film runs about 25 minutes. The film is introduced by Gioia and hosted by actors Wallace Acton and Noel True, who narrate this explanation of Shakespeare's universality and enduring importance in contemporary culture. Walter Jacob wrote the script. True explains to viewers, "Shakespeare is all around us." True and Acton take viewers through a history of Shakespeare's life, plays, and Elizabethan England. The narration is visually punctuated with clips from film and stage versions of Shakespeare's plays.

Typical of a documentary film, text is inserted over the images so that students may read the titles of some of the films while listening to the narration and watching the film cut from clip to clip. True and Acton explain the emotions of Shakespeare's language and act out scenes to demonstrate different approaches to interpreting the text. They also explain how to read iambic pentameter. This sequence includes a clip from Branagh's *Love Labour's Lost*. The clip portrays Branagh tap dancing his lines while standing on a desk. In the film the character demonstrates this for his companions. Under the film clip, the text of the play is inserted so students can read along as Branagh taps out the iambic pentameter. The text reads:

"Have AT you THEN, aFECTION's MEN-at ARMS.

ConSIDer WHAT you FIRST did SWEAR unTO.

True explains, "Shakespeare's use of meter and the vivid imagery of his language give his words a life of their own, beyond the lives of the characters for whom they were written." In the last portion of the film the actors explain Shakespeare's history in North America, his popularity in the United States in the nineteenth century, and his

global influence by showing adaptations of Shakespeare's plays from French and Japanese productions. As Acton explains, "Today, Shakespeare's plays move and delight audiences around the world in new languages, costumes, and settings." The film closes with a final barrage of clips including versions of the St. Crispin's Day speech from the Branagh version of *Henry V* and the film *Renaissance Man* (Penny Marshall 1994), in which a group of army privates are transformed through the power of Shakespeare and one greater.

There is a tremendous amount of information packed into this 25-minute film. Approximately thirty-five cinematic and five theatrical clips are used. The films used are nearly all from the film cycle that began in 1989. This shotgun approach to Shakespeare is similar to that of other documentaries made for students such as those produced by Standard Deviants. As noted above, text is used to identify the titles of some of the films. Interestingly, a clip of Falstaff from Branagh's *Henry V* (for which Branagh borrowed lines from Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1* in order to expand Falstaff's role) is one of the only clips to feature a minor character from Shakespeare's plays. In the documentary, Falstaff is also the only non-title character whose name is printed on the screen for viewers. This use of Falstaff is an indicator of the Hirschian model upon which the film is based.

Hirsch is one of many to call for a standardized national curriculum, preferably based on his list of cultural literacy. According to Hirsch, "the extensive curriculum would be designed to ensure that all our high school graduates are given the traditional information shared by literate Americans" (*Cultural Literacy* 128). The point of the curriculum is to basically ask students to memorize an index of items that constitute

culture in order to improve conversation and student learning. Shakespeare is part of Hirsch's model, but students do not need to waste time applying critical thinking to the plays in order to communicate effectively with those in power, they simply need to know as much Shakespeare as is included in the NEA film. In order to check Shakespeare off on the literacy index, "Almost any battle will do gain a coherent idea of battles. Any Shakespeare play will do to gain a schematic conception of Shakespeare" (129-130). According to Hirsch, for American civilization to thrive there is no need to depend on a teacher's ability to help students learn how to think critically. Instead, conservatives such as Hirsch argue that effective communication relies on a body of shared knowledge and that schools have a duty to impart this body of knowledge to students in order to help them succeed. As I articulated in chapter 2, such an approach to culture and education is rigid and does not serve the needs of learners. The vast amount of outstanding and provocative (classic *and* contemporary) printed and visual fiction and nonfiction material available to study in order to understand historical and contemporary cultures defies any attempts at listing.

The shortcomings of the Falstaff approach to Shakespeare can be explained by applying similar reasoning to the St. Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V*, a long popular Shakespeare play, and the Branagh film that began the recent film cycle. The speech figures prominently in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* approach to the Bard. It is included as one of the speeches in the Recitation Contest included with the education toolkit. It is the longest speech from any Shakespeare play used in *Shakespeare in Our Time* and is used at the film's conclusion. *Why Shakespeare?* includes an interview with Dana Gioia in which the NEA Chair admits to weeping

during a recitation of the speech by a young Asian American student at ceremony at the nation's capital. According to Harold Bloom, by understanding the speech in the context of the entire play the ambiguity and irony of Henry's speech are evident. He says of the speech, "That is the King, just before the battle of Agincourt. He is very stirred, so are we; but neither we nor he believes a word he says . . . 'the ending of the world' is a rather grand evocation of an imperialist land grab that did not long survive Henry V's death" (320). But in the context of *Shakespeare in Our Time* and *Why Shakespeare?* Henry's speech shares the patriotic jingoism of President Bush. Through the Hirschian model, one doesn't need to read all of *Henry V* to be culturally literate. Thus students watching this film don't have the proper context to read ambiguity into Henry's speech. The same approach is essential for Republican's to maintain their political power. The more students are capable of reading and analyzing the ambiguity Shakespeare developed in his texts the better prepared they will be to reading the ambiguity in the rhetoric of contemporary politics and realize when they are being manipulated.

The film's framing of Shakespeare's image as universal is similar to the approach endorsed by Harold Bloom. As Bloom explains in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, "Early modern English was shaped by Shakespeare: the *Oxford English Dictionary* is made in his image." Bloom argues that Shakespeare is universal since his language literally makes us who we are:

Life itself has become a naturalistic unreality, partly, because of Shakespeare's prevalence. To have invented our feelings is to have gone beyond psychologizing us: Shakespeare made us theatrical, even if we never attend a performance or read a play. (13)

If we are to believe Bloom's assertions we must believe that our very thoughts are mediated through the language that Shakespeare invented and that we are products of his genius. As I noted in Chapter 2, Bloom believes that when we teach Shakespeare, we should not concern ourselves with historical or political context to our students. Bloom makes his own politics perfectly clear, however, by invoking the rhetorical frame of the political right, "Every great writer may fall away, to be replaced by the anti-elitist swamp of Cultural Studies. Shakespeare will abide, even if he were expelled by the academics, in itself most unlikely" (17). Bloom wants us to admire and ponder Shakespeare's greatness. He wants us to read Shakespeare carefully in order to understand the complexity of how we understand the world. It is not important how Shakespeare, manages to reach people, the argument goes, only that it reaches them.

Arguments against imagining Shakespeare as a universal figure, somehow transcending the complex interactions between people and power that determine how and why Shakespeare is read abound. As Emma Smith explains in her introduction to the play for the series *Shakespeare in Production*, *Henry V*, first performed in 1599, fell out of favor with audiences after 1600 until the eighteenth century, and that its popularity has since waxed and waned. According to Smith, "the fluctuating fortunes of *Henry V* in the theater are instructive in reminding us that state history can only be understood in a broader cultural and historical context" (Smith 1).

Bloom's approach is to ignore the historical contexts by which Shakespeare's plays are promoted. He explains, "I am not concerned . . . with how this [Shakespeare's prominence] happened, but with why it continues" (3). The 'why,' in

Bloom's view, is only Shakespeare's brilliance. However, in his chapter on *Henry V*, Bloom points out that the play "is now most widely known because of the films quarried from it by Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh" (319). Bloom gives the reader the information to understand *how* Shakespeare's popularity is continued, despite his attempts to argue that such things do not matter. Universality is a myth. Shakespeare's plays do indeed cover a wide array of human emotional and political situations. But to deny that his influence on society is due to a number of complex historical and political considerations inaccurately represents how literature moves through culture.

In her book *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins articulates a position widely agreed upon among contemporary scholars. Using the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a central figure in the traditional canon, Tompkins explains:

The reputation of a classic author arises not from the 'intrinsic merit' of his or her work, but rather from the complex circumstances that make texts visible initially and then maintain their preeminent position. When classic texts are seen not as the ineffable products of genius but as the bearers of a set of national, social, economic, institutional, and professional interests, then their domination of the critical scene seems less the result of their indisputable excellence than the product of historical contingencies. (xii)

Bloom's book and *Shakespeare in American Communities* are parts of a complex set of interests that have resulted in Shakespeare's current cultural position. To teach students that Shakespeare is everywhere does not give them the tools to understand how Shakespeare got everywhere or why politicians, educators, and those involved in theater are so interested in spreading his influence. Hollywood would not produce so many adaptations of the Bard's work if those films weren't making money. *Shakespeare in Our Time* wouldn't have been made if the NEA were not trying to



appeal to conservative politicians. As a cultural artifact, the NEA film is a perfect example for disproving Bloom's argument. If you have to try to convince people that Shakespeare is universal, then how can he be? Shakespeare's role in culture is manufactured, not merely the natural result of his brilliance. If documentaries such as *Shakespeare in Our Time* are taught as texts to be engaged and deconstructed, they serve an invaluable lesson in the classroom. But if such films are presented to students as a way to increase their cultural literacy they serve as conservative propaganda.

**Documentary or Advertisement?** *Why Shakespeare?* was directed by Lawrence Bridges. In 1989, *Connoisseur* magazine selected Bridges as the "Best Advertising Auteur" ("Lawrence Bridges" 1). According to Red Hen Press, "He single-handedly turned editing into a killer application for advertising agencies seeking to maximize the impact of their ads on television audiences" ("Lawrence Bridges" 1). Of course, maximizing the impact of advertising means convincing consumers to buy more of a company's products. According to the Internet Movie Database *Why Shakespeare?* was produced for an estimated budget of \$250,000. The NEA's decision to hire an advertising director reveals its attempts to sell Shakespeare to students. *Why Shakespeare?* is not a documentary film but an advertisement, and should be read as such.

The film is a montage of testimonials and brief readings of Shakespeare. The film juxtaposes the testimonials of 'experts' - film actors, theater directors, and poets (not scholars) - with students and people on the street. Every one repeats the same

basic message that Shakespeare and the theater have the power to change lives. The comments of Chris Anthony, Director of Youth & Education at the LA Shakespeare Festival, typify the comments made by everyone else in the film, "When I open the gift of Shakespeare I find life. I find life in all its complexity and contradiction, in all of its beauty and dismal banality." By the end of twenty minutes, the viewer has heard about the importance of Shakespeare nearly fifty times.

In their book *Advertising and the Mind of the Consumer*, marketing professor Max Sutherland and advertising executive Alice K. Sylvester articulate the agenda-setting theory of marketing. As a cognitive process, agenda-setting in marketing is similar to Lakoff's explanation of frames. According to Sutherland and Sylvester, "the agenda-setting theory was originally developed to explain the influence of the mass media in determining which political issues become important in elections" (15). By repeating a message, and avoiding references to alternative ideas, an effective advertisement increases salience, "the probability that something will be in the conscious mind at any given moment" (16). By setting our cognitive frames, "the mass media doesn't tell us what to think. But they do tell us what to think about" (15). Sutherland and Sylvester's book is intended for use by "those who foot the bill for advertising and those who produce advertising" in order for them to understand the advertising process and use such knowledge to design more effective advertising and in maximize profits. In the case of a promotional film such as *Why Shakespeare?* the goal is not to produce immediate profits for the NEA. What the NEA is interested in maximizing, however, is its promotion of conservative multiculturalism. The film is certainly intended to convince students, especially minority students, to "buy" the idea

of Shakespeare and embrace conservative cultural values. By reading the film as an advertisement it is possible to gain a better understanding of how propaganda operates to set the agenda.

According to Sutherland and Sylvester, “what we perceive as ‘reality’ is very much influenced by how other people see it. In making choices people are influenced by two things: what they think; and what they think other people think” (43). Repetition of a single cognitive frame increases the perception of its popularity. In *Why Shakespeare?* actor Michael York says, “I have witnessed over and over again the power of theater and the performing arts to shape lives.” LA Shakespeare Festival Artistic Director Ben Doneberg says, “When I work on a Shakespeare play it connects me . . . to my community.” Actor Chiwetel Ejiofor explains, “Once I got involved in the theater a something, a light, went on in my head and when I went back to school . . . I improved at everything at once.” Student Ruby Romero says, “Before Shakespeare I used to be, like, really inside my shell.” By maximizing Shakespeare’s perceived popularity, making him appear popular by repeating his importance over and over, *Why Shakespeare?* uses marketing strategy by attempting to convince the viewer to jump on the bandwagon.

Analyzing the effectiveness of ads, Sutherland and Sylvester argue, has far less to do with what is being said than it does with who is saying it. “An invaluable starting point to the process is to ask two questions: 1. Who is the ad talking to? 2. Who is doing the talking?” (106). *Why Shakespeare?* is talking to typical American public school students. Two groups of people do the talking, celebrities and students.

The film opens with Tom Hanks, arguably the most famous living actor. Hanks leads a cast of celebrity presenters that includes William Shatner, Martin Sheen, Christina Applegate, Bill Pullman, and Dana Gioia. Students I showed the video to recognized most of the stars. They recognized veteran actor Michael York, for example, not from his roles in Shakespeare production but for his portrayal of Basil in the *Austin Powers* films. Clearly, these actors are intended to appeal to teachers as well as students. The use of celebrity presenters rather than academics distinguishes the film from typical documentary films.

According to Sutherland and Sylvester, “the use of a presenter instead of the advertiser to do the talking in an ad seems to lessen the sense of someone with a vested interest talking directly to us and doing a hard sell on us” (109). By using familiar faces that students associate with entertainment rather than education, the film masks the reality of the NEA’s intention of selling Shakespeare. If students don’t think they’re being sold something they’ll be less skeptical.

If the celebrities are representative of people the student viewers want to be like in the future, the students in the film are intended to represent people the viewer is like now. Student Ruby Romero is one example of Bridges’ use of the technique of testimonial. Romero explains how she used to be quite shy and unwilling to participate in activities but that by working on Shakespeare plays she has learned to be more outgoing. Student Victor Dorotea has a lip ring, eyebrow piercing, and wears a t-shirt with a skull on it. Dorotea explains how his friends dropped out of school but that he has ambitions to start a band and become a famous musician. Student Kareem Monroy explains how she came from a close-minded background, but that working on

Shakespeare has helped her “to think in different ways.” Testimonials are intended to convince the viewer that people like him or her enjoy the benefits of the product being sold. According to Sutherland and Sylvester, “This is the satisfied-customer technique. . . . The process of empathy and identification indicates that the more like us the ‘satisfied customer’ appears to be, the more effective their testimonial” (103-104). If the students used in the film are representative of those in the audience, it becomes clearer that the NEA’s intended audience is comprised of students from ethnic minorities that it wants to introduce to cultural literacy.

Two of the key lines in the film demonstrate its appeal to conservative multiculturalism. Poet Donald Hall claims, “Shakespeare’s the one who makes the language. That’s where our language comes from too, the American language.” This nationalistic appeal echoes Hirsch’s attempts to formulate a common culture. In another sequence, an Asian American man interviewed on the street, says, “Shakespeare’s important because he’s something that binds our heritage as an American. It’s something that I think you can go up to anybody and say ‘Have you read Shakespeare?’” This argument that Shakespeare is part of American cultural heritage pervades *Shakespeare in American Communities*.

*Why Shakespeare?* is a good example of the conservative approach to multiculturalism. In its portrayal of successful, white adults, and disadvantaged, minority students, the film makes the argument that if minorities wish to succeed as people the answer is to become more like white Americans. Conservative multiculturalism espouses rapid assimilation rather than shared understanding. According to Peter McLaren:

Conservative multiculturalism—as in the positions taken by Diane Ravitch, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Lynne V.B. Cheney, Chester Finn, and others—uses the term ‘diversity’ to cover up the ideology of assimilation that undergirds its position. In this view, ethnic groups are reduced to ‘add-ons’ to the dominant culture. Before you can be ‘added on’ to the dominant U.S. culture you must first adopt the consensual view of culture and learn to accept the essentially Euro-American patriarchal norms. (McLaren 93).

That all but one of the students in the film are minorities indicates the conservative ideology of the film. The film is not intended merely to promote Shakespeare, but to promote Shakespeare as an icon of American culture. Minority students who want to become American are encouraged to embrace Shakespeare. The minority students are represented as trying to become like the successful white celebrities.

**Decoding Text.** In the classroom, students need to be taught how to decode media texts from multiple points of view. An individual constructs meaning from a media text by decoding it. Such media texts as advertisements or promotional films are encoded with the hope that their arguments will be fully accepted by the viewer. The NEA wants students to have an increased interest in Shakespeare and to view Shakespeare as part of a common culture that defines us as Americans. Not every viewer, however, is going to decode the message at face value. Many will choose to examine its claims critically. Stuart Hall has articulated “positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed” (Hall 100). Hall’s approach to reading and analyzing media tasks makes for a good fit with responsible pedagogy. By representing multiple ways of examining a text, educators can help students learn important critical thinking and analysis skills. The NEA films are intended to market Shakespeare to students not to encourage them to engage in discourse. To be

responsible requires the teacher not to simply put the film in, let it play, and then say, "Okay who wants to learn some Shakespeare." Hall's model gives teachers a way to invite students into a more critical discussion of the films and Shakespeare. It is up to the teacher to introduce the academic conversation about Shakespeare that these films ignore. Because of the NEA's use of advertising strategies intended to obtain the specific result of increased salience, the films allow one to apply Hall's theory in a relatively straightforward manner.

According to Hall, a viewer can decode a televisual text from a dominant-hegemonic position, a negotiated position, or an oppositional position. Decoding from the dominant position means accepting the arguments of the text as the producers of the text intended. According to Hall, "When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say a television newscast . . . full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating *inside the dominant code*" (101). In the case of the Shakespeare films decoding from the dominant position means accepting Shakespeare as a universal literary figure, a key part of America's cultural heritage, and as a figure with the power to change lives for the better. Accepting the NEA's view means agreeing that cultural literacy is more important than critical thinking.

Most viewers will not fully engage in an automatic acceptance of the dominant position. Instead they decode from a negotiated position. Despite particular or situated local conditions which may contradict the dominant position, viewers still tend to accept the message intended by the producer (102). Messages fail to convince audiences when they are unable to convey the hegemonic position well enough to

convince the viewer. “Decoding within the *negotiated version* contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements . . . It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to ‘local conditions’” (102). A viewer decoding in the negotiated position may accept that Shakespeare is important and part of American cultural heritage, even if they do not see a particular importance for their own lives.

When a viewer decodes, or constructs meaning, from a text from an oppositional position it means that he or she clearly understands the intended interpretation but makes the conscious choice to “decode the message in a *globally* contrary way. He/she detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (103). By reading *Why Shakespeare?* for example as an advertisement rather than documentary, as conservative propaganda rather than positive news involves understanding the NEA’s intentions and flipping them on their head. Hall argues, “One of the most significant political moments . . . is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the ‘politics of signification’—the struggle in discourse—is joined” (103). In articulating an oppositional position a viewer can effectively reframe the texts arguments.

In the classroom students have the right to learn the skills to read texts from both the dominant and oppositional positions. Teachers do have a responsibility not to attempt to manipulate students into accepting the decoding position of the teacher. In other words, a student has the right to accept the dominant position even if it conflicts



with a teacher's politics. Too often teachers are unwilling to accept their own culpability to rhetoric intended to appeal to their politics. The educators I have worked with and studied who are the most effective with students are able to articulate both sides of an argument while using the classroom space to help students formulate their own informed opinions.

By understanding both the dominant and oppositional decoding positions students have the opportunity to negotiate new understandings of texts. Individuals empowered with the tools of critical analysis are able to situate their understanding of texts and politics as they see fit. Crucially, by understanding a teacher's modeling of critical analysis, and then applying that model to their own research and writing on topics of their choosing, students can develop the skills of critical inquiry, analysis, and synthesis of information and contexts. Ideally, students will learn to pay close attention to how language is used to frame debates and set mental agendas. Of course, engaging every student is an impossible challenge. However, by developing a responsible approach to pedagogy, and treating students as unique individuals, teachers will improve in their ability to reach out and engage students. And if teachers work together with administrators, counselors, and parents, in a spirit of cooperation we can help more students achieve self-realization. Responsible teachers recognize the importance of working in the classroom to represent and help students understand the complexities of the world to the best of their ability. A rigid, repressive, and radical approach to education, however, is doomed to fail.

A responsible approach to *Shakespeare in American Communities* in the classroom means informing students of the contexts through which the program can be

understood. Those who see the program as a positive way to encourage participation in the arts will benefit from seeing that it may be rather more insidious than it appears on the surface. Those convinced that the program represents all of the evils of radical conservatism would do well to consider the prospect that it may well encourage a few students to get involved in the arts who may not otherwise have thought to. It is difficult to argue that helping more people learn how to read and understand Shakespeare is a bad thing. Shakespeare isn't going anywhere anytime soon. But how we approach Shakespeare is what matters. Understanding life in all its complexity does not mean that we should attempt to make life less complex by convincing people to embrace a rigid definition of what it means to be American.

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