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Reinforcing Inequity: The Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Exam as Gatekeeper

Lorrie Cobain
lorriecobain@yahoo.com

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REINFORCING INEQUITY: THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION EXAM AS GATEKEEPER

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Lorrie Cobain
March 2020

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Approved by:

Alexandra Cavallaro, Committee Chair, English

Karen Rowan, Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

The Advanced Placement (AP) program was started in the 1950s to give talented students an opportunity to accelerate their studies and earn college credit. The AP English Language and Composition test that was established in 1980 became a cornerstone of the program because it allowed students to skip part or all of first-year composition. Despite the exponential growth of the course throughout the country and attention from the College Board to foster increased access for underserved students and to support program equity, the mean score on the AP Language exam for all but one ethnic minority is consistently below the passing score of three according to the College Board website. Because quantitative research demonstrates that simply taking an AP Language class does not translate into stronger college grades or retention, both scholars and some school districts have started to question the validity of the program. Research also reveals that barriers remain for students from marginalized backgrounds, such as students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This paper proposes that the test itself is a potential gatekeeper by reinforcing inequities through a traditional standardized test. Using grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustainable pedagogy to analyze six recently released exams, four AP provided sample syllabi, and a sampling of four teacher and district syllabi from different regions of the country, this paper demonstrates that the content provided by the College Board that shapes teacher curriculum and pedagogy, is predominantly

male, white, decontextualized, and primarily focused on test preparation. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates disturbing omissions when looking at what authors are reflected in the academic selections included in both the tests and the AP provided syllabi. Often the resulting course is isolated from students' lives and needs and is not aligned with the demands of first year composition courses. The results raise questions about the AP Language's course intentions and outcomes, the reification of institutional power structures, and ultimately, the ethics of the program for students from marginalized backgrounds.

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CHAPTER ONE:
REINFORCING INEQUITY: THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION EXAM AS GATEKEEPER

Tension is at the core of teaching an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition course to juniors in California. First, there is the desire to delve into the richness of teaching American literature in all of its complexity. Not as a project of mere appreciation, but as a course that interrogates what American society and identity represents, both past and present. Merging this goal with teaching college level composition where success is measured by a four hour make-or-break test in May seems punishing at best and potentially unethical when considering the resulting curriculum. The released exams and sample syllabi meant as tools to guide educators instead constrain them, resulting in a hodgepodge of pedagogical approaches and course curricula that targets isolated skills. The demands of the test, the endurance required, and the agility needed to address a variety of subjects in a critical way often result in a tactical focus on the test itself as the cornerstone of an AP course. This is not only a hidden curriculum of test prep, but a null curriculum (Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986) that deprives students of learning about topics they care about and matter to their world. Large chunks of a more purposeful and equitable

education that “[takes] learning beyond the confines of the classroom” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.75) get left behind in the pursuit of an improved pass rate.

Admittedly, some students persevere and even thrive in this atmosphere of high stakes testing. They embrace test prep because they are conditioned by our competitive culture that rewards high exam scores and entrance to elite colleges. Some public schools offer Saturday prep classes, but the offerings at one public high school in Riverside were limited to twice a year and classes were capped at forty students with an extensive waiting list. Wealthier parents pay for tutoring at a variety of for-profit centers, like Oxford Tutoring. But the high cost (starting at \$320 a course or more costly individualized tutoring) puts this option out of range for many students. More often, students do not have this extra support and are unable to leap through the hoops of a random curriculum that emphasizes discrete skill attainment rather than authentic learning. These students fall behind because of deficit mindsets that view their culture and contributions as marginal rather than mainstream. Instead, the promises of jumping ahead of the pack by earning college credit early are often unrealized. Students with AP on their transcript often end up in a first-year composition course without the implied advanced background. Many of these students seem unprepared to navigate the complex challenges of college writing (Duncheon, 2017), creating a tangible disconnect between the worlds of secondary education and college composition (Walsh, 2016).

The damage done is revealed in the quantitative data released by the College Board itself: the mean score on the exam for all but one ethnic minority is below the passing score of three. Research also shows that if students do not pass the exam, there are no positive benefits as they move into their college courses (Hansen et al., 2006, Klopfenstein 2009, Deaton 2014, Koch et al. 2016, Duncheon 2017).

Literature Review

The Roots of Advanced Placement

The Advanced Placement exam emerged in the 1950s out of a desire prompted by “elite high schools and colleges” (Kolluri, 2018, p. 671) to create a program that would allow “gifted and talented” high school students to “pursue college-level studies” (AP Central, 2018). A committee “composed of faculty members from three elite private secondary schools (Andover, Exeter, and Lawrenceville) and three elite private universities (Harvard, Princeton, and Yale)” (Jones, 2002, p. 52) called for exams that would “grant entering students ‘advanced placement’” (p.52). By 1956 the College Board began administering the Advanced Placement Program to around 1000 students from a hundred schools, who completed roughly 2000 tests (Jones, 2002). The first Advanced Placement English Language and Composition exam was administered in 1980 (Jones, 2002).

As the program has evolved, there has been an attempt to bridge the secondary to college level gap. The AP guide for teachers recommends that

since it is “the equivalent of a college rhetoric course, [teachers] should be clued into what is being required of students in those courses” (Puhr, 2007, p.3).

However, instead of resources or authentic guidance for teachers, what follows is a list from the “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” Rhetorical knowledge, critical thinking, reading, and writing, processes, and knowledge of conventions are explained through bullet points (p. 4-5). Next is a rationale for the WPA document, and its focus on “outcomes, not inputs” (p. 6) that ensure “autonomy” (p. 6) for the teacher. Three approaches to composition at the college level are briefly mentioned: the theory and practice of rhetoric, writing across the curriculum, and service learning/civic engagement (Puhr, 2007). The teacher is reminded to teach students to be “citizen-rhetors” and “engaged with the world” (p. 6) while also keeping in mind the “affective skills” in a school climate that “privileges competition” (p. 7). While there is a nod to cultural studies and critical literacy in this overview and the resources provided, the clear focus is on rhetoric. Consequently, the program does not really support the idea that composition “is a robust, intellectually challenging, and vigorously changing field” (Jolliffe, 2007, p. 6). It does not really address that there are a variety of paths to help students discover and make meaning. Instead, the brief admonitions and resource lists seem, instead, to provide a vague link to college composition for credibility.

The program experienced exponential growth in the 2000s when the College Board seemingly shifted its mission. While previously conceived as an

elite program, an equity statement from the Advanced Placement 2017 Teacher's Guide states: "The College Board and the Advanced Placement Program encourage teachers, AP Coordinators, and school administrators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs" (vii). Since the late 1990s, the federal government has pumped \$25 million dollars into schools with low income students to address equal access (Kolluri, 2018). As a result, in February of 2018 the College Board posted staggering numbers of exams and exam takers: "More than 1.17 million students in the class of 2017 took 3.98 million AP Exams in public high schools nationwide, up from 1.14 million students in 2016 and 691,437 in the class of 2007" (AP Central).

Growing pains followed this expansion, especially with one of the most popular tests, the English Language and Composition exam. In 2007, as the program began spreading across the nation, educators began examining the impact of this growth. In looking at talented minorities in advanced programs, Kyburg et al. (2007) posits "... as more students take AP courses, the passing rates typically decrease. It appears that just getting minority students into advanced level classes is not enough to enable them to thrive" (p. 182). Suneal Kolluri (2018) reviews the extensive, mostly quantitative, literature regarding the growth and effectiveness of the program. He presents three interpretations of the data: "students are not prepared for advanced coursework" (p. 699), content is "poorly delivered" to students from "marginalized communities" (p. 700), and/or "dominant groups" are "ensuring the reproduction of the social order" (p. 701). He

challenges the research which “forces program analyses into a ‘tug-of-war’ metaphor” where either “equity or excellence will emerge as the victor” (p. 705).

Quantitative Data and Problems with Equity

Although AP is touted as a college equivalent class that potentially saves students money by allowing them to skip the traditional first year composition course, a review of the research on the academic outcomes and advantages is mixed. A study (Hansen et al., 2006) following the writing of three groups of sophomore college students concluded that students who had taken both an Advanced Placement English course and a first year composition course “performed significantly better” (p. 461) in terms of writing during their sophomore year in college than their peers who only completed an AP course or only a first year course. The authors begin with an explanation of the renewed focus on writing by the National Commission on Writing (established by the College Board), the shifting attitudes toward AP English exams, and a literature review of AP courses and exams to explain the wariness toward AP as a college equivalent course. After reviewing the study of 497 Brigham Young students, the authors determined that the study’s outcome indicated that “the more writing instruction a student received, the better” (p. 489) and as a result, suggested that “the College Board may be working at cross purposes” by encouraging more writing through the National Commission on Writing and at the same time encouraging both high schools and colleges to embrace the Advanced

Placement program which aims to offer students the opportunity to skip composition courses at the college level which results in less writing instruction.

Another article (Klopfenstein, 2009) evaluating AP claims of success asserts that the interpretation of much of the data surrounding program success is flawed and “overestimates” (p. 888) the program’s benefits. In their introduction, they explain the change in the perception of the AP course from a college equivalent course to a course that is a “primary signal” (p. 873) that indicates strong students in the admissions process. In their conceptual framework, they differentiate between AP as a “measure” of “ability and motivation” and AP as a process to “build human capital” (p. 876) which has two different implications. If the program “builds human capital” then its expansion might be justified, but if it is a “signal” of a strong student, then it might not deserve more resources. In their data, they look at “28,000 Texas high school graduates who attended 31 four-year universities” (p. 878) to determine if the AP program is an effective indicator of college success. They looked at white, black, and Hispanic students in a variety of different disciplines to determine trends. Their “research finds no conclusive evidence” (p. 887) that AP courses have “a causal impact” (p. 887) on college success.

A closer look at the impact of AP on underserved communities outline a persistent problem that is a continuing struggle for the program. An early study (Ndura et al., 2003) asserted that to improve equity and college readiness for minority students in their educational program, AP and school district needed to

increase their access to these courses. They presented their results analyzing minority representation in AP classes, influences on taking AP courses, socio-economic impact on AP enrollment, and the relationship of a parent's profession on AP class enrollment in order to make the case that more effort needs to be made to enroll "socially and economically disadvantaged students in AP classes" (Ndura et al., 2003, p. 30).

An article (Koch et al., 2016) analyzing test data from 1997 to 2012 concluded that the majority of Hispanic students who took an Advanced Placement English exam in Arizona, California, and Texas failed to earn a score that would result in college credit. In presenting evidence that reveals low pass rates for Hispanics, the authors propose shifting financial resources to programs that more effectively promote developing necessary skills for college readiness. Interestingly, this was the only article in my review that included a declaration about no conflicts of interest from the authors, and a further note from the authors that they received "no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article" (p. 711). The implication that the College Board as a powerful player in institutionalized education is clear.

As a further indictment of how AP promotes its success, Deaton (2014) asserts that rural students in Appalachia also do not demonstrate improvement in their college English courses from participation in AP English courses when compared to students who were not enrolled in AP. He, too, explores the history of the Advanced Placement program, through summaries of its implementation,

expansion, and benefits, and follows by addressing the concerns regarding equity in the case of urban youth. In revealing the lack of data that addresses all students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, he contradicts the perceived success of the AP program that is often promoted by the College Board with their studies that focus on suburban youth.

However, there is some evidence that a culturally relevant approach to curriculum and instruction might provide an important link to strengthening students transition into advanced programs and college. In her article, Duncheon (2017) makes the link between AP preparation and cultural capital by examining the experiences, challenges, and successes of “eight first generation Latinx students” (p. 358) as they transition from “a low performing urban high school” (p. 358) to college through “mobilizing” Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model. She develops her case study through looking at specific barriers the students experience in academics and campus integration (Duncheon, 2017) and how they utilized “aspirational and navigational capital” and “familial and social capital” to bridge the gap from their “poor quality college preparation” (p. 367) to challenging academics and unfamiliar terrain of their respective college campuses. However, the lack of preparation these students received at their college prep charter school, specifically in their AP courses illuminates the potential problem with the program and the test. The virtue of the AP class designation was not providing equitable access, it was rather the “familial and social capital” of the student’s background that enabled students to thrive. In

seeing “Latinx urban youth through an asset lens” (p. 369) and providing support through their own communities might provide an alternate, more viable path for college readiness.

Community and educational support is a common theme in the critique of advanced programs. Researchers (Kyburg et al., 2007) explored the intersection of underserved students and advanced programs like AP and assert that students from diverse backgrounds can succeed in accelerated courses if there is a belief that the students can succeed, if there is scaffolding to provide the necessary support by teachers and administration, and if teachers adapted their instruction to meet individual student needs (Kyburg et al., 2007). The authors explore the challenging trends to the programs such as demographic shifts, growth, and state initiatives and the barriers to achievement that impact underrepresented students in advanced programs. In looking at three urban high schools from two Mid-Atlantic states the authors detail the complex relationships between the superintendent/community level, the coordinator/central office administrative level, the building administrator level, and the teacher/student classroom level. Those districts with the strongest philosophical stance tended to ensure that necessary student programs and teacher trainings were in place, and that in turn, focused site administrators and a “veteran core of teachers” (p. 198) to impact students in and out of the classroom. Again, merely providing access to advanced programs and tests was not enough; the power was in leveraging the local community and in providing focused support that made a difference.

Missing in the current literature is an analysis of the test itself as the locus of inequity. While the course and the test are purported to indicate a level of proficiency in composition, and the research demonstrates that a significant majority of those who take the exam are unsuccessful, what is not acknowledged is the role that the test plays in driving curriculum and instruction. There is little research on the content of the test and how that content limits how and what students receive during their courses. There is little research on the resources and preparation that AP Language teachers receive and how those resources drive the courses.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Both the released tests and course syllabi play a significant role in constructing the curriculum and instruction students receive. To evaluate the implicit intentions of this course, I examined the literary content and test questions included in the released exams from 2013-2018 available to approved Advanced Placement instructors. While the Advanced Placement program provides many versions of previous exams, I decided to focus on the most recent complete tests provided because I felt that they would represent a current snapshot of the underlying philosophy of the program. I then looked at how the test influenced the content and the rhetoric of the sample syllabi provided on AP Central website and four syllabi posted by teachers and school districts using a general Google search using the key words "AP Language Syllabus." My only filter for choosing the posted syllabi was that they represent different areas of the

United States, including both rural and urban areas. My rationale for looking at both the released tests and the syllabi in my research was to compare the extent of the textual and rhetorical similarities between the two forms. If the test turned out to be reinforcing inequities, did the syllabi mirror this or counter it?

My ultimate project goal was to specifically explore how the AP English Language and Composition test and traditional AP pedagogy might reinforce inequities in secondary English education. In the attempt to lift more boats, have these programs just further stratified an unequal system with a standardized test and a pedagogy that refuses to address the needs of all learners? To this end, I coded and analyzed the AP Language tests and course syllabi using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Huckin et al., 2012). I chose grounded theory because I wanted a method that would help me construct conclusions through tracking certain aspects of the text to see what patterns developed. According to Charmaz (2014), “grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (p. 1). However, I also knew that CDA would help me understand and analyze potential inequity embedded in the tests. Huckin et al. (2012) defines CDA as “an interdisciplinary approach to textual study that aims to explicate abuses of power promoted by those texts” (p. 107). After categorizing my findings, I evaluated each category through culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) (Paris & Alim, 2014). Ladson-Billings explains that

students must “experience academic success,” “develop and/or maintain cultural competence,” and “develop critical consciousness” (p. 160) for instruction to be “culturally relevant.” Paris and Alim explain that CSP aims to “[sustain] linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (p. 88). Because all of these approaches focus on education, equity, and institutional practices, I was able to evaluate both the curriculum and tests for potential access issues and embedded attitudes toward cultural pluralism.

I began by creating descriptors for the tests. By creating some initial data by categorizing by gender, ethnicity/nationality, time period and text complexity, I was able to look at general trends in each of the test passages. My descriptors for the syllabus examples were simply coded by whether or not they were AP samples or from the Google sampling because I wanted to look at the “model” syllabi versus the real ones teachers and districts created. The next step was creating codes for the data. For this process, I used a combination of CDA and grounded theory. I coded for purpose and topics, for attitudes toward those topics (traditional or countering roles), for the types of skills required to answer the questions, and for the type of writing required. To look for patterns of privilege and power based upon the authors, topics and arguments chosen (van Dijk, 1993 & Lamb, 2013), I coded for a textual focus on identity/race, culture, history, science, women, men, and people of color. While I used many of the same codes for the analysis of the syllabi, I did add codes to indicate specific pedagogy

(process writing, AP strategies, unit philosophy), to label skill-based or thematic-based unit themes, and to tag pronoun usage. By adding these codes, I wanted to see how a test like this might drive and limit curriculum and pedagogical choices. I also wanted to look at teacher and student agency in the syllabi rubric and sample syllabi and draw conclusions about power dynamics in these courses.

To analyze the data gathered through descriptors and coding, I created several charts using a descriptor matrix to isolate by gender and ethnicity/nationality and codes organized into categories such as writing purposes, topics, and attitudes for the testing data. The charts revealed patterns and omissions that were significant. I used the same descriptor and code matrix to evaluate the syllabus categories of curriculum, pedagogy, and pronoun usage by AP sample syllabi and randomly selected syllabi. In comparing these, I was able to analyze the impact of AP resources and consequently, the embedded philosophies of the program on teachers and districts.

Test Analysis: 2013-2018

Textual Complexity and the Influence of New Criticism

On the multiple-choice portion of the AP English Language and Composition test, students are asked to close read four nonfiction passages and answer 55 questions that ask students to analyze the text rhetorically. Students are asked to comprehend “topically diverse” texts and to analyze “individual texts in isolation” (AP Central). New Criticism, “the study of the text itself, not the

culture or author that produced the text or the experience one has while reading the text” (Francis, 2008, p.29), is at the heart of the AP Language course. Francis states that “Advanced Placement exams ‘reflect a faith in textual autonomy and objectivity,’ and see ‘the sum of textual elements that are best studied piece by piece to discover how parts fit together to make a whole,’ clearly indicating the fixedness of New Critical methods as the way to a high score on the high-stakes exam ” (p. 32).

It follows that the exam questions ask students to determine tone and purpose, look carefully at detail and syntax, and identify rhetorical devices and their effects. Students also must be familiar with rhetorical appeals, a wide range of vocabulary, and the function of narrative structure and how those impact an author’s intended purpose as revealed in the text itself. Students must be able to analyze metaphorical language and determine the role of an author’s footnotes in text. The range of text topics varies. Sometimes the texts are literary in nature (Woolf, *Least-Heat Moon*, 2013), and sometimes they are from college academic texts from topics that range from history to psychology to science. The unifying thread that ties these random texts together is the intention that they can stand on their own as rich, complex texts that are worthy of analysis without any context, whether they are historical or cultural.

Based on my analysis, one thing the texts have in common is their level of complexity-- 83.3% of the reading selections are at or above college level based upon the Flesch-Kincaid readability level formula that determines text difficulty.

This standard holds regardless of gender, literary time periods, or ethnic backgrounds. The texts are clearly chosen for their advanced vocabulary, complex syntax, and metaphorical meaning. However, the texts, while complex, are not necessarily chosen because they are a part of the canon. For every selection by a writer like Jonathan Swift (2015), there might be an esoteric selection about walking by an obscure British author from the early twentieth century (2017). The complexity of text also comes from academic texts, like David Carrasco's excerpt (2017) about native artists during the Mexican conquest and bell hooks' discussion of feminist speech and writing (2016).

A specific look at the question tasks reveal interesting trends. Because students are taught to comprehend and dissect readings for purpose and tone and support their conclusions using evidence of diction, detail, syntax, and narrative structure, all questions focus on these concepts. Questions that ask students to determine the tone and attitude of the text, to identify the author's purpose, to perceive the effect of language, and to demonstrate an understanding of vocabulary are roughly evenly distributed across all passages of the six tests. What this illustrates is that all of the passages included on the test provide the opportunity for critical analysis—one text is not less serious or less academic than the other. To use a favorite accountability term in the world of secondary education, each text is equally rigorous in that it provides the necessary grist for the analytical mill. Some of the question tasks revealed some differentiation. The passages written by British or American white authors tended

to have more questions focused on identifying and analyzing argument, while authors of color tended to have more questions focused on identifying and analyzing metaphorical language, narrative structure, and syntax. However, this difference does not seem to indicate a difference in depth or complexity—it is more of an indication of the subgenre of nonfiction. The essays included by people of color tended to be personal accounts, relating their experience to larger historical or cultural issues, while the argumentative pieces seem to focus on abstract concepts like “pragmatism.”

In the essay section of the exams, textual complexity and randomness of topic reign. The synthesis essay of the 2013 exam has students read seven sources that briefly discuss genetically modified foods and then, using at least three of those sources, take a position about “What should be the role of GM foods in the global food supply?” (2013) On the second essay question, a rhetorical analysis, students are expected to analyze the rhetorical strategies and purpose of excerpted texts that are roughly a page in length. Samuel Johnson is the featured writer on the 2013 exam where students “analyze the rhetorical strategies Johnson uses to argue his position on debtors’ prisons” (2013). The final essay is an argument, where students read a brief quote by Sui Sin Far that states that “individuality is more important than nationality” (2013) and then write an essay where they “explain [their] position on individuality and nationality.” All of the writing tasks ask students to be adept at close reading, at developing a position, and at providing evidence for that position. However, there is no

thematic, cultural, or historic thread that unites the essay questions. The students must answer these questions isolated from a larger topic or theme. As a result, they might not bring the necessary cultural or historic background to the discussion. They are simply expected to know or develop their knowing from the text itself.

While the practical tools of New Criticism are the coin of the AP realm and text complexity the gold standard, reading texts in isolation is a potentially damaging endeavor even when looking at the inclusion of texts from diverse authors. On the multiple-choice exam selections, students are not given the author's names, only the time period and sometimes the nationality. So, unless they can determine from the text itself, they do not know the gender of the writer or the ethnicity, two pieces that provide potentially important contextualization for an author's purpose and rhetorical choices. They receive no explicit historical or cultural background on the text, so if they have never heard of GMOs or do not have a full understanding of debtor's prisons and their role in oppression, they have about ten minutes to make sense of these concepts and then write cogently for a high stakes test. In "concentrating on 'the text itself' in a vacuum" students are "left...without any means of making sense of the text itself" (Graff, 2007, p.174). This lack of contextualization can result in students making errors in their evaluation of text, which is the core task of the exam. Graff states, "If you deprive readers of the information needed to infer the probable relevant circumstances of

a text, you force them to do the next best thing and construct an improbable set of circumstances” (p. 175).

In their singular focus on textual complexity and the text itself, students, particularly students of color are left behind. The lack of contextualization ignores that “students’ experiences are shaped historically, socially, and politically” and that an ethical education seeks “to connect to students’ cultural and racial heritage” (Milner, 2017, p. 25). The Advanced Placement’s approach to education, rather, sees students as “fragmented” (p. 25), able to be pulled apart from the totality of their experience. This approach also diminishes the power, richness, and complexity of diverse texts. By taking an approach that includes authors of color symbolically rather than authentically, by ignoring the context that makes literature matter, the AP test is “losing endless educational chances” (Graff, 2007, p. 169) to demonstrate that writing from a variety of voices is important, complex, and academically valid. By ignoring that certain writers on the exam have experience with colonialism, with oppression, with racism through questions that only ask about the elements of literature and rhetoric, the test diminishes the role of that diversity-- it sends the message that “White middle-class norms of knowing and being” should “continue to dominate notions of education achievement” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p.86). It reinforces a colorblindness that ignores that culture and race can be central to a person’s identity (Milner, 2017). When approached through this lens, the New Critical approach on the AP

exam can be seen “as a ‘fundamentally conservative, even reactionary’ project” (Bove, qtd. in Graff, 2007, p.176) that inscribes current power structures.

Lack of Representation of People of Color

Certain assumptions seem to underpin what characteristics determine academic, college level text. Complex text contains academic vocabulary and intricate syntax. It deals with serious matters and exemplifies the richness of language. But, what authors are recognized by the College Board as being legitimate sources for a course that serves as the equivalent of first year composition? Based upon analysis of the multiple-choice sections, 37.5 % of the authors are British and white, and 33.3% are American and white. The remaining 29.2 % make up a variety of ethnicities and nationalities: African American, Asian American, Mexican American, Native American, British Trinidad, and British Indian. Clearly, the College Board has made decisions about who can speak for the academy in their choice of authors. White British and American authors are still privileged, while authors who represent diverse viewpoints and world views are minimized. Essentially, they have made the decision that one passage in the multiple-choice section is slated for a person of color, the others are to remain representative of those in power. These inclusions do not seem to have a real purpose, rather, it is simply a formula (1 in 4 or 1 in 5); it is “proof” that the program acknowledges diverse voices. Because the background of the author is often not specifically discussed anyway, the gesture is additive, at best.

Diverse representation on the essay portion of the exam is also grim. The first essay is a synthesis essay which is meant to reflect a research paper format. Students are provided with six to seven sources, a mixture of images and short passages of academic, government, and journalistic texts that are about a particular topic such as genetically modified food (2013). Students read and develop a position that synthesizes at least three of the sources into a “coherent, well-written essay.” Out of thirty-six identified authors, three are people of color, the remaining thirty-three are white.

Next, students write a rhetorical analysis essay. The prompt is usually centered around a piece of literary nonfiction, and their task is to analyze rhetorical strategies used by the author to achieve particular purposes. Representation by people of color on this portion of the exam is nonexistent—all of the authors are white.

Finally, students must also write an argumentative essay that responds to a concept from a (sometimes) notable author. They are expected to take a position on the idea, and “use appropriate evidence from [their] reading, experience, or observations to support [their] argument[s]” (2013). Five out of the six authors represented are white Americans. The other author is a white British writer from the early twentieth century who renamed herself “Sui Sin Far” because of her interest in “Chinese-American life.” Somewhat ironically, her main argument in this particular prompt is that “individuality is more important than nationality.”

Not surprisingly, the topics of the passage choices themselves do not attend to critical issues of the marginalized communities to which many of our students belong. There are twenty-four multiple choice passages on the exams that span 2013 to 2018, and five of those passages contain topics that might be considered culturally relevant to students of color. Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, and David Carrasco all write about the complexity of colonization's influence. Amy Tan discusses multiple "Englishes" and family, while bell hooks writes about her experiences as a woman of color in a traditional family. However, on the multiple-choice test, students are not asked to think about these particular themes and their relationship to rhetoric in a larger sense. Rather, they are asked to analyze vocabulary and functions of paragraphs, to infer tone of voice, and to deduce how footnotes support academic research. Students are not asked to make the "so what" connections that make writing important. The questions force students to look "atomistically" (Markham, 2001, p.18) at language and stop there. Larger culturally relevant issues are not a part of the question format, although in each case the writers themselves mention the cultural impact on their writing and their lives.

In the essay portion of the exam, two passages out of a total of 48 might be characterized as addressing topics that are culturally relevant. The 2013 synthesis question on genetically modified food includes a selection from an article by Olga Manda that discusses the controversy surrounding "genetically modified food aid." She documents the reluctance of some African nations to

accept donations of GM food because they do not want to become the “guinea pigs” of their former oppressors. Interestingly, this source is the last listed (Source G) in the group of seven documents that students must read through in roughly fifteen minutes-- students might not even get to it under the high-pressure time-constraint of the exam. The author, who is a person of color, and the topic are effectively thrust into the background. The second passage that reflects some diversity is the first source in a group of documents that discuss the concept of what texts are worthy of preservation. The document, written by a white male academic, discusses the importance of archiving materials—such as slave narratives—at major universities, like the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The other documents students must consider consist of letters, postcards, and tweets. While it is a significant window into the argument of what is worth archiving and thus, studying, it is presented as a small part of a larger argument. It seems again-- incremental in its force. Because these passages are not placed in positions of power thematically but are “individual texts in isolation” (AP Central) they lack the resonance they might have if the topics were in a contextualized format. As such, they are drained of meaning and significance.

The lack of representation by people of color in the exam passages, and the marginalization of their experience in the topics addressed within the format, cause a faulty color blindness and isolation of cultural experience that reinforces societal norms of white privilege and power. Instead of “[utilizing] students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161), culture is

incidental and thus, tokenized. The presence of people of color within the framework of the AP exam seems symbolic at best. The message seems to be: here is a place at the table, but we are not going to consider the implications of that seat. The method of author and topic choices that force students to connect random dots of literary and rhetorical elements outside of consequential meaning to their lives and experience, is “designed to reify the cultural practices and ways of knowing and being of the White majority” (Milner, 2017, p.3). While voices of color are included on the exam, their scant representation and the outright omission of their names in many cases diminishes their contributions, and the construction of the questions reduce the meaning of these texts to random pieces instead of the whole.

Who Can Speak on the AP Language Exam?

The New Critical stance that drives the foundation of the exam, and the lack of representation of people of color on the test’s roster of authors, begs the question: what authors do speak for the AP language test and what are they allowed to speak about? Because texts are presented in isolation, with no cohesive purpose, the topics and purposes run the gamut. Some are purposefully academic, a few are from the canon, and many are obscure, seemingly dug up from dusty British journals. A few are about nature and the weather, some are historical, some are personal, and a few are meant to entertain (even though the humor is grounded in the nineteenth or early twentieth century and might be lost on our students). After a review of the 2013-2018

released exams, a few patterns emerge about who is positioned to speak about certain topics and who has the authority to speak academically.

The picture of women authors as presented by the exam is problematic at best. Although women writers make up 50% of the synthesis passages and rhetorical analysis passages, only 37.5% of the multiple-choice selections and 33.3% of the argument selections are represented by female authors. However, a closer look into the purposes and topics of those passages reveal an even more complicated portrait of what women are allowed to write about on the exam. After coding passages for topics and purposes, women wrote largely about family (2014, 2017), children (2018), other women (2013), and early education (2017). They also wrote about socializing and parties (2018), and they wrote pieces that honored others—especially men like Thomas Carlyle (2013), George Washington (2015), or Victor Hugo (2016). Women also asked men for help (2016, 2017). When they are presented as writers of academic texts or journals, that writing is often centered around women’s education, childhood, or early education (2016, 2017, 2018).

However, the writing by women was more often coded as being culturally relevant, when compared to male writers, and it was more often coded for addressing an injustice. Women wrote about being Black (2016) and being Asian (2014) within the confines of American culture. Women also wrote about the lack of educational access afforded them (2017). While sometimes confirming

attitudes and traditional roles, women more often than men countered traditional attitudes in their writing (2016).

Writers of color are also limited in the types of topics that they are allowed to take up on the AP exam. Many of the selections are reflections, often personal reflections. While the topics of colonization, racial prejudice, immigration may simmer in the background, what is foregrounded in most of these selections are stories of family and aspirations for the future. Amy Tan writes about the intimacy of “Englishes” spoken in her family (2014), bell hooks explores and defines “the right speech of womanhood” through a personal lens (2016), and V.S. Naipaul looks up to his brother, aspiring to the Oxford education that he is pursuing (2015). What is notable about this collection is not what they are about, but what they are not about—which is a variety of other texts and topics that are included on the AP exam as “serious” writing, which includes science, psychology, literature, history, weather patterns, fish, pragmatism, and politics. The people of color represented on the AP exam are not writing abstract arguments about politics or pragmatism. They are not usually writing for the distinct audience of an academic journal. The sole Native American represented is writing about nature in a metaphorical way, but not as science. However, like the women represented on the exam, people of color wrote about issues that would be considered culturally relevant (2014, 2016, 2015, 2017) and the selections often countered traditional attitudes and discussed injustice.

White American and British men, a well-represented contingent on the exam, can write about whatever they want. They are not pigeon-holed into “women’s issues” of child-rearing, family, and early education. They are not limited to talking about their lives in terms of personal education and aspirations. They can write personal reflections about the wonders of laziness (2015) and walking to pubs in the English countryside (2017), they can give advice about complaining too much (2016) or how to be happy (2017). They can discuss the damage of lying politically (2015) and also the benefits of pragmatism (2016). They can discuss the importance of books (2015) and Modernism (2014). They can speak of science (2013, 2017, 2014), psychology (2015) and technology (2014). Abraham Lincoln (2018) and the American Project (2014) are fair game. And if one is Samuel Johnson, he can weigh in on debtor’s prisons (2013) and impatience (2014) in consecutive years. When it comes to injustice and to being culturally relevant? Not so much. While Johnson does rail against the loss of life incurred by the debtor’s prisons, issues of justice are left to the people of color and the women who write.

In this critical catalog of patterns, there are two outliers. A notable one in this field is a multiple-choice passage on the 2018 exam written by an African American woman, Danielle Allen, about the Declaration of Independence. In this passage from a book on the document, the author likens the Declaration to an extremely well-written memo which can instruct readers on how to read the text. It is approachable, full of questions and definitions. Students are asked to

respond to the text by answering fourteen questions about its textual elements. But students who are taking the test do not know that this text is written by an African American woman who is a professor at Harvard University. They do not know that this book won a prestigious American History award. The omission is potentially important one for students of color and for the teachers of those students. While important, academic, award-worthy work is being done by African American women, and being included on the AP exam, students and teachers are not made aware of it. The power of this academic voice is diminished because it is not labeled; it is put into service of an exam that in many ways reinforces inequality by its very structure.

Another outlier emerged when looking at the trend of ethnicity in passage two of each multiple-choice test. The focus of passage two is an academic text that contains a fair amount of footnotes, and the idea is to test the student's ability to comprehend and analyze these texts and to determine the role of footnotes and research in the overall purpose. In the six exams reviewed, only the 2017 exam had a person of color as an author of the slated research-based passage. The other five authors of passage two were either British or American white academics. What I found interesting and disturbing in this analysis was that over the course of six recent tests, the test writers found only one person of color worthy of the "research" passage—implied in that choice is the assumption that valid research is conducted by white people. And to complicate this issue further, the name of the author of this selection is omitted on this part of the exam, so

students and teachers do not know that the writer, David Carrasco, is a Mexican American who writes about colonialism and (again) is a professor at Harvard.

To take this a step further, this bias is evident in the construction of the synthesis essay question and documents. The synthesis essay question functions as a mini-research paper where students are provided six to seven documents and images to use to take a position on a research question. The topics of the questions are as follows: the importance of preserving texts, technology, children and television, genetically modified food, the use of plastic bags, and kindergarten. It is not surprising that women are the primary researchers on the kindergarten question. In fact, all the listed authors are women. The same holds for the topic of children and television. Five out of six resources are authored by women. As noted earlier, people of color are barely represented as authors in the texts provided for these questions. Their lack of inclusion as researchers on these particular topics reveal a consistent attitude embedded in the exam: research is conducted by white people. But, if research does happen to be conducted by a person of color, it is not acknowledged, not seen. It is rolled into the random collection of complex textual offerings that make up the exam.

The recursive theme to the patterns of the exam is that in isolating the texts from each other in order to “standardize” the process, the same “systemic racial and intersectional inequalities that continue to be part of the fabric of schooling” (Alim & Paris, 2014, p.2) also continue to be a part of “the fabric” of

the AP exam. Because of the continued focus on “the text itself” without the contextualization that might bring perspective, meaning, and authentic pluralism to the exam, the exam continues to reinscribe the inequities it professes to address. Clearly, the isolation and randomness of the textual choices is not innocent, but a reflection of the power structures that still exist. By including passages by white men about any topic, and by limiting the voices of women and people of color to certain types of topics, deficit thinking is reinforced. So while a certain attention is present to issues of gender and race, “student learning is translated as assimilation and narrow forms of success, and cultural competence as ‘We did or read something Black’; and the goal of supporting students’ critical consciousness is either distorted...at best, or conveniently left out altogether at worst” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 142)). Real equity on the AP exam cannot be addressed narrowly or “through the prism of whiteness” (p. 142), but it must be deliberate, thorough, and transparent.

Analysis of AP Course Syllabi

AP Syllabi are Constructed by the Test

One of the mandates of teaching Advanced Placement courses is that teachers must submit their class syllabus for approval. In addition to the AP English Language and Composition curriculum guide and released AP exams provided as teacher resources, the website also includes four sample course syllabi and a rubric to assist with this task. The rubric provided by the College Board breaks down sixteen key syllabus elements with a laser focus on skills. In

the language of the rubric on the website: “The course requires the student...to write in several forms” and “to write essays that proceed through several stages” and “to write in informal contexts” in addition to analyzing “nonfiction readings” and “how visual images relate to written texts.” After a teacher is approved, the school submits the same renewal each year to maintain teacher certification (I last submitted my course syllabus in the fall of 2007, so regular curriculum and pedagogical reflection is not mandated—but teacher and district accountability is). The samples provided reflect the emphasis on analyzing ‘the text itself’ and are clearly influenced by the construction of the exam in every way. In presenting the study of rhetoric and composition through this skill-based lens and providing (and requiring) a checklist of particular elements, the syllabi that teachers create reflect the tension between the high stakes test, the institutional mandates of AP, and what many teachers feel is effective in their classrooms.

In a review of the four AP provided syllabi and four public AP syllabi chosen from both rural and urban regions using a Google search, a pattern emerges. All of the syllabi center their instructional units around skills, like close reading or writing in particular modes even though the skill might be organized around a theme like “Obligations within a Society: Foundation for the American Mind-set.” In this unit the assignments and outcomes are centered around quizzes, comparing the arguments in classical texts (Hobbes, Machiavelli), and responding to one of the author’s arguments with textual evidence. The syllabi also focus on mentioning the requirements of the AP program and test, and

syllabus content explicitly embeds practice with released multiple choice exams. Some of the samples use released AP essay prompts as a way to center their instructional units in order to bring a thematic sense to the work. The author of sample two explains:

I have found that integrating the timed writing into the natural progression of the course helps build students' confidence and expertise. For example, when we read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, students complete the timed free-response (essay) questions on Abraham Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" from the 2002 [exam]. (AP Central)

When the assignments and essays are not explicitly incorporating the prompts and questions found on the exam, they are mirroring the types of essays and questions students will encounter in the middle of May. In each syllabus example, students were required to write at least one synthesis essay, one argument, and one rhetorical analysis that were not released exams—in most cases they wrote several. When tallying the codes for the AP-style essays reflected in the eight syllabi, students were required to write 66 plus essays, which does not include the research papers or personal essays that the teachers often required. The result is an awful lot of test prep as an instructional format.

Embedded in these assignments are explicit directives to learn the incremental skills that are needed to challenge the exam. In a review of the syllabi, students were required to practice analyzing images, rhetorical situations and devices, syntax, claims, tone, narrative structure, author's purpose, and

vocabulary. Often, students are informed directly of this task. In sample one, the syllabus author claims on the first page that:

Course reading and writing activities should help a student gain textual power, making them more alert to an author's purpose, the needs of an audience, the demands of the subject, and the resources of language: syntax, word choice, and tone. By early May of the school year, students will have nearly completed a course in close reading and purposeful writing. (AP Central)

By framing the attainment of these skills as "early May," the teacher foregrounds the importance of the test in the course. While these skills are solid and important, the ability to analyze these elements might lead to larger purposes. It might, for example, help a student detect the real meaning of a politician's appeal during a heated election or write an eloquent op-ed to change an oppressive policy. Instead, these skills are framed as being important for a test score, an ever more common narrative in the public-school sphere.

Drilling down more into the choice of authors, themes, and activities as reflected in these eight syllabus examples, a real tension emerges. It is a conflict between preparing diverse student bodies across the country for a high-stakes test, or teaching students in a culturally responsive and relevant way that honors our students experience and knowledge and prepares them for participation as citizens. On the four AP samples, representation of authors from the canon, from Plato to Steinbeck, are included at twice the rate when compared to the four

Google examples. The ratio of representation of men and women are the same in each category: men represent 57% of the authors and women 43% of the authors included on the syllabus. However, when it comes to authors of color, they represent 23% of the AP samples and 40% of the randomly chosen examples. Topics in each of the categories reflect a different approach between the AP provided samples and the others. The syllabi in the AP samples were more likely to convey traditional approaches and require previous background knowledge in history or the classics, whereas the randomly chosen syllabi were more concerned with countering attitudes and understanding contemporary issues.

The review of the AP samples and the random examples indicate that AP Language teachers in real classrooms throughout the country are conflicted. Because of the institutional demands of Advanced Placement syllabi, all the examples foreground course requirements and skills. However, to varying degrees, there is an acknowledgement that the study of rhetoric and composition can be more and include more voices. On every syllabus there is an inclusion of people of color and women authors, but in many cases the attempts seem “stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77). While students might be studying a selection by Jamaica Kincaid or Martin Luther King, Jr., the approach is to identify and analyze the rhetorical devices rather than make links to “critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities” (p. 78). There is little “sociopolitical

consciousness” that would help students “take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75).

In one particular online example, this tension between institutional requirements and culturally relevant teaching stood out. The syllabus is from an East coast school district that serves around 145,000 students. The demographics are as follows: African American: 23.4%, American Indian: 0.3%, Asian American: 15.7%, Hispanic: 23.4%, and White 37.2%. Students receiving free or reduced-price meals are from 33.2%-42.4%. The first two pages of the syllabus were dedicated to explicating course goals and requirements through an AP lens, clearly an attempt to fulfill the rubric points for submission. Interestingly, the following instructional units are inquiry-based, organized around questions such as “To what extent do our schools serve the goals of a true education?”, “What is the impact of the gender role that society creates and enforces?” and “How do race, culture, and language reveal who we are?” The reading selections are mostly from a commonly used AP anthology, 50 Essays, but they are organized and supplemented around questions that urge students to consider ideas beyond the typical New Critical approach. After reading a variety of selections by men and women from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, students respond to the following question in an essay:

In a 1994 interview, Rodriguez makes the following comment about multiculturalism: Multiculturalism, as it is expressed in the platitudes of the

American campus, is not multiculturalism. It is an idea about culture that has a specific genesis, a specific history, and a specific politics. What people mean by multiculturalism is different hues of themselves. They don't mean Islamic fundamentalists or skinheads. They mean other brown and black students who share opinions like theirs. It isn't diversity. It's a pretense of diversity." Do you agree with Rodriguez that "multicultural centers" or "multicultural curriculum" or other similar projects are not truly diverse? Defend or refute Rodriguez's quote about multiculturalism using examples from your experiences and the readings. Cite sources appropriately.

The argumentative format of the essay is familiar, the readings are from an anthology, but the question does ask students to engage thoughtfully with an issue that impacts their own lives at a racially diverse school. And the readings listed from Julia Ortiz Cofer and Bharati Mukherjee, as well as their own experiences with race, would provide the means to help students counter or align with Rodriguez's statement.

This syllabus provides a window into the institutional tension where "it is nearly impossible for teachers to ignore mundane content and skills-focused curricula" (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.83) yet, here is an educator who is willing to "take on the dual responsibility of external performance assessments as well as community- and student-driven learning" (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This teacher is

attempting to foster “a culturally sustaining pedagogy” that succeeds in “its ability to meet both demands without diminishing either” (p. 84).

Syllabus Rhetoric and Power

Not only is the content of the sample syllabi constructed by the requirements of the AP Language test and the rubric, both teacher and student agency are revealed through the rhetoric of these approved resources. In the rubric teachers are given “the requirements” for the course with a detailed list of rhetorical modes and types of assignments and teachers “provide instruction and feedback” (AP Central). While the expectations reflect classical rhetorical influences and writing as a process, there is not a lot of agency for the instructor implied in the rhetoric of this rubric. Rather, instructors are “required” to present a vast array of content and “provide” a significant amount of instruction and feedback. Students are the subject of only one component, that of citation format, but they are not at the center of the document. They are syntactically on the receiving end of the action—they are objects of formulaic commands. Students must “demonstrate research skills” and “produce one or more projects.” Students and learning are in the background. There is little sense of agency for either the educator or student in this framework. Rather, they are placed on the receiving end of sixteen “objectives” which are directives that prescribe pedagogy and implicitly guide how they relate to their students. These institutional constraints play out in both the sample syllabi and in the examples.

Pedagogy is clearly driven by these explicitly stated resources and guidelines. In a review of the eight syllabi, process writing, reading response journals, and peer critique are integrated throughout the assignments and discussions of class procedures. Although all syllabi include process writing, one AP sample syllabus spends paragraphs articulating the drafting process required by students multiple times, foregrounding process writing's importance in the course, in alignment with the rubric. Certain AP-approved "best practices" or strategies are integrated throughout each syllabus—both the AP samples and the random examples. Students use specific analytical strategies labeled by acronyms (OPTIC to analyze images and SOAPtone to analyze tone and purpose). Their specific mention signals the discourse of Advanced Placement, the specialized practices that teachers receive in staff development conferences and curriculum guides, as well as on the website. The four samples all list explicit student expectations and grading practices, often at the beginning of the course syllabus. The real examples all follow suit, however many include grading practices at the end of the syllabus—a stand against the foregrounding of accountability, perhaps? Certain traditional composition anthologies and texts are highlighted in the sample syllabi, and the real examples include most of them. The inclusion of these texts reflects a teacher's philosophy and pedagogy, but they also signal that they are a part of the AP team. They have chosen from the approved list. The four AP sample syllabi also highlight the importance of summer work as a part of the course to imply that the course should be rigorous,

that the high school year is simply not enough to master the material.

Interestingly, only one of the school examples mentions summer work which might reveal community pushback or resource issues that are not addressed in the official samples.

The commonalities in these syllabi indicate the lock-step nature of the program, the syllabi are repeating the same philosophies, the same strategies, the same resources, and the same lists of expectations. This reveals that a focus on skills (and the test) is paramount when teaching, not necessarily on student learning for other, larger purposes. In this survey of popular (and dated) composition pedagogy over eight syllabi, teaching AP seems like a “technical task that could be accomplished in a recipe-like fashion” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.163) not a work of “artistry” that demonstrates “enthusiasm and vitality” (p. 163). What is missing is a sense that this teacher is creating “learning environments where students develop voice and perspective and are allowed to participate more fully in the multiple discourses available in a learning context, by not only consuming information but also helping to deconstruct and to construct it” (Freire, qtd. in Milner, 2017, p. 8-9). Because teachers lack agency in this paradigm, there is not a sense of responsibility or obligation to the student, therefore there is not a sense of a “trusting environment” that “demonstrates care” and creates “expectations” as well as “community” (Milner, 2017, p. 26). The danger in this standardized approach is that it “disregards teaching practices that are most effective for historically marginalized learners” (Royal & Gibson,

2017, p.15) for the sake of a facade of accountability. As a result, the current rhetoric of the program sources, from the released tests to the resulting syllabi, creates a climate of teaching and learning that “reifies the American racial, cultural, and socio-economic caste system” (p. 17).

Conclusions

While the Advanced Placement program plays an increasingly larger role in public school course offerings and has made strides in the past decades in increasing access to AP courses and the test, a systematic review of recently released exams and sample syllabi reveal that the roots of the program—the test and core supporting materials--reinforce a system that is focused on supporting a world view that “White middle-class cultural practices are the sole key to power” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 89).

The test passages reflect a lack of representation by authors of color and of women. When marginalized voices are included, they are allowed to speak about certain topics (family, education), but not of others (science, history). White male authors, who make up the majority of authors on the test, still wield power. Not only are they dominant in their percentage of representation, but the topics they are allowed to write about illustrate the embedded perceptions regarding who is allowed to speak and in which forum. This lack of representation represents an “outdated philosophy that will not grant our young people access to power; rather it may increasingly deny them that access” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 6) by ignoring that “the future is a multilingual and multiethnic one” (p. 6). This

focus on pedagogies and standardized testing formats that are “closely aligned with linguistic, literate, and cultural hegemony” (Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 86) prevents students from being able “to examine more intently what they are learning; to create, construct, and deconstruct content meaning; to contribute to the multiple conversations in a classroom and beyond with agency; to succeed academically and socially” (Milner, 2017, p. 11). Further, when students “[see] their culture in the curriculum and through instruction” (p. 11), they “understand the important ways in which their culture has contributed to various genres and features of curriculum content and also to the broader fabric of society” (p. 11). Instead of providing a meaningful, content rich instruction for everyone that “[uses] school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p.75), the Advanced Placement program promotes a decontextualized, New Critical approach that isolates rhetorical content from one of the key purposes of rhetoric, which is to effect change.

The course syllabi are a reflection of the philosophies and pedagogies of the program, school districts, and teachers, and reinforce this dominant, “hyperstandardized” and “hyperaccountable” educational model that emphasizes “high test scores” as the “sole entity for which educators should aim” (Royal & Gibson, 2017, p. 3). This focus on the test is seen in the syllabi’s multiple references to the test, the integration of multiple practice tests within the content frameworks, and the singular focus on individual (and often isolated) skills as opposed to important questions of purpose and theme. The pedagogy reflected

in these syllabi position the teacher and the institution as the authority; the teacher and student relationship is not presented as “fluid and equitable” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.163) or collaborative. It is clear that within this system, “educators experience greater pressure to conform to teaching practices and pedagogies that more obviously demonstrate positive assessment outcomes” (Royal & Gibson, p.15). Examples from around the country that include more authors of color, more women, and attempt to confront contemporary issues, indicate that there is an internal conflict between “[creating] lessons that are both individually accessible and meaningful” (p.15) and working within a system that is “[muting] educators’ individuality and expertise” (p. 7). But, are these “scaled down versions that resemble teaching strategies instead of pedagogy” (p. 18) enough to fully engage marginalized students?

In the winter of 2019, the College Board announced that there would be a complete revision of the AP test for May 2020. New materials resources were rushed out June 2019 and bits and pieces have been released since. Unfortunately for students and teachers, the changes do not indicate a radical institutional change. Rather, it seems to be a doubling-down. Instead of addressing the issue of equity, they have “hyper-standardized” their offerings by introducing skill standards in the guise of “big ideas” and “essential knowledge.” They are changing their writing rubrics from a holistic approach to an analytical approach. The “Course and Exam Description” notebook AP teachers received in June present particular “Enduring Understandings” such as “RHS-1: Individuals

write within a particular situation and make strategic writing choices based on that situation” (p. 31), followed by skills like “1.A Reading- identify and describe components of the rhetorical situation: the exigence, audience, writer, purpose, context, and message” (p. 31). These combine to create an “Essential Knowledge” which looks like: “RHS-1.A: The rhetorical situation of a text collectively refers to the exigence, purpose, audience, writer, context, and message” (p. 31). None of these learning goals are negative. They are part of what we do as writing teachers. However, when these goals are decontextualized and isolated from why we write and who writes and why it matters, these understandings lose their potential power and meaning. In addition to these goals, teachers are provided with a framework, nine units that are embedded with skills that progress over the course of the year, but “these units only delineate skills students should be developing across the AP English Language and Composition course but do not specify the content or themes students will study” (p. 11). Then, teachers are encouraged to “focus their students’ learning and practice” (p. 11) by taking AP provided “Personal Progress Checks” (p. 11) to “measure student progress as they acquire content knowledge and develop skills” (p. 1). The implied message behind these individual “atomistic” skills is not about a course that “cultivates reading and writing skills that students need for college success and for intellectually responsible civic engagement” (p. 11) but about a “restrictive curricula” (Royal & Gibson, 2017, p.19) that reifies “the cycle of subordination and disengaged, feckless formal

schooling experiences” (p. 18). Although the document states that the “publication is not a curriculum” (p. 11), the worksheets that list specific skills over nine units dilute the potential power of a more cohesive, culturally pluralistic approach that pursues goals that are beyond a high stakes test in May. Add to the mix, online assessments of these skills, and the priority of the course is clear: the test.

The AP materials explain that any prepared student should be able to take an AP class. There should be no gatekeeping. They open their new Course and Exam Description with this admonition:

College Board strongly encourages educators to make equitable access a guiding principle for their AP programs by giving all willing and academically prepared students the opportunity to participate in AP. We encourage the elimination of barriers that restrict access to AP for students from ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups that have been traditionally underserved. (p. 1)

But what if the test itself is the gatekeeper? What if the philosophy that is foundational to the approach provides the obstacles that “restricts access”? What if the resources that are presented to guide teachers as they create their curriculum solidify current power structures? AP research has acknowledged that there are “equity gaps” as detailed in the Tenth Annual AP Report, but what if these are not really “gaps” but a reinforcement of a pervasive deficit lens? Paris and Alim (2014) envision a pedagogy that is “centered on contending in complex

ways with the rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of Indigenous American, African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other youth and communities of color” (p. 86). Inclusion of authentic “diverse texts” (AP Guide, 2019, p. 11) and intentional reflection on “diverse audiences for diverse purposes” (p. 11) is not just to “merely make [students] ‘feel good’” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.160), but to “utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161) and “[prepare] students for active citizenship” (p. 162).

Clearly more research is needed. The test and the resources that drive curriculum point to an approach that reinforces current institutional power structures, and the revised test indicates that a system that privileges accountability through evermore testing is still at play, even though the same skill-based approaches have underperformed in the past for marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Royal, 2012; Royal & Gibson, 2017). In addition to the pressures of implementing culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy in this current atmosphere, “little quantitative research has documented how students who learn from educators who embrace CRP perform academically in comparison to students who learn from educators who embrace other pedagogies” (Royal & Gibson, 2017, p.14). However, in our increasingly complex and fluid culture we need “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings qtd. in Milner, 2017, p. 17-18).

This is a ripe opportunity for educators at both the secondary and college level to research how CRP and CSP work in composition classrooms. Some research (Kyburg, 2007; Duncheon, 2017) has provided a window into programs that were trying to provide targeted support for accelerated programs like Advanced Placement in underserved communities, but the success of those programs has not been consistently tracked to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Integral to this task is a renewed effort at communication between secondary and college composition communities. Expectations and goals at each level often seem to be at cross-purposes, making any sort of alignment or common cause a challenge. Add to that, teacher preparation programs that barely scratch the surface of content specific preparation. But, for students who need the support of their whole communities, clear articulation between all participants seems to be a large part of the solution, and its absence is a key part of the problem.

So, the tension continues. The test and materials are still disconnected from real issues of education and learning. Research shows, and thoughtful teachers know, that learning needs to be meaningful and contextualized. Research also shows that students need both educational and community support that values their experience and cultural capital. While a study of American literature could be a rich platform for exploration, contextualization, and action, national standardized tests are isolated affairs that reduce learning to a checklist of skills devoid of real world meaning. However, the pressure from our

competitive culture, from parents and colleges, is real. It forces us to accelerate the learning process in a single direction, so that only a select group can keep up. The decisions we have to make when we teach these courses diminishes our craft and damages our students. Instead of “reading and writing the world” and providing a solid foundation for our students moving into the realm of higher education, we minimize the power of rhetoric and the power of our students as future rhetors. The questions I have posed and have attempted to answer in this study are crucial not only in diagnosing the ongoing inequities of the exam and program, but also in helping us decide if this continued focus on standardized meritocracy is ethical in public education. Why, in a system where we are supposed to live and breathe access and equity, are we continually creating processes that reinscribe power structures that benefit those who are privileged already? And why are we still focused on a curriculum that is isolated from our students’ lives and needs, instead of providing them with content that reflects and supports their experience?

CHAPTER TWO:
TENSION AT THE CENTER: THE INEQUITIES OF THE ADVANCED
PLACEMENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION EXAM
CONFERENCE PROPOSAL

Despite the exponential growth of the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition course in the decades since its inception and attention from the College Board to foster increased access for underserved students and to support program equity, the mean score on the AP Language exam for all but one ethnic minority is consistently below the passing score of three. Because quantitative research demonstrates that simply taking an AP Language class does not translate into stronger college grades or retention, both scholars and some school districts have started to question the validity of the program. This paper proposes that the test itself is a gatekeeper by reinforcing inequities through a standardized test. Using grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, culturally relevant pedagogy, and culturally sustainable pedagogy to analyze six recently released exams, this paper demonstrates that the content provided by the College Board that shapes teacher curriculum and pedagogy, is predominantly male, white, decontextualized, and is primarily focused on test preparation. As a result, the course is isolated from students' lives and is not aligned with the demands of first year composition courses. The results raise questions about the AP Language's course intentions and outcomes, and the

reification of institutional power structures, and ultimately, the ethics of the program for students from marginalized backgrounds.

CHAPTER THREE:
TENSION AT THE CENTER: THE INEQUITIES OF THE ADVANCED
PLACEMENT ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION EXAM
CONFERENCE PAPER

As I start each school year, I feel ambivalence about teaching my Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classes. First, there is the desire to delve into the richness of teaching American literature in all of its complexity. Not as a project of mere appreciation, but as a course that interrogates what American society and identity represents, both past and present. But, merging this goal with teaching supposed college-level composition where success is measured by a four hour make-or-break test in May seems punishing at best and potentially unethical. I have made peace with this tension by crafting a syllabus that addresses big questions, that includes writers that both reflect the backgrounds of my students and that stretch them into areas of discomfort. They research issues that matter to them. I try to provide context for what we learn and include test preparation material only if it fits within these boundaries in some way. Then, sometime in January, I begin to panic. Am I preparing my students to take the test? Will they be able to navigate the random sampling of literature and topics? Will they be able to write three essays in two hours and fifteen minutes? Cringing more, I think, will I improve my pass rate?

Of course, colleges have testing through papers, midterms, and finals. Students are required to demonstrate what they have learned and how they have progressed as they work toward their degrees. However, the language and motives feel different to me. In high school it is foregrounded. It is an accountability culture that is driven by state and national tests, that test both the teacher and the student. The resulting scores are then used to “grade” the school and the district. Along the way, the Advanced Placement (AP) program has become an active participant in this game. They have become major players in defining a school’s mission and curriculum. But a more careful look at the program reveals the problems inherent in this approach. Five studies conducted from 2006-2017 demonstrate (Hansen et al. 2006; Klopfenstein 2009; Deaton 2014; Koch et al. 2016; and Duncheon, 2017) that mere access to these tests does not equal equity or rigor. What it usually indicates is a cycle of test preparation and competition that continues to favor the privileged and leave behind those who are not of the dominant culture. It also results in a tangible disconnect between the worlds of secondary and higher education. Students are getting the stamp of “advanced” or “college ready” on their high school transcript without the ability to navigate college level writing and engagement.

Because standardized testing is such a constant in public schools, I wanted to drill into the AP English Language and Composition—or AP Language—test itself. Could the test be reinscribing the inequities that the College Board was claiming to address? In the attempt to lift more boats, have

these programs just further stratified an unequal system with a standard test and a pedagogy that refuses to address the needs of all learners? Is the program even ethical for students from marginalized backgrounds? To do this, I analyzed the released tests from 2013 to 2018 using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Huckin et al., 2012), culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and culturally sustainable pedagogy (CSP) (Paris and Alim, 2014). I focused on these tests because they were resources provided to teachers explicitly for test prep in 2017 and 2018, so I felt they would reflect the current, underlying philosophy of AP. First, I found a continuing influence of New Criticism as a core philosophy. Secondly, there was a lack of representation of people of color in the nonfiction selections. Finally, there was a dominant focus on white men as those who are allowed to speak on the exam.

Textual Complexity, Richness, and the Influence of New Criticism

On the multiple-choice portion of the AP English Language and Composition test, students are asked to close read four nonfiction passages and answer Fifty-five questions that ask students to analyze the text rhetorically. Students are asked to comprehend “topically diverse” texts and to analyze “individual texts in isolation” (AP Central). New Criticism, according to Francis, is “the study of the text itself, not the culture or author that produced the text or the experience one has while reading the text” (2008) and is at the heart of the AP Language course. The exam questions ask students to determine tone and

purpose, look carefully at detail and syntax, and identify rhetorical devices and their effects and how these elements impact an author's intended purpose as revealed in the text itself. The range of topics varies. Sometimes the texts are literary in nature and sometimes they are from college academic textbooks. The unifying thread that ties these random texts together is the intention that they can stand on their own as rich, complex selections that are worthy of analysis without any contextual basis.

Based on the analysis of these exams, the texts mostly share their level of complexity-- 83.3% of the reading selections are at or above college level based upon the Flesch-Kincaid readability level formula. This standard holds whether the author of the text is male or female, from a different literary time period, or represents a different ethnic background. The texts are clearly chosen for their advanced vocabulary, complex syntax, and metaphorical meaning. However, the texts, while complex, are not necessarily chosen because they are a part of the canon. For every selection by a writer like Jonathan Swift (2015), there might be an esoteric selection about walking by an obscure British author from the early twentieth century (2017). The complexity of text also comes from academic texts, like David Carrasco's excerpt (2017) about native artists during the Mexican conquest and bell hooks' discussion of feminist speech and writing (2016).

A specific look at the question tasks reveal interesting trends. Questions that ask students to determine the tone and attitude of the text, to identify the author's purpose, to perceive the effect of language, and to demonstrate an

understanding of vocabulary are roughly evenly distributed across all passages of the six tests. What this illustrates is that all of the passages included on the test provide the opportunity for critical analysis regardless of time period, gender, or ethnicity. The notion that some texts are more academic than others because they are from the canon or written by a white man from the nineteenth century is not reflected in the analysis.

In the essay section textual complexity and randomness of topic reign. In the 2013 essay portion, students have to read seven short sources about GMOs and develop an argument, analyze an essay by Samuel Johnson, and argue about a quote from an early twentieth century woman British writer, Sui Sin Far. All of the writing tasks ask students to be adept at developing a position and providing evidence for that position. However, there is no thematic, cultural, or historic thread that unites the essay questions. The students must answer these questions isolated from a larger topic or theme. They are simply expected to know from the text itself. While this decontextualization might seem “fair” in that everyone must analyze new material on the spot, what emerges is a far different picture.

While the practical tools of New Criticism are the coin of the AP realm and text complexity the gold standard, reading texts in isolation is a potentially damaging endeavor even when looking at the inclusion of texts from diverse authors. On the multiple-choice exam selections, students are not given the author’s names, only the time period and sometimes the nationality. They do not

know the gender of the writer or the ethnicity, two pieces that provide potentially important contextualization for an author's purpose and rhetorical choices. They receive no explicit historical or cultural background on the text, so if they have never heard of GMOs or do not have a full understanding of debtor's prisons and their role in oppression, they have about ten minutes to make sense of these concepts and then write a cogent essay in the remaining thirty. According to Graff (2007), in "concentrating on 'the text itself' in a vacuum" students are "left...without any means of making sense of the text itself" (p. 174). This lack of contextualization can result in students making errors in their evaluation of text, which is the core task of the exam. He states, "If you deprive readers of the information needed to infer the probable relevant circumstances of a text, you force them to do the next best thing and construct an improbable set of circumstances" (p.175).

In AP test's singular focus on textual complexity, students, particularly students of color are left behind. According to Milner (2017), the lack of contextualization ignores that "students' experiences are shaped historically, socially, and politically" and that an ethical education seeks "to connect to students' cultural and racial heritage" (p. 25). The AP's approach to education, rather, sees students as "fragmented" (p. 25), able to be pulled apart from the totality of their experience. This approach also diminishes the power, richness, and complexity of diverse texts. By taking an approach that includes authors of color symbolically rather than authentically, by ignoring the context that makes

literature matter, the AP test is limiting educational opportunities to demonstrate that writing from a variety of voices is important, complex, and academically valid (Graff, 2007). By ignoring that certain writers on the exam have experience with colonialism, with oppression, with racism through questions that only ask about the elements of literature and rhetoric, the test diminishes the role of that diversity—it sends the message that, according to Paris and Alim (2014) “White middle-class norms of knowing and being” should “continue to dominate notions of education achievement” (p. 86). It reinforces a colorblindness that ignores that culture and race can be central to a person’s identity (Milner, 2017).

Lack of Representation of People of Color

Secondly, certain assumptions seem to underpin what characteristics determine academic, college level text. Complex text contains academic vocabulary and intricate syntax. It deals with serious matters and exemplifies the richness of language. But, what authors are recognized by the College Board as being legitimate sources? Based upon a review of the 2013 through 2018 multiple choice sections of the released exams, 37.5 % of the authors are British and white, and 33.3% are American and white. The remaining 29.2 % make up a variety of ethnicities and nationalities: African American, Asian American, Mexican American, Native American, British Trinidad, and British Indian. Clearly, the College Board has made decisions about who can speak for the academy in their choice of authors. White British and American authors are still privileged,

while authors who represent diverse viewpoints and world views seem additive—a way to check the people of color box.

Diverse representation on the essay portion of the released tests is also grim. In the synthesis essay, out of thirty-six identified authors across the six exams, three are people of color. The remaining authors are white. In the rhetorical analysis essay, representation by people of color is nonexistent. In the argumentative essays five out of the six authors represented are white Americans. The other author is a white British writer from the early twentieth century who renamed herself “Sui Sin Far” because of her interest in “Chinese-American life” (13).

Not surprisingly, the topics of the passage choices themselves do not attend to critical issues of the marginalized communities to which many of our students belong. There are twenty-four multiple choice passages on the exams that span 2013 to 2018, and five of those passages contain topics that might be considered culturally relevant to students of color. Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, and David Carrasco all write about the complexity of colonization’s influence. Amy Tan discusses multiple “Englishes” and family, and bell hooks focuses on being a woman writer of color. However, on the multiple-choice test, students are not asked to think about these particular themes and their relationship to rhetoric in a larger sense. Rather, they are asked to analyze vocabulary and functions of paragraphs, to infer tone of voice, and to deduce how footnotes support academic research. Students are not asked to make the “so what” connections

that make writing important. The questions force students to look “atomistically” (Markham, 2001) at language and nothing more.

In the essay portion of the exam, two passages out of a total of 48 might be characterized as addressing topics that are culturally relevant. The 2013 synthesis question on genetically modified food includes a selection that discusses the reluctance of some African nations to accept donations of GM food because they do not want to become the “guinea pigs” of their former oppressors. The second passage discusses the importance of archiving materials—such as slave narratives—at major universities. Because these passages are “individual texts in isolation” (AP Central) they lack the resonance they might have if they were in a contextualized format. Each seems incremental in its force. Instead of presenting writing as a way to illuminate the challenges that society confronts on a global scale, the passages and tasks are drained of meaning and significance.

Instead of “[utilizing] students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.161) as Ladson-Billings advised, culture is incidental and thus, tokenized. The presence of people of color within the framework of the AP exam seems symbolic at best. The method of author and topic choices is, according to Milner (2017) “designed to reify the cultural practices and ways of knowing and being of the White majority” (p. 3). While voices of color are included on the exam, their scant representation and the outright omission of their names in

many cases diminishes their contributions, and the construction of the questions reduce the meaning of these texts to random pieces instead of the whole.

Who Can Speak on the AP Language Exam?

Finally, after a review of the 2013-2018 released exams, a few patterns emerge about who is positioned to speak about certain topics and who has the authority to speak academically.

The picture of women authors as presented by the exam is problematic at best. Although women writers make up 50% of the synthesis passages and rhetorical analysis passages, only 37.5% of the multiple-choice selections and 33.3% of the argument selections are represented by female authors. However, a closer look into the purposes and topics of those passages reveal an even more complicated portrait of what women are allowed to write about on the exam. After coding passages for topics and purposes, women wrote largely about family (2014, 2017), children (2018), other women (2013), and early education (2017). They also wrote about socializing and parties (2018), and they wrote pieces that honored others-- especially men like Thomas Carlyle (2013), George Washington (2015), or Victor Hugo (2016). Women also asked men for help (2016, 2017). When they are presented as writers of academic texts or journals, that writing is often centered around women's education, childhood, or early education (2016, 2017, 2018).

Writers of color are also limited in the types of topics that they are allowed to take up on the AP exam. Many of the selections are often personal reflections.

Amy Tan writes about the intimacy of “Englishes” spoken in her family (2014), bell hooks explores and defines “the right speech of womanhood” (2016), and V.S. Naipaul aspires to be like his brother, an aspiring Oxford student (2015). What is notable about this collection is not what they are about, but what they are not about—which is a variety of other topics that are included on the AP exam as “serious” writing. People of color on the AP exam are not writing abstract arguments about politics or pragmatism or writing for a scientific journal.

White American and British men, a well-represented contingent on the exam, can write about whatever they want. They can write personal reflections about the wonders of laziness (2015) and walking to pubs in the English countryside (2017), they can give advice about complaining too much (2016) or how to be happy (2017). They can discuss the damage of lying politically (2015) and also the benefits of pragmatism (2016). They can discuss the importance of books (2015) and Modernism (2014). They can speak of science (2013, 2017, 2014), psychology (2015) and technology (2014). Abraham Lincoln (2018) and the American Project (2014) are fair game. And if one is Samuel Johnson, he can weigh in on debtor’s prisons (2013) and impatience (2014) in consecutive years.

In this critical catalog, there are two outliers. A notable one is a multiple-choice passage on the 2018 exam written by an African American woman, Danielle Allen, about the Declaration of Independence. But students who are taking the test do not know that this text is written by an African American woman who is a professor at Harvard University and won a prestigious American History

award. The omission is a potentially important one for students of color and for the teachers of those students. While important, academic, award-worthy work is being done by African American women, and being included on the AP exam, students and teachers are not made aware of it. The power of this academic voice is diminished because it is not labeled, it is put into service of an exam that in many ways reinforces inequality by its very structure.

Another outlier came from looking at the author of passage two in each multiple-choice test. The focus of passage two is an academic text with footnotes, and the idea is to test the student's ability to analyze these texts and to determine the purpose of the footnotes. In the six exams reviewed, only the 2017 exam had a person of color as an author. Over the course of six released exams, the test writers found only one person of color worthy of the "research" passage—implied in that choice is the assumption that valid research is conducted by white people. And to complicate this issue further, the name of the author of this selection is omitted on this part of the exam, so students and teachers do not know that the writer, David Carrasco, is a Mexican American who writes about colonialism and (again) is a professor at Harvard.

Conclusions

The recursive theme to the patterns of the exam is that in isolating the texts from each other in order to "standardize" the process, the same "systemic racial and intersectional inequalities that continue to be part of the fabric of schooling" according to Alim and Paris (2017, p. 2), and they also continue to be

a part of “the fabric” of the AP exam. Because of the continued focus on “the text itself” without the contextualization that might bring perspective, meaning, and authentic pluralism to the exam, the exam continues to reinscribe the inequities it professes to address. Clearly, the isolation and randomness of the textual choices is not innocent, but a reflection of the power structures that still exist. By including passages by white men about any topic, and by limiting the voices of women and people of color to certain types of topics, the test reinforces deficit thinking. So while issues of gender and race are present, Ladson-Billings (2014) asserts that “student learning is translated as assimilation and narrow forms of success, and cultural competence as ‘We did or read something Black’; and the goal of supporting students’ critical consciousness is either distorted...at best, or conveniently left out altogether at worst” (p.142). Real equity on the AP exam cannot be addressed narrowly or “through the prism of whiteness” (p. 142); it must be deliberate, thorough, and transparent.

This year the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition test is changing. Unfortunately for students and teachers, the changes do not indicate a radical institutional change. Rather, it seems to be a doubling-down. Instead of addressing the issue of equity, they have “hyper-standardized” (Royal & Gibson, 2017) their offerings by introducing skill standards in the guise of “big ideas” and “essential knowledge”. The implied message behind these individual “atomistic” skills is not about a course that “cultivates reading and writing skills that students need for college success and for intellectually responsible civic

engagement” (AP Language Course Guidelines 2019) but about a “restrictive curricula” (Royal & Gibson, 2017, p.19) according to Royal and Gibson that reifies “the cycle of subordination and disengaged, feckless formal schooling experiences” (p.18).

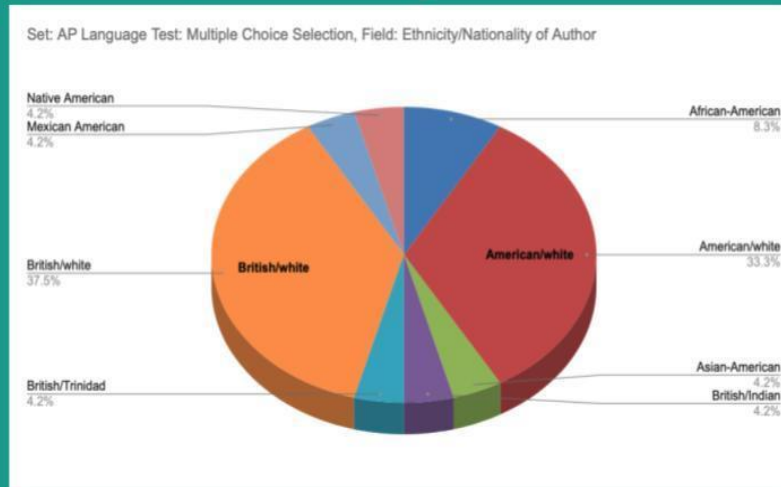
Although the document states that the “publication is not a curriculum” (AP Language Guidelines 2019), the worksheets that list specific skills, such as identifying claims and creating a line of reasoning, over nine units (just add your own content and themes!) dilute the potential power of a more cohesive, culturally pluralistic approach that pursues goals that are beyond a high stakes test in May. Add to the mix the online assessments of these skills, and the priority of the course is clear: the test. The revision has seemingly pushed the prominence of the test to a new level. By foregrounding the isolated skills of New Criticism, and by not providing any new resources to create a contextualized, diverse curriculum that is purposeful for all of our students, the College Board has intensified the divide between secondary and higher education. Most first year composition courses at the college level do not look or feel like this. There are no online testing drills of invented standards. No multiple choice. While writing is a clear focus of college composition, the emphasis is on developing students as writers who engage with meaningful ideas that are important in their communities. They do not sit down and do random, timed “research” papers in 55 minutes.

Instead, even a quick Google search of first year composition course syllabi reveals an attention to equity and learning through contextualized approaches to reading and writing. Inclusion of authentic “diverse texts” (AP Guide 11) and intentional reflection on “diverse audiences for diverse purposes” (11) is not just to “merely make [students] ‘feel good’” (Ladson-Billings 160), but to “utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (161) and “[prepare] students for active citizenship” (162). In these courses, students write essays and research papers, and engage in discussions about topics like education, identity, and justice. While the College Board claims to be addressing equity through their yearly “equity” statements and periodic test revisions and resources, the test has remained a persistent gatekeeper that reinforces a pervasive deficit lens. By maintaining the strict adherence to New Criticism despite its diminished reputation in academic circles, and in providing testing materials and resources that serve to reinforce those in power rather than “utiliz[ing] students’ culture as a vehicle for learning,” I fear that the program is continuing its focus on those students who are well connected anyway. And in continuing to promote its narrative as a rung on the ladder of high school success, it is potentially damaging those students who deserve a deeper, more meaningful education.

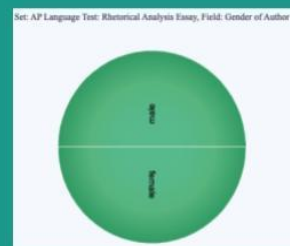
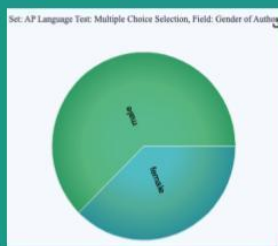
APPENDIX
CONFERENCE PAPER SLIDES WITH TABLES

The following slides were created by Lorrie Cobain using grounded theory, critical discourse analysis, and constructed using Dedoose and Google Slides.

AP Language 2013-2018 Multiple Choice Selections: Representation



Who Can Speak: Gender Representation



Linked Titles	Memos	male authors	female authors	topic
Syn2016.pdf	0	5	1	Writing/History
Syn2014.pdf	0	5	2	technology
Syn2015.pdf	0	1	5	Children/TV
Syn2013.pdf	0	3	1	Science
Syn2017.pdf	0	4	4	Science
Syn2018.pdf	0		5	Kindergarten

Gender Representation by topic

- socializing and parties (2018) honoring others-- especially men like Thomas Carlyle (2013), George Washington (2015), or Victor Hugo (2016)
- asking men for help (2016, 2017)
- centering research writing around women's education, childhood, or early education (2016, 2017, 2018)

Descriptor Matrix	Codes								
	entertaining	evaluating history	experiencing nature	explaining colonization	offering advice	recognizing passages that honor	being culturally relevant	attributing politics	arguing injustice
female	1	6			1	4	11	1	6
male	20	13	4	34	5	3	2	5	

Representation by Writers of Color

- Amy Tan writes about the intimacy of "Englishes" spoken in her family (2014)
- bell hooks explores and defines "the right speech of womanhood" (2016)
- V.S. Naipaul aspire to be like his brother, an aspiring Oxford student (2015)

What is notable about this collection is not what they are about, but what they are not about-- which is a variety of other topics that are included on the AP exam...

Descriptor Matrix	Codes								
	entertaining	evaluating history	experiencing nature	explaining colonization	offering advice	recognizing passages that honor	being culturally relevant	attributing politics	arguing injustice
African-American		3					5	1	3
American/white	2	5	1			2	2	2	1
Asian-American							2	3	
British/Indian				7			1	1	
British/Trinidad		1			2				
British/white	18	2	1			4	2	1	4
Mexican American		8		25			1		
Native American	1		2						

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