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Obama's American Graduation Initiative: Race, Conservative Modernization, and a Logic of Abstraction

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The American Graduation Initiative stands as the cornerstone of the Obama administration's higher education agenda. To investigate the state of the politics of education in the Age of Obama, this article employs critical discourse analysis to unveil the hidden meanings and ideological commitments inherent in Obama's policy discourse. Read within and against the backdrop of what Apple (2006) called the era of *conservative modernization*, Obama's policy discourse relies on a *logic of abstraction* that serves to promote a falsely "postracial" society in which hegemonic notions of education are perpetuated.

On July 14, 2009, President Obama stood at a podium in Warren, Michigan, and introduced his vision for the American Graduation Initiative (AGI). As the largest federal investment in postsecondary education outside of the Higher Education Act, the AGI stands as the cornerstone of the Obama administration's higher education agenda. The setting was significant as Michigan was suffering from the beginning of a sharp economic downturn (one that would only worsen with time). Further, Obama chose to introduce his initiative at Macomb Community College, an educational institution that would play a key role in the development of AGI. Like all speech-acts, Obama's address finds meaning amidst multiple contexts, both local and global. Thus, we find use in examining Obama's address in terms of both the content presented and the way in which such content draws meaning from the privileged social discourses of our times. Further, we find both the AGI and the speech that presented the initiative as articulating a distinct discourse of common sense regarding economic viability, educational attainment, and a deracialized American worker

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that is particularly problematic. Thus, this article seeks to apply a critical lens to the AGI as a cultural artifact, one that draws from contemporary manifestations of what Apple (2006) termed *conservative modernization* and has troubling consequences for our work as critical educators in the academy.

Specifically, in what follows, we explore higher education policy in the Obama administration against the backdrop of the contemporary era of conservative modernization (Apple, 2006). After briefly defining conservative modernization, we explore a major policy—the AGI (White House, 2009). We show how AGI, as a manifestation of conservative modernization, utilizes an assumptive *logic of abstraction* through its appeals to hegemonic common sense. This logic of abstraction presents ours as a culture of individuals, ignoring the collective renditions of human experience and meaning-making. This has particular ramifications for individual and group identity, most notably along the lines of race as it presents a clear avenue for understanding ourselves as culturally (and economically) “postracial.” Yet, as our analysis shows, race is never fully absent from such discourses, existing instead as an “absent presence” in the production of individuals who participate in the economic restructuring of our society.

The AGI is a 10-year, \$12 billion postsecondary education plan that emphasizes the role of community colleges in workforce development and training as well as avenues toward increasing college graduation rates. In introducing the initiative, President Obama asked all Americans to commit to a year or more of training in a postsecondary institution, with the ultimate goal of the United States once again becoming the international leader in proportion of citizenry with a postsecondary degree. Generally, the AGI consists of five strategic aims: (a) increase the number of community college graduates by 5 million, (b) create a series of competitive community college tuition grants, (c) promote strategies to increase collegiate degree acquisition, (d) improve community college facilities, and (e) create a series of online courses distributed through community colleges that emphasize skills training and lifetime experience (White House, 2009). More specific elements of the AGI, as well as the multiple local and global contexts in which it is formed, are analyzed next.

CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION

Conceptually, conservative modernization signifies a hegemonic bloc of social forces that collude to effect conservative changes in education. Effectively, this hegemonic bloc forms a movement to sustain the dominant power structure and exacerbate social inequalities, under the guise of rhetoric that espouses “freedom” and purports the values of meritocracy. Temporally, conservative modernization represents a contemporary condition of education wherein conservative agendas rule and progressive agendas are illegitimate. Conservative modernization can be understood as the era in which education finds itself today. As a framework, conservative modernization must be understood by its formative dimensions—its colluding constituents.

As a movement, conservative modernization relies upon loose, yet mutually reinforcing alliances between four political groups that make up the dominant “rightist” ideologies. These groups include neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and the new middle class (or managerialism)—professionals and managers with the expertise to keep the administrative systems running that sustain conservative reforms (Apple, 2006). To be clear, these four political groups each are formed by shared beliefs in economic, social, and/or cultural values that should

govern society. Although mutually reinforcing, these groups are not wholly congruent in the values they privilege in their worldviews. Indeed, there are tensions and contradictions between each of them. It is how they work through these tensions to form their alliances that gives rise to the state of conservative modernization permeating higher education today; interrogating such strategies provides avenues for effective resistance and movements for progressive change. For clarity, we provide the following definitions of these key terms that are integral to understanding conservative modernization as a framework for critically examining the politics of education in the age of Obama.

Neoliberalism calls for a weak state wherein goals for social life can be met by free market policies. Private enterprise reigns supreme to ensure maximum choice for individuals (McChesney, 1998). As Apple (2006) concluded, “neoliberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic concept, not a political one” (p. 15). *Neoconservatism*, on the other hand, relies on a strong state (Williams, 1977). Government is called upon to enforce the cultural order of society, which should resemble as closely as possible (a somewhat romanticized notion of) the Western tradition. Values of discipline, punishment, and constraint are assumed to bring order and organization to human relations, which in turn protect individual freedoms (Bennett, 1988, 1994; Larrain, 1996). Government protects what is sacred about the state—the shared values that hold it together.

Authoritarian populism affirms the religious convictions of a growing number of conservative constituents. God, and in particular the Christian God, dictates the values that individuals should uphold to live a meaningful and productive life (Apple, 2006; Nord, 1995; Vryhof, 2004). God is the authority over the human population. Yet even the religious values that undergird authoritarian populism intersect with an emergent economic rationalism. It is important to note that, in line with the theoretical framework of this article, salvation is sought not in some form of afterlife but in this life (Foucault, 2007). Furthermore, within the contemporary context of conservative modernization, “salvation” is intimately tied to economic development. A meaningful and productive life is one that is economically viable, demonstrating recognizable skills in the eyes of the market and, consequently, asserting one’s “free will” to be an active economic player in an increasingly globalized world. Thus the values-driven logic of authoritarian populism finds traction in the economic sphere.

Managerialism, represented by the new middle class of administrators and other midlevel professionals with bureaucratic expertise, develops and maintains the systems that sustain the efforts of neoliberals and neoconservatives (Apple, 2006; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). They are the emergent experts on efficient institutionalization and standards-based success who “provide the technical expertise to put in place the policies of conservative modernization” (Apple, 2006, p. 48). Afforded a certain amount of privilege that makes life comfortable for them, the new managers seek to protect these privileges for their families. Therefore, even if more socially progressive than conservative, they can be called on to support policies that are seen to ensure their privileges will be institutionalized—passed on to their children, the comfort of their families remain intact.

These political groups exist in tension over their imagined future world and the roles that education should play in creating a productive society. Strategic alliances between and across these interests allow them to work through these tensions. It is in the resolutions of these tensions that the hegemonic bloc called conservative modernization effectively takes hold and the neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and managerial interests collude to fundamentally

reframe and reshape education within a “rightist” agenda, a values-laden discourse from which the AGI derives meaning and is rendered legitimate.

At stake in the era of conservative modernization are the purposes, roles, functions, and outcomes of American higher education in society. Indeed, as our critical analyses show, the imagined future society in which higher education is constitutively embedded will be shaped by the effects of conservative modernization and the ways that critical scholars, practitioners, and policy makers confront the conservative modernization of the academy. As Apple (2006) put it, “Who we are and how we think about our institutions are closely connected to who has the power to produce and circulate new ways of understanding our identities” (p. 8). Our focus in this article is to demonstrate how the Obama administration’s AGI is embedded within and instantiates the effects of conservative modernization in order to make visible how this discourse perpetuates current standards of economic viability, educational attainment, and a deracialized American worker.

Complementing the conservative modernization framework, we couch our analyses in an understanding of culture put forward by Yúdice (2003), who argued that contemporary American politics engages in an “expediency of culture” (p. 1), which treats culture as resource and deploys culture in policy and policymaking toward a particular social order. When exercised by dominant forces, such as the U.S. government, culture as resource affords hegemonic understandings to become normalized and rational through the discourse of policy and its plausible material consequences. Yúdice linked his theory of the expediency of culture to the performative turn (see Butler, 1990) in social theory, arguing,

A performative understanding of the expediency of culture . . . focuses on the strategies implied in any invocation of culture, any invention of tradition, in relation to some purpose or goal. That there is an end is what makes it possible to speak of culture as a resource. (p. 38)

Consequences of such speech, in turn, bring about conditions that force an individual “to forge his or her own freedom” (Yúdice, 2003, p. 39) from within the social models imposed by others—in this case, the state. In complement to conservative modernization, we view the Obama administration’s discourse, as represented in the AGI and President Obama’s remarks when he publicly introduced the policy in Warren, Michigan, as an expedient cultural artifact. Through our discursive analyses of the ways by which the AGI discourse instantiates conservative modernization, we focus on Obama’s implied strategies and indeed show that culture is spoken by way of resource.

Important to a critical understanding of conservative modernization are the multiple ways in which it operates as an encompassing social discourse, offering up particular truth-claims and rationalities for how we understand the world in which we live. This has particular consequences for the types of evidences and reasoning recognized as legitimate within social discourse. Thus, a primary argument of conservative modernization is to sustain resources such as government subsidization of colleges and universities so individuals may participate in higher education, which will, in turn, influence the public good. This is reminiscent of a traditional input–output model, which emphasizes educating individual people (input) who will then work to increase the national, state, and local economies (output). As Paulsen and Toutkoushian (2007) described, “economists think of colleges in much the same way as other organizations in that they rely on an input–production–output to deliver higher education services” (p. 19).

As an example of how conservative modernization plays out in policy discussions, DesJardins's (2003) study focuses on Minnesota's attempts to ascertain if the state is making a sound monetary investment in public higher education. His study utilizes individual income and tax revenues to define the benefits of higher education. DesJardins assessed the private returns of completing a bachelor's degree (earnings) and weighed it against the private costs incurred (tuition, books, transportation, etc.). He also considered estimated lost earnings while a student is enrolled in college. DesJardins found that "the State will accrue an additional \$57,018 in non-discounted income tax over the working lifetime of each [male] bachelor's degree recipient" (p. 186). In addition, alumni will spend more money in contribution to the local economy. DesJardins also found that the state of Minnesota's internal rate of return (IRR) for men who had some college is conservatively 3.6%; for a bachelor's degree, the IRR is 8.4%; and for a professional degree, the IRR is 11.2%. The individual IRR is 4.9%, 12.5%, and 18.5%, respectively. Additional research on women proves positively significant yet is not as strong as the male outcomes. DesJardins concluded that public subsidization of public higher education is a "win-win proposition" (p. 196) for the state. This proposition does not identify who is included in, or excluded from, this "win-win" scenario.

Situated within the political frame of conservative modernization, these findings advance the argument that the national economy will suffer if higher education does not privatize research to protect its own interests (Brown & Schubert, 2000; Currie & Newson, 1998). In this conceptualization, higher education is the "engine of growth" for the economy (Becker, 1964/1993; Becker & Lewis, 1993). This idea justifies the neoliberal perspective of higher education as a value to market economies and as a societal good measured as a return on an investment.

Yet what this argument precludes are understandings of education and human welfare outside economic terms. As Au (2009) claimed, human capital theory treats dynamic, complicated, and complex human beings (e.g., students) and social institutions (e.g., schools, colleges, and universities) as "widgets to be mechanically produced in standardized models" (p. 313). Au continued to argue that "to think we can treat all of this human complexity like an assembly line and accurately measure it . . . not only is methodologically unsound, it also borders on ridiculous" (p. 313). The inconsistencies of human capital theory, of course, has particular ramifications, most notably that it does not address important issues of race, gender, and class and by default argues that we are in a "postracial" society; the market is all we need to pay attention to as we develop strong economies. Human capital theory ignores any argument for educational equity and opportunity based on moral and just grounds (Au, 2009). Educational equity and opportunity are not to be found within higher education policy if these ideals cannot promote human capital to engender a thriving economy.

Further, even within human capital theory, issues of class and the cyclical pattern of classism across generations are not addressed. Pasque and Rex (2010) referred to this intergenerational progression as *cumulative oppression* as juxtaposed with *cumulative privilege*, where wealth and well-being continue across generations. Stated another way, if families are poor and have little education, the probability is high that their children will live in a similar state; the human capital across generations will remain relatively the same unless a force interrupts the reproduced status quo. Furthermore, if families have wealth and have received a strong education throughout the PreK-higher education system, the probability is high that their children will live in a similar state. In this manner, neoliberals purport that the market will address issues of economic growth and education; however, they do not actively interrupt this cycle of *cumulative oppression* across race,

gender, or class, thereby perpetuating their own *cumulative privilege*. Significant concentration on market values by higher education leaders stratifies the “haves” and the “have-nots” (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Green & Trent, 2005; Hagedorn & Tierney, 2002; Labaree, 1997, 2007). By focusing solely on a market perspective, neoliberals ignore difference and reify disparities across race and class. From a cultural perspective, à la Yúdice’s expediency model, the engine of growth concept imposes a social order that all who participate in higher education must be confined to serving the economy through their participation, stripped of broader cultural wealth or practices that might be in tension with the economic goals of higher education’s role in society. Furthermore, individuals, as is illustrated later, become entrenched into fixed bodies whose roles in society readily are made apparent but yet go unnamed.

LOGIC OF ABSTRACTION

One of the key issues inherent in the rationality of conservative modernization and more specifically articulated in Obama’s AGI is an ongoing *logic of abstraction*. In an era of conservative modernization the individual is produced through an abstraction from local and material contexts, presented as disembodied and materially unbound. McLaren’s (1995) notion of the American “predatory culture” is instructive here:

In our hyper-fragmented and predatory postmodern culture, democracy is secured through the power to control consciousness and semiotize and discipline bodies by mapping and manipulating sounds, images, and information and forcing identity to take refuge in the forms of subjectivity increasingly experienced as isolated and separate from larger social contexts. (p. 117)

In the era of conservative modernization, and as is shown in AGI, race is abstracted from individual identity as people are identified through their worker identity and ability to produce within the economic system. Finally, education itself is abstracted from concepts that do not derive directly from workforce development. Here, this logic of abstraction drives conservative modernization and has particular implications for Obama’s initiative, as well as how race operates in our contemporary worldview.

Importantly, instantiations of conservative modernization are linked through utilitarian assumptions regarding the overlay of capitalism and democracy (Apple, 2006). We would like to extend Apple’s insights by linking the intersection of capitalism and democracy with this ongoing logic of abstraction. The capitalistic system is read by neoliberals and neoconservatives alike as inherently requiring the individual to be “known” (interpreted, understood, and defined) through his or her economic activities and their performance of “the good American,” as tied to their economic contribution. For example, when a person is identified by his or her occupation, such as a lawyer, surgeon, steelworker, or teacher, there is a reflexive label or set of assumptions about that person’s socioeconomic class and annual income. Thus, the individual (or individual identity) is stripped of all but instantiations of economic production. In this sense, the logic of abstraction operates through insisting on economic rationality as the sole means through which to identify “healthy” or “contributing” individuals. This logic is far-reaching. For example, economic activity becomes inherently understood as democratic activity (to not participate in the economy is to be undemocratic and, by extension, unpatriotic) and moral activity (being productive economically

is morally charged, thus the decision to build new skills through AGI is, at one and the same time, linked with a moral decision to take care of one's self, to earn economic independence, etc.).

Thus, elements of conservative modernization are linked by an unwavering belief in the economic sphere as a vehicle for democratic change and the abstraction of the individual as a means to interpret identity. Furthermore, conservative modernization is built on a deep belief in individualization in relation to the market—that the market is neutral and objective because it treats everyone the same, as individuals. As a consequence, cultural biases (e.g., race or class) are ruled out in relation to the market. With such a commonsensical interpretation of the market in our society, it is no longer easy to present a critique that emphasizes the collective (ethnicities or classes, etc.). The market operates on a rationality of the abstracted individual. Thus we are all subjected to the market and made subjects by the market (who we are is determined by the market—a viable employee, an unemployed worker in need of new skills training—even as the market allows us to be someone, individually speaking). Rationalities of the individual are pivotal here: Why wouldn't I, as an individual, want to be retrained to reenter the workforce, to move out of the subject position of the unemployed and into the subject position of the productively employed? Furthermore, such a rationality, as previously noted, links with notions of democracy and morality: Not only should I want to be retrained, I am compelled—as a believer in democracy and morality—to do so.

Once rationalities of the abstracted individual achieve the level of common sense (what Althusser, 1977, termed “know-how”), the collective critique loses rational traction. As Apple (2006) wrote,

Conservative modernization has radically reshaped the common sense of society. It has worked in every sphere—the economic, the political, and the cultural—to alter the basic categories we use to evaluate our institutions and our public and private lives. It has established new identities. (p. 226)

This remains important to our analysis because it is difficult to talk about something like race when the contemporary discourse is fixated on the production and analysis of individual actions (essentially, economic activity). The “basic categories we use to evaluate” the social world have, as Apple noted, changed. Our new identities exist in overdetermined (and individual) relationship to the market. The simplest way to deal with this is to claim that race no longer exists as an organizational (or defining) term in our society; as individuals we are “postracial.” Thus, the critical analysis of our contemporary state of conservative modernization refuses such thinking and seeks, instead, to tease out the logics, rationalities, and manifestations of such individualization in order to see how they are (re)produced, distributed, and appropriated on multiple levels.

THE LOGIC OF ABSTRACTION AND THE PRODUCTION OF RACE

Given this logic of abstraction amidst conservative modernization, it becomes clear that race can no longer be read in the collective sense. Rather, race manifests as the (in)ability to participate in the economic market, to engage in economic activity. The abstracted individual must account for his or her activity, make it meaningful within the eyes of the market, and do so in economic terms. Race, consequently, falls away as a qualifying term; it cannot be fully accounted for in the

logic of abstraction (or systems of economic rationality). Thus, race is (once again) marginalized as a constitutive term, both in the sense of the individual and social.

In line with Yúdice's notion of culture as resource/expedient, race—as constructed to produce collective bodies (e.g., racialized subcultures or interest groups)—within the logic of abstraction disallows the affordance of rights or justice in ways that explicitly account for racialized inequalities. Consequently, as Yúdice (2003) pointed out, group entitlement then must be contested upon “surrogate terrain” (p. 55), such as language (e.g., bilingual education policy), family (e.g., welfare policy), and sexuality (e.g., health policy). Applied to higher education, the logic of abstraction relies on expedient cultural artifacts to remove race from policy concerns, inciting risk to racialized minorities.

Within all of this, race operates as an “absent presence”—never named but always there. Thus, we are far from postracial. Indeed, Obama's remarks point to an eager return to an historical cultural order—one in which race is ignored, cast aside in favor of a relentless focus on the market. Of course, as a critical reading of conservative modernization emphasizes, the market is far from neutral and never exempt from those same sociocultural biases that operate within our lived world.

In this sense, racism is all the more insidious because of its veiled manifestations: “Race gets a good deal of its power through its very hiddenness. Nowhere is this more true than in the discourse of markets and standards” (Apple, 2006, p. 236). One element is that the very discourse of conservative modernization resists analyses that move beyond individual accountability, seeking to render collective identity, and the public/social contributions, obsolete. Yet the fears that uphold racism continue: “Fear of the racialized Other is connected to fears of nation, culture, control, and decline—and to intensely personal fears about the future of one's children in an economy in crisis” (Apple, 2006, p. 241). And we see the contemporary fears and anxieties within Obama's address—a fear of falling behind, of failing our nation on an individual basis.

READING AND ANALYZING HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF OBAMA: CRITICAL AND POLICY DISCOURSE ANALYSES

Conservative modernization, as an epoch and a movement, is made commonsensical in everyday understandings. Thus, it can be difficult to discern the forces of conservative modernization, particularly in light of the logic of abstraction that is at play in particular political mechanisms (e.g., federal higher education policies). To these ends, we engaged in critical and policy discourse analyses of the rhetoric used to introduce the AGI, as well as the text of the policy itself. Critical discourse analysis and policy discourse analysis are methods for uncovering hidden meanings in the everyday texts that govern social life (Allan, 2010; Fairclough, 2006; Johnstone, 2002).

Critical discourse analysis is a methodology that assumes human realities are made possible through talk and action (Fairclough, 2006). We cannot come to understand a reality—conceptualize it, intellectualize it—without first being able to imagine it. As our imaginations are bound by language (albeit in a recursive relationship), *discourse* is assumed to be an interlocuter to reality. That is to say, different concepts of the world become discursively available for use through our talk and action—the text of our everyday lives. These are processes laden with power and ideological formation. As such, critical discourse analysis seeks to understand the

underlying assumptions that co-construct the discursive availability of our available understandings of the world.

Policy discourse analysis draws from critical discourse analysis but focuses in on the talk and action within policy: the text of policy and its meanings, its discourse (Allan, Iverson, & Ropers-Huilman, 2010). Of interest in policy discourse analysis are the ambiguities and contradictions within and across policy discourses. These ambiguities and contradictions are assumed to be the lair for material formations of oppression and/or opportunity (or hope). These spaces are fissures within and across policy discourses that might afford possibility for social change.

Traditions of critical and policy discourse analysis share three key assumptions: (a) Discourse is understood as the meaning created from the talk and action of any given text, (b) the language of discourse is formative and historical, and (c) (discursive) power is productive rather than repressive (Allan, 2010; Baxter, 2003; Fairclough, 2006; Foucault, 1978). As such, we took President Obama's speech at the introduction of AGI and the text from AGI itself as our primary data and sought to understand the discourses of higher education produced by the Obama administration. Using conservative modernization as a primary framework, we read these texts (i.e., the speech and the policy) for the neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and managerial discourses that constitute conservative modernization within the expediency of culture.

Within our theoretical framework, these four discourses collude in forming the hegemonic bloc that reifies the logic of abstraction and makes policy initiatives like AGI commonsense. What we present next is a disruptive reading of this discourse, illustrating how the politics of education in the age of Obama are complicit in perpetuating the conservative modernization of higher education. This disruptive reading focuses on the construction of the individual in the logic of abstraction, the construction of knowledge/education in producing community colleges as technical workforce development, and an ominous use of race as an "absent presence."

CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION AND THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION'S AMERICAN GRADUATION INITIATIVE

The AGI emphasizes educating individual people to increase their ability to find a job and financially contribute to society. Further, community colleges are not viewed as complex entities that address myriad issues and engage with local communities but instead are reduced to workforce development. In this way, the AGI assumes that issues of race, gender, and class either will be addressed from a market perspective or are not worthy of addressing at all. The AGI buys into this "engine of growth" philosophy (Obama, 2009); an investment in individuals (input) is directly connected to the country's economic vitality (output). For example, in his speech, Obama (2009) identified Kellie, a UAW worker at a Ford plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan. She used to drive a forklift but then decided "to train here at Macomb [Community College] for a job that required new skills, and now she's an apprentice pipe fitter." In this example, not only are community colleges "an essential part of our recovery" to support the engine of growth, but the administration identifies higher education as job training and workforce development. Here lie two fundamental problems with this neoliberal conceptualization of higher education.

First, as Apple (2006) pointed out, paying attention only to the private/economic aspect of the argument depoliticizes the argument and purports that education is about (a) working hard to train oneself for a better job and (b) supporting the economy by educating the individual.

There is an implied postracial climate in this argument, as though meritocracy and marketization reduces the need to wrestle with systemic issues of racism, classism, sexism, and other “isms.” It removes arguments and ideas such as “whose knowledge should be taught, who should control school policy and practice, and how schools should be financed” (Apple, 2006, p. 38). These issues are left for the market to decide. Consumer choice is the guarantor of democracy. It is this depoliticization process that makes it difficult for people with less economic, political, and cultural power to be heard or have needs met.

Second, the Obama administration emphasizes particular postsecondary institutions with particular goals for supporting the national economic engine: community colleges as workforce development. This is another neoliberal concept that supports a market perspective yet, again, does not uncover the inherent racism and classism reflected in this argument. To come back to the example of Kellie, her apprenticeship as a pipe fitter is defined as a college education, one that will enable her to obtain a job and actively participate in the economy. However, such an apprenticeship does not provide Kellie with an opportunity for a liberal education or provide her with choices outside a working-class conceptualization of the economic frame, as described by Levine’s (1996) *The Opening of the American Mind: Cannons, Culture and History*. Even though access to community college may increase through the AGI, college still serves as a sorting mechanism, where access to community college does not always equate to the advantages received from an Ivy League or land grant flagship institution, as spelled out in Brint and Karabel’s (1998) *The Diverted Dream*.

Directly relevant to our interests in how the Obama administration’s educational policy platform produces racialized subjects and objects, it is important to recognize that students of color are more likely to be tracked into community colleges than White students (Gildersleeve, 2010; Noguera, 2003). This tracking goes hand in hand with the segregation of schooling (Lipman, 2003; Oakes, 2005; Sohoni & Saporito, 2009) that plagues urban schools in particular and inflicts symbolic violence on all members of school communities (Rowley, 2000). In this way, tertiary educational systems are linked to secondary and primary schools through more than the graduation of students from one institution to another—such systems are linked in their reproduction of the values that sustain conservative modernization generally and racial tracking more specifically.

Research findings show that students of color and students from lower socioeconomic statuses are less likely than their peers to receive information about financial aid and funding opportunities (Kezar, 2005; Southern Education Foundation, 1995). Kezar (2005) argued that the high price of college, even if it is subsidized, leaves a “financial aid gap” or “sticker shock” (p. 32), which deters students from attending college or from attending a more expensive institution. In this way, students are more apt to attend a local community college such as Macomb, rather than a regional or flagship institution that provides greater access to choices that may contribute to both the individual private good and a larger (not economically based) public good. It remains important to note that these tracking mechanisms echo the longstanding concerns of segregation and tracking in K-12 schools that scholars like Lipman (2003) and Noguera (2003) have linked to economically driven false-promises for equity in communities of color. In this way, the historical systematic tracking and segregation of students of color that has plagued primary and secondary institutions are replicated throughout higher education; a process that has only intensified within the era of conservative modernization.

Even more pointedly, students in higher education are less likely to smoke cigarettes and more apt to participate in leisure activities and have extended life expectancy (Institute for Higher

Education Policy, 1998). Further, 77% of the children of college-educated individuals go to college, whereas only 33% of children of individuals without a college education attend college (Gándara, 2002). In light of these figures, the people privileged enough to receive a bachelor's degree continue to live longer, healthier lives than people without a college education, and this continues throughout generations. Apprenticeship programs such as Kellie's continue to put her at risk; they do not break the cycle of health and wellness concerns for her children or their children. As mentioned earlier, this contributes to the cycle of *cumulative oppression* and *cumulative privilege*, reifying the status quo in the era of conservative modernization.

These tracking mechanisms echo the long-standing concerns of segregation and tracking in K-12 schools that scholars like Lipman (2003) and Noguera (2003) have linked to economically driven false promises for equity in communities of color. Not only are select students tracked into select schools—not only does such selection overly impact students of color—but it contributes to the (re)formation of particular daily practices and the surveillance of such practices as students progress through our educational institutions.

In many ways, AGI is a stern example of government as the director of daily conduct. As Foucault (1982) wrote, “To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others” (p. 221). This has implications for education as teaching becomes the direction of daily conduct (Foucault, 2007). To both govern and teach in these ways, the individual subject must undergo constant observation (some might say surveillance). Thus, Obama argues for a systematic sequence of tracking that extends through the community colleges and out into subjects' behavior within the (increasingly privatized) market: “So we'll fund programs that track student progress *inside and outside* [emphasis added] the classroom.” This “tracking” of the student, again, is aimed not at the individual, but his or her activities—it is a thorough abstraction of the person, now understood as educational (and soon-to-be economic) activity.

In addition, Obama (2009) aimed to

create a new research center with a simple mission: to measure what works and what doesn't. All too often, we don't know what happens when somebody walks out of a classroom and onto the factory floor or into the library or—the laboratory or the office.

This is more than simply renditions of the panopticon (where individuals undergo surveillance and regulate themselves accordingly). Here, the subject produces data (skills and conduct) that, in turn, the new manager interprets in relation to market needs and uses to justify alterations to the actions/conduct of that very subject. This is a process of intense individuation, a continually abstracting process that makes sense of individuals through their activities. This type of governmentalization has been linked to what Yúdice's materialist analysis argued “is an important conditioning factor in the politics of identity” (p. 54), which, through the logic of abstraction become unavailable, if not already untenable. Identity politics become the *de facto* interpretation of human needs through the terminology of the hegemonic discourse, which translates needs via their relation to capitalist practice, yet politically constructed identities, such as race, are abstracted, and their productions of inequality (e.g., racialization) are rendered insignificant.

One could read Obama's address as all about changing community colleges to become institutions that produce individuals who are steeped in “right action” (in this case, who have the skills necessary to be productive individuals in the eyes of the market). Thus, as Obama (2009) noted, the collegiate degree “really has to mean something . . . If a worker is going to spend two years training to enter into a whole new profession, that certificate has to mean that he or she

is ready, and that businesses are ready to hire.” Here, the degree certifies that she or he can be economically productive, has the skills, can engage in the correct actions so as to contribute to the market. Thus, it is a problem if “businesses often can’t be sure what a degree is really worth. And schools themselves don’t have the facts to make informed choices about which programs . . . achieve results and which programs don’t” (Obama, 2009). The AGI becomes a process of aligning individual actions (as well as his or her economically substantiated values and goals) and the institution (and its credentialing system) more directly with the concerns of the market. Both the individual and the institution are invested in producing and consuming similar types of “data”—in this case, “facts to make informed choices about which programs . . . achieve results” (Obama, 2009). Further, individual freedom and the (newly defined) democratic process are established through becoming an acknowledged and independent individual in the eyes of the market. More simply, one becomes (freely) engaged in the democratic process through (freely) altering one’s actions and (freely) becoming an individual in relation to the market. One becomes both subject to and a subject of the market. This, of course has unique implications. If elements of freedom are determined by economic independence, it “must by its very nature draw a line between those classes of people who have it (economic independence) and those who do not” (Apple, 2006, p. 12). Yet we might again push Apple’s line of reasoning further, noting that the era of conservative modernization promotes a logic of intense individualization, precluding the possibility for analyses of “classes of people” in favor of situating the individual infinitely in relation to the market, on his or her “own terms” (terms that do not include race or class).

AGI AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE AMERICAN WORKER

President Obama invokes conservative modernization rhetoric to gather supporters as being part of a common American culture with common concerns and similar needs. According to Obama (2009), this American culture “define[s] ourselves by the work we do. That’s part of what it means to be an American. . . . Not just for income, but because it makes you part of that fabric of a community.” To be considered “American,” one must share these values about the relationship between work, worker, and community. Americans are therefore auto mechanics, dentists, custodians, professors, insurance adjusters, and other definable professions. Any differences outside of our vocation are inconsequential. American subjectivity is erased. An American identity is reborn: the American worker.

Within its discourse, the American worker is put in historical context as having always played this part in the American culture. Indeed, within the neoconservative discourse of the American worker, individuals’ and families’ economic problems come from the fact that we have strayed from what makes us American, and so, according to Obama (2009), “in this moment we must do what other generations have done.” Yet that which our predecessors did, which is apparently what we need to do now, gets defined only in terms of what is wrong with what Americans have done of late. Rather than defining by example what other generations did, Obama provides a litany of contemporary social sins that have taken individuals and their families away from that idyllic past: putting off tough decisions, shrinking prominence over the global economy, and spiraling out-of-control health care costs. This laundry list of contemporary social sins serves as a call for a return to the idyllic (and elusive) past without actually noting any examples of how the past achieved any remedies or preventive measures for these sins. *The American worker is*

Obama's expedient cultural artifact. The Obama administration (or the Bush, Clinton, and Bush administrations) does not own, acknowledge, or address historical educational inequities across race, class, and gender. Instead, Obama neatly bookends his comments with vacant citations to history that emphasize how we need to return to the American worker.

To breathe life into the American worker, Obama must rhetorically establish the American worker's reliance on the strong state. Here, Obama appeals to neoconservative sensibilities by calling for a "return" to useful and *approved* knowledge—knowledge that has been tested and proven "true." A primary mechanism for controlling knowledge in higher education is the curriculum. Long-fought and understood as the purview of the faculty, Obama's description of AGI unveils a number of strategies that shift the power structure of curricula.

Obama speaks about only one kind of work in his speech introducing the AGI. Time and again, the president refers to manufacturing-related jobs that require technical skill sets. Yet when defining the curricula desired from the community colleges, he alludes to more professional settings. Specifically, Obama (2009) stated, "We'll put colleges and employers together to create programs that match curricula in the classroom to the needs of the boardroom." This sentence should be read carefully. Obama does not suggest that community colleges can or should think of their students as future members of the boardroom. Rather, community college students must fulfill their proper role in American society as the American worker—one who gets defined by the professional/managerial class in the boardroom. It is the needs of those in the boardroom that Obama wants to satisfy, *not* the needs of those who are ensnared in the discourse of the American worker. Well, at least no needs beyond that of being able to become the American worker, at the behest of those inside the boardroom.

So, if we conclude that the AGI is not so much about education (in the progressive sense) and more about workforce development (education in an era of conservative modernization as the production of economic knowledges and activities), we see community colleges playing a key role in this approximation. Community colleges provide the workers who are managed by the new managerial class. They are the teachers who are explicitly developed to articulate standards-based education in their classroom. They are the technicians who are trained to move from one assembly line to another, exchanging sets of skills for other sets of skills though no less alienated from their work. If the new managers are promoted as agents of change (Apple, 2006), community college graduates are those who are changed by such agents. They are the subjects of a discourse of change. We argue that, instead, all active participants in education—whether they be community college or 4-year university students, graduates, or faculty—should be encouraged to serve as agents of social change.

In the beginning of his remarks, Obama defined American identity as the American worker. Toward the end he reminded his audience, "At every juncture in our history when we've been challenged, we have summoned the resistance and the industriousness—that can-do American spirit—that has allowed us to succeed in the face of even the toughest odds" (Obama, 2009). What Obama's comments fail to recognize is that many Americans were on the suffering ends of these junctures. Many Americans were the very bodies sacrificed to racism (e.g., slavery), neo/colonialism (e.g., immigration policy), homophobia and heterosexism (e.g., response to HIV/AIDS), and sexism (e.g., reproductive freedoms) in order for the common culture to emerge as the globally dominant American worker. One explanation for the absence of these Americans in Obama's rhetoric is that they are not real Americans. They were not, nor can they now be, part of the discourse of the American worker. The American bodies sacrificed to slavery, failed

immigration policies, inhumane responses to HIV/AIDS, and the restriction of reproductive freedoms were necessary accommodations along the way to building a stronger monocultural essence of what it means to be American—The American Worker.

The AGI creates a “Community College Challenge Fund” in which economic resources will be available, on a competitive basis, to “improve instruction, build ties with businesses . . . innovate and expand *proven* [emphasis added] reforms” (White House, 2009). From a critical perspective, the notion of proof is problematic; from the perspective of conservative modernization, it is a given. In the pluralistic, dynamic, context-laden yet ever-shifting realities of the contemporary postmodern epoch, proof has been established as a fallacy—a “façade of clarity” that allows the functions of any policy to betray its intentions (Carducci, Contreras-McGavin, Kuntz, & Pasque, 2006). Furthermore, colleges that receive these competitive grants and can “demonstrate improved educational and employment outcomes will receive continued federal support and become models for widespread adoption” (White House, 2009). The desire to find generalizable strategies for increasing the educational attainment of Americans (and thereby strengthening the human capital provided by the American worker), from a critical perspective, should be read as promoting a monocultural ideal. “Models of widespread adoption” indicates that all colleges need to produce the same outcomes using the same means without attention to race, class, and gender. These would be the tried-and-true, *proven* means that can pass neoconservative scrutiny. Ostensibly, the goal of the community college challenge fund then becomes influencing community college curricula to such an extent so as to regulate the outcome (graduates) in the shape of the American worker.

A RETURN TO RACE AND THE HEGEMONIC BLOC OF CONSERVATIVE MODERNIZATION

Simple demographic statistics help illustrate the absence of race in AGI. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), community colleges are responsible for 34.14% of all students in American higher education. Students of color make up a whopping 35.64% of community college students—far greater than their proportional representation in American higher education generally and with even greater overrepresentation when compared with 4-year institutions. Furthermore, community colleges enroll 46.43% of all students of color in American higher education. When socioeconomic status is overlaid with these race-based statistics, it becomes clear that the targets of AGI are working-class youth and adults, especially working-class persons of color. As alluded to earlier, Brint and Karabel’s (1989) notion of higher education as one of the country’s most powerful sorting mechanisms becomes illustratively clear in light of these demographics and our critical analysis of the AGI. As such, neoconservative ideals such as The American Worker and neoliberal concerns about sustained economic stratification via the “free” market are reified in the absent presence of race in Obama’s higher education policy. Further, the logic of abstraction serves managerialist and populist concerns to continue the status quo, whether through neoconservative or neoliberal means. All of these discourses collude in the expediency of culture as normalized notions of American subjects get translated into the postracial American object—The American Worker.

As Cameron (2001) explained, critical discourse analysis is concerned with the “hidden agenda” of discourse, or its “ideological dimension” (p. 123), where choices about discourse are

not viewed as random but as ideologically patterned. The ideological pattern of the AGI “hidden agenda” is clear when viewed through the lens of conservative modernization; to argue for a postracialized society through a focus on the individual American worker who contributes to society through providing an economic benefit, one that abstracts him or her of culture, race, ethnicity, and a sense of identity.

It is clear that conservative modernization offers particular rationalities through which multiple educational policy initiatives find meaning; the AGI is no exception. Many within the educational community hoped that administrative changes in political leadership would lead to systematic alterations to how education is known and how it might contribute to the world in which we live. However, though administrations have changed, contemporary manifestations of conservative modernization have not—we might go so far as to conclude that they have only intensified. As a consequence, we find value in interrogating the logical systems that undergird educational policy to better understand how they reveal themselves in multiple and often contradictory ways. In this way, we advocate for a critical approach that refuses traditionally legitimated approximations of common sense. In the realm of policy, this requires investigations into both what select educational policies do (e.g., imbuing community colleges with the hope of a new American worker) and how they are formed (through the collusion of multiple forces inherent in conservative modernization).

Our analysis reveals the AGI as driven by a logic of abstraction that refuses collective identity formations as it promotes a strongly individualized economic worldview. As a consequence, the AGI does not provide a progressive way forward toward national economic recovery. Instead, it operates on a regressive logical structure that (falsely) assumes a posture of a postracial society, one intent on individualized ways of producing economic success. If any productive change is to occur within the field of education it will not be provoked by simple policies or initiatives but by the radical realignment of the very logic that undergirds such policies and renders them legitimate.¹

¹*Reflective Coda:* As criticalists, we value positioning our own dissident perspectives, even as we seek to write this article from a consensually unified voice. As such, we wish to end our analytical commentary on the politics of higher education in the age of Obama by sharing our dissensus—the nonagreements we share as we reflect upon the analyses we presented in this article. Primarily, our nonagreements stem from the role and responsibility that President Obama might play himself as the chief executive of the United States and, ergo, primary executor of the policy discourse we analyzed for this article.

Ryan wishes to make clear that he holds President Obama responsible for the effects of AGI’s complicity with conservative modernization. Yet, I (Ryan) make note that Obama’s administration is ensnared within the discourses of the era of conservative modernization, just as any other policymaking agent might be. Therefore, rather than vilifying Barack Obama, the man, I wish to hold his presidency accountable for failing to exercise the agency that his position affords him in potentially disrupting the hegemonic bloc that perpetuates the conservative modernization of the academy. In short, the Obama presidency has failed higher education. And it will continue to fail if it promotes policy such as AGI—policy that reifies market-driven conceptualizations of higher education while seeking to codify knowledge and perpetuate the “othering” of nondominant subjectivities in American life.

I, Penny, agree with Ryan and add an additional perspective. As we have shown through this analysis, the complexities of discourse can be slippery and perpetuate the era of conservative modernization, whether it is intentional or not. However, intention to disrupt is not enough; action is desperately needed to interrupt the cycle of cumulative oppression and privilege across race, gender, and class. Although some may say “at least the administration is doing something,” the policy, as we have reflected upon, reifies inequities. Yet I see all too clearly the ways in which any critique of the current administration could be utilized by people with a conservative modernization perspective to tear down the current administration in order to promote their own agenda. In this vein, I (Penny) add an air of hope: that this article contributes to unpacking the complexities of discourse, and the ways in which power across race and class is embedded in such discourse, in order for

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the Obama administration to take the stand that Ryan mentions previously—one that does not perpetuate the ideas of a postracialized American Worker and limit community colleges to that of workforce development for an individual benefit, but one that recognizes historic and contemporary inequities, engages in explicit “truth telling” about such inequities, and works toward equity in education.

Aaron remains concerned with what he sees as the intensification of conservative modernization, particularly within the field of education that coincides with the Obama administration assuming power. Although I (Aaron) maintain an ethical position of hope, I find myself disillusioned with policy “changes” and initiatives that increasingly seem to fortify and otherwise concentrate the vagaries of conservative modernization. In particular, I remain troubled by the ease with which national educational policies ignore collective identity in favor of understanding individuals on their own (ahistorical) terms. By ignoring the historical development of inequity and their historical manifestations in our education systems, we all too easily lay claim to a position of “post”—postracial, postclass, and so on. Yet we are never fully beyond our collective histories (as the term “post” would seem to imply), never untouched by such identities. Thus, hopeful change can occur only through the rejection of the logic of abstraction, refusing the very norms that uphold such initiatives and make them commonsensically feasible. Rejection, resistance, and collective action—therein lies hope.

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