Literary Analysis Engages with Neoliberalism

*Jane Eyre* & *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Preface

I would first like to thank my thesis advisors Brynja Elisabeth Halldórsdóttir and Ólafur Páll Jónsson. I am gratefully indebted to them for their guidance and valuable comments on this thesis. I would also like to thank Jón Ólafsson for introducing me to Wendy Brown’s book *Undoing the Demos* in his course Culture and Dissent. I am also incredibly grateful to the University of Iceland for their generosity in providing a tuition-free education to students from around the world regardless of their nationality or citizenship. My academic experience in Iceland has been exceptional and I will continue to value and treasure all that I have learned here, the friends I have made, and the inspiration I have received both inside and outside of the classroom.

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This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the University of Iceland Code of Ethics (https://english.hi.is/university/university_of_iceland_code_of_ethics) and have followed them to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited to all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with me and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work. Signed:

Reykjavík, 3 May 2018

[Signature]
Abstract

Within the neoliberal economization of daily living, critical pedagogy proffers a holistic framework to practice “thought-full activism” (Slee, 2011, p. 168) in everyday life. A primary component of critical pedagogy is to proffer students oppositional viewpoints that deconstruct dominant ideological practices. The practice of critical pedagogy enables students to identify and reformulate politicized categories of being and the worldviews they represent. With such tools, students can incorporate the creation of new knowledges through the use of course material and student dialogue to construct new ways of understanding, cultural schema, and self-reflexivity. In this context this means for fronting a critique of neoliberal ideology. In my thesis, I discuss how to use critical pedagogy in literary studies to interrogate and to resist neoliberal ideologies that commodify students, teachers, and education. The aim of this thesis is to offer readers an example of how fictional literature—Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea—might be used to facilitate students' understanding of and critical reflection upon neoliberalism and its role in shaping their lived-realities, thereby enabling students to engage "thought-fully" with the world in which they live.
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1 Introduction

In a special edition of Radical Teacher entitled “Teaching Post-Colonial Literature in the Age of Empire,” Dittmar and Leistyna present a need they see as arising from the myopic focus on literature as a cultural artifact, divorced of other structural underpinnings:

We [teachers] need to develop a critical pedagogy...within a more comprehensive understanding of the structural, economic and political changes our world is undergoing in tandem with a more active engagement in these changes. (2008, p. 7)

The aim of my research is to respond to the shortcoming identified by Dittmar and Leistyna. By critically engaging with neoliberal ideology1 through literature, I hope to encourage teachers2 to bring both an understanding and a critique of the socio-politico-economic system of neoliberalism into their classrooms. The purpose of bringing about a discussion of neoliberalism is to offer students “a more comprehensive understanding” of the world we inhabit as well as to encourage “a more active engagement” with the inequalities and systems of privilege and disadvantage inculcated by neoliberal ideology. In other words, I situate my attempt to engage with neoliberalism through literature alongside critiques of other systems of hegemony, ideology, and power. My ultimate hope is that literary analyses focused on neoliberal ideology might change classroom conversations in a manner similar to the ways in which post-colonial literary criticisms, for example, have transformed the literary landscape. To that end, I divide my work into five sections. In section one, I introduce the theoretical underpinnings of my research, discuss the relevance of my work, and present my methodological approach. Sections two and three present semi-independent papers3 that aim to teach students about neoliberal ideology through literature using critical educational praxis. Drawing from and building upon post-colonial literary analyses, I proffer my own

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1 In this thesis, I use the terms “neoliberal ideology,” “neoliberal capitalist ideology,” “neoliberal capitalism,” and “neoliberalism,” using the first two when I refer to a rationality or framework for thinking and the last two when I refer to the socio-politico-economic structure. I exbound upon the concepts later in this introduction. For now, it suffices to say that my conceptualization of neoliberal ideology draws heavily on Wendy Brown’s (2016) book Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution and is closely related to her delineation of neoliberal rationality and its subject, human capital: “the norms and principles of neoliberal rationality do not dictate precise economic policy, but rather set out novel ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy, and subject...[inaugurating] a new ‘economization’ of heretofore non-economic spheres and endeavors,” thereby “[replacing] the classical figure of homo oeconomicus...with one driven by (human) capital appreciation” (pp. 50, 70).

2 Throughout the present work, I use the terms “teachers” and “educators” instead of the terms “academics” or “scholars” when referring to my intended audience because my work is focused on the role such individuals play in the classroom environment and on engaging with students. In particular, my intended audience is “teachers of literature” in classrooms with students from a variety of disciplines—namely, entry-level literature classes that meet students’ general education requirements or literature classes that are cross-listed with other disciplines.

3 Since teaching neoliberalism through literature is a novel approach and since I did not know at the outset whether such an attempt would succeed, I refer to each of the semi-independent papers as “paper-experiments.”
literary analyses of two texts—one from the Western literary canon, *Jane Eyre*, and another from post-colonial feminist literature, *Wide Sargasso Sea*—as starting points for such a critique of neoliberalism using literature. In section two, I demonstrate how literature teachers at the post-secondary level can teach their students about neoliberalism while discussing *Jane Eyre*. In section three, I describe how that same task can be accomplished in a discussion of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In section four, I illustrate how literature teachers can further engage their students in discussions about neoliberalism using examples from contemporary U.S. mainstream culture. In the final section, I examine the results of my research.

### 1.1 Research Question

I approach the problem of the concomitant pervasiveness and invisibility of neoliberal ideologies (Monibot, 2016) in the classroom and education system in the U.S. within the context of the following question:

1. How can an examination of literature enliven critical thinking and a transformation of personal politics pertaining to neoliberalism?

I address the above question in two semi-independent papers, a section pertaining to contemporary examples, and a discussion of the results in the conclusion to this project. As an overview, my research project employs literary analysis to critically engage with neoliberalism by examining two texts—*Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I dedicate one section to each of the aforementioned texts. Each section presents an analysis of how neoliberalism can be discussed in relation to one of the two texts. Ultimately, the aim of each section is to offer teachers at the post-secondary level a starting point for or an example of how fictional literature might be used to facilitate their students' understanding of and critical reflection upon neoliberalism and its role in shaping their lived-realities. Moreover, since using literary analysis to critically engage with neoliberalism is a new approach to literary studies, each semi-independent paper is experimental. Thus, the conclusion discusses the results of the paper-experiments. In the conclusion, I evaluate how well the paper-experiments respond to the challenge of teaching students about neoliberalism in classrooms and contexts structured by neoliberal ideology. In the conclusion, I use the results of the paper-experiments to address the question articulated above and to discuss the potential insights gained.

### 1.2 Theoretical Background

Within the neoliberal economization of daily living, critical pedagogy proffers an holistic framework to practice “thought-full activism” (Slee, 2011, p. 168). A primary component of

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4 In the U.S., “post-secondary” refers to any level of education following high school (i.e., after grade 12). It refers not only to colleges and universities but also to many continuing education courses, certificate programs, technical schools, and enrichment programs.
Critical pedagogy is to proffer students oppositional viewpoints that are engaged in an ongoing deconstruction of dominant ideological practices. In our times an engagement with the dominant ideology means forefronting a critique of neoliberalism. The practice of critical pedagogy enables students to reformulate politicized categories of being and the knowledge to which they give rise. Students can incorporate the creation of new knowledge by using course material/literature and student dialogue to acquire new understandings, cultural schema, and self-reflexivity. By exploring fictional literature in the context of an engagement with neoliberal ideology, I aim to challenge contemporary manifestations of competitive individualism in neoliberal educational praxis and to illustrate that critical pedagogy, coupled with literary analysis, can negotiate within and between the metanarratives of hegemonic, neoliberal discourses.

Critical education praxis, as a frame of mind, is an holistic perspective that enables local communities to work as empowered agents of change; the model reorients community members away from bureaucratic policy making and toward critical futures. The flexibility of the critical pedagogical model is a “movement away from power over to power with” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 9). Since that model is structured around mindset, identity, and attitude, I hope to demonstrate that using critical pedagogy to challenge neoliberalism can be accomplished through a variety of texts and contexts. Moreover, I aim to utilize a critical pedagogical perspective to implement an holistic technique that prioritizes a critical engagement among students, contemporary neoliberal ideology, and the novels. Critical education—operationalized as a frame of mind—enables students and teachers to move toward a “qualitative change of outlook and ultimately may lead to a transformation of what we take ourselves to be” (Bonnett, 2002, p. 13). Practically speaking, I aim to achieve that change in outlook through literary criticism and a critical pedagogical model that empowers students to be actively engaged in the texts while "thought-fully" engaged in the world around them. Moreover, by “changing lives and changing mindsets” (Ritz, February 2012) critical education, as a frame of mind, might be able to counteract mainstream policies that disenfranchise marginalized communities by “[making] greater demands on Western consciousness” (Bonnett, 2002, p. 13). I hope that critical educational praxis focused on neoliberal ideology can critically deconstruct “hierarchically interconnected” (Constanza & Pattern, 1995, p. 193) systems that enforce social injustice. Lastly, I hope that critical education, as a frame of mind, leads to education that empowers students to engage with grassroots movements and community-building.

1.2.1 Critical Pedagogical Praxis

Education does not take place in a vacuum and “no education is politically neutral” (hooks, 1994, p. 37). Critical pedagogy is a scholastic intervention that recognizes the importance of teaching as a tool of empowerment with a focus on education as a political commitment; critical pedagogy is predicated on teaching as a practice of freedom and the classroom as a
political site that provides a space to create new models for thinking (Aronwitz & Giroux, 1991; Karamcheti, 1995; Alexander, 2005). Critical pedagogical praxis makes sense of the students’ socio-political location within their classrooms by showing how the classroom is structured by the socio-economic conditions that are a part of the students’ lived-realities (Simon, 1992; Giroux, 2016; Johnson, 1995). Life in the classroom is re-conceptualized to draw critical attention to systems of domination (e.g., militarism, classism, ethno-nationalism, misogyny, racism, etc.), and learning becomes a practice of freedom rather than an educational practice that reproduces and reifies dominant neoliberal values. A critical awareness of the role that socio-economic structures play in the classroom encourages students to confront the disequilibrium that is created by systemic violence in their communities (Epstein & Sears, 1999; Johnson, 1995). Critical pedagogy transforms the trajectory of education “when our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, [with] no gap...between theory and practice” (hooks, 1994, p. 61). Such an approach to the classroom leads to a production of knowledge that uses the students’ location within the socio-political economy as a site of empowerment through a critical engagement with the academic materials and students’ lived-experiences.

1.2.2 Cultural Workers: Critical Pedagogues in Education

In critical educational praxis teachers are viewed as cultural workers (Friere, 1998). Critical pedagogy provides liberatory political paradigms that create a space for practicing resistance. When educators approach teaching as cultural work, they teach in ways that transform consciousness. According to Paulo Friere, “teacher preparation should go beyond the technical preparation of teachers and be rooted in the ethical formations both of selves and of history” (Friere, 1998, p. 23). Critical pedagogy is founded on the idea that education should not reinforce systems of domination; rather, it should be a source of inspiration for teachers and students to engage in liberatory dialogue:

In opposition to the instrumentalized reduction of pedagogy to a mere method that has no language for relating the self to public life, social responsibility or the demands of citizenship, critical pedagogy works to illuminate the relationships among knowledge, authority and power. For instance, it raises questions regarding who has control over the conditions for producing knowledge, authority and power. (Giroux, 2016, p. 356)

Envisioning teachers as cultural workers posits educators in a role that seeks to transform the curriculum in order to educate students to be critically engaged so that the classroom does not perpetuate the biases and systems of domination of neoliberalism.

In the U.S., education is a key public service that, in its ideal form, is supported by democratic underpinnings. As public servants, educators play an important role in their
communities. In American school culture, the significance of educators' role in civil society is characterized by the socio-cultural endowment that educators inherit when they choose to become a part of the education system. According to David Carr (2003) in *Making Sense of Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Theory of Education and Teaching*, educators are charged with the “social imperative to equip the young with the knowledge and values necessary for the moral and economic survival and continuity of a civilised liberal democratic polity” (p.42). In a society structured by neoliberal capitalist ideology, educating students about neoliberalism is a social imperative and a necessity with implications that extend far beyond the classroom. Therefore, cultivating critical thinking skills in the student body needs to be a part of educational praxis. Moreover, educators’ engaging students in critical educational praxis is a social responsibility that would be incomplete without a discussion of neoliberal ideology.

When engaged in the cultural work of education, it is also important to be mindful of the influence teachers can have on their students and to maintain a critical, self-reflexive posture when engaging with topics that are so intimately imbricated with students’ lives. Therefore, critical pedagogy also foregrounds educators' ethical responsibilities in regard to their ability to influence their student body. Giroux notes, “[P]edagogy is always a deliberate attempt on the part of educators to influence how and what forms of knowledge and subjectivities are produced within particular sets of social relations” (2016, p. 356). As a part of a critical education praxis teachers expose students to literature that is meant to change them, possibly affecting their identity and subject-positions through the processes of thoughtfulness and awareness. In other words, teachers doing the cultural work of educating students about neoliberalism and other forces of structural oppression, violence, and inequality are simultaneously preparing students to inhabit abject places without succumbing to them.

1.2.3 *In Action: Discourse, Meaning, and Subject-Constitution*

Within the context of critical pedagogy, the discursive structure of the classroom is formatted around the expression of students' lived-experiences being incorporated into the learning context, becoming a part of the curriculum by articulating forces of domination that are incompatible to the students’ processes of self-actualization and meaning-constitution (Diawara, 1993; Epstein & Sears, 1999). In critical pedagogical practice, teachers encourage students to give voice to their lived-experiences and to become speaking subjects that participate in the construction of new identities and critical dialogue. Discourse analysis proffers tools to identify and understand the ways in which people construct meaning, to make sense of their lived-realities and the social world they inhabit:

The analysis of discourse forms part of a wider reading of a text within its social and historical context, and this reading is informed by the researcher’s own
perspective, the assumptions they bring to the analysis, and their theoretical and personal orientation. (Willig, 2014, p. 351)

An important aspect of discourse analysis is to illustrate the “social effects of language, its action orientation and its constitutive power” (Willig, 2014, p. 341). To that end, I use discourse analysis of current events to call students’ and teachers’ attention to “[w]hat may be the potential consequences of the discourses that are used for those who are positioned by them, in terms of both their subjective experience and their ability to act in the world” (Willig, 2014, p. 344). Including discourse analysis of current events facilitates one of the main aims of critical pedagogy—namely, relating the classroom material to the students’ lived-realities.

1.2.4 In Context: An Understanding of Neoliberalism

Since the aim of the present work is to demonstrate how an educator might teach about neoliberalism and not to delineate the histories, shifts, and controversies surrounding neoliberalism, I provide only a brief description of how I conceptualize neoliberalism and of what it does as an ideology:

Neoliberalism is a specific normative mode of reason, of the production of the subject, “conduct of conduct,” and scheme of valuation.... The norms and principles of neoliberal rationality do not dictate precise economic policy, but rather set out novel ways of conceiving and relating state, society, economy, and subject...[and] also inaugurate a new “economization” of heretofore non-economic spheres and endeavors. (Brown, 2016, pp. 48, 50)

Neoliberalism alters the subject-positions available to individuals; it frames everything in economic terms, and encourages—and oftentimes uses state policy to coerce—individuals to do the same. For example, within neoliberal capitalist ideology, a student does not pursue a university education to broaden the scope of their knowledge or to explore interests, but only to be more marketable to employers and to gain a competitive advantage in the job market. Neoliberalism displaces a class model based on identification amongst those in similar economic positions and replaces it with a discourse focused on competition among competing human capitals in which some will be winners and some will be losers and in which those in similar situations ought to be seen as the nearest competitors as opposed to companions/comrades. Concurrent with the dismantling of the language of class conflict and the awareness of class struggles—in particular, the shrinking middle class, the heightened vulnerability of the working class, and the invisibility of the extremely poor—neoliberalism “[includes] civil rights/equality politics within a framework that minimizes any downwardly redistributing impulses and effects” (Duggan, 2003, XIX). As discussed in this thesis, neoliberalism is not simply an economic policy; instead, it is the rationality that drives decision-making—both economic and non-economic. Throughout this thesis, I refer
interchangeably to neoliberalism, neoliberal ideology, neoliberal capitalism, and neoliberal capitalist ideology in order to remind the reader that (1) neoliberalism functions as a way of thinking with material consequences (i.e., is an ideology), (2) neoliberalism coexists with and mutually reinforces capitalism (i.e., is, in effect, neoliberal capitalism), and (3) neoliberalism, in all its extant manifestations, reproduces the capitalist system (i.e., is a capitalist ideology).

As an economic policy, neoliberalism can be broadly understood as a “‘multicultural’...‘equality’ politics—a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources” (Duggan, 2003, XI). However, neoliberalism is more than an economic framework; it is a “paradigmatic shift, a style of thought [that] connotes particular formations of thought, distinct ways of seeing...and recognizable expressions of terms, concepts, references, assertions and relations” (Slee, 2011, p. 127). Even more perniciously, neoliberalism reconstructs subjectivities (e.g., to reimagine and reproduce economic-rational individuals) through “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms” (Brown, 2016, p. 17). Neoliberalism is a discursive instrument of new capitalism and is highly influential in structuring subjectivities and discourses and is deeply intertwined with both colonial legacies and identity-based oppression/violence/subjugation. Neoliberalism has many variegations and diverse impacts; therefore, it is both important and imperative to discern which aspects of neoliberalism are most relevant to the present study. I have determined to focus my attention on the particular alterations that take place as neoliberalism reconfigures individuals as human capitals:

Rendering human beings as human capital has many ramifications.... First, we are human capital not just for ourselves, but also for the firm, state, or postnational constellation of which we are members. Thus, even as we are tasked with being responsible for ourselves in a competitive world of other human capitals, insofar as we are human capital for firms or states concerned with their own competitive positioning, we have no guarantee of security, protection, or even survival.... Second, inequality, not equality, is the medium and relation of competing capitals.... Third, when everything is capital, labor disappears as a category, as does its collective form, class, taking with it the analytic basis for alienation, exploitation, and association among laborers.... Fourth, when there is only homo oeconomicus, and when the domain of the political itself is rendered in economic terms, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good.... Fifth, as the legitimacy and task of the state becomes bound exclusively to economic growth, global competitiveness, and maintenance of a strong credit rating, liberal democratic justice concerns recede. (Brown, 2016, pp. 37 – 40)
From a neoliberal perspective focused on human capitals, education and students are viewed through an economized mindset that produces the capitalization of publics, individuals, education, schooling, and learning spaces. With such a conceptualization in mind, we can better understand how neoliberalism works to economize education, evaluating faculty and the student body through metrics that remove community accountability and shared resources and that replace such concepts with competing human capitals. The capitalization of education has led to the dehumanization of faculty and student body alike. Conversely, critical pedagogy values "community, the recognition and representation of difference and fosters interdependence across constituencies to enlist schooling as an agent for an education in democracy and social change" (Slee, 2011, p. 155). Critical educational praxis reframes the field of educational studies as a "political project concerned with the examination of identity, difference, privilege, disadvantage and oppression" (Slee, 2011, p. 154) while simultaneously exposing the barriers that are systemically created vis-à-vis neoliberal ideology (e.g., competing capitals) and the articulation of market-driven education.

### 1.2.5 Neoliberalism in Education

Over the course of decades, the rise of neoliberalism has brought about sweeping changes to public institutions in the U.S. (Hursh, 2007, Kermath, 2005; Aguirre & Simmers, 2012; Giroux, 2016). The shift from a classical liberal democratic framework to a neoliberal one has led to the adoption of “policies enacting both discursive and structural changes in education and society” (Hursh, 2007, p. 493). Structurally, schools have implemented standardized testing as the guiding principle for shaping the evaluative criteria used in classrooms (Lipman, 2004; Aguirre & Simmers, 2012). As a result of the importance attributed to test results for both teachers’ performance and school funding, teaching to the test has become commonplace in U.S. public schools (Lipman, 2004; Nichols & Berliner, 2005; Giroux, 2016). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that “in focusing on test preparation, schools are likely to reduce or eliminate subjects that are not being tested, including the arts and sciences” (Hursh, 2007, p. 507). Moreover, in public education discourse, “neoliberal ideals of meritocracy, selfishness, and competition” (Aguirre & Simmers, 2012, p. 8) have come to the fore. Moving away from the discursive formations of classical liberal democracy, which emphasized the “public good” and an “informed citizenry” as educational goals (Young, 2003; Kermath, 2005), neoliberal discourse emphasizes students as consumers and education as the development of human capital (Hursh, 2007) for trade in the globalized free market (Gill, 2003).

In broad terms, the neoliberal project has several specific and enduring features: (1) marketization of social services, (2) decrease in spending/funding for social services, (3) corporate privatization of public assets and social services, (4) reduced public oversight of the administration of public assets and social services (i.e., deregulation), and (5)
replacement of “social welfare” or “community benefit” with “personal responsibility” and “individual choice” (Lemke, 2002; Martinez & Garcia, 2000). Each of the aforementioned attributes of neoliberalism is visible in the structure of classrooms and educational institutions in the U.S. First, marketization is apparent with “the introduction of a new doctrine focused on performance and competition between schools” (Aguirre & Simmers, 2012, p. 7). The shift toward marketization in the U.S. public education system means that school “performance” is measured in terms of standardized testing and that participation/conversion to the neoliberal education market is guaranteed by allocating funding based on performance data. Thus, “competition” is built into the U.S. institution of public education. Second, and clearly related to “the rule of the market” in U.S public education (Aguirre & Simmers, 2012; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), neoliberal budgets slash spending for public education and allocate the slim funds available to higher/better performing schools. Thus, classroom curricula are restructured as “teachers are compelled to teach skills and knowledge that will be tested, neglecting more complex aspects of the subject, and indeed some subjects altogether” (Hursh, 2007, p. 506). The third and fourth attributes of neoliberalism are highly imbricated when it comes to the structure of U.S. public education. The privatization of schools in the form of charter schools, magnet schools, and voucher systems has led to an increased reliance on standardized testing and its associated curricula (Hursh, 2007). Such publicly funded private enterprises out-perform traditional public schools by being more selective about the composition of their student body (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Hursh, 2007; Capello, 2004; Gotbaum 2002). Furthermore, the privatization of public schooling diminishes teachers' and parents' (i.e., the public’s) input in curricula selection and educational decision-making (Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2004). In other words, increased privatization of education is concomitant with decreased public oversight (i.e., deregulation). Parents can now choose where their children are taught but not how they are taught; the choice of how children are taught is made at the corporate (i.e., private) level. Therefore, in the neoliberal model of “public school choice,” “[T]he rhetoric of choice positions parents and children as consumers of schooling” (Bartlett et al., 2002, p. 6). Moreover, as with other forms of consumerism, neoliberal educational policies result in increased stratification across race and class by placing those with access to fewer resources in an even more vulnerable position as one’s purchasing power becomes even more relevant to attaining educational goals (Bartlett et al., 2002; Giroux, 2016). Fifth and finally, the neoliberal educational marketplace constructs social and economic inequality in educational outcomes in terms of “personal responsibility” and “individual choice” (Olssen et al., 2004; Giroux 2016; Hursh, 2007; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003).

Rather than conceptualizing education as a collective or public asset or good, neoliberal ideology posits education as a personal investment in capital aggrandizement:
Neoliberalism transforms how we conceptualize the role of the government and the relationship between the individual and society.... Neoliberalism promotes personal responsibility through individual choice within markets.... For neoliberals, those who do not succeed are held to have made bad choices. Personal responsibility means nothing is society’s fault. People have only themselves to blame. Furthermore the market becomes central within such a conception of the individual. (Hursh, 2007, p. 496 – 497)

The neoliberal erasure of the collective quality of public education has restructured the U.S. educational system and classrooms at every level, transforming aspects of teaching from what is selected/taught to how it is taught and who is considered worth teaching (Hursh, 2007; McNeil 2000; Nichols & Berliner, 2005). In other words, neoliberal education policies in the U.S. give rise to school systems in which the “social reproduction of a consumer culture is institutionalized” (Aguirre & Simmers, 2012, p. 9).

In the U.S., the neoliberal project has transformed not only the structure of educational institutions and classrooms but also the discourse surrounding the purpose and value of education (Hursh, 2007; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Lipman, 2004; Young, 2000; Aguirre & Simmers, 2012; Giroux, 2016). As Aguirre and Simmers state, “Within the neoliberal view of public education, students are transformed into agents for generating capital that can then be invested in the marketplace in joint venture with the corporate/business elite sector” (2012, p. 5). Positing students and parents as consumers or as “customers, who shop for schools in isolation from—and even in competition with—their neighbors” (Hursh, 2007, p. 503) has altered dominant discourses concerning education in the U.S. (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Giroux, 2016). Conceptualized as consumers, students and parents are encouraged to view education as an investment in human capital that affords stability and opportunity in a globalized marketplace where future workers (i.e., current students) will compete for scarce jobs (Hursh, 2007). Even if students and parents disagree with the proliferation of standardized testing methods and the privatization of schools, neoliberal educational discourse presents such changes as necessary if a future worker is to be competitive and appealing to employers in a globalized economy (Hursh, 2007; Aguirre & Simmers, 2012; Tabb 2002). Neoliberal discourse constructs students and parents as economic-rational individuals whose decision-making is constrained by and evaluated in regard to the impositions of the market (Lemke, 2002). In a neoliberal framework, the purpose of education is personal—to gain a competitive edge—and the value of education is understood only in terms of the effectiveness of the competitive edge it affords (Olssen et al., 2004).

Neoliberalism has had an undeniable effect on U.S. education: public discourse, privatization of public schooling, and educational values and goals (Giroux, 2016). According to Wendy Brown (2016) in Undoing the Demos, “the cultural shift is plain: replacing
measures of educational quality are metrics oriented entirely to return on investment” (p. 23). In contemporary American society, market-driven metrics focus educational goals on job placement and capital aggrandizement. Neoliberalism has restructured education in the U.S. and has become entrenched in the classroom, redefining both the context in which education occurs and the normative orientation directing the value of education. However, neoliberalism remains largely invisible as a topic of classroom discussion and analysis; students are remarkably ignorant of the ways in which neoliberal ideology shapes their lives (Monibot, 2016). Teachers need to bring knowledge and understanding into that void. It is imperative that teachers educate students about what neoliberalism is, what it has done, and what it continues to do as well as about the modes through which neoliberal ideologies exert control and perpetuate exploitation.

As a political and economic formulation undertaken in a multitude of nations, neoliberalism takes many forms. Broadly speaking, in the U.S. neoliberalism has been enacted through the following policies:

[1] the presentation of neoliberal policies as neutral, managerial precepts for good government and efficient business operations, with the underlying capitalist power politics and cultural values obscured.... [2] the opposition of U.S. domestic conservative versus liberal politics, or Republican versus Democratic policies, with the overarching salience of global neoliberalism across this entire spectrum effectively ignored.... [3] the shape-shifting array of alliances and issues through which a neoliberal policy agenda has been promoted in the United States and abroad. (Duggan, 2003, XII)

In the United States, educational perogatives and learning outcomes are integrally linked to global capitalism and market demands. The interconnection between global capitalism and market-driven education has created an educational system that is constructed from an economic standpoint that instantiates human capitals through the intensification of competitiveness, efficiency, and individualism while simultaneously undermining the humanity of those who inhabit these complex infrastructures. Moreover, exclusion is an historical causation of neoliberal socio-economic politics that often leads to processes of dehumanization and the creation of surplus populations that are deemed wasteful and disposable (i.e., “consumer eugenics” [Slee, 2011]). Characteristics of the new political economy create a grim landscape of intensified competitive individualism, dispossession, estrangement, fragmented social cohesion, disengagement, fear, and prejudicial perspectives enfolded in a socio-political economy that proffers increasingly myriad threats and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, exclusion is exacerbated “[i]n the new political economy [when] people lose self-narrative as they try to traverse the fragmented social and economic landscape” (Slee, 2011, p. 47). A useful pedagogical tool for combating the exclusion perpetuated by neoliberalism, storytelling—whether through literature or through the
development of self-narrative—creates a space for counter-hegemonic narrations that are instructive in critical educational studies because they carve out spaces where “small thinking” (Slee, 2011, p. 101) can occur, metamorphosing narratives into opportunities for social justice and change.

In sum, neoliberalism is predicated on an ethos of competition and individualism and is codified in educational structures through standardized testing and hierarchical tracks based on market metrics. Neoliberalism constructs a society “[w]here schools are encouraged to operate according to the logic of the market place and where there has been a narrowing of the curriculum to be measured through high-stakes testing and the publication of school performance ‘league tables’” (Slee, 2011, p. 71). Rather than building up a strong, cohesive community of learners, those policies reinforce social division and fragment learning communities. Education is a socio-political landscape worth fighting for: it is a highly influential institution in the social imaginary, disseminating mainstream values and knowledge, and teachers ought to encourage critical thinking in their classrooms. Critical education equips students to engage with an ever-changing world and to question the “common-sense” arguments of neoliberal ideology. A primary component of critical pedagogy is to proffer students oppositional viewpoints that deconstruct dominant ideological practices. The practice of critical pedagogy enables students to identify and reformulate politicized categories and the world views they represent. With such tools, students can incorporate the creation of new knowledge through the use of course material and student dialogue to construct new ways of understanding, cultural schema, and self-reflexivity. At issue is “students' exposure, critique, and repositioning of their personal politics, in this instance through the mediation of literature and cultural studies, as an overt political project where critical thinking contributes to social transformation” (Dittmar and Leistyna, 2008, p. 7). This thesis examines the fruitfulness of using fictional literature to facilitate students' understanding of and critical reflection upon neoliberal capitalist ideology and its role in shaping their lived-realities, thereby enabling students to engage “thoughtfully” with the world in which they live. For students to better understand and respond to social challenges, a discussion of neoliberalism is warranted. However, contemporary schooling is governed by market-driven economics and neoliberal perspectives. The following sections are presented as an attempt to interject teaching about neoliberalism into that context.

1.3 Methodology

Continuing the tradition of applying tools from critical cultural studies to literary analyses, I challenge the ideological dogma of neoliberalism through literature. As Dittmar and Leistyna note, “teaching students to reflect critically on how their thinking relates to lived life via works of the imagination—stories!—is a familiar undertaking” (2008, p. 7). The contribution of my project to the existing field is my utilization of and critical engagement with
neoliberalism. Extant literary analyses that “employ [critical] pedagogical strategies that create ruptures in the established order” (hooks, 1994, p. 185) most commonly reference feminism, post-colonialism, critical race theory, and/or queer theory. In this project, I use critical pedagogy in the transformative and counter-hegemonic manner already prevalent in the disciplines cited above. In so doing, I participate in an enactment of the critical pedagogy advocated by Giroux:

[C]ritical pedagogy should provide students with the knowledge, modes of literacy, skills, critique, social responsibility, and civic courage needed to enable them to be engaged critical citizens willing to fight for a sustainable and just society. (2016, p. 358)

In this research project, I use critical pedagogy to interrogate and to resist neoliberal ideology that commodifies students, teachers, and education. I employ critical pedagogy in literary analyses using contemporary neoliberalism as my reference point and an oppositional engagement with the attributes/tenets of neoliberal ideology as my guideposts.

I rely heavily on Wendy Brown’s (2016) Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution and her elucidation of the transformations that have taken place in moving from classical liberalism to contemporary neoliberalism as manifested in the United States:

The contemporary “economization” of subjects by neoliberal rationality is thus distinctive in at least three ways. First...we are everywhere homo oeconomicus and only homo oeconomicus.... Second, neoliberal homo oeconomicus takes its shape as human capital seeking to strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value, rather than as a figure of exchange or interest.... Third, and related, today, the specific model for human capital and its spheres of activity is increasingly that of financial or investment capital, and not only productive or entrepreneurial capital.... [H]omo oeconomicus as human capital is concerned with enhancing its portfolio value in all domains of its life, an activity undertaken through practices of self-investment and attracting investors. (pp. 33 – 34)

The subject constituted in/by neoliberalism is conceptualized as an economic-rational individual in all domains of life and the ways in which the neoliberal subject perceives economic rationality has also been transformed: human capitals do not acquire assets strictly for trade or wealth production but rather for portfolio enhancement and improved market positioning. In my selection of which themes and existing critiques to highlight when discussing the two novels, I refer to the above delineation of the impacts of neoliberalism on the modern-day U.S. subject. As a result, many of the points explicated in the above quotation appear and are addressed in greater detail in the two semi-independent papers that follow this introduction. Additionally, since my intention is to craft a research project
that could be applied by post-secondary literature teachers, I choose to narrow my conceptualization of neoliberalism to that articulated by Brown (2016) so as not to overwhelm educators/readers with multiple viewpoints and perspectives concerning neoliberalism. Rather, I choose to present one primary text that teachers might use as a jumping off point for their engagement with neoliberal ideology.

1.3.1 Literary Analysis Utilizing Critical Pedagogy: Reading against the Grain

In critical educational praxis, students actively engage in the production of knowledge and the novel’s meaning:

> Readers can bring a variety of aspects of identity to bear in the reading process. We might just as fruitfully work from the assumption that a text becomes popular because it can be appropriated by social subjects in multiple, varied, and productive ways. (Bossche, 2005, p. 51)

Moving away from an understanding of the text as a static object that holds its own inalterable meaning, teaching literature using critical educational praxis cultivates an active engagement with the text and recognizes that readers play a role in constructing its meaning. An appreciation for the role of the socio-cultural bearings of the reader in determining the meanings of a text acknowledges that readers interpret the text in relation to the meaning-systems in which they live. Such an approach to reading views “literature as a social activity—an intervention in the social” (Bossche, 2005, p. 54).

A reading framework that allows for a discussion of the socio-historical meanings available to the reader creates a flexible space wherein students can grapple with their own life histories and multi-vocal experiences to discuss themes and issues that are asynchronous with the text. The development of fields of literary criticism that are concerned with critical educational praxis (e.g., post-colonial, post-structuralist, feminist, etc.) has interrogated the ideological function of literature and its role in the social imaginary. However, that “conception tends to confine agency to the realm of production—the social or economic—and to foreclose the agency in the realm of culture, which it regards merely as the reproduction of the economic sphere” (Bossche, 2005, p. 48). Following Bosschée’s reasoning, the problem with a conceptualization in which meaning systems are activated in and by a text is that it locates meaning-creation within the purview of the author only. Such an enactment of ideology in a text imbues the novel with an immovable ideological anchor that solidifies the subjectivities of its characters and mirrors the author’s subject-constitution in the reader, a perspective that obfuscates the active engagement of the reader with “the text in producing—not just reproducing—ideologies and identities as well as the variety of uses to which reading subjects can put this textual material” (Bossche, 2005, p. 47). Emphasizing a reading framework that involves the subject-constitution of both the reader and the author
annunciates the direct correlation between critical literary studies and students' lived-experiences.

When teachers employ a literary analysis framework that includes meaning-systems relevant to the students' lived-realities, teachers can intervene in the process of meaning-creation and subject-constitution by encouraging students to use the text to examine the world in which they live. Furthermore, teachers can provoke students to use literature to become aware of the ideological frameworks they negotiate in contemporary society through a critical engagement with the text, regardless of when it was written. Critical educational praxis creates a learning environment that enables the student body to scrutinize that which goes unexamined about ourselves and our society.... [T]he classroom [is] an excellent forum for students to reflect on what we might call the non-neutral spaces of their reading habits....[and] expose[s] the connections between these reading habits and Eurocentric or imperial ways of knowing. (Brown, 2008, p. 9)

Engaging with literature using critical educational praxis enables students to explore the text while highlighting the politicization of shared cultural practices such as reading. In so doing, students are challenged to examine how they interject their own socio-political locations and histories into the text during the process of reading. Moreover, students are given an opportunity to reflect on how their own reading cultures, presuppositions, anxieties, and socio-political locations are articulated in their interpretations of the text. In such a literary analysis, class discussions pertaining to the novel provide a space to converse about a diversity of topics pertinent to the text and to the students—topics such as gender, post-colonialism, class roles and exploitation, as well as the topic of neoliberal capitalist ideology.

In their provocative article Teaching Post-Colonial Literatures in the Age of Empire Dittmar and Leistyna ask, “if colonialism and empire are in fact a part of current reality, albeit in new forms and contrary to myriad symbols and assertions of autonomy and self-sustenance, how do we get to understand that and as teachers, respond to it?” (2008, p. 7). In this thesis I hope to enliven classroom dialogue about Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea that focuses on using critical education to examine new formations of neoliberalism to encourage students to engage with the current reality of neoliberal capitalism through a self-reflexive engagement with the novels. By doing so, the texts will “steer us, students and teachers, not only towards thinking about the little known, colonized ‘other,’ but towards reflecting about the unknown ‘us’ as agents in the present neo-imperialist processes” (Dittmar and Leistyna, 2008, p. 5). That process not only develops a linkage between the texts and students' lived-realities by grounding the texts in “the world of lived experiences” (Raja, 2008, p. 33) but also guides the student body to engage with literature in an intimate and personal way—one where they learn more about themselves as well as how they read, interpret, and articulate the “other.” Such a process of critical educational pedagogy
illustrates that “literary texts do not constitute an end in themselves, but are rather instrumental in teaching the world” (Raja, 2008, p. 33).

In my literary analysis of *Jane Eyre*, a text which predates the rise of neoliberalism, my aim is to use the text to grapple with the transmogrifications that have taken place in the transition to neoliberalism. In attending to *Jane Eyre*, I draw upon post-colonial and class-centered literary critiques—particularly those related to the subject-positions presented in *Jane Eyre* and by Jane Eyre—to identify points of distinction between the subjectivities represented in the text and those favored by neoliberal ideology. The goal of such an approach to *Jane Eyre* is “to continuously demystify the realities we create, and to fight the tendency for categories to congeal” (Lanther, 1992, p.120). In so doing, I hope to offer students a better understanding of their acculturated knowledge and lived-experiences.

In regard to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, an explicitly feminist and post-colonial text written during the neoliberal epoch, my aim is to expound upon existing literary analyses by drawing clear linkages between the text and neoliberalism by referencing the text to explicate themes pertaining to rebellion or resistance and to disability. My goal is to disrupt the dominant, neoliberal discourse through a literary analysis that “foregrounds the lack of innocence in any discourse by looking at the textual staging of knowledge, the constitutive effects of our uses of language” (Lanther, 1992, p.120). I hope that my approach to the text illuminates ways in which teachers might use fictional literature as a critical pedagogical tool for teaching students to reflect upon how neoliberalism permeates their lives.

### 1.3.2 Discourse Analysis

To firmly ground the neoliberal themes extrapolated from Brown (2016) and related to the texts as well as to explicitly relate both the themes and the texts to the present-day, I include discourse analyses of contemporary examples drawn from current events in the section following the two semi-independent papers. My aim in doing so is to further clarify the linkages between the topics being discussed through literature and the functioning of neoliberalism in the real-world. I choose to focus on current events and to draw my examples from news items since such items “often reveal the contradictions in the social and political struggles about the practices and policies at stake” (Jóhannesson, 2010, p. 254). The initial step in my analyses is to look at the language utilized in the news item, focusing on word choices and ordering. Following Crang and Cook's (2012) advice, I start by listening to the news item one “sentence at a time, and trying to concentrate on what was going on step by step” (p. 134). In my discourse analysis, I set out to better understand the ways in which discursive meaning is constructed in the events under consideration and to invite students and teachers to consider the implications of such meaning-constitution. I highlight what information is given, who the sources of information are, what is foregrounded and backgrounded in the presentation of such information, how language is utilized to represent the issues discussed, and lastly, what neoliberal ideologies are at play in the information
presented. I utilize discourse analysis to illustrate how “participants in discourses consciously and unconsciously employ the various ideas and practices of the social strategies available to them in the historical conjuncture [demonstrating] how normalization works: indirectly through the visible and, no less effectively, the invisible power relations” (Jóhannesson, 2010, p. 253). Through the analytical process, I aim to illuminate the presence of neoliberalism in contemporary discussions/events and to invite students to use that knowledge both to reflect upon what they think about neoliberalism and to critically engage with neoliberalism outside the classroom.

Discourse analysis is an important aspect of social research because it examines how discursive practices are performances, utilized by “material-semiotic actors” (Haraway, 1993, p. 204) who continually form and perform social worlds. Furthermore, discourse analysis illustrates the important role of language not only in producing meaning but also in constituting subjects. When analyzing news sources/events to illuminate the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, I use two forms of discourse analysis: narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. In narrative analysis, I pay attention to the cultural representations and perform a close-reading of the text and to examine word choice and ordering, to actively parse-out the assumptions being made, and to make sense of the text by identifying the underlying discourses. Throughout that process, I trace how the argument is being constructed, the presuppositions on which the author relies, and the rhetorical strategy at play in the text. Lastly, I identify the continuities/ruptures with the neoliberal themes derived from my literary analyses of the novels. In my critical discourse analyses, I identify the neoliberal ideological underpinnings of the texts, proffer a reflexive analysis of the discourse, and question the role of discourse in the texts and its socio-political agenda.

1.4 A Response Grounded in Critical Pedagogy: Engaging with Neoliberalism through Literature

For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (Lorde, 1984, p. 112)

In contemporary U.S. classrooms, lessons devoted to teaching about neoliberalism are hard to find; yet, classroom environments impacted by neoliberal ideology are ubiquitous (Brown, 2016). At the same time, teachers continue to attempt to bring critical educational praxis into their classes with the hope/goal of inspiring students to become critically engaged with the systems of power that structure our lives (hooks, 1989). I support the aim of critical education; however, I contend that a critical educational praxis that omits teaching about neoliberal ideology fails to equip students to comprehend the society in which we live. Therefore, teachers of all disciplines concerned with systems of hegemony, ideology, and power must find a way to teach the difficult topic of neoliberalism and to link their field of
interest to a critical engagement with neoliberal ideology and its influence on our lived-realities. Given the neoliberal constraints—in terms of both policy and discourse—placed on teachers in the U.S. context, how can educators at the post-secondary level intervene to teach students about neoliberalism? I present the following sections as a starting point to a potential answer. The present work attempts to acknowledge the constraints placed on contemporary post-secondary classrooms in the United States and to frame the response in terms that fit within, while still challenging, those constraints. In an attempt to spur students’ critical engagement with neoliberalism, the paper-experiments deploy literary analysis in the broader project of educating students about neoliberal ideology.

Literature enlivens critical engagement and social reflexivity, and teaching students to critically engaged with novels, such as Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea, offers them a politicized outlook that articulates “a more comprehensive understanding of the structural, economic, and political changes our world is undergoing in tandem with a more active engagement with these changes” (Dittmar and Leistyna, 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, focusing attention on teaching the precepts of a neoliberal capitalist ideology in interaction with Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea brings a new political history to bear on both the texts and the students’ lived-realities, thus enabling their critical engagement with the text as well as with the present-day. Relating extant interpretations of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea to the neoliberal moment in which we live explores the texts differently and adds to the depth of the texts as well as to the varied interpretations of them. Thereby, the learning environment is enhanced by critically engaging with the texts with an eye to explicating the neoliberal capitalist ideology that structures contemporary lives. Bringing neoliberal capitalist ideology into discussions of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea “shift[s] the focus from the novel’s synchronic structures of signification to its diachronic processes of meaning production” (Bossche, 2005, p. 54). Furthermore, critical educational praxis enables a learning environment that provides space for producing a political discourse that allows readers to appropriate the text, bringing it into contact with their own system of meaning-creation. As critical educational praxis illuminates students lived-experiences within the context of the classroom, the text is diversified through a “variety of reading practices...reading such factors as geography, religious background, and politics” (Bossche, 2005, p. 55). With the focus on teaching neoliberal ideologies to students, critical education operates to create a new political discourse while simultaneously exploring the text as it relates to the contemporary context and bringing students’ responses to the novel as well as the present-day into the classroom.

Literature—storytelling and narrative—has long been used as a way of reflecting on present and historical positions and processes. More recently, educators have used literature as a cultural artifact that enables students to understand the legacies and lived-realities of colonialism and neocolonialism in geopolitics. In an edition of Radical Teacher entitled “Teaching Post-Colonial Literature in the Age of Empire,” Dittmar and Leistyna write:
The teaching practices under discussion concerned mainly cultural analysis. This focus has the double benefit of engaging students’ empathic identification via literature and visual culture while teaching them to see through the ideology that propels the West’s efforts to sustain hegemony. At the same time, such an exclusive focus on cultural discourse has a drawback of missing the needed contextual analysis of the economic, political, sociological, psychological, and sometimes even military steps empires have taken to enforce this hegemony and benefit from it. (2008, p. 5)

Although conceiving of post-colonial literature as a cultural artifact facilitates cultural analysis and critique, it also leaves political, social, and economic realities unexamined. The disengagement of cultural analysis from socio-politico-economic realities represents a serious shortcoming, and it is one that I engage with in my research by using a critique of neoliberalism as a reference point in literary analysis.

For teachers interested in critical pedagogy, conveying to students an understanding of the forces structuring our lived-realities is of the utmost importance:

Critical pedagogy addresses power as a relationship in which conditions are produced that allow students to engage in a culture of questioning, to raise and address urgent, disturbing questions about the society in which they live, and to define in part the questions that can be asked and the disciplinary borders that can be crossed.... In part, this suggests providing students with the skills, ideas, values and authority necessary for them to...fight deeply rooted injustices in a society and world founded on systemic economic, racial and gendered inequalities. (Giroux, 2016, p. 358)

For students to grapple with the issues of our times, educators must commit to teaching them to critically reflect upon the ideological underpinnings structuring the world in which we live. In other words, critical pedagogy necessitates teaching students living in a neoliberal era about neoliberalism. I situate my research project as a response to that imperative—as an attempt to demonstrate to teachers how they might critically engage with neoliberalism using literature.
2 How to Teach Neoliberalism through *Jane Eyre*: Post-Colonial & Class-Centered Critiques

In this section, I use well-established literary analyses of *Jane Eyre* to discuss the novel and, equally important, to teach students about neoliberal capitalist ideology. I use the text to draw attention to neoliberal capitalist ideology by illustrating the shifts from the Victorian era of *Jane Eyre* to the present-day. For example, *Jane Eyre* was written during the rise of the middle class; as we read the text in present-day U.S. classrooms, we are reading the text within the context of a society increasingly impacted by neoliberalism and the concomitant shrinking middle class. I structure this section around previously done literary critiques of *Jane Eyre*. Chosen for their relevance to neoliberal capitalism, I focus on post-colonial and class-centered analyses of the text; due to the relevance of Western feminist readings of *Jane Eyre* to post-colonial critiques of the text, I also provide a brief summary of the main points raised by Western feminist literary analyses. Since the rise of neoliberalism was concomitant with the fall of old forms of European imperial colonialism, post-colonial critiques of *Jane Eyre* provide an excellent framework from which to interrogate neoliberal capitalism. Additionally, since neoliberal ideology erases the language of class-based identification, analyses of *Jane Eyre* that foreground the class discourses utilized within the text provide a poignant contrast to the neoliberal elision of the relevance of class unity. When discussing post-colonial and class-centered readings of the text, my intention is not to provide an exhaustive summary of each or any of the aforementioned analyses, but rather to draw upon a range of interpretations and to demonstrate how one might relate each to a classroom discussion of neoliberal capitalism. Therefore, following a discussion of existing interpretations of *Jane Eyre*, I demonstrate how each of these readings might be discussed in terms of neoliberal capitalist ideology. My aim in this semi-independent paper is to exemplify, using a breadth of well-recognized literary analyses, how each of these existing literary criticisms might be extended and related to neoliberal capitalist ideology. In so doing, I hope to provide educators with a starting point from which they might consider how to bring a discussion of neoliberal capitalist ideology into their classroom curricula and, thereby, to equip their students with the knowledge to critically engage with the ideological framework that structures our daily lives. I hope that the following sections in which I link themes from *Jane Eyre* to neoliberal capitalist ideology serve to elucidate the transformations that distinguish neoliberalism from previous forms of capitalism.

2.1 Western Feminist Readings of *Jane Eyre*

Many of the post-colonial critiques of *Jane Eyre* respond to Western feminist literary analyses. Therefore, I review the most ubiquitous and/or influential points made by feminist literary criticisms of the text before moving onto post-colonial critiques of *Jane Eyre*. Western feminist analyses of *Jane Eyre* foreground the character of Jane Eyre and the
uniqueness of her representation as a Gothic heroine. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in The Madwoman in the Attic (1978), their landmark contribution to feminist literary criticism, the prototypical Gothic heroine is constructed as the “good” woman or “angel” and is imbued with certain qualities: she is demure, controlled, submissive, and pious. Additionally, the typical format counterposes another female character as the “bad” woman or “monster” and assigns certain maligned qualities to her: she is passionate, sensual, rebellious, uncontrollable, and immoral. Traditionally, setting the “good” and “bad” women in parallel contexts in which the “angel” is rewarded and the “monster” suffers serves to demonstrate the perils of female independence and indulgence. Gilbert and Gubar find the feminism of Jane Eyre in Brontë’s refusal to cast Jane—and to a far lesser extent, Bertha—as always and only the “angel” or the “monster,” attributing to Jane a number of characteristics typically associated with both of those paradigms: Brontë portrays Jane as both pious and independent, as both modest and passionate, as both reserved and autonomous. In so doing, Brontë reconfigures the presumed monstrosity of an outspoken woman. The following passage demonstrates how Brontë allows Jane to be forthcoming without being overrun by passion:

Again the surprised expression crossed his face. He had not imagined that a woman would dare to speak so to a man. For me, I felt at home in this sort of discourse. I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female, till I had passed the outworks of conventional reserve, and crossed the threshold of confidence, and won a place by their heart’s very hearthstone. (Brontë, 1987, p. 406)

Feminist interpretations such as that of Gilbert and Gubar focus on how such narration posits Jane as eschewing social customs regarding female propriety without succumbing to madness or wild comportment. Thus, such feminist analyses not only focus on Jane’s independence and autonomy but also on her departure from social proscriptions and norms. Western feminist critiques of the text highlight Jane’s resistance to gender roles found in such statements as the following made to Rochester:

I don’t think, sir, you have a right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience. (Brontë, 1987, pp. 141–142)

In a typical Gothic narrative context, such a proclamation—violating social norms for proper interaction between not only men/women but also master/dependent and elder/youngster—would imply impending doom for the female character to whom it had been attributed, yet Jane ends the text happy and fulfilled.
While Gilbert and Gubar focus on Brontë’s engagement with Victorian social issues through her unification of the Gothic “angel” and “monster” and her reimagining of a “good” woman, their analysis also touches upon several other themes prevalent in Western feminist readings of *Jane Eyre*—namely, Jane Eyre’s desire for independence, self-reliance, and autonomy. Within such a reading, such remarks as the following are uniformly hailed as representative of Jane’s unwillingness to submit to patriarchal authority: “I am sure, sir, I should never mistake informality for insolence: one I rather like, the other nothing free-born would submit to, even for a salary” (Brontë, 1987, p. 142). Jane’s regarding herself—both in her social position as a woman and as a non-aristocrat—as “free-born” and claiming for herself a right to refuse degradation have gained *Jane Eyre* a position within the canon as an example of a proto-feminist text. The fact that Jane dares to imagine herself as possessing both/either the willingness and/or the capacity to refuse to submit has drawn much praise from Western feminists. Equally noteworthy within Western feminist readings of *Jane Eyre* is Jane’s unwillingness to prize romantic love above autonomy: “Knowing that she can earn thirty pounds a year as a governess, Jane rejects being hired as a mistress or bought as a slave” (Pell, 1977, p. 410). Western feminist readings draw attention to Jane’s refusal to stay with the man she loves once she realizes that their union would not be one amongst relative social (if not, gender) equals. From the Western feminist vantage point, Jane’s determination “to secure some independence from her future husband” (Pell, 1977, p. 415) demonstrates her commitment to her own autonomy and self-reliance above her commitment to patriarchal marriage. Following her refusal to become Rochester’s mistress and prior to the eventual resolution of the pair’s socio-economic differences, Jane narrates her internal dialogue:

"Who in the world cares for you? Or who will be injured by what you do?” Still indomitable was the reply—"I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.” (Brontë, 1987, p. 342)

Jane’s decision to care for herself and her assertion of her own self-respect and self-worth exemplify the qualities beloved in Western feminist analyses of *Jane Eyre*. Although some Western feminist critiques of the text have read the narrative as a tale of submission to social norms since Jane ultimately marries Rochester—thereby implicitly giving up any claim to independence and submitting to the status quo—even such readings praise Jane’s earlier desire for autonomy and frame such a desire as an act of social rebellion (Politi, 1982). Moreover, Jane’s description of her eventual marriage to Rochester can also be read as indicative of her commitment to her own agency and independence; she states, “Reader, I married him” (Brontë, 1987, p. 488). Jane positions herself as the subject rather than the predicate of the sentence—recalling “I married him” instead of “He married me”—thus asserting her own decision-making and autonomy even as she enters the social institution of marriage.
2.2  Post-Colonial Readings of *Jane Eyre*

2.2.1  What have post-colonial critiques said about *Jane Eyre*?

There is a vast post-colonial canon of literary criticism that has highlighted how cultural production has reinforced the representation and legitimation of colonialism. Post-colonial critiques of *Jane Eyre* are a part of a new historicism that remakes global history by interrogating popular Western interpretations of lived-reality and socio-cultural productions. In her well-known work “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” Gayatri Spivak offers a provocative critique of mainstream Western feminist readings of *Jane Eyre* through her own post-colonial reading. Spivak draws attention to *Jane Eyre*'s representation of iconic Western feminist individualism:

> As the female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the “native female” as such (within discourse, as a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm. If we read this account from an isolationist perspective in a “metropolitan” context, we see nothing there but the psychobiography of the militant female subject. In a reading such as mine, in contrast, the effort is to wrench oneself away from the mesmerizing focus on the “subject-constitution” of the female individualist. (1985, p. 245)

Mainstream feminist readings of *Jane Eyre* focus myopically on the “militant female subject.” Within such readings, Jane's feminist subject-position is articulated in a “subject-constitution” that is characterized by individualism, autonomy, and an outspoken critique of class and gender relations in British society. Spivak reminds us that Jane's feminist voice is mirrored in popular representations of Western feminist values and that Western feminists oftentimes position themselves within a framework that prioritizes autonomy and individualism at the cost of the further marginalization of “other” feminisms and ways of being feminist. Post-colonial critiques of the text contend that *Jane Eyre*’s popularity as a feminist text is rooted in its vocalized, Western-centric point of view: the text represents a robust breakaway from British norms by positing female individualism as a vehicle to equity and free movement. Jane's socio-political imaginary is limited to her lived-experiences and the people for whom she has affection. Her sense of feminism and fairness is delineated in a personal desire to represent the ability of an educated middle class to be on par with the ladies and gentlemen of the upper classes and aristocracy. Jane says,

> I hastened to drive from my mind the hateful notion I had been conceiving respecting Grace Poole: it disgusted me. I compared myself with her, and found we were different. Bessie Leaven has said I was quite a lady; and she spoke the truth: I was a lady. And now I looked much better than I did when Bessie saw me:
I had more colour and more flesh; more life, more vivacity; because I had brighter hopes and keener enjoyments. (Brontë, 1960, pp. 174 – 175)

In the above passage we see Jane's identification with middle-class ideals in her desire to be a lady as well as in Jane's distancing herself from lower-class women and their experiences in her disdainful reference to Grace Poole, the servant who cares for Bertha. At Thornfield Jane has access to a quality of life that was unavailable at Lowood school. Now, she can become the embodiment of a middle-class ideology that values health, happiness, and hope. Furthermore, in the passage we see the primacy of upward class mobility in her desires—a primacy that manifests itself throughout the text as a “passionate commitment to her own welfare” (Pell, 1977, p. 404) as opposed to a sense of camaraderie that extends to all women who are excluded from the benefits of ladyship. Moreover, since it would have been impossible for a non-White woman to become a lady, Jane's desire to embody ladyship further marks her feminist vision as incompatible with a broad-based feminism that would include colonized women in its egalitarianism. Post-colonial perspectives remind readers to pay attention to the implicit exclusions—such as the valuation of ladyship—presented within the text.

Post-colonial feminist readings of Jane Eyre point out that Charlotte Brontë’s “narrative of female fulfillment was interleaved with a series of hegemonic discursivities” (Bossche, 2005, p. 53). For example, Jane moves from lower-middle class to middle class by acquiring an inheritance based on colonial exploitation and enslavement; Jane justifies her desire for inclusion on the ground that she already possesses many attributes of ladyship while ignoring the fate of those women who, either by race or caste, could never achieve such attributes. In many ways, Jane's ascension to social inclusion depends, both narratively and symbolically, upon her already existing inclusion in certain privileges—namely, those of race and class. Therefore, as post-colonial critiques have asserted, Jane Eyre as well as many Western feminist readings of the text “essentialized Womanhood and failed to see how gender was fused with discourses of power” (Bossche, 2005, p. 53). In so doing, post-colonial criticisms of Jane Eyre illustrate that Brontë was not concerned with the emancipation of all women. Post-colonial analyses highlight the women to whom Jane Eyre’s feminism does not extend—namely, Britain's lower-class and colonized women—and argue that “the feminism of Jane Eyre was a white, middle-class feminism built on a series of exclusions of racial and class others” (Bossche, 2005, p. 53). As opposed to Western feminist readings that praise Jane’s desire for parity with her male kin, post-colonial interpretations “focus on power relations, including representations of the colonizer and the colonized, of ways dominant and subordinated knowledge are produced and circulated” (Dittmar and Leistyna, 2008, p. 7) in order to call attention to the ways in which Western feminist readings keep the power relations of colonizer/colonized intact and unquestioned. Spivak's poignant argument that Jane Eyre circulates “covert axiomatics of imperialism” (Spivak, 1985, p. 257) is “a crucial
reminder of the need to contextualize the study of both colonial and postcolonial literatures—to develop a postcolonial present while simultaneously avoiding the violence, both actual and epistemological, of imperial history” (Pollack, 1996, p. 269). Following Spivak’s call, we can avoid the pitfalls of earlier Western feminist work that obfuscates how hegemonic ideologies devalue non-Western and lower-class feminist subjectivities and how women’s lived-realities are engendered differently across race and class oppressions.

*Jane Eyre* represents a feminist artifact of colonialism—one that relies on imperialism to promote White, middle-class feminism in England. As such, Brontë articulates a feminine subjectivity that is predicated on feminist individualism—one that seeks the inclusion of middle-class Western women while maintaining the exclusion and exploitation of colonial women (and men). The following passage from a Western feminist reading of *Jane Eyre* illustrates why Spivak’s argument that *Jane Eyre* is a by-product of imperialism (i.e., a colonial artifact) and her critique of Western feminist analyses of the text are well-founded:

She [Jane] chooses instead to divide the money equally with her three cousins. St. John admits that he does see “a certain justice,” but he objects that Jane’s dividing her inheritance “is contrary to all custom. Besides,” he continues, “the entire fortune is your right: my uncle gained it by his own efforts; he was free to leave it to whom he would: he left it to you. After all, justice permits you to keep it: you may, with a clear conscience, consider it absolutely your own.” Their disagreement seems typical; St. John argues for the absolute possession of property that legal justice permits, Jane for the human justice of sharing with those she loves, whose needs she has experienced, by whose labors she has benefited…. Her experience of the accession of wealth becomes joy when the personal reality of interdependence becomes economically possible. (Pell, 1977, p. 416)

In the mainstream Western feminist readings of *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s decision to divide her inheritance equally between herself and her cousins is interpreted as an act of radical egalitarianism. However, the inheritance is wholly dependent upon the labor of enslaved, colonized peoples; thus, Jane’s action can only be interpreted as egalitarian if the slave labor that produced the fortune is either ignored or accepted as just. The passage quoted above makes several references to “justice” and Western feminists have read the scene as exemplary of Jane’s broader sense of “human justice” in which “her experience of the accession of wealth becomes joy when the personal reality of interdependence becomes economically possible.” Within such a reading, the colonized races are excluded from all conceptions of “human justice” and do not at all sully Jane’s ability to accept the inheritance “with a clear conscience” and to “consider it absolutely her own.” The absence of the enslaved, colonized peoples from the mainstream feminist perspectives becomes even more striking when Jane explains that she wishes to share her inheritance with her cousins.
because their labors have contributed to her well-being and livelihood. Whereas the text explicitly includes Jane’s British cousins within the narrative of “human justice” and whereas Western feminist perspectives have celebrated Jane Eyre for “sharing with those she loves...by whose labors she has benefited,” neither the text nor the feminist readings include the labor of the enslaved races as worthy of consideration or redistributive justice. When the colonized peoples are included in the analysis, Jane’s act becomes not one of radical egalitarianism but rather one of conservative redistribution—the funds are not reallocated in a way that disrupts the status quo; instead, Jane divides her inheritance in order to allow both herself and her cousins to be included in the British bourgeoisie. The cited passage exemplifies why Spivak critiques Jane Eyre and the emergent feminist viewpoints as colonial artifacts that replicate the “axioms of imperialism.”

One of the passages of Jane Eyre that has been cited most frequently as an example of Jane’s radical feminist vision is her soliloquy in chapter twelve:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercises for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer…. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë, 1987, pp. 132 – 133)

Western feminists have hailed the above soliloquy as demonstrative of Jane’s egalitarianism and have pointed to Jane’s assertion that “women feel just as men feel” and “need exercises for their faculties...as much as their brothers do” as evidence of the novel’s feminist impetus. Mainstream feminist readings of the text tend to focus on Jane’s objection to the socio-cultural constraints placed upon women and regard Jane’s desire to broaden that which “custom has pronounced necessary” for women to include the full range of activities and opportunities available to men. In so doing, mainstream feminist readings claim Jane Eyre as a feminist text and Jane Eyre as a militant feminist who seeks universal equality. However, following post-colonial critiques of the text, the same soliloquy can be used to belie the universality of Jane Eyre’s feminism. The proscription that “women are supposed to be calm generally” did not apply to all women: colonized women worked alongside their enslaved brothers; likewise, women of the lower classes within British society toiled as industrial laborers—albeit for lower pay and in less desirable positions. In both cases, women confronted oppressive conditions based upon their sex; however, in neither case was their behavior expected to be “calm.” The expectations for women’s behavior were variegated across both race and class (Anderson & Zinsser, 1988; Alexander & Mohanty, 1997).
Therefore, the women for whom Jane Eyre is concerned are not all women nor are they even all British women; rather, Jane Eyre’s soliloquy focuses on the very narrow group of women of the British middle- and lower-middle classes. Moreover, mainstream feminist readings that decry the universal egalitarianism of Jane’s soliloquy continue to include only middle-class Western women in their field of vision, thereby perpetuating the exclusion of non-Western and lower-class women within their feminist epistemologies.

A post-colonial reading of *Jane Eyre* enables readers to better understand how the exclusion of the colonized races from the concerns articulated in the novel is neither merely incidental nor narratively insignificant. Instead, the exclusion of colonized races from the feminism of *Jane Eyre* is complete and total even though it is their labor, suffering, and enslavement that enables the entire plot of the novel to advance. For example, Edward Fairfax Rochester, the male character with whom Jane falls in love and around whom— together with Jane—the romance tale of the text unfolds, would have been bequeathed a highly-valued family name but not, as the second-born son in a system of primogeniture, any wealth if it were not for his marriage to Bertha, his Creole wife. Rochester’s marriage to Bertha places him in possession of her dowry—a fortune acquired through colonial slave labor—and allows him to return to Britain, to lead a gentleman’s life, and to employ a governess (i.e., Jane Eyre) to care for and educate his child protégé. In other words, the bringing together of Rochester and Jane is facilitated by and through wealth appropriated from the British imperial project. Moreover, Jane’s own acquisition of wealth at the end of the novel—the fortune which positions her as a socially appropriate wife in her marriage to Rochester—also arises from the spoils of colonialism:

The atmosphere of Ferndean [the hunting lodge where Jane and Rochester reside] recalls the fact that, even if Rochester’s tainted colonial wealth has been burned away, the wealth Jane is able to bring him, enabling her to meet him on equal terms—and the wealth she earlier distributes in such a scrupulously egalitarian and “revolutionary” spirit—has a colonial source. (Meyer, 1990, p. 267)

The marital fulfillment that completes the love story of *Jane Eyre* and that places Jane in a social position from which she can later write her psychobiography is wholly intertwined with Jane Eyre’s and Edward Rochester’s familial ties to colonialism. Despite the narrative dependence upon wealth extracted from the colonies, the violence of colonialism endured by colonized races remains hidden and excluded from the action of the text. In a similar manner, the oppression of the colonized races persists outside the field of the feminist vision expressed by Jane Eyre.

In addition to the ways in which the spoils of imperialism spur the action of *Jane Eyre* without troubling Jane Eyre, post-colonial readings further decry the exclusion/erasure of colonized races in the use of racial/colonial metaphors such as dark skin and slavery to call
attention to oppressions within British society, thus erasing their relevance/reference to actual dark-skinned people (i.e., the colonized). Throughout the text, “the function of racial ‘otherness’...is to signify a generalized oppression. But Brontë makes class and gender oppression the overt significance of racial ‘otherness,’ displacing the historical reasons why colonized races would suggest oppression” (Meyer, 1990, p. 250). Analyses of the text that do not foreground the colonizer/colonized power relation and, thus, that do not participate in the post-colonial analytical project have interpreted Brontë’s figurative use of dark skin differently. Such analyses have often pointed to the complexity of Jane’s relationship to colonialism and/or to the complicated metaphorical strategy deployed by Brontë. Rather than reading a single and consistent use of racialized metaphors, perspectives situated outside post-colonial literary criticism tend to conclude that Brontë and/or Jane have an ambivalent attitude toward British empire: sometimes the text seems to criticize the oppressive impacts of colonialism while other times it appears to endorse or at least accept the realities of colonialism (Pollack, 1996). However, what Meyer’s post-colonial analysis brings to the fore is that the use of race to signify oppression within the text is wholly symbolic; the figurative use of race bears no actual, historical reference to the oppression endured by colonized races but only represents the abstract idea of oppression.

Interestingly, from a post-colonial vantage point such as that proffered by Meyer, *Jane Eyre* is remarkably consistent in its use of racialized metaphors. Once the notion that Jane is speaking from a place of concern for colonized races—for example, using the word “imperious” (Brontë, 1987, p. 197) as a term of indictment—is jettisoned, then the constancy of Brontë’s use of racialized metaphor becomes plain. Brontë dislocates racialized language from its historical reference point, retaining only the implication of “otherness” and imbuing such racialized terminology with greater malleability:

With this odd twist, racial “otherness” becomes also the signifier of the oppressor. By using dark-skinned people to signify not only the oppressed but also the oppressor, Brontë dramatically empties the signifier of dark skin in her novel of any of its meaning in historical reality and makes it merely expressive of “otherness.” By assigning these two contradictory meanings to the signifier “non-white,” the novel follows this logic: oppression in any of its manifestations is “other” to the English world of the novel, thus racial “otherness” signifies oppression. This is the most fundamentally dishonest move in the novel’s figurative strategy, the one that reveals the greatest indifference to the humanity of those subject to British colonialism. (Meyer, 1990, p. 261)

Following Meyer’s reasoning, Brontë’s metaphorical use of race to call attention to oppression within the British Isles and her simultaneous use of race to signify “otherness” lead to an implicit assertion that oppression (within middle-class British society) is antithetical to (i.e., “other” to) British middle-class comportment. Thus, the epistemological
violence to which Spivak referred is compounded even further: not only are colonized races absent from the text but also is the violence of their historical oppression erased while linguistic reference to colonized races is appropriated to argue for the inclusion of (middle-class) British women in the full benefits of the British imperial project. By foregrounding the position of *Jane Eyre* as a colonial artifact, Meyer’s brilliant analysis both resolves the ambiguity others found in Brontë’s figurative use of racialized language and enhances existing interpretations of the text. For example, Gilbert and Gubar note the disappearance of the language of oppression (i.e., racialized language) following Bertha’s self-immolation and Jane Eyre’s concomitant ascendency to a position of high status. Gilbert and Gubar attribute the linguistic shift to the resolution of Jane’s anxieties by and through the death of Bertha. However, if Jane’s references to the violent oppression of colonized races were grounded in real—as opposed to figurative—concerns, then the absence of such language toward the end of the novel would be disingenuous. Importantly, Meyer’s understanding of Brontë’s figurative strategy adds further explanation to Gilbert and Gubar’s observation: the racialized criticisms of oppression disappear because Jane’s own oppression within and exclusion from British middle-class society has been resolved. The language of racial oppression disappears since it was always only a metaphor for oppressions internal to the British Isles.

2.2.2 How do post-colonial critiques interpret Jane Eyre’s subject-position?

Post-colonial critiques highlight how Jane’s subject-position is articulated within a desire for the freedom and respect that middle-class, colonizer men have. Post-colonial feminisms draw attention to middle-class feminists’ penchant for packaging feminist individualism as agency. In her critique of Western feminism, Spivak responds to Elizabeth Fox-Genoves’ essay, “Placing Women’s History in History.” Spivak writes:

> Elizabeth Fox-Genoves, in an article on history and women’s history, shows us how to define the historical moment of feminism in the West in terms of female access to individualism. The battle for female individualism plays itself out within the larger theater of the establishment of meritocratic individualism, indexed in the aesthetic field by the ideology of “the creative imagination.” (1985, p. 246)

Unlike feminist critiques of *Jane Eyre*, which regard the text as an example of Brontë’s radicalism and regard the protagonist as a warrior for female equality, post-colonial critiques regard *Jane Eyre* as emblematic of the narrow scope of feminism in the West and point to the continuing praise heaped upon the text as representative of the ongoing exclusion of non-Western women from the mainstream Western feminist agenda. Post-colonial readings of *Jane Eyre* “show us how...the historical moment of feminism in the West...[is defined] in terms of female access to individualism” and situate such access within “the larger theater of the establishment of meritocratic individualism.” By positioning the mainstream Western
feminist quest for inclusion within the larger context of a system predicated upon multiple exclusions, post-colonial interpretations draw our attention to the limitations of the feminist musings articulated by Jane Eyre. Whereas mainstream Western feminists read Jane Eyre as a woman ahead of her time in making demands for female inclusion and equality, post-colonial readings focus on Jane Eyre’s embeddedness within, as opposed to her departure from, the prevailing power structures. From the post-colonial vantage point, Jane’s failure to include colonized women and lower-class British women in her feminism demonstrates her identification with the British status quo. To comprehend the post-colonial critique of the feminism represented by Jane Eyre, one must attend to two different systems of power at play within the text: “This stake is represented on two registers: childbearing and soul making. The first is domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as ‘companionate love’; the second is the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social mission” (Spivak, 1985, p. 244). Focused exclusively on improving her own social position, Jane Eyre only seeks to alter the first of the aforementioned oppressive systems. Jane wishes to achieve her own inclusion—and the inclusion of other British women in a similar situation—within the British middle class. The fact that her inclusion within the existing hierarchical system leaves the imperial project and its violent exclusions in place is not of importance to Jane Eyre. Even if some post-colonial interpretations read aspects of the text as critiques of the enslavement of colonized peoples or as problematizing the violence of colonial imperialism, post-colonial readings nonetheless remain clear that the feminist subject-position proffered by Jane Eyre is one that depends upon denying or ignoring the dehumanization of colonized women and men. In other words, Jane’s inclusion is predicated upon her willingness to embrace an individualistic, imperialist project:

Asked whether she is a good child, Jane finds it impossible to respond. Brockelhurst reminds her that naughty children are apt to die and go to hell. “And should you like to fall into that pit and to be burning there for ever?” he asks her. “No, sir,” Jane replies. “What must you do to avoid it?” Brocklehurst then insists. After a moment’s deliberation Jane declares lucidly, “I must keep in good health, and not die.” This simple reply may be taken as a rubric for the rest of the novel. Jane is candidly committed to her own survival; but, more than that, she plans as well to “keep in good health.” (Pell, 1977, p. 403)

Jane’s emphatic commitment to herself and to her own well-being, which Western feminists have lauded as demonstrative of her independence, reveal the individualistic character of her feminism. Viewed from a post-colonial perspective, Jane Eyre does not present a radical feminist vision but rather a Western-centric feminism that leaves the colonizer/colonized imperial power structure in place. In other words, Jane Eyre occupies a subject-position that is firmly entrenched in the imperial project and claims a form of inclusion that fits non-disruptively within such a system. Post-colonial critics point out that Jane wants to be
included in the exploitative/abusive system without undoing the exploitation/abuse of colonized peoples and lower classes.

What arises from the post-colonial critiques is not an egalitarian Jane Eyre who dreams of a society in which all have equal access to resources and in which hierarchy and violence in all their forms have been abolished. Instead, what emerges from the post-colonial perspectives is a Jane Eyre who wishes inclusion for those who possess the qualities prized by the middle and upper classes. For those who lack education and the distinctions associated with higher caste, Jane is not concerned; for those who are non-White/non-British, Jane displays no yearnings for their inclusion. Although post-colonial perspectives obviously call attention to the exclusion of the colonized from Jane’s feminism, such readings also highlight the British women who are passed over by Jane Eyre’s individualist feminism:

Jane cleans the house to celebrate the egalitarian distribution of her newly acquired legacy, which will enable her to live there happily with her new-found family. Brontë writes of Jane’s “equal” division of her fortune, using the rhetoric of a revolution against class oppression, although symbolically it represents a redistribution of wealth in favor of only a limited group of people, the lower-middle class. (Meyer, 1990, p. 265)

Even though Jane, at various points in her life, has benefited from the labor of servants, her egalitarian division of her inheritance only extends to her social equals. The symbolic act of her performing a task typically performed by the servant class could be read, as it is in Meyer’s analysis, as underlining the reality of those who are excluded from equitable wealth redistribution; however, Jane’s focus is not on the excluded laborers but rather on the victory of her own and, thereby, her cousins’ inclusion within the ranks of the middle class. Rather than challenging the caste system as a whole, Jane embodies a subject-position that seeks the inclusion of herself and others like her—those who are almost already middle class—while those of lower status remain excluded. Some readings of the text have interpreted Jane’s identification with the British middle class as a matter of pragmatism, grounded in her understanding of the difficulties of poverty:

Young Jane’s sense of poverty is concrete rather than abstract: “to be uneducated, to grow up like one of the poor women I saw sometimes nursing their children or washing their clothes at the cottage doors of the village of Gateshead: no, I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste.” The irony of the last clause seems unmistakable, but at least the mystifying concept of the noble poor has not obscured Jane’s vision. (Pell, 1977, p. 403)

Rather than interpreting Jane’s unwillingness to join a lower caste as evidence of her clear-sightedness or of her pragmatic approach to liberty, post-colonial critiques encourage
readers to ask more of their heroines. Why, for example, should readers and literary critics not uplift protagonists whose vision of liberty is not dependent upon the enslavement—whether literal or socio-economic—of others? Or, less radically, why should literary analyses not forefront—or at least mention—the excluded castes for whom Jane’s feminism is wholly meaningless? Post-colonial critiques point out the upwardly-mobile, status-driven nature of Jane’s subject-position while simultaneously foregrounding those who continue to be excluded from Jane’s individualist feminism. Such readings understand the inclusion proffered by Jane Eyre as self-centered and self-serving.

A primary component of post-colonial criticisms of Jane Eyre is Jane's interest in upholding British racial superiority. At the crux of the post-colonial readings of Jane Eyre is the assertion that social transformation ought not to consist of merely replacing a male protagonist with a female one, a male author with a female one, and/or including women within the existing male power structures. Post-colonial critiques claim for Jane Eyre a limited feminism and a Western-imperialist subject-position—centered around both individualism and imperialism. Furthermore, post-colonial perspectives argue that, within the historical context of the novel, such a centering of individualism necessarily upholds imperial subject-constitution. Mainstream Western feminist readings of the text have—either implicitly or explicitly—asserted that the individualist feminism presented by Jane Eyre is not necessarily imperialist insofar as the equality attained by Jane may one day be available to all women. Post-colonial critiques undermine that contention:

They [Western feminist analyses] do not notice the distance between sexual reproduction and soul making, both actualized by the unquestioned idiom of imperialist presuppositions evident in the last part of Jane Eyre: “Firm, faithful, and devoted, full of energy, and zeal, and truth [St. John Rivers] labours for his race.... who share the last mighty victories of the Lamb; who are called, and chosen, and faithful.” (Spivak, 1985, p. 249)

Although there may likely exist overlaps between and imbrications of gender-based oppressions in Britain and race-based exploitations of colonized peoples, Spivak reminds readers that the two are not reducible to one another; indeed, the valorization of St. John Rivers as a colonizer and the elevation of his participation in imperialism as God’s work demonstrate the “distance between sexual reproduction and soul making.”

From the post-colonial perspective, Jane does not challenge nor does she desire to challenge the presumed racial superiority of the British over the colonized. Instead, post-colonial critiques reveal that Jane’s dependency upon and acceptance of the British imperial project are wholly inseparable with “Plain Jane’s progress” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 360) throughout the novel, which Jane’s narration informs readers is written using “Indian ink”: 
In this way the novel connects the act of writing with colonialism. Specifically writing “Jane Eyre,” creating one’s own triumphant identity as a woman no longer oppressed by class or gender—or writing *Jane Eyre*, the fiction of a redistribution of wealth and power between men and women—depends on colonial “ink”.... ink with which to write a novel about ending oppression in England. (Meyer, 1990, p. 267)

Within the text, Jane achieves her independence as the result of and at the expense of the suffering—both historical and ongoing—of colonized races. Moreover, as post-colonial critiques point out, Jane, writing the novel ten years after the conclusion of its action, still benefits from the spoils of the imperial project and still relishes in her acquisition of a position of status within British society. In other words, Jane’s identification with the imperial British race enables her to shamelessly—or even triumphantly—write her celebratory psychobiography with commodities usurped through violent imperialism. The disconnect between the exalted subject-position occupied by Jane and the subject-position denied to the colonized races whose labor and resources enable her writing belies the Western feminist claim of Jane as a champion of universal egalitarianism. Post-colonial analyses abjure conceptualizations of Jane that impart to her a feminism in which the ending of gender-based oppression within imperial centers of power could bring about the dismantling of the imperial project and the attainment of gender parity in the colonies. Rather, post-colonial readings take Jane at her word and allot to her a subject-position that relies upon and agrees with the exclusion of class and racial “others” in order to be granted her own inclusion.

2.2.3 How are post-colonial analyses of *Jane Eyre* relevant to a discussion of neoliberal ideology?

In this section, I demonstrate the viability of connecting a discussion of neoliberalism to post-colonial interpretations of a canonical text. I draw on contemporary critiques of neoliberalism to emphasize that continuing to read *Jane Eyre* without attending to imperial/colonial realities is to continue the perpetuation of the actual and epistemological violence of the imperial project. Following in the footsteps of post-colonial literary analysis, this section is “a crucial reminder of the need to contextualize the study of both colonial and post-colonial literatures—to develop a post-colonial present while simultaneously avoiding the violence, both actual and epistemological, of imperial history” (Pollack, 1996, p. 269).

Pairing neoliberal critiques with post-colonial ones shows the continuities of present-day neoliberal practices with the historical legacies of imperial/colonial realities described in *Jane Eyre*. I engage in the current undertaking to partake in the work of critical education; a crucial component of critical educational praxis in literary studies is the continual re-evaluation and grounding of students’ lived-realities and real-world experiences in the text. The critical thinking skills students employ to draw these connections fosters a deep-reading
of the text that challenges the student body to "thought-fully" engage with both the text and the ever-changing world in which they live.

In the mid-nineteen-eighties Spivak stated, “What is at stake, for feminist individualism in the age of imperialism, is precisely the making of human beings, the constitution and ‘interpellation’ of the subject not only as individual but as ‘individualist’” (1985, p. 244). Three decades later, I forefront this assertion by examining it with attention to neoliberal capitalist ideology to better understand how neoliberal rationality, in the context of contemporary U.S. society, influences students’ and teachers’ lived-realities inside and outside the classroom. To that end, I explore how imperial/colonial realities are connected to neoliberal capitalism via liberal capitalism:

Linking imperialism directly to liberal economic ideology opens a space for arguing that the post-colonial world remains structured by imperialism. On this account, even if formal empires have retreated to the wings, imperialism remains embedded in the structures and ideology of the current global economic order. Neoliberalism can be seen as the latest manifestation of capitalist imperialism. (Bell, 2016, p. 107)

Exploring themes from post-colonial readings of Jane Eyre and their relationships to neoliberal capitalist ideology is a worthwhile expedition in critical literacy. Derived from post-colonial analyses of Jane Eyre, I link the following themes to my discussion of neoliberalism: (1) feminist individualism, (2) binaries of inclusion/exclusion, and (3) the appropriation of racialized language that leads to the erasure of actual racialized realities.

2.2.3.1 Feminist Individualism: The valuation and valorization of individualism and the demand for middle-class women to have access to self-actualization

Jane’s representation of a feminist individualism is a primary focus of post-colonial criticism that situates Jane Eyre as a cultural production of an “imperialist narrativization of history” (Spivak, 1985, p. 244). Even though Jane Eyre is a cultural representation of imperial/colonial realities, it is not often read from a post-colonial perspective and such a failure “attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms” (Spivak, 1985, p. 243). A post-colonial critique of the feminist individualism that seeks the inclusion of middle-class Western women (e.g., Jane) and feminisms that perpetuate “axiomatics of imperialism” is a crucial aspect of present-day discussions that call into question neoliberal rationality and the espousal of the “common-sense” of meritocratic individualism.

A critique of feminist individualism from the post-colonial perspective creates a re-narrativization of imperial/colonial histories that interpret Jane Eyre not as a radical feminist with an egalitarian vision but as an individualistic Western feminist who wants the freedom and respect that middle-class, colonizer men have. Similarly, a critique of the neoliberal
project draws attention to the remaking of liberal individualists as individuated human capital; the shift from the self-actualizing subjects of liberal individualism to neoliberal human capitals means that choices and desires are constrained:

Human capital’s constant and ubiquitous aim, whether studying, interning, working, planning retirement, or reinventing itself in a new life, is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking. In this, it mirrors the mandate for contemporary firms, countries, academic departments or journals, universities, media or websites: entrepreneurialize, enhance competitive positioning and value, maximize ratings or rankings. (Brown, 2016, p. 36)

Whereas liberalism’s economically stable, self-actualizing individuals are free to pursue whatever interests they wish—of course, within the constraints placed by custom and fashion—human capitals are constantly at risk of becoming obsolete or losing their competitive advantage. Therefore, human capitals must always be reinvesting in themselves in order to maintain their competitive position; their pursuits must not only conform to social customs but also contain the potential to aggrandize their social position. In constant competition with other capitals, human capitals cannot afford to think in terms of self-actualization but instead must think in terms of market demands. The ambitions pursued by human capitals are not chosen from internal interests but are based on the needs of the market.

2.2.3.2 Inclusion/Exclusion: The inclusion of some is predicated upon the continued exclusion of others

Post-colonial readings point out that colonized races are excluded from Jane Eyre even though it is their labor, suffering, and enslavement that advances the plot of the novel. Situated within the argument that Jane leaves unquestioned the “ideology of imperialist axiomatics” (Spivak, 1985, p. 248) that inherently validate the British imperialist project, the discussion of inclusion/exclusion in Jane Eyre in terms of neoliberal rationality is guided by a post-colonial approach to the text. Post-colonial critiques interpret Jane as a subject who wants to be included in more of the benefits of the exploitative/abusive imperial system rather than to undo the exploitation/abuse by including the colonized peoples in the benefits of their own labor. From the aforementioned vantage point, Jane’s socio-political criticisms are rooted in a desire for her own inclusion; however, in seeking (and achieving) her own inclusion, she is complicit with the continuing exclusion of lower classes and colonized races. For Jane, “imperialism and its territorial and subject-constituting project” (Spivak, 1985, p. 249) grant her access to the British middle class. From that standpoint, Jane’s politics of location are firmly rooted in “the independence and affluence” (Brontë, 1987, p. 418) that are justifications for the British imperial project in the West Indies where her uncle accrues his colonial fortune in Madeira. Her inheritance of imperial capital places Jane on the axis of
imperialism—a stakeholder in the politics of imperialism—where wealth is a means to an end. In Jane's narrativization of imperialism, wealth is more than "the bequest of coin—it [is] a legacy of life, hope, enjoyment" (Brontë, 1987, p. 418). With such narration, Jane Eyre materially assists imperial ideology and the progress-narrative of European colonization by remarking on how imperial wealth is more than monetized capital—it provides access to an improved way of being.

Post-colonial criticisms of Jane Eyre facilitate the parsing out of how inclusion and exclusion function within neoliberal capitalist ideology. Within the discourse of neoliberalism, those who are able to be included profitably and non-disruptively within the system are welcome to participate and to reap the benefits of economic growth—a form of rationality that is not a radical departure from, but rather that shares commonalities with, the form of inclusion Jane desires and attains for herself and her three cousins. Moreover, since neoliberalism occurs within the context of capitalism, the full inclusion of everyone within the benefits of the system is clearly incompatible with increased profitability; therefore, since exclusion is necessary for continued profitability, some human capitals must always be excluded from the benefits of economic growth. Furthermore, those whose inclusion does not increase profitability or competitive advantage are excluded—another outcome that shares similarities with the post-colonial readings of Jane Eyre and their discussions of colonized races and criticisms of the text's portrayal of "the ignorant, coarse, and besotted [peasantry]" (Brontë, 1987, p. 422). Building upon the post-colonial critiques of the novel positions Jane Eyre as an excellent text to use as a guide to better understand contemporary neoliberal ideology, the subjectivities proffered by neoliberal rationality, and the modes of governance that "generate a citizen integrated into and identified with the project of the economic health of a nation, a citizen who can be legitimately shed or sacrificed when necessary" (Brown, 2016, pp. 71-72). Following Spivak's reading of Jane Eyre as "an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism" (1985, p. 251), I read Jane Eyre as a representation of feminist individualism that presages neoliberalism's valorization of a meritocracy of human capitals.

In current neoliberal ideology, gender is no longer portrayed as relevant to a socio-political categorization of difference. Like other differences (e.g., race, class, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, etc.), gender becomes irrelevant in the subject-constitution of the economic-rational individual of the neoliberal project. In a contemporary neoliberal context, market-driven economics claim that socio-political categories are no longer pertinent in the global marketplace—an economic metric portrayed as an evaluation of merit is all that is needed to assess productivity and (e)quality. Therefore, within neoliberal ideology, Jane's feminist individualism is unnecessary. All that matters is her stake-hold in the imperial/colonial reality that desires the "independence and affluence" of wealth—regardless of how it is amassed or of who has amassed it. A discussion of neoliberal ideology invites an interrogation of Jane's imperial rationality through critical pedagogy that explores
the intertextuality of literature in lived-realities. For example, according to neoliberal rationality, “common-sense” structures a world where meritocratic individualism divides us into winners/losers, included/excluded. Neoliberalism asserts that socio-political categories such as race and gender no longer matter in a globally-minded world—a world in which meritocracy governs ascension and the capital aggrandizement of the individual does not engender discrimination within the space of a neutral market. Neoliberal rationality posits that we have reached a fair-minded marketization wherein global citizens actually exist in a post-imperial, post-feminist, post-categorical world. However, as the next theme makes clear, such appearances can be, and often are, deceiving.

2.2.3.3 Appropriation of Racialized Language: The erasure of the lived-experiences of racialized peoples

Brontë’s figurative use of racialized language—“the topoi of racial ‘otherness’” (Meyer, 1990, p. 253)—leads to the erasure of actual racialized experiences located in imperial/colonial realities. Post-colonial critiques point out the ways in which the lived-experiences of colonized races are used as a metaphor that calls attention to oppressions within British society, thereby erasing the relevance of race to the actual oppression of colonized races in imperial/colonial realities. In previous sections, I have shown how post-colonial readings interpret Jane as wanting to uphold the idea of British racial superiority and bourgeois ideals. Jane prizes her ascension to her position without being troubled by its dependency upon the violence of the British imperial project. Rather, Jane's inherited, colonial wealth is romanticized in the text—it gives Jane access to her heretofore unattainable desires and yields happiness as it unfetters the captive, releasing her from her “plebian” (Brontë, 1987, p. 171) state, enabling Jane to hear Rochester calling her name:

Jane, Jane, Jane!...the voice of a human being—a known, loved, and well-remembered voice—that of Edward Fairfax Rochester.... I recalled the voice I had heard; again I questioned whence it came, as vainly as before: it seemed in me—not in the external world. I asked was it a mere nervous impression—a delusion? I could not conceive or believe: it was more like an inspiration. The wondrous shock of feeling had come like the earthquake which shook the foundations of Paul and Silas's prison; it has opened the doors of the soul's cell and loosed its bands—it had wakened it out of its sleep, whence it sprang trembling, listening aghast; then vibrated thrice a cry on my startled ear, and in my quaking heart and through my spirit, which neither feared nor shook, but exulted as if in joy over the success of one effort it had been privileged to make independent of the cumbrous body. (Brontë, 1987, pp. 456, 458)

The above excerpt demonstrates the commingling of Jane’s attainment of colonial wealth with the fulfillment of the romance tale of the narrative. Jane’s newly acquired financial status alters her experience of Rochester’s cry. No longer separated by their different
economic positions, “it has opened the doors of the soul's cell and loosed its bands.” Unlike Jane’s previous attempt to have a romantic relationship with Rochester, in which she made repeated references to becoming his slave, Jane’s colonial wealth enables her to “[exult] as if in joy over the success of one effort.” Jane's “cumbrous body” has been freed by her imperial wealth and she is now an unbound “independent woman” (Brontë, 1987, p. 473); thus, her narrative no longer relies on the colonial imaginary that draws on racialized bodies to connote oppression. Similarly, the independent marketplace of neoliberal capitalist ideology erases the relevance of race in contemporary, market-driven discourse:

[E]conomic growth by itself should enable individuals to prosper and to protect themselves against risk, so economic growth is the state's social policy. Competition is a means facilitating an end; the state primes this means so that the economy can generate the end. (Brown, 2016, pp. 63 – 64)

The economic-rational individual is unencumbered by race. Within U.S. neoliberal capitalist ideology, the public good vanishes so that social changes are pursued only insofar as (and only because) they contribute to economic growth. For example, the state does not invest in education to create an informed citizenry, but rather because “investing in an education will reduce the drags on [economic] growth caused by teen pregnancy and violent crime” (Brown, 2016, p. 25). Not only does the aforementioned statement obfuscate the fact that these social ills disproportionately impact non-White races in the U.S., but also situating economic growth as the reason to quell those social ills erases their importance in the lives of actual racialized people—a contemporary reality with chilling parallels to the type of figurative erasure of colonized races delineated by Meyer’s post-colonial analysis of Jane Eyre.

2.2.4 How are post-colonial readings of Jane Eyre connected to a discussion of neoliberal capitalism?

There are threads of continuity between post-colonial critiques of Jane Eyre and a discussion of neoliberal capitalism. A post-colonial reading of Jane Eyre encourages readers to “expand the frontiers of the politics of reading” (Spivak, 1985, p. 259) and invites them to contextualize colonial and post-colonial literatures in an intertextual analysis that interleaves with their own neoliberal lived-realities. For example, Jane Eyre depends on exploitation and the maintenance of excluded “others.” Drawing attention to the colonial/imperial realities of the text can encourage present-day students to "thought-fully" engage in a discussion of how excluded “others” are still highly raced and classed. Furthermore, a politicized reading of the text steers readers “towards an understanding of who they are themselves, as well as how they read and see the ‘other’” (Dittmar and Leistyna, 2008, p. 5). In this section I reconnect Jane Eyre to a discussion of modern-day neoliberal capitalism.
In Jane Eyre, “Brontë dramatically empties the signifier of dark skin in her novel of its meaning in historical reality” (Meyer, 1990, p. 261). Similar to how the appropriation of race as a metaphor for oppression within Britain obfuscates the oppression of colonized races in the text by centering the focus on British society, neoliberal capitalist ideology downplays the importance of marginalized identities while maintaining (indeed, increasing) the inequalities based upon social hierarchies. Moreover, neoliberal ideology erases the historical impact of marginalization by centering foci on market-driven measures that are said to be neutral and independent of socio-political structures.

Another continuity between Jane Eyre and a discussion of neoliberal capitalist ideology is the motivation of equitable justice. Similar to neoliberal capitalist ideology, Jane pursues “justice” and equity insofar as it advances her own needs/wants. When Jane learns that she has become an heiress, she decides to share her wealth with Diana, Mary, and St. John Rivers. She realizes her power to free and unite them all when she says, “the independence and affluence which was mine, might be theirs too...justice would be done—mutual happiness secured” (Brontë, 1987, p. 418). After St. John Rivers hears her decision to quarter her inheritance he says, “You wander: your head becomes confused” (Brontë, 1987, p. 419). Jane replies:

I am rational enough...it is you who affect to misunderstand....I am not brutally selfish, blindly unjust, or fiendishly ungrateful. Besides I am resolved I will have a home and connexions. I like Moor House, and I will live at Moor House; I like Diana and Mary, and I will attach my life to Diana and Mary. It would please and benefit me to have five thousand pounds; it would oppress me to have twenty thousand; which, moreover, could never be mine in justice, though it might be in law. (Brontë, 1987, p. 419)

In this passage Jane elucidates her vision of justice—a justice where she shares her sizable inheritance with the Rivers siblings and can fulfill her long-awaited desire for companionship, a sense of belonging, and a home-life shared with those she loves and for whom she has affection. When St. John explains to her that he and his sisters will be like family to her regardless of whether she quarters her inherited wealth amongst them she retorts, “Brother? Yes; at the distance of a thousand leagues! Sisters? Yes, slaving amongst strangers! I, wealthy—gorged with gold I never earned and do not merit! You, penniless! Famous equality and fraternization! Close union! Intimate attachment!” (Brontë, 1987, p. 420). In the previous passage, we see Jane articulate the meaning of justice and equity as her ability to share her inheritance with the Rivers and gain their life-long intimate companionship in return. In Jane’s reasoning, it is right/just to share her inheritance because doing so will enable her to have both “a home and connexions.” Likewise, in accordance with neoliberal rationality, “justice [and other social goods]...may be pursued to the extent that they advance economic purposes” (Brown, 2016, p. 40). With the Rivers, as with Rochester,
Jane insists that companionship must be paired with financial parity in order to enable intimacy. Furthermore, Jane's vision of justice is not egalitarian; rather it is self-interested and not pursued as an end unto itself. Her version of justice refers to that which is required to enable her own happiness.

Alongside the continuities between *Jane Eyre* and neoliberal rationality, there also exist ruptures that displace colonial/imperial discourses around gender and race—predominant themes in post-colonial critiques of *Jane Eyre*. Unlike liberal/imperial capitalism, neoliberal capitalism no longer constructs impenetrable boundaries around race and gender: some non-Whites and some women are included in the system while maintaining the exclusion of the majority. Drawing from the text, this rupture is illustrated in the outward appearances of Jane and Bertha and the role embodiment plays in their lived-experiences in colonial/imperial realities. Their bodies and their feminine subjectivities are inscribed by their ability to showcase a particular embodiment and way of being in high-ranking British society. For example, Jane’s lower-middle-class status as a governess is mitigated by her inheritance: she is capable of class ascension because her White, middle-class embodiment and characteristics of ladyship (not just her wealth) enable her to assimilate into the middle class. Conversely, Bertha’s Creole embodiment disallows her assimilation into aristocratic society. Despite her family’s wealth—a sizable dowry accompanied her into the marriage—her hybrid, colonized body is unintelligible in England and is unable to transcend British imperial norms. In contrast to the impossibility of Bertha’s assimilation, neoliberalism no longer constructs boundaries based upon the acquisition of particular social customs or norms, but rather on the acquisition of marketable skills and assets. Within neoliberal rationality, “race, gender, or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial” (Duggan, 2003, XIV) and such differences are deemed irrelevant to discussions of economic policies, which are “understood as primarily a technical realm” (Duggan, 2003, XIV). Thereby, neoliberal rationality essentializes/universalizes economic opportunity and creates forced exclusion based on economic metrics as opposed to race and/or gender. Moreover, economic metrics portend to be objective and neutral, but in terms of the actual allocation of resources and the upward distribution of wealth, their impacts are not at all neutral to social hierarchies based on nationality, race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. However, appeals to such metrics do construe identity-based demands as irrelevant to neoliberal capitalism. What was achieved in *Jane Eyre* based on colonialism and the forced exclusion, exploitation, and enslavement of colonized races is now achieved through neoliberal economic metrics.

### 2.3 Class-Centered Readings of *Jane Eyre*

#### 2.3.1 What have class-centered critiques said about *Jane Eyre*?

Just as many post-colonial critiques of *Jane Eyre* are a direct response to Western feminist readings of the text, so too are class-centered critiques crafted in response to post-colonial
interpretations. Unlike Western feminist literary criticisms, which foreground gender-based analyses in claiming a subversive position for Jane Eyre as a heroine, class-centered critiques find a form of radicalism in the class discourses in which the novel participates. Situating the novel within the historical context of the prevailing class discourses, class-centered analyses take issue with post-colonial critiques of the text that malign *Jane Eyre* for extolling British middle-class ideology. Instead, class-centered interpretations of the text assert that such post-colonial readings essentialize class in much the same way as post-colonial critiques assert that Western feminist readings essentialize gender (Bossche, 2005; Pollack, 1996). In other words, class-centered literary criticisms argue that post-colonial readings such as Spivak’s universalize British middle-class experience, ignoring the ways in which such experience was inflected by other social hierarchies in a way similar to the Western feminists who attributed a universal experience to womanhood. According to class-centered critiques, Jane Eyre must be viewed in terms of all the constraints placed upon her, and with such acknowledgement in mind, *Jane Eyre* presents a far more complicated relationship to class than the one portrayed (and criticized) by Spivak and other post-colonial literary critics.

From the aforementioned vantage point, *Jane Eyre* must be read in terms of its historical context—namely, it must be understood as an artifact of a period in which the middle class was gaining influence and the aristocracy was losing its traditional social privilege. Thus, the novel cannot be read as a solidly middle-class text and Jane Eyre cannot be read as representing an unswerving middle-class ideology since the concept of the middle class was, in itself, in transition. Instead, Jane Eyre appropriates elements of the two prevailing class discourses of her day and uses them to serve her own interests:

> [S]he employs two distinct strands of class discourse. First, she draws on the triadic model of class in which the aristocracy and middle class each represent themselves as better able than the other to govern, and protect the interests of, the working class. However, rather than identifying exclusively with one or the other of these potential ruling classes, Jane strategically alternates between them, and, moreover, critiques both by setting them against one another.... And, she draws on a dichotomous model in which the lower classes demand the right of social inclusion from the upper classes that exclude them from access to power. (Bossche, 2005, p. 47)

For Bossche, the novel relies upon both a triadic model—in which classes are divided hierarchically into the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie or middle class, and the servant and peasant classes—and a dichotomous model identified elsewhere as Chartism—in which there is only the ruling class, defined as those with political representation and economic viability, and “the people,” defined broadly as everyone who is excluded from representation and rule. Furthermore, the persistence of both class models throughout the text and Jane’s continued alternation between them provides a counterpoint to post-colonial charges of a
middle-class focus. Nonetheless, Bossche identifies Jane as a “self-made woman” who rises to join the ranks of the middle class; however, unlike the post-colonial readings of the text, Bossche denies that either *Jane Eyre* or Jane Eyre presents a unified middle-class ideology. Instead, class-centered readings refer to the complexity of Jane’s relationship to class within the text. For example, the following passage expresses not an aspiration to join the bourgeoisie but an awareness of the insurmountable gulf between Jane’s own class prospects and that of the ruling class:

> I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space: “Then,” I cried, half desperate, “grant me at least a new servitude!”.... A new servitude! There is something in that...I know there is, because it does not sound too sweet. It is not like such words as Liberty, Excitement, Enjoyment: delightful sounds truly, but no more than sounds for me. (Brontë, 1987, p. 88)

Unlike elsewhere in the text where Jane expresses an awareness “of the fine distinctions of class custom among servants as well as between servants and gentry” (Pell, 1977, p. 407) that is compatible with the triadic model, the above passage shows her identifying herself as one amongst a field of servants—all of whom are disempowered relative to the ruling class, whether it be aristocratic or bourgeois. Class-centered responses to post-colonial critiques focus attention on the incongruities of Jane’s class identification to assert that *Jane Eyre* does not posit a middle-class ideology. That being said, the class-centered critiques leave the post-colonial charge against Jane’s feminist individualism firmly in place.

### 2.3.2 How do class-centered critiques interpret Jane Eyre’s subject-position?

In the following section I give text-based examples to show how *Jane Eyre* problematizes class discourse as a whole and how the narrative uses class “as a resource through which identities can be mobilized” (Bossche, 2005, p. 56). I illustrate how *Jane Eyre* disrupts class discourses by proffering Jane as an autonomous, “self-made woman” that defies categorization in terms of an achieved middle-class subjectivity. The malleability of Jane’s subject-position explores how Jane’s reaction to her social exclusion results in her desire to be autonomously independent “at moments of crisis when dependence threatens to foreclose her power” (Bossche, 2005, p. 58). Furthermore, I explore Jane's negotiations with aristocratic society as she rises as a “self-made woman” and Rochester's equal. I discuss the issues that arise in the text that promote the rise of the middle class as an alternative to the outmoded aristocracy that is in decline. In sum, this section is an exploration of Jane’s subject-position in relationship to her shifting positions within class discourses that are themselves in transition.
Jane’s desire to overcome caste barriers is decided early in her narration when she writes, “I from that hour set to work afresh, resolved to pioneer my way through every difficulty: I toiled hard, and my success was proportionate to my efforts” (Brontë, 1960, p. 80). However, “[g]iven that she has neither wealth nor status to offer on the marriage market, her only prospect seems to be that of the self-made woman” (Bossche, 2005, p. 58).

During her tenure at Lowood school, a charitable institution for low-caste girls, Jane uses her education as a vehicle of transformation and makes herself eligible for a middle-class subject-position. Later, the necessity of being a “self-made woman” comes to the fore after Blanche Ingram’s arrival: when Rochester’s aristocratic houseguests descend on Thornfield Hall, Jane no longer exists as his companion and confidant; she becomes merely Adéle’s governess. At this juncture in the narrative Jane must come to terms with the reality that her education and mannerisms do not allow her full entry into genteel society. Rochester’s peers become a barrier between Jane and Rochester, reminding her of the social divide between them. Jane’s socio-political demotion inspires a re-evaluation of her position and identity. To be “self-respecting” (Brontë, 1987, p. 172) Jane returns to her pre-Rochester desire to live independently as a teacher rather than a governess amongst elites. She resolves to return to her autonomous, pioneering path when she says, “my utmost hope is, to save enough money out of my earnings to set up a school some day in a little house rented by myself” (Brontë, 1987, p. 211). At this stage in Jane's narrative, her hopes are dashed: she realizes that her life as Rochester’s equal is impossible because she has not inherited wealth or a name that allows her access amongst his peers. Thereupon, she decides that despite her belief that they are kindred spirits—“he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine—I am sure he is—I feel akin to him” (Brontë, 1987, p. 186)—she is destined to live independently as a “self-made woman” and teacher.

Throughout the novel, there is a tension between Jane’s desire to be a part of the aristocratic ruling class and her desire to break away from aristocratic moorings and to exalt the bourgeoisie, with its offer of new social customs such as middle-class independence and freedom:

Jane Eyre appears to be a bildungsroman cast in the form of the narrative of the rise of a middle-class that displaces an outmoded aristocracy.... From this perspective, Jane Eyre can be regarded as a self-made woman who shapes her destiny through individual industry, a rise that is set against the backdrop of genteel families whose fortunes are in decline. (Bossche, 2005, p.56)

The above passage illustrates the discursive underpinnings of class in Jane Eyre and highlights the context in which it is written—the rise of the middle class and the decline of the aristocracy, resulting in shifting class ideologies and social customs.

In this section, I explore how Jane’s “shaping identity” (Bossche, 2005, p. 56) is partly invested in accouterments of gentility and reliant upon upper-class markings such as
education and heritage to legitimize her place in the world and her ability to be “self-respecting.” As previously discussed in post-colonial critiques, Jane's feminist individualism and investment in ladyship comes to the forefront within a class-centered analysis as well.

The evening before Jane leaves to become a governess at Thornfield Hall her childhood nurse Bessie arrives at Lowood school to visit her before she (Jane) leaves for a distant part of the country. During their meeting Bessie's appraisal of Jane recognizes Jane's ability to appear and perform as a genteel woman. When she assesses Jane's comportment and overall appearance she says, “You are genteel enough; you look like a lady” (Brontë, 1960, p. 101). She then goes on to favorably compare Jane to her aristocratic cousins, the Miss Reeds. Throughout the passage, Bessie praises Jane's accomplishments and the skills she has acquired at Lowood school and compliments her for her ability to surpass the Reed sisters in their learning and abilities. Regardless of her humble upbringing at the Lowood school, Jane has conscientiously driven herself in her studies and worked dutifully hard to overcome the class markings of her low-caste position. She has acquired the French language and is now able to play the piano, to masterfully draw, and to skillfully do fine needlework on par or better than the genteel ladies who outrank her in caste. After noting Jane's skillfulness and her lady-like appearance, Bessie goes on to say that she believes Jane's paternal family is gentry and that her father's brother “looked quite the gentleman” (Brontë, 1960, p. 102) when he came to inquire after Jane at Gateshead. Bessie's description of Jane's uncle as a gentleman grounds Jane implicitly amongst British gentry even though she has been orphaned without wealth or name, presenting one example of Jane's on-going, ambivalent class negotiations.

Jane's aristocratic anchor and upper-class markings enable her to assert her right to equity despite her poverty. Furthermore, her attributes as an autonomous, middle-class woman give her the ability to assert her independence in “moments of crisis” (Bossche, 2005, p. 56). For example, when Rochester says he will marry Miss Ingram and suggests that Jane is welcome to stay at Thornfield as the governess, she replies:

Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong!—I have as much soul as you—and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you. I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!.... I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free woman with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you. (Brontë, 1987, pp. 270 – 271)

In the above passage, Jane values social inclusion over economic position and “shift[s] positions within class discourse, not in order to move towards a final class identity but in
response to economic dependence, social exclusion, personal isolation, and other circumstances” (Bossche, 2005, p. 47). Her willingness to leave Rochester and Thornfield Hall is necessitated because she risks social exclusion if she stays. Rochester's pending marriage leads her to reassert her position as an autonomous woman who can move freely in the world regardless of her class status. Furthermore, Jane's disconnection from the ruling class allows her to thoroughly critique Britain's elite social customs that have interrupted her idyllic life as Rochester's companion. When reflecting on Rochester's pending marriage to Blanche, she states:

I have not yet said anything condemnatory of Mr. Rochester's project of marrying for interest and connexions. It surprised me when I first discovered that such was his intention: I had thought him a man unlikely to be influenced by motives so commonplace in his choice of a wife; but the longer I considered the position, education, &c., of the parties, the less I felt justified in judging and blaming either him or Miss Ingram for acting in conformity to ideas and principles instilled into them, doubtless from their childhood. All their class held these principles: I supposed, then they had reasons for holding them, such as I could not fathom. It seemed to me that, were I a gentleman like him, I would take to my bosom only such a wife as I could love. (Brontë, 1987, p. 199)

The above passage demonstrates how Jane's narrative strategically employs a class critique “as a means of constituting contingent identities capable of dealing with the dilemmas of her circumstances” (Bossche, 2005, p. 56). Jane's narration criticizes the customs of the aristocracy because she aspires to live in a world where the man she loves is able to marry for happiness rather than connexions she does not have.

2.3.3 How are class-centered analyses of Jane Eyre relevant to a discussion of neoliberal ideology?

In the following analysis I examine how class-centered critiques of Jane Eyre are relevant to a discussion of neoliberal ideology. Jane Eyre, written when middle-class ideology was being carved out and articulated in British society, is a cultural artifact that mirrors ongoing public debates in the nineteenth century that “sought to understand, manage, and come to terms with a diverse series of social conditions” (Bossche, 2005, p. 50). From that perspective, we can better understand how Brontë uses Jane's shifting subject-positions as representations of politicized social experiences and lived-realities and how she uses class discourse to confront a myriad of issues within the overarching narrative of the rise of the middle class. Drawing upon the class-centered analyses, I link the following themes to my discussion of neoliberal capitalist ideology: (1) class identification and (2) social inclusion.
2.3.3.1 Class Identification: The ability to locate oneself alongside one’s peers based on an understanding of the similarities of one another’s position/status

In his class-centered analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Bossche points out that Jane's social agency and decisions are a part of a political affect that illustrates that “[c]lass discourse made it possible for individuals to identify their interests with one another to act collectively, but it did not make such action inevitable” (Bossche, 2005, p. 50). At times, Jane's class narrative draws on the triadic class model to articulate the debate wherein the aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie vie for primacy as the penultimate ruling class—as the class able to govern the actions of all others. For example, when Jane becomes the village school teacher in Morton she says,

I must not forget that these coarsely-clad little peasants are of flesh and blood as good as the scions of gentlest genealogy; and that the germs of native excellence, refinement, intelligence, kind feeling, are as likely to exist in their hearts as in those of the best-born. My duty will be to develop these germs: surely I shall find some happiness in discharging that office. (Brontë, 1987, pp. 388 – 389)

In the above passage we see an overlapping of imperial and class ideologies taking place. There is a nativist discourse interwoven with Jane's middle-class desire to nurture the children of Britain's working-class peasantry. However, unlike Miss Oliver, an heiress who can come and go from the school at leisure, Jane relies on her teaching position as her livelihood and her classed vulnerability is articulated in a dualist frame of mind that reflects her shifting positions and negotiations:

I felt—yes, idiot that I am—I felt degraded. I doubted that I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence. I was weakly dismayed at the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw round me. But let me not hate and despise myself too much for these feelings; I know them to be wrong—that is a great step gained; I shall strive to overcome them. (Brontë, 1987, p. 389)

As articulated above, Jane represents a firmly entrenched middle-class position that is relegated between the working class and the aristocratic elite. Her upbringing at Lowood school enables her to empathize with the lower class and to chastise herself for her class-based bias at the same time that she prizes her own elevated social position. She has become a village school teacher surrounded by “the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness” that denigrates her own social existence. However, unlike “imperious” aristocrats, she recognizes the injustice of her class biases and seeks to overcome them. Moreover, she recognizes the fruitfulness of meritocratic individualism and works from the presupposition that class mobility is possible and her students’ lower-class positions can be mitigated by
good schooling and educational attainments (e.g., grammar, history, geography, and the ability to stitch more elaborate needlework).

Jane's narrative of a middle-class subject-position stimulates a discussion of neoliberal capitalist ideology from the perspective of class identification. Within neoliberal capitalist ideology there is no class consciousness; instead would-be class comrades become competitors in a field of human capitals:

> Competition yields winners and losers; capital succeeds by destroying or cannibalizing other capitals. Hence, when market competition becomes generalized as a social and political principle, some will triumph and some will die...as a matter of social and political principle. (Brown, 2016, p. 64–65)

Since *Jane Eyre* offers variegated narrations, from various points of view and subject-positions, I utilize the novel to show how the triadic class model also distances Jane from colonial/imperial realities and lower classes (i.e., peasants and servants). Furthermore, the narrative provides the opportunity to engage with neoliberal ideology when we think about who the winners and losers are in the text. For example, in the dynamic between Jane and Bertha, there is no sympathetic class or feminist consciousness in the narration that draws these women together. Focusing our attention on neoliberalism, we can explicate the feminist and class ramifications of Jane's social agency—one that is closely tied to a feminist individualism that extols pragmatic, self-interested negotiations. Within a meritocratic discourse Jane's diligence and hard work move her from the socio-politico-economic periphery to a solidly middle-class subject-position. From such a perspective her narrative moves from one of resistance to assimilation as she “rebels against social exclusion yet ultimately does not seek to overturn the existing social order” (Bossche, 2005, pp. 46–47). As a “winner” Jane no longer needs to think about the “losers.” Even though the text offers a scathing critique of the aristocratic caste system, Jane’s subversion of class ideology is neutralized because it is no longer necessary for her to deploy the language of class confrontation to secure her social inclusion: she has successfully overcome the class hurdles she faced. After her uncle's death she becomes an independent woman, an heiress who can seek companionship and equity in a marriage where-within she is “supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband's life as he is mine” (Brontë, 1987, pp. 490–491). Of course, her “win” is also predicated on the death of Rochester’s colonial wife Bertha, the ultimate “loser” in *Jane Eyre*: Bertha loses her status, her homeland, her fortune, her sanity, and her life.

### 2.3.3.2 Social Inclusion: The valuing of social inclusion in its own right and above economic position

“The fact that *Jane Eyre* is as much concerned with social inclusion as with economic autonomy accords with [the] Chartist belief that working poor could not achieve economic reform unless they first obtained political agency through representation in parliament”
Bossche’s analysis is exemplified in the division of Jane's inheritance amongst her three cousins. In Jane's narrative, the competency engenders equity and provides the necessary monies for Jane, Diana, and Mary to live together at Moor House, proffering Jane the social inclusion for which she pined. Relating Jane's action to neoliberal capitalist ideology, we can contrast Jane's Chartist philosophy with neoliberal capitalism's focus on economic opportunity as a byway to socio-political empowerment:

Like the Chartist, whose concern was not solely economic but also political, she is more concerned with achieving social inclusion than economic autonomy. In this light we need not conclude...that Jane's musings about how “political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth” are a textual “incoherence”; instead, we can regard her as mobilizing, for that moment, a radical identity. As with her mobilization of entrepreneurial and genteel identities, this use of radical discourse strategically addresses particular circumstances, situations in which she is threatened by social exclusion. (Bossche, 2005, p.59)

Neoliberal capitalism offers only economic opportunity; it inverts or dissolves the Chartist understanding that political access is necessary to improve economic conditions. In contrast to Chartist rhetoric, neoliberal capitalist ideology reiterates, through the economization of all spheres of life, that all that matters, in both public and private life, is the attainment of economic success to achieve social status—thereby allying social and political representation with economic standing.

As liberty is relocated from political to economic life, it becomes subject to the inherent inequality of the latter and is part of what secures that inequality. The guarantee of equality through the rule of law and participation in popular sovereignty is replaced with a market formulation of winners and losers. Liberty itself is narrowed to market conduct, divested of association with mastering the conditions of life, existential freedom, or securing the rule of the demos. (Brown, 2016, p. 41)

In terms of neoliberal ideology, Bertha's position can be understood as an asynchronous representation of “a market formulation of winners and losers.” According to Brown, neoliberal rationality relocates the conceptualization of liberty from a political location to an economic one, changing the character of liberty from a political attribute to an economic perk. Brown's liberal-democratic perspective draws attention to the shift in discourse. However, read from the vantage point of contemporary neoliberalism, Jane Eyre draws attention to the long-time struggle for liberty and the lived-experiences of marginalized subjects such as Bertha. Bertha demonstrates how “liberty is narrowed to market conduct, divested of association with mastering the conditions of life [and] existential freedom.” In her marriage to Rochester she is divested of her wealth, exiled from her homeland, and
confined to “a room without a window” (Brontë, 1987, p. 316). In her arranged marriage to Rochester, Bertha is symbolic of “a market formulation of winners and losers” and becomes a cannibalized capital, usurped by Rochester, “as a matter of social and political principle,” to aggrandize his own competitive positioning.

2.3.4 How are class-centered readings of Jane Eyre connected to a discussion of neoliberal capitalism?

In the following section I parse out the continuities that thread between Jane Eyre and neoliberal capitalism in terms of the themes discussed in the previous section—namely, class identification and social inclusion. In Jane Eyre, Brontë uses a strategic appropriation of classed language: Jane deploys Chartist language without any allegiance to the lower classes. Similarly, in present-day neoliberal discourse, elites use the language of “class warfare” to decry any threat—however small—to ruling-class/capitalist hegemony. Duggan articulates this feature of neoliberalism:

> Opposition to material inequality is maligned as "class warfare," while race, gender or sexual inequalities are dismissed as merely cultural, private, or trivial.... Once economics is understood as primarily a technical realm, the trickle-upward effects of neoliberal policies can be framed as due to performance rather than design, reflecting the greater merit of those reaping larger rewards. (Duggan, 2003, p. XIV)

To flesh out such a conceptualization of neoliberal rationality in Jane Eyre, I draw again on the intersectional differences that formulate Jane and Bertha as the novel's winner and loser. Jane’s ability to access a middle-class subject-position relies, in large part, on her education and Whiteness. As an educated, White woman, she is able to become a part of the ruling class. Her embodiment and cultural bearings allow her the opportunity to surmount her low-caste status—an obstacle she attempts to overcome through meritocratic individualism: she conscientiously acquires highly-valued skills and an education at Lowood school. Later, she has the good fortune to receive an unexpected inheritance of wealth. Jane’s “winning” exemplifies “the trickle-upward effects of neoliberal policies that can be framed as due to performance rather than design.”

Jane’s character traits fit snugly into the rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism, which is further illustrated in her relationship to Rochester after they are engaged to be married. In a close approximation of neoliberal ideology, Rochester extols Jane’s merit when he exclaims to her, “you mutinied against fate, and claimed yourself as my equal” (Brontë, 1987, p. 282). Jane’s cultural capital and appearance give her access to a “new sphere” (Brontë, 1987, p. 302) when she becomes betrothed to Rochester. Jane’s embodiment allows Rochester to bestow on her “heirlooms for the ladies of Thornfield” (Brontë, 1987, p. 278). After his engagement to Jane he promises that “every privilege, every attention shall be [given her
that he] would accord a peer's daughter, if about to marry her” (Brontë, 1987, p. 278). He goes on to remark:

I will make the world acknowledge you a beauty too...I will attire my Jane in satin and lace, and she shall have roses in her hair...she shall taste too, of the life of cities; and shall learn to value herself by just comparison with others. (Brontë, 1987, pp. 278 – 279)

The above scene provides a fruitful example of a continuity linking Jane Eyre and current neoliberal capitalism: liberty is achieved through economic gain and, for “winners,” caste is no longer determinate if one can overcome economic barriers. Moreover, Rochester asserts that Jane's self-perception and sense of her own worth will be improved by her new class position, shaping a new identity that will become known to her through her comparison with elite women in aristocratic spheres. However, at that point in the narrative, Jane's access to aristocracy is foreclosed at Thornfield Hall; Jane's marriage to Rochester is stalled when Jane discovers that he is already married to Bertha. After Jane has left Thornfield and has walked away from the class ascension proffered by and through a marriage to Rochester, she unexpectedly finds herself once again on the cusp of vast colonial wealth in the form of a fortune bequeathed to her. When St. John Rivers tells her she is an heiress he goes on to say, “you cannot form a notion of the importance twenty thousand pounds would give you; of the place it would enable you to take in society; of the prospects it would open up to you” (Brontë, 1987, p. 420). Read from the vantage point of neoliberalism, Jane is a market-winner with the potential to occupy the upper echelons of society and to partake in the advantages of the ruling class—a position where her “nobility” (Brontë, 1987, p. 278) would be recognized and her wealth would be her liberty. In other words, Jane is offered the ability to attain the apex of economic opportunity proffered by neoliberal capitalist ideology: the opportunity to acquire wealth and, thereby, to improve one’s socio-political status.

Conversely, Bertha lacks the ability to transcend her Creole heritage, her madness, and her catastrophic marriage. Discussed in terms pertaining to neoliberal ideology, her economic location is fixed in “a technical realm” that renegotiates and devalues her subject-position. Applying the market logic of neoliberal capitalism, Bertha's position as a “loser” illustrates her failure to conform to the needs of her new circumstances. Her deficiencies can be understood as a failure to meet market demands requiring personal responsibility for market deficiencies rather than a recognition and understanding of the categorical disempowerment that takes place via race, ethnicity, and disability. Neoliberal capitalism and rationality lay claim to individual industry and meritocracy as the source of one’s success: Jane portends to economic independence and to be able to support her own efforts without acknowledging the social privileges (i.e., race, acculturation, and class) that have enabled her success. Likewise, neoliberal capitalist ideology attributes the wealth of elites to
their own entrepreneurial genius without acknowledging the benefits, historical and ongoing, they receive from the status quo.

In addition to the continuities between neoliberal capitalism and *Jane Eyre*, the text also offers opportunities to explore the ruptures that create discontinuities between *Jane Eyre* and present-day neoliberal capitalism. A primary disconnect from neoliberal capitalism is the Chartist language utilized in *Jane Eyre*. The Chartist mentality exemplified in *Jane Eyre* is narrated in Jane's desire for simultaneous social inclusion and economic autonomy. Jane's realization that political and social agency can affect her economic standing is elucidated throughout the text, beginning with her efforts at Lowood school where she strives to excel as a student and continuing through her procurement of a teaching position at the school and her later employment as a governess at Thornfield. Moreover, for Jane social inclusion is at times more important than economic gain. For example, when she adapts to life at Lowood school, has been given the opportunity to engage in cultural activities, and has the friendship of Helen and Miss Temple, Jane quotes Solomon, “Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith” (Brontë, 1960, p. 81). Jane's social inclusion at Lowood school is meaningful; rather than being a purely economic-rational individual, Jane values the friendships and cultural interests that bring her happiness. She asserts, “I would not now have exchanged Lowood with all its privations, for Gateshead and its daily luxuries” (Brontë, 1960, p. 81). Jane's commitment to social inclusion and cultural interests stands in stark contrast to neoliberal capitalist ideology: “neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities—even where money is not the issue—and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as homo oeconomicus” (Brown, 2016, p. 31). A neoliberal formulation presents a direct contrast to the Chartist formulation articulated in *Jane Eyre* and brought to the fore by the class-centered analyses of the text. The Chartists believed that the economic inequalities they faced were the result of their exclusion from the political system; they framed the problem as essentially a political one and argued that their economic inclusion would follow from their political inclusion. On the contrary, neoliberal ideology posits political inclusion as dependent upon economic inclusion and, thereby, emphasizes the primacy of the economic realm.
3  Teaching Literature & Initiating Difficult Conversations: Wide Sargasso Sea Introduces Disability Studies, Ideologies of Resistance, & Neoliberal Capitalism

In this semi-independent paper, I offer an example of how literature teachers might use Wide Sargasso Sea to initiate a conversation about and an understanding of neoliberal ideology. In selecting what to emphasize from the novel, I focus on disability and resistance, and I prioritize those aspects of the text both for their relevance to the novel and for their devaluation within or elimination from neoliberal ideology.

3.1  A Disability Studies Reading of Wide Sargasso Sea

Jean Rhys’s impetus to write the novel Wide Sargasso Sea arose from her reading of Brontë’s Jane Eyre. Rhys, who herself struggled with the difficulties of Creole embodiment, empathized and took issue with the only representation of a Creole woman in Jane Eyre—the mad first wife of Mr. Rochester, Bertha Mason. When she penned Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys did so with the intention of giving “a life” (Rhys, 2016, p. 6) to the unknown and unfortunate madwoman. Although Rhys’s novel can certainly be read on its own, a disability studies reading of the text greatly benefits from an understanding of the novel’s relationship to and points of contact with Jane Eyre. Therefore, I first turn to a disability critique of Bertha as Rhys first encountered her in Brontë’s Jane Eyre. Following that, I turn to a discussion of Wide Sargasso Sea, foregrounding issues of relevance both to disability studies and to a discussion of contemporary neoliberal ideology.

3.1.1  Jane Eyre and the Prototypical Use of Disability in Literature

Disabled figures have a traditional tropic role in English literature (Thompson, 1997). Namely, disabled characters serve to embody a specific trait, relying on cultural presuppositions and stereotypes to assign a literary meaning to a given disabled character. Thus, the disabled character may, in a brief moment of representation in the text, convey a particular meaning. For example, a short description of a mad character may function to represent—to embody—being beyond reason and wholly out-of-control:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it groveled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.... A fierce cry...the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet.... The maniac bellowed.... the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek. (Brontë, 1987, p. 316)
In the aforementioned scene from *Jane Eyre*, the beloved British heroine Jane meets the insane first wife of Jane’s future husband, the now infamous trope of the madwoman. The above quotation encapsulates everything the reader learns about the mad Bertha Mason throughout the entirety of *Jane Eyre*. Throughout the text, Bertha has a rhetorical and narrative function, but her character remains underdeveloped and overdetermined—a typical occurrence in the representation of disability in literature: “textual descriptions [of disability]... invest the traits, qualities, and behaviors of their characters with much rhetorical influence simply by omitting...other factors or traits that might mitigate or complicate the delineations” (Thompson, 1997, p. 10). Since Bertha’s overdetermined traits serve to highlight aspects of Jane’s character, much literary discussion has focused on the counterposition of the self-controlled, disciplined, and articulate Jane Eyre to the mad, feral, animalistic, incomprehensible, and uncomprehending Bertha Mason.

Writing from variegated strands of literary analysis, critics read Bertha and her function in the narrative of *Jane Eyre* in multiple ways. Following Gilbert and Gubar’s compelling feminist analysis entitled *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1978), feminist literary analyses focus much attention on the character of Bertha Mason and on her function as a dark double to Jane Eyre. Many feminist literary critics cite Brontë’s depiction of Bertha as the location and embodiment of women’s resistance to patriarchal structures, as an instance of “using madness to represent women’s rebellion” (Donaldson, 2002, p. 102). Alternatively, other critics have focused on Bertha as the representation of all that must be repressed in Jane for Jane to progress socially and to attain personal fulfillment within British society. Such readings view Bertha as “the central locus of Brontë’s anxieties about oppression, anxieties that motivate the plot and drive it to its conclusion...anxieties [settled] partly by eliminating the character who seems to embody them” (Meyer, 190, p. 252). Although neither of the aforementioned interpretations of Bertha foreground her position as a disabled woman, all present the opportunity for a disability critique. On the one hand, reading Bertha as a metaphor for women’s rebellion serves to erase the meaning and experience of her actual madness. In such a reading, Bertha disappears completely and the only relevance of her madness is figurative. On the other hand, reading Bertha as either Jane’s dark double or as the location of anxieties that once belonged to Jane denies Bertha’s madness of any cause separate from Jane’s need for congruity. Again, Bertha and her madness serve only to enable the narrative progression of an able-bodied character and have no meaning or importance beyond that function. A response to the inattention to Bertha in the text, *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds the story and complexity of the madwoman and, in so doing, inverts the prototypical portrayal of disability in literature. By writing a prequel to *Jane Eyre* with Bertha’s experiences at the center, “Rhys’s novel gives voice to the previously silent madwoman.... Rhys...makes it easier for readers to understand and to identify with the originally enigmatic and inarticulate character” (Donaldson, 2002, pp. 99 – 100). While *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands in contrast to the literary norm insofar as it represents a disabled
character as complex and worthy of more interest than that of a mere metaphor or narrative double, the novel nonetheless still relies upon several other common disability tropes.

3.1.2 Disability as a Personal Failing in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Disability often functions as a sign of moral deviance or as a signal of otherwise invisible character flaws in literature (Thompson, 1997). Literary analyses of *Wide Sargasso Sea* point to Antoinette’s “helplessness” and to her inability “to read the past or resist the circumstances that allow Rochester to victimize her” (Kamel, 1995, pp. 10, 11; emphasis added). By focusing attention on Antoinette’s refusal to help herself and to be self-actualizing—both highly-valued characteristics in liberal democracies (Brown, 2016)—and by positing Antoinette as allowing herself to be victimized, Kamel notices the ways in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents Antoinette as responsible, at least in part, for her own madness. When Antoinette observes a change in her husband’s behavior towards her, she seeks the advice of her childhood nurse: “Christophine, he does not love me. I think he hates me.... I cannot endure it any more, I cannot. What shall I do? He was not like that at first.” Christophine replies, “You ask me a hard thing. I tell you a hard thing, pack up and go.” When Antoinette expresses that she will not go and subject her husband to humiliation, Christophine chastises, “Why you ask me, if when I answer you say no? Why you come up here if when I tell you the truth, you say no?” To which Antoinette responds, “But there must be something else I can do.... But I cannot go.” (Rhys, 2016, p. 99). The scene with Christophine is prophetic: Antoinette expresses all that she cannot do—she cannot handle her current treatment, but she cannot take leave of her husband either—and presents no options that she can endure. Considered as precipitating her later madness, Antoinette’s unwillingness to act on her own behalf is read as evidence that “Antoinette is imprisoned even before her confinement in Thornfield” (Kamel, 1995, p. 11). From such a perspective, one of the causal factors of Antoinette’s madness is the fault of Antoinette herself. Thus, Antoinette is blamed for her own madness while her madness is simultaneously positioned as a consequence of her flawed character. Even in the process of “stressing the causal factors that contribute to Antoinette’s emotional state” (Donaldson, 2002, p. 100), Rhys reproduces one of disability’s most prevalent stigmata—namely, that disability represents a failure of the disabled person.

3.1.3 Disability as a Denial of Agency in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

As I noted previously, disabled characters in literature are typically portrayed as stereotyped caricatures that deny them subjectivity by omitting aspects of their character that would enable readers to understand them as complete and complex human beings. Moreover, “representation tends to objectify disabled characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency” (Thompson, 1997, p. 11). In many ways, the narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea* pushes back against the narrow scope typically available to disabled characters in literature by focusing on Antoinette’s tale and “depict[ing] what some might consider the
causes of her madness” (Donaldson, 2002, p. 99). However, in other ways, the narrative structure of the novel serves to replicate the problem of denying agency and subjectivity to disabled characters. In particular, the majority of the novel is narrated by people other than Antoinette. Rhys’s decision to include multiple narrators has been read as an attempt to represent the untenable historical position of Creole women: not colonized peoples but not included in the privileges and social status of colonizers either, Creole women’s ambiguous position means that they have no nation within which to locate their identities and, thus, their stories. Therefore, Creole women’s narratives have no historical reference point and are constantly being written over and influenced by the perspectives of others. From that vantage point, Rhys’s “interweaving other voices (Rochester’s, Daniel Cosway’s, even Grace Poole’s) into the narrative, paradoxically serves to remind us of Antoinette’s historical helplessness in authoring her own narrative” (Kamel, 1995, p. 6). While the interjection and overlapping of different narratives in Antoinette’s tale may serve to highlight the historically precarious position of Antoinette as a Creole, it also reinforces the trope whereby disability represents ineffectualness and helplessness. In other words, in the process of representing the historical erasure of Creole women and their “historical powerlessness to articulate a narrative” (Kamel, 1995, p. 3), Rhys perpetuates the trope of the inarticulate madwoman, unable to narrate her own story and to give voice to her own experiences. Instead, the ability to delineate the events which lead to her madness is handed over to others.

3.1.4 Disability as Enabling Antoinette’s Commodification in Wide Sargasso Sea

When not read from the perspective of a disability critique, Antoinette’s “status as a commodity” has been interpreted in racialized terms in which “his [Rochester’s] fear that Antoinette may be partly black” (Kamel, 1995, pp. 7, 9) explicates his treatment (and imprisonment) of her. In terms of the historical context in which the novel was written, a problem exists with that interpretation—namely, miscegenation laws would have prevented Rochester from bringing Antoinette back to Britain as his wife if she were partly black (Meyer, 1990). Indeed, “he [Rochester] harnesses racism to misogyny in order to justify his colonization of Antoinette” (Kamel, 1995, p. 8); however, it is Antoinette’s disability that facilitates and completes his objectification of her as well as both his willingness and his ability to lock her away in an attic in England. After Rochester has conceived of his plan to take Antoinette back to Britain with him and to lock her away under his total control, he narrates:

I could not touch her. Excepting as the hurricane will touch that tree – and break it. You say I did? No. That was love’s fierce play. Now I’ll do it. She’ll not laugh in the sun again.... Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her, and she’ll see no other.... She said she loved this place. This is the last she’ll see of it. I’ll watch for one tear, one human tear. Not that blank hating moonstruck face.... I’ll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She’s mad but mine,
When Rochester articulates his desire to completely destroy Antoinette, he also expresses an awareness that she is not (yet) lost to her madness. He has been informed of her family’s propensity for madness, and he has seen signs that portend madness in her expressions and appearance: “[h]er eyes...are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me” (Rhys, 2016, p. 60 – 61). However, he intends to use her vulnerability to madness in order to drive her mad; he intends to remove her from all that she knows and loves and to place her under his total and hateful control. Rochester has already learned that his displays of contempt disturb Antoinette’s mental and emotional state, and he plans to envelop her with his hatred, decimating her and transforming her into a “lunatic” wife he has an excuse to imprison. In sum, it is the imbrication of Antoinette’s ambiguous position as a Creole, her disempowerment as a woman, and her disability that ultimately enable her commodification. Without Antoinette’s madness, Rochester would have had either to remain in the West Indies or to introduce his wife to British social elites; Antoinette’s disability facilitates Rochester’s move back to Britain and his re-integration into British high-society. In other words, Antoinette’s madness completes her transformation into a commodity by enabling her to be transported to Britain. Thus, in terms of a disability critique of the text, the extended narration of Antoinette’s life story proffered by *Wide Sargasso Sea* ultimately portrays her disability both as a factor in her objectification and as the linchpin of her commodification (and incarceration). In so doing, *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents Antoinette as a sympathetic and understandable character—unlike the unknown and violent madwoman in *Jane Eyre*—but the novel’s explication of her past also serves to flatten the experience of her disability, positioning her madness as the ultimate cause of her pain and imprisonment.

### 3.2 Disability, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Neoliberal Ideology

I select disability as one of the topics to discuss in this article not only because of its relevance to the text but also because of the need to call students’ attention to the ways in which neoliberal ideology posits disability as well as to the effects of neoliberalism on the life-chances of people with disabilities. In the following sections, I relate the disability tropes from the text to contemporary U.S. neoliberal ideology, highlighting points of continuity as well as points of rupture with the aim of stimulating students’ critical engagement with the novel as well as the neoliberal landscape in which we live.

#### 3.2.1 From Disability as a Character Flaw to Disability as a Personal Problem

In the text, Antoinette’s helplessness is oftentimes portrayed as a lack of determination. Moreover, her failure to help herself is also positioned as a proximate cause of both her attachment to Rochester and her later madness. Similar to other disabled figures,
Antoinette’s disability and demise become intricately linked with other undesirable and socially stigmatized aspects of her character. The narrative portrayal undergirds an understanding of her disability in which her madness becomes reducible to her faults in character:

[T]he depiction...parallels other cultural representations of people with disabilities...[in which] disability...is conflated with character flaws...[T]hey [disability and the character flaw] are repeatedly linked...and the link is naturalized... [T]he message...is that there is no material separation between disability and serious flaws in character. (McRuer, 2006, p. 23)

The presumption underlying such logic is that if Antoinette would simply overcome her character flaw (i.e., her self-imposed lack of self-determination), then she would be able to avoid her disability (i.e., her madness). In one of the scenes foreshadowing Antoinette’s obliteration by Rochester, he changes her name to Bertha. After expressing a dislike for the name and requesting that he not call her Bertha, Antoinette capitulates to Rochester’s will. Following the equation of Antoinette’s madness and her lack of willpower, readers understand the narrative implications of such a scene: if Antoinette had only asserted herself, then she would not later succumb to madness.

The construction of disability as a personal failing or character flaw also permeates neoliberal ideology. Within neoliberal discourse, people “are rendered as little capitals (rather than as owners, workers, and consumers) competing with, rather than exchanging with each other” (Brown, 2016, p. 36). Similar to the positioning of Antoinette’s madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, disabilities are portrayed as personal problems to be overcome within the competitive structure of neoliberalism. As Robert McRuer writes, “According to the...logic of neoliberalism...all disabilities are essentially temporary, appearing only when, and as long as, they are necessary” (McRuer, 2006, p. 29). In other words, disabilities function as challenges within neoliberal ideology, and savvy competitors adjust to those challenges as a matter of personal interest. Moreover, a failure to overcome the problem of disability is necessarily indicative of a personal failing. Furthermore, in the context of neoliberalism an individual’s personal failing (i.e., disability) amounts to an inability to be/remain competitive in the marketplace; in such reasoning, a failure to resolve or move past the challenges posed by a disability exists as a failure to make oneself competitive in the neoliberal marketplace and, therefore, renders the disabled person as obsolete as “political subjects lose guarantees of protection by the liberal state” (Brown, 2016, p. 64). In sum, a disability analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* points out the ways in which Antoinette’s madness is conflated with problematic aspects of her character, which, in turn, can be utilized to open a classroom discussion about the modern-day manifestations of similar ideas in neoliberal ideology that posits prolonged disability as a personal problem and an individual responsibility.
3.2.2 From Disability as Loss of Narrative Agency to Disability as Loss of Real-World Agency

_Wide Sargasso Sea_ interjects other narrators into Antoinette’s telling of her own story, denying her the agency to define her own experiences. In the novel, Antoinette asserts neither that she is mad nor that she is not mad. Instead, Rochester determines that Antoinette is and will be mad, and it is Christophine who objects to his characterization:

> You think you fool me? You want her money but you don’t want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it. The doctors say what you tell them to say. That man Richard he say what you want him to say – glad and willing too, I know. She will be like her mother. You do that for money? But you wicked like Satan self! (Rhys, 2016, p. 145)

Rochester’s authority to define Antoinette is paralleled by the narrative authority he is given within the novel; indeed, Rochester’s voice takes up the majority of the text. Furthermore, Rochester’s definition of Antoinette as mad depends upon the collaboration/corroboration of others in positions of authority within the social structure—namely, a doctor and Antoinette’s brother. The authority to define and delimit both disability and disabled bodies continues to fall outside the purview of disabled people themselves, and the denial of self-definition to disabled people is an important aspect of neoliberalism. Since disability appears as a personal impediment to competitiveness and, thus, to human capital aggrandizement in neoliberal ideology and since continual capital growth is the neoliberal imperative, neoliberalism attempts to reconfigure disability so that it might generate economic growth. To that end, experts are granted authority to define disability and to determine what constitutes a disabled body: “behavioral differences congeal beneath a label that is both institutionally imposed and offered” and that label is proffered “as a comprehensive explanation” (McRuer, 2006, p. 22); disabled bodies are “monitored...for signs of behavioral and physical difference that might impede their productivity” (McRuer, 2006, p. 21); where possible, experts are encouraged to intervene to transform the disabled body into a productive human capital. From the perspective of neoliberalism, the transformation from disabled to able-bodied human capital occurs when “the capacity for economic advantage” (Brown, 2016, p. 23) has been restored or attained. More importantly, since neoliberalism “[removes] quaint concerns with developing the person and citizen” (Brown, 2016, p. 23), the attempt to reclaim a disabled body can be deemed a success whether or not the disabled person experiences any positive results from the process since the process itself invariably contributes to economic growth. Similar to Antoinette’s narrative erasure in _Wide Sargasso Sea_, the experiences of disabled persons themselves disappear within neoliberal ideology and its “central principle of market rationality” (Brown, 2016, p. 64). In both cases, the erasure of disability facilitates other progress—whether that be of an able-bodied person such as Rochester or of a highly-valued end such as economic growth. Moreover, the
authority to define disability and disabled experience is denied to actual disabled people, and the denial of that authority is part of what enables the disability to become socially productive: in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester’s authority to define his wife as mad enables him to return to England with her wealth, and in contemporary neoliberalism, experts’ authority to define disability enables capital aggrandizement based on diagnosing and transforming disabled bodies.

### 3.3 Resistance and Rebellion in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Whereas a disability critique of *Wide Sargasso Sea* problematizes many aspects of the life story Rhys crafted for Antoinette, a typical post-colonial feminist reading of the text proffers the opportunity to draw students' attention to Rhys's successes in writing a response to *Jane Eyre*. Although there are post-colonial feminist criticisms of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (most notably by Gayatri Spivak), I choose to focus on the positive readings of the novel to highlight the text’s departure from (as opposed to continuities with) traditional imperial/patriarchal ideology. My aim is to utilize an understanding of the text as a post-colonial feminist work to open classroom discussion about the topics of resistance and rebellion—topics that are both incredibly germane to and largely absent from mainstream U.S. neoliberal discourse. I hope that engaging students in conversations about resistance and rebellion will encourage them to think critically about modes of resistance to neoliberalism in the U.S. and abroad. To that end, following an analysis of themes pertaining to resistance and rebellion in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I relate the novel and the theme of resistance/rebellion to contemporary neoliberal ideology.

#### 3.3.1 Ideologies of Resistance

To facilitate a conversation about resistance to neoliberal ideology, ideologies of resistance are important topics of analysis for critical education and today's students. Moreover, for educators who are concerned with the lived-realities of oppression and the effects of neoliberalism, ideologies of resistance are necessary to the pursuit of critical educational praxis. Introducing concepts of resistance through literature, I explore ideologies of resistance through a post-colonial feminist reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and draw upon the following understanding of the concept:

> Ideologies of resistance deny the legitimacy of imperial control...ranging from moderate positions that reject only some aspects of imperial rule and seek accommodation with the existing order, through to defenses of violent rebellion and the revolutionary transcendence of the system. (Bell, 2016, p. 94)

Through an analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I discuss the text as an example of writing resistance and employ critical educational praxis as a process of reading as resistance. Utilizing novels such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, critical education can be implemented as a
“pedagogical mode of subjectivation that performs such an important role” (Hope, 2012, p. 66) in teaching students to read as an act of resistance in order to think critically and to ask critical questions.

In both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha/Antoinette characterizes a “site of ideological dislocation” (Pollock, 1996, p. 253) that resists the confines of patriarchal/imperial matrices of empire and evokes passionate resistance to her ongoing victimization. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha exists as the embodiment of the Creole Other as seen through the imperial gaze of British Jane. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette articulates her own subjectivity and loss of identity within the margins of imperial rhetoric and cultural manifestations. In his compelling work *Reordering of the World*, Duncan Bell asks his readers to reflect on forms of resistance and to “thoughtfully” explore modes of resistance that are appropriate for present-day realities:

We are left with a question about what forms of resistance are appropriate in the contemporary world.... Gandhian nonviolence still finds enthusiasts. What of violent resistance? This is a topic that is rarely explored in contemporary political theory, yet if the current global order is a site of vast injustice, as many theorists suggest, should violence be ruled out? After all, to deny victims the right to resist their oppressors seems to conspire in their subjugation.... We live in a world shaped by the histories, memories, and myths of past empires, and in, which imperial power still determines the life chances of countless millions of people. It should remain a central topic of concern for students of political thought. (2016, p. 115)

*Wide Sargasso Sea* exemplifies the significance of post-colonial reading/writing in the process of decolonization through re-narrativization. In so doing, the novel illustrates how empire is “a site of struggle where dominance is asserted and resisted” (Bossche, 2005, p. 50) and the ramifications of gender interplays within other discourses of power—illustrating how “the history of the subject is a text inscribed within the general field of history” (Doneday, 2001, p. 43). The novel also delineates an example of violent rebellion: Antoinette burns Rochester’s mansion to the ground as her captor and other residents sleep. Therefore, the text can be used to bring about a discussion of modalities of resistance and rebellion as well as when and why different modalities might be appropriate and/or necessary.

### 3.3.2 Writing Resistance: A Post-Colonial Feminist Intervention

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is a post-colonial feminist intervention that writes the slippages and ruptures in the imperial/patriarchal discourses structuring Antoinette's lived-reality. Rhys's authorial intervention demonstrates the fruitfulness of counter-hegemonic storytelling that “engages in, breaking the concept of chronological, linear historical time into a fragmented, cyclical fictionalized narrative” (Doneday, 2001, p. 49). As an act of resistance, Rhys retells
the story of empire from the politicized location of the colonized West Indies. Rhys, a Dominican writer and the daughter of a Creole mother, published *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 and wrote the novel as a visceral response to Brontë's imperial characterization of Rochester's first wife, a Creole brought from the West Indies. A non-synchronous prequel of the well-known *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was provoked by Rhys's desire to counter the imperial gaze by proffering Bertha's/Antoinette's life story. To do so, Rhys draws inspiration from her own Caribbean history and experiences of marginalization in England and grapples with issues of post-coloniality and feminism. Furthermore, Rhys crafts a dialogic novel told from multiple perspectives: it has elements of post-colonial autobiographics, historiography, and non-Western representations of time and perception.

From a post-colonial feminist perspective, *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers a variegated narrative of Antoinette's life—a life story that is told by interweaving voices in a narration where no one voice is prioritized or valued over another: the narration does not invest one voice with a narrative authority. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's refusal of the traditional Western narrative form in which a single narrative voice recounts the progression of a linear history parallels oral histories and communal story telling. Thus, Rhys “creates in dialogic form the story...filling in the blanks of history by using fiction...[emphasizing] a dialogue between history and fiction, written and oral traditions” (Doneday, 2001, p. 50). Drawing on actual historical events such as British imperialism and the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies, *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of the materiality of power relations and is illustrative of a post-colonial text that illuminates “how impossible it is for cultural hybrids...to embrace a simple, unitary identity” (Doneday, 2001, p. xx). The text articulates polyphonic histories that narrate the fractures, fissures, and complex experiences of colonial realities, exposing the epistemological and physical violence of colonialism. In so doing, the novel illustrates why post-colonial narrations place the “utmost importance [on] the recovery of one's past, especially because the written record has been shown to lie” (Doneday, 2001, p. 50). Therefore, one of the important facets of reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a post-colonial feminist text is to demonstrate how Rhys’s writing of the novel is an act of resistance against the lies and omissions in the hegemonic British imperial narrative.

### 3.3.3 Reading as Resistance and Critical Educational Praxis

In critical educational praxis, reading *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* together can stimulate a discussion about the problems of imperial history while encouraging a critical reading of both texts in order to better understand why “imperial metropoles and peripheries need to be viewed as part of a 'single analytic field'—as dynamically connected and interpreting” (Bell, 2016, pp. 95-96). A tethered reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* exemplifies how literature can critically engage readers in a process of reading as resistance. In both novels, the authors’ writing resists hegemonic norms to varying degrees, and each text proffers readers the opportunity both to appreciate the resistance offered by
the authors and to read a different form of resistance into the text—namely, to bring a
critical eye to the texts to ask which hegemonies/ideologies the authors uphold and take for
granted. Encouraging such critical engagement approaches literature from different points of
view, allowing for and inciting different interpretations:

Reading against the grain, or reverse reading, works to lift the veil on systems of
domination, based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, precisely where those
systems are often concealed—within our books. Reading against the grain claims
a power reserved for readers within the political economy of texts. (Kimmey,
2006, pp. 130-131)

Critically engaged readers can put novels in flux by retracting the focus from the novel's
“synchronic structures of signification to its diachronic processes of meaning production”
(Bossche, 2005, p. 54) thereby bringing another political discourse to bear on the text.

In the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys’s critical reading of *Jane Eyre* led her to write the
novel in which she inverts the imperial process. Typically, the imperial metropole takes from
the colonial periphery to improve the metropole; however, Rhys appropriates an artifact of
the empire (i.e., *Jane Eyre*) in order to negotiate her own historical specificity as a Dominican
writer. The result of Rhys’s resistance-reading, “*Wide Sargasso Sea* makes a strong case that
reading is a critical site for contesting ideological discourses and for creating a subversive
counter-discourse” (Kimmey, 2006, p. 115). Rhys’s post-colonial reading of *Jane Eyre*
illustrates the potency of reading as a form of resistance that can lead to new discussions
and cultural productions:

*Wide Sargasso Sea* as a post-colonial text that responds critically to the culture of
empire, revisits the British literary canon not (or not only)...to extend and
broaden it...but also in order to subvert it from within, taking residence inside
the textual domicile of empire in order to bring about its disintegration or even,
indeed, its conflagration. (Hope, 2012, p. 67)

Participating in “axiomatics of imperialism” (Spivak, 1985, p. 243), *Jane Eyre* functions as a
permanent and standardized cultural production of empire. However, in writing *Wide
Sargasso Sea*, Rhys “exposes the material substrate of inscription that undoes the very
ideality of the archive it is supposed to sustain” (Hope, 2012, p. 52) to use appropriative
force to disrupt the epistemological violence of the archive as the product of British empire.

Utilizing critical educational praxis to teach students to read as resistance, *Jane Eyre* and
*Wide Sargasso Sea* proffer opportunities to read resistance and to thoughtfully explore the
complexities of empire to better understand “the ways in which it is a historical practice and
an established framework for thinking about power and resistance” (Brown, 2008, p. 9).
*Wide Sargasso Sea* brings reading as resistance to the fore, and within the context of critical
educational praxis, we can initiate analyses of writing as an external process of non-violent resistance with the potential to interrupt epistemological violence as well as imperial records and cultural productions. Moreover, reading as resistance holds the possibility of sparking revolutionary ways of thinking. In that context, class discussions can explore the potential of reading against the grain as an interjection—a response to systemic violence, actualized in physical and epistemological ways—in order to better understand the circulation of violence in empire.

3.3.4 The Threat of Violent Rebellion as Resistance

Antoinette is deeply invested in the West Indies, a place where she has a sense of belonging and rootedness: “This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay” (Rhys, 2016, p. 99). However, Antoinette eventually becomes displaced even in her beloved home Granbois—a place which transforms from somewhere Antoinette identifies with a sense of peace and belonging to another location of misery and heartache. By law, Antoinette lost possession of Granbois when she married Rochester and he took ownership of her money and property. Later, Antoinette becomes psychically and emotionally dislocated from Granbois when she becomes unhappy there. When her fondness and love for the place diminishes, she loses her sense of home, and when Rochester openly stages his infidelity with their servant Amélie, her rage erupts:

> I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It’s just somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. I hate it now like I hate you and before I die I will show you how much I hate you. (Rhys, 2016, pp. 133–134)

Enraged with Rochester and his theft of her home and sense of belonging, Antoinette smashes a decanter of rum against the wall. He grabs her wrist but she manages to free herself and stands with “broken glass in her hand and murder in her eyes” (Rhys, 2016, p. 134). From the vantage point of a post-colonial reading of the text, the scene portrays more than an argument between lovers. Instead, Antoinette’s threat of violent rebellion against the imperial man whose acts of psychological and emotional violence have robbed her of her home, have decimated the one place where she still felt a sense of peace and belonging, and have exacerbated her feelings of powerlessness symbolizes the ever-present threat of violence circulating in colonial/imperial realities:

> Violence, and the threat of violence, is a necessary element of imperial governance. Empires are typically administered through a complex pattern of central rule and local collaboration, but violence is an ever-present possibility, employed both to enforce the existing order and to challenge it. (Bell, 2016, p. 109)
In a post-colonial reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette and Rochester represent proxies in a textual exploration of resistance and violence that can be seen as a paradigmatic encounter between two inextricably intertwined discursive structures—the violence of imperialism and the violence of decolonization. When discussing ideologies of resistance, the scene cited above invites conversation about both the actual violence enacted by oppressors and the continual threat of increased or renewed violence by rulers; moreover, the scene invites a discussion about whether the *threat* of violence by the oppressed is enough to stop the violence enacted by oppressive regimes or if the oppressed must too resort to actual violence in order for their threats to be taken seriously and to bring about real change.

### 3.3.5 Neoliberal Ideology and a Comparison of the Protagonists of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*

In this section, I utilize *Wide Sargasso Sea* and aspects of *Jane Eyre* to discuss neoliberal ideology in order to illustrate the pertinence of a critical analysis that engages students both in the text and in current neoliberal discourse. In so doing, I illustrate how teachers and students can participate in critical educational praxis that connects fictional literature with their lived-realities in real-world contexts. Drawing on the neoliberal construction of people as “human capitals” (Brown, 2016) and comparing Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway, neoliberal ideology would interpret Jane as a “winner” whose innovativeness earned her a position as an independent woman while it would interpret Antoinette as a “loser” who failed to capitalize on her opportunities:

> When we are figured as human capital in all that we do and in every venue, equality ceases to be our presumed natural relation to one another. Thus equality ceases to be a priori or fundament of neoliberalized democracy. In legislation, jurisprudence, and the popular imaginary, inequality becomes normal, even normative. A democracy composed of human capital features winners and loses, not equal treatment or equal protection. (Brown, 2016, p. 38)

From the vantage point of neoliberal ideology, Jane’s success in becoming a “self-made woman” (Bossche, 2005, p. 58) is attributable to her merit: Jane deserves to climb up the social ladder because she makes choices that increase her socio-economic positioning and applies herself to expanding her portfolio of skills to meet the needs of upper-class society. In other words, Jane acts as the epitome of the economic-rational individual; she reaps the rewards of her efforts; and she takes her place among society’s “winners.” Contrastingly, Antoinette’s life-outcomes also are attributable to her (lack of) merit within neoliberal ideology. Unwilling/unable to alter her social situation and to be self-actualizing, Antoinette embodies an example of someone neoliberalism posits as a “loser.” Moreover, within neoliberal ideology, “losers” deserve—indeed, bring about—any and all misery that comes their way. According to neoliberal discourse, human capitals are responsible for investing in
themselves, and inequality in life-outcomes is the result of inequality in merit. All other aspects of an individual’s life are deemed insignificant.

Examining the life-stories presented in the texts presents the opportunity to ask students what they think about the aforementioned neoliberal ideologies and initiates critical dialogue about neoliberalism. In an application of critical educational praxis, teachers and students can discuss the antecedents that affected the life-experiences of Antoinette and Jane. From a young age, Antoinette is groomed for marriage and ultimately becomes the embodiment of an economically-constituted “gift” (Nicola, 1994, p. 8) that entitles her husband to ownership of her wealth within the imperial/patriarchal system in which she lives. Antoinette's position as a Creole woman enables her legal dispossession, and Rhys draws attention to Antoinette's predicament in an argument Antoinette overhears taking place between her Aunt Cora and her brother Richard:

> When I passed her room, I heard her quarreling with Richard and I knew it was about my marriage. “It's disgraceful,” she said. “It's shameful. You are handing over everything the child owns to a perfect stranger. Your father would never had allowed it. She should be protected legally. A settlement can be arranged and it should be arranged. That was his intention.” “You are talking about an honourable gentleman, not a rascal,” Richard said. “I am not in a position to make conditions, as you know very well. She is damn lucky to get him, all things considered. Why should I insist on a lawyer's settlement when I trust him? I would trust him with my life,” he went on in an affected voice. “You are trusting him with her life not yours,” she said. (Rhys, 2016, p. 104)

Importantly, the above scenario is not wholly fictional. Antoinette's story is historiographic and narrates an historical point of fact that affected the lived-experiences of real women’s lives and the oppressive pauperization they underwent before the Married Women’s Property Act was passed in 1870. The story of Antoinette's painful dispossession portrays Victorian women's actual subjugation under English law that codified patriarchal domination. Once Antoinette is married she is no longer legally recognized or autonomous. She explains her predicament to Christophine: “I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him.... That is English law” (Rhys, 2016, p. 66). Rhys's novel depicts the historical circumstances that allowed Antoinette to be disinheritced of her familial wealth/dowry and arranged in marriage without a settlement that would guarantee her financial protection. Furthermore, the story of the Mason family’s plan to marry her to an Englishman after the end of slavery brought about the demise of plantocracy also portrays a colonial reality specific to Creole women. Therefore, Antoinette’s life-outcome as a “loser” was largely decided by her relationship to the patriarchal and imperial systems of power.

Another aspect of Antoinette's and Jane’s life-stories relevant to their later social status is the differences in their respective educations. Focused on equipping her with the cultural
accouterments she would need to attract the attention of marriageable Englishmen coming to the colony in search of wealthy wives, Antoinette’s convent education provided her with the ability to attract suitors but with nothing else. Rhys’s description of Antoinette’s tailoring “inscribes Antoinette as metaphorically the same as the West Indies, as richly endowed property which is continually open to imperial exploitation” (Nicola, 1994, p. 8). Thus, Antoinette’s stepfather ensured that she was enticingly dressed in fashionable finery and that she was introduced to gentlemen who would be willing to marry a Creole woman in exchange for the competency they would receive from her family. In contrast, Jane’s education at Lowood school prepared her to establish herself as a “self-made woman” who had the ability to gain independence and autonomy in spite of her low caste. The skills Jane gained at Lowood school provided her with the education she needed to fulfill her differing roles in society—first in a lower-middle-class position as a teacher and governess and later in middle-class and aristocratic society as an heiress and Rochester’s second wife. Lowood school instilled in Jane’s education skills that proffered Jane the ability to find occupational satisfaction, social acceptability, and happiness in cultural attainments.

Engaging students in critical educational praxis, teachers can initiate a conversation about which social structures differentially affect contemporary lived-experiences and life-outcomes. Neoliberal ideology insists that social structures are irrelevant, that everyone participates in the marketplace of human capital, and that market-metrics are neutral (Brown, 2016); however, teachers can (and should) encourage students to critically question whether nationality, disability, gender, race, and economic background have no bearing on an individual’s “marketability.” Using Antoinette’s and Jane’s narratives to initiate discussion, teachers can engage students in a critical (and crucial) discussion about neoliberalism. For example, Antoinette’s brother decided the terms of her marriage agreement whereas Jane entered into one on her own behalf; thus, Jane had more control over her own marriage even though she was disempowered by the same set of laws. Additionally, Antoinette’s education groomed her to appear marriageable but not to live an economically independent life whereas Jane’s education assumed that she would need to economically support herself. Therefore, the two women were taught and acculturated in completely different ways. Is it reasonable to assume their different experiences would not result in different life-outcomes? What are the possible outcomes available to Jane and Antoinette in accordance to their rank and stature in society? Would Jane also have been a “loser” if she were in Antoinette’s position? Furthermore, teachers can ask students to consider the following: is it fair/just to categorize people as “winners” and “losers”? In neoliberal ideology, the importance of our lived-realities is downplayed and erased—the relevance of our social statuses (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.) are posited as inconsequential. Employing critical educational praxis, the novel can be used to call attention to the neoliberal erasure of socio-political categories to stimulate a discussion that asks students to
contemplate the underlying rationality of neoliberalism and to explore whether or not they think neoliberal ideology is creating a society in which they would like to live.

3.3.6 Neoliberal Ideology and Resistance/Rebellion in Wide Sargasso Sea

Wide Sargasso Sea can illustrate to students how our lived-realities are molded by our environments and how dominant social structures play a role in crafting our life-chances. Teachers can also utilize the text to bring about a discussion of resistance to neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal conceptualization of people as “winners” and “losers” has implications and utilities that extend beyond upholding individualism and the notion of meritocracy; it also posits participation in (if not acceptance of) neoliberalism as something obligatory—as falling outside the realm of choice:

The guarantee of equality through the rule of law and participation in popular sovereignty is replaced with a market formulation of winners and losers. Liberty itself is narrowed to market conduct, divested of association with mastering the conditions of life, existential freedom, or securing the rule of the demos.... [N]o longer is there an open question of how to craft the self of what paths to travel in life.... Indeed, no [human] capital, save a suicidal one, can freely choose its activities and life course or be indifferent to the innovations of its competitors or parameters of success in a world of scarcity and inequality.... Thus...we are no longer creatures of moral autonomy, freedom, or equality. We no longer choose our ends or the means to them. (Brown, 2016, p. 41 – 42)

According to neoliberal ideology, human capitals must compete and win; capitals who fail either to compete or to win become society’s losers. Therefore, in a society with as few social protections as the U.S., neoliberal ideology posits that human capitals have no other option but to compete. In other words, neoliberal ideology claims that resistance is not possible—or, to use Brown’s phrasing, to resist would be “suicidal.” In Wide Sargasso Sea, for much of the novel Antoinette views herself as completely powerless to resist or to rebel against her circumstances. Antoinette believes that she has no options within the constraints of the social system, and she narrates her disempowered position when she considers taking leave of Rochester:

Going away to Martinique or England or anywhere else, that is the lie. He would never give me any money to go away and he would be furious if I asked him. There would be a scandal if I left him and he hates scandal. Even if I got away (and how?) he would force me back. So would Richard. So would everybody else. Running away from him, from this island is a lie. What reason could I give for going and who would believe me? (Rhys, 2016, p. 103)
In the above quotation, Antoinette articulates why and how she is trapped within her current position and, therefore, why she has no choice but to stay. However, later in the text, Antoinette is physically imprisoned by Rochester and is even more disempowered and alone; yet, she decides that she is no longer powerless. Determined to resist her captor and to rediscover something “that has meaning” (Rhys, 2016, p. 166) to her, Antoinette sets Rochester’s mansion ablaze, destroying all that he attained through her colonial wealth and jumping to her death as an act of agency and rebellion against Rochester’s control. Even after “they have taken everything away” (Rhys, 2016, p. 162), Antoinette nonetheless finds the means to rebel. However, at the point that she chooses rebellion, the only modality left to her is literally “suicidal.” Pairing a discussion of neoliberal ideology and its assertion that our actions must be governed by its imperatives with a discussion of Antoinette’s final act of violent rebellion invites conversation not only about the possibility of resistance but also about the possibility that waiting to resist is not without its perils.
4 Connecting the Novels to the Present-Day: Contemporary Examples of Neoliberal Ideology

Not only to further clarify the tenets of neoliberal capitalist ideology but also to pique students’ interest by grounding abstract concepts in their contemporary experiences, I select examples from current events that relate the themes drawn from the text to the present-day. In an effort to illustrate the pervasiveness of neoliberal capitalist ideology, I attempt to focus my attention on contemporary examples drawn from Leftist news media. Given that the U.S. currently has a right-wing president and that U.S. media tends to portray current problems as either relics of a previous administration or as the fault of the current administration, I select contemporary Leftist news sources in an attempt to call attention to the omnipresence of neoliberal ideology. That being said, the selection of which news media sources to use as illustrative of current examples of neoliberal ideology is not nearly as important as bringing the discussion of neoliberal capitalist ideology into the classroom. Any contemporary example that highlights the ways in which neoliberal ideology functions in the real world and that relates to themes drawn from literary analyses of the text would be sufficient.

Ultimately, the purpose of bringing neoliberal ideology into a discussion of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to encourage students to engage with and interrogate neoliberal rationality—a governing force that shapes their lives, whether or not they are consciously aware of its effects or understand what it is. As with all attempts to spark critical thinking, the aim is not to tell students what to think about neoliberal capitalist ideology; rather, it is to provide students with knowledge that enables them to better comprehend their surroundings. Therefore, the goal when referencing a present-day example is two-fold: (1) to ground the themes derived from the text, demonstrating in concrete terms how these themes unfold in a real-world example of neoliberal rationality in discourse; and (2) to invite students to consider what they think about how people are interpellated by and within neoliberal ideology.

4.1 Lights, Camera, Action! Elucidating neoliberal ideology through a present-day example

To discuss the themes derived from literary analyses of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I have selected an example from discussions following the 2018 Oscars. I have chosen the Oscars since it is a popular television event with much coverage in both traditional and new media. Therefore, I hope students find the topic both interesting and familiar.

4.1.1 Neoliberal capitalist ideology and Oscars 2018 activism: What does it mean to sell diversity?

On 8 March 2018, April Reign—a community organizer, director of the activist group Color of Change, and the creator of the widely-used Twitter tag #OscarsSoWhite that was used to
criticize the absence of people of color from the 2017 Oscars’ nominees—appeared on the news program Democracy Now! to discuss the outcomes of and happenings around the 2018 Oscars. As part of her analysis, Reign states, “What we know is that representation matters and diversity sells. So, if Hollywood still chooses not to be more inclusive, more diverse—both in front of and behind the camera—they are literally leaving money on the table” (Democracy Now!, 8 March 2018). Indeed, representation matters. Being able to see actors who remind people of themselves taking on positive, influential, and multi-faceted roles certainly buoys peoples’ perceptions of themselves, of the groups to which they belong, and of their possibilities in the world (Ferguson, 2004). On the contrary, seeing actors with whom they might identify cast in one-dimensional, caricatured, and derisive roles elicits feelings of shame and anger as people wonder if this is indeed how others see them (Thompson, 1997).

Furthermore, since representation shapes cultural expectations, others do tend to identify and interpret people in terms of the negative stereotypes portrayed on film (McRuer, 2006). Clearly, representation is a serious issue. However, the context of that representation is also important, and the remainder of Reign’s statement presents an incredibly problematic argument if one’s goal is transformational social change, as Reign’s Color of Change organization professes. As asserted by post-colonial critiques of Jane Eyre’s feminist individualism, inclusion within an exploitative system is not a form of inclusion that disrupts the status quo; instead, such inclusion leaves many forms of exclusion intact and only alters the social landscape for a limited group of people.

As the discussion of resistance and rebellion in the Wide Sargasso Sea illustrates, resistance can take many forms. Therefore, while thinking about Reign’s statement, it is important to encourage students to contemplate whether Reign’s proposed form of inclusion is transformative or, alternatively, if it relies upon a form of inclusion similar to that of Jane Eyre. Further, educators can ask students to discuss which form of resistance/rebellion presented in Wide Sargasso Sea most closely resembles Reign’s approach, to consider whether they (students) think Reign’s approach is an effective form of resistance, and to posit alternative forms of resistance that one might take to achieve a goal similar to that of Color of Change.

Assuming it is true that “diversity sells,” what does it mean to use this point as an argument for being more diverse? What does it mean to demand racial diversity on the ground that such inclusion is profitable? What are the implications of asserting that racial diversity ought to be present to enhance the competitive positioning of a film? In a discussion about representation, how are people of color being represented when someone states that “diversity sells”? In that phrase, racialized bodies—the bringers of diversity to plots otherwise centered around straight, able-bodied, White men—are that which is being sold. In line with a neoliberal conceptualization of people as human capitals, people of color are not being represented as self-actualizing individuals—that elusive subject of liberalism that Jane Eyre posits as worthwhile and worthy of respect; the same subject that Antoinette/Bertha is punished for not attaining in Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre. Rather,
people of color are posited as things, as objects, or—more specifically—as profits and as opportunities for capital aggrandizement. If “diversity sells,” then that positions people of color as the profits to be maximized—as the individuated human capitals of neoliberal capitalist ideology.

Beyond the objectification and dehumanization/devaluation that takes place when she argues that “diversity sells,” Reign’s argument posits “leaving money on the table”—or, in other words, failing to maximize profits—as unquestionably undesirable. Such reasoning is at the crux of neoliberal capitalist ideology—a rationality grounded in the desirability (indeed, the necessity) of economic growth. In Wide Sargasso Sea, students see the commodification (i.e., the selling) of Antoinette, and in Jane Eyre, students confront the history of imperial slavery. In both instances, economic growth is prioritized over human beings, and both paper-experiments introduce students to discussions about the ramifications of such prioritization. How does Reign’s rhetoric fit within the historical lineage of the novels? Neoliberal capitalism pressures us to view everything on its terms—namely, in terms of economic metrics—and within its value-system—namely, valuing economic growth as sacrosanct, as ultimately beneficial. Forging the connections between neoliberal ideology and Wide Sargasso Sea illuminates how neoliberal capitalist ideology posits compliance as obligatory and resistance as impossible, demanding participation based on purported necessity. The demand that we serve the interests of profitability is pervasive in mainstream culture, but this certainly does not necessitate that we reduce ourselves and our lives to these demands. In the Wide Sargasso Sea section, disability critiques illuminate how neoliberal ideology denies agency to people with disabilities by allocating authority over disabled bodies to persons other than disabled people themselves, yet Antoinette resists and rebels after she seemingly has no means to do so. Is compliance with neoliberal capitalist ideology truly non-optional? Is it necessary to invoke the rationality of neoliberal ideology simply because we live within that system? Do we want to think of ourselves and one another in terms of whether we are achieving profit maximization and capital aggrandizement? Do we want to strive for representation that merely enables the next generation to dream the dream of refusing to “leave money on the table”? Is representation that values diversity in terms of profit even inclusive representation at all? If non-White bodies are included in films with profits appropriated to (primarily) White elites and executives, and if such films shape the dreams and desires of non-White peoples, then what does it mean to demand inclusive representation within this system? Furthermore, the representation of diversity on screen and the inclusion of people of color on set may function in a manner similar to the erasure of racialized colonial realities in Jane Eyre. Insofar as films are more inclusive of the experiences of people of color, the realities of actual racialized inequalities—the exclusion of non-Whites from studio ownership and from access to capital—are further obfuscated.
4.2 Neoliberal inequality: The foregrounding of the economic

On 19 March 2018, Senator Bernie Sanders hosted a live national town hall entitled “Inequality in America” that was aired as a Facebook event as well as played on other digital media outlets. I turn to that event to discuss a present-day example of the perpetuation of neoliberal ideology. My choice of the “Inequality in America” event is based on the fact that Senator Bernie Sanders is portrayed by mainstream media outlets—whether right-of-center, centrist, or left-of-center—as representative of the far Left. Both his critics and his supporters refer to him as a “socialist” and even those farther to the Left who do not find his politics to be radical enough often categorize him as “progressive.” Senator Sanders’ prominence, particularly among young people, and the general perception of him as a Leftist contribute to my selection of his “Inequality in America” event to illustrate the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology within U.S. political rhetoric.

4.2.1 “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall”

The “Inequality in America” town hall lasted for about 90 minutes and was led by four main panelists, Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Darrick Hamilton, and Michael Moore. Instead of analyzing one statement made by a particular panelist, I focus on the overarching framing of both the problem of and the solution to “Inequality in America.” Throughout the town hall, the problem of inequality was repeatedly framed in terms that prioritized economic inequality. Indeed, although the word “inequality” in the title of the town hall might have referred to any number of gross inequalities within the U.S., it was stated at the very outset of the discussion that “we are here to talk about the problem of income and wealth inequality” (Senator Sanders, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018; emphasis added). Thus, from the outset, economic inequality—not social or political inequality—is granted primacy and foregrounded as the most important form of inequality facing the U.S. population. The disability analysis of Wide Sargasso Sea exposes students to how neoliberalism constructs disability as a personal problem for an individual, or a human capital, to overcome. In the framing of the problem of inequality at the town hall event, what economic options are available to a person who is disabled from birth? Or to a person whose disability disrupts his/her livelihood? Is it fair/just to ask such people to wait until they can aggrandize some capital before the social structure helps them to survive? According to the panelists, political inequality arises from economic inequality—“Because they have more money, they have more influence in politics” (Senator Sanders, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018)—and social inequality also arises from economic inequality—“These [poor] people suffer [from lack of access to clean drinking water] because [businesses believe] they aren’t worth the investment” (Michael Moore, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018). Within the context of the town hall, inequality—in all its manifestations—is, at its core, an economic problem. Unlike Jane Eyre, who values social inclusion in its own right, the understanding of the social
consequences of economic inequality presented at the town hall brings the benefits of alleviating social ills back to economic terms—investing in people’s clean drinking water enables them to participate in the economic growth of their communities (“Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018). What do we think of this world view? Do we want to live in a world in which all our problems are reframed and reprioritized in terms of economic gain or loss? Are our communities, our friends and families, our bodies only relevant insofar as they contribute to economic growth? Is economic inequality the most important form of inequality? Or is it the symptom of social and/or political inequality? Are economic, social, and political inequality able to be extricated from one another?

Unsurprisingly, the solution proffered by the panelists at the “Inequality in America” event is also an economic one. Namely, the panelists suggest that the solution to inequality is “equality of opportunity” and, as is clear from their discussions, “opportunity” means economic opportunity—“We want the same opportunity to accomplish the American Dream as generations before us” (Senator Warren, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018). The answer to the “predation” faced by “the most vulnerable people when trying to do something for themselves” (Hamilton, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018) is to disallow the predatory economic practices that prevent vulnerable populations from being able to reap the rewards of their efforts. In other words, the solution presented is one of fostering an economic environment in which each individual’s “efforts will truly be rewarded” (Hamilton, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018). The solution is not uplifting a particular class or providing a social safety net that all can enjoy or redistributing resources from one group or class to another, but rather allowing each individuated human capital to have an equal opportunity for economic advancement. Unlike the class identifications and discourses within Jane Eyre, the panelists at the “Inequality in America” event focus attention on altering the conditions that prevent individuals, not socio-economic classes, from participating in the benefits of the economic system. By proposing solutions in terms that foreground individual economic opportunity, the panelists participate in the neoliberal substitution of competing human capitals for class-comrades and perpetuate the hardships confronted by disabled persons. In such terms, the goal of changing the system is to end the “harm on those who really try hard” (Hamilton, “Inequality in America: A National Town Hall,” 19 March 2018), removing the barriers for these potential “winners” to enjoy economic gain. Such a framing ignores structural barriers such as racism, patriarchy, and ableism and is perfectly compatible with positing disability as a personal failing as discussed in the Wide Sargasso Sea experiment. In addition, such a framing of the solution maintains the individualism and meritocratic language present in Jane Eyre while erasing the discourses of class solidarity. As a consequence of the obfuscation of class-based identification, individuals are encouraged to seek and take advantage of economic opportunity in order to achieve economic benefits; those individuals who fail to capitalize on their own economic opportunities will still suffer
the economic—and thus political and social—consequences. Do we want to perpetuate a system in which we are constantly in a state of competition for access, resources, and, ultimately, survival? Is such a system capable of eradicating inequality? Or, does equality of opportunity simply mean that a more variegated group of people can become “winners”? Do we want to live in perpetual fear of joining the ranks of the “losers”? Do we want to live in a society in which our survival and comfort are entirely dependent upon our ability to remain economically competitive? What does such a social configuration imply for the elderly? The disabled? The sick? The young? Do we want to frame equality in terms of equal economic opportunity?
5  Conclusion

Applying the concept of critical educational praxis as a pedagogical practice that is a “social activity—an intervention in the social” (Bossche, 2005, p. 51) enables educators to open a space for analyzing neoliberal capitalism within the context of coursework and students' lived-realities. In the paper-experiments “How to Teach Neoliberalism Through Jane Eyre” and “Teaching Literature & Initiating Difficult Conversations,” I illustrate the worthwhileness of exploring literature in connection with neoliberal ideology in the context of literary studies. I have shown the importance of using critical pedagogical praxis to relate course literature to students’ lived-experiences in order to better understand the ubiquitousness of neoliberalism in their everyday lives.

In the Jane Eyre section my goal is to present educators with a literary analysis that operationalizes Jane Eyre as a critical pedagogical tool. My approach is to encourage a “deep approach to learning” and to inspire educators to “triangulat[e] reality by looking at it from different angles” (Tagg, 2003, p. 76). A part of my approach to critical educational praxis is to show the value of literary criticism that views reading and literary analysis as a social activity that encourages students to “thought-fully” engage with the text and its relationship to their real-world experiences. With that goal in mind, the paper-experiment offers educators an exemplar of a literary analysis that urges students “to connect history to their own lives while developing a better understanding of the world around them” (Raja, 2008, p. 35). I interrelate the importance of critical educational practice, the value of deploying new interpretations of Jane Eyre that include a focus on neoliberalism, the usefulness of proffering students post-colonial and class-centered analyses, and the importance of teaching as a form of resistance in student-centered curricula.

Utilizing neoliberal capitalism in a discussion of Jane Eyre brings a new political history to bear on the text and enables another critical engagement within post-colonial and class-centered analyses. Examining neoliberalism in relation to Jane Eyre explores the text differently and adds to the numerous and varied interpretations of the novel. My interaction with the post-colonial and class-centered critiques has sought to show how a present-day learning environment can be enhanced by critically engaging with both Jane Eyre and neoliberal capitalism. Furthermore, critical educational praxis enables a learning environment that provides space for producing a political discourse that allows readers to appropriate the text “in diverse ways in order to constitute contingent identities” (Bossche, 2005, p. 54). By illuminating students’ lived-experiences within the context of the classroom, critical educational praxis proffers the solvency of a literary analysis that includes a discussion of neoliberalism in order to enable a fuller understanding of the text, its socio-economic narrative, and its relationship to students' lived-realities, socio-economic locations, and negotiations.
As presented in the *Wide Sargasso Sea* paper-experiment, disability critiques of literature already provide insights into who is disallowed from (literary) relevance and who is devalued by social stigmas, and post-colonial readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* already present the text as an example of resistance to imperial ideology. Foregrounding the need to teach neoliberal ideology presents a new aim when engaging with literary analyses of *Wide Sargasso Sea* while still enabling teachers to draw upon and form linkages between the extant readings and themes. Initiating difficult conversations about neoliberal ideology and its impact on our lives does not require that we dispose of existing scholarship; instead, it enlivens that scholarship by forging connections between the text, literary analyses, and a critical engagement with contemporary neoliberal ideology.

In my discussions of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I have made use of the novels to bring about a teachable moment to attend to the influence of neoliberalism. In his essay titled “Embracing the Teachable Moment: The Black Gay Body in The Classroom,” Bryant Alexander (2005) describes the teachable moment as a socio-political interstice, where “the conditions under which we live can be used to impart knowledge as well as to engage a critical dialogue” (p. 249). My use of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* creates a teachable moment that has an ethical aim: to use literature as pedagogical tool to enhance students understanding of the world in which they live while encouraging them to "thought-fully" engage in literary criticism as they simultaneously “look at their own everyday practices in a critical manner and, if needed, change their practices to facilitate a greater degree of good for the rest of humanity” (Raja, 2008, p. 35). The analyses I have done—with its focus on neoliberal capitalism—capture the teachable moment and is illustrative of how critical education in literary analysis proffers different interpretations that inform myriad ways of seeing the novels. Furthermore, it exemplifies the multi-layered relationships that circulate when using critical educational praxis. Differing histories, subject-positions, and perspectives elucidate the complexity of the texts as well as of lived-realities and experiences. Placing neoliberal ideology as a cornerstone in the teaching of the text, the novels frame a complex story that is central to understanding the past and the present-day. My aim has been to produce an example of how teachers can engage students in a teachable moment that broadens the scope of intelligible discourse that relates to their lived-realities. Furthermore, this thesis exemplifies the dialectic of decolonization in critical educational practice as resistance speech, a “talking back” (hooks, 1989), that articulates dangerous knowledges: “dangerous because they destabilize established common-sense worldviews; dangerous because they pull the veil away from oppression, discrimination, and suffering, making for uncomfortable confrontation with these issues” (Cheryl Johnson cited in Alexander, 2005, p. 258). This thesis illustrates how the classroom is an active site for struggle and the reimagination of education and agency: a place for resistance speech and dangerous knowledge and a site where cultural interpretation and political interest are knotted together.
5.1 Evaluating the Results

I embarked on this research project in an attempt to find a fruitful way of engaging students in education that addresses neoliberal capitalist ideology within the constraints of the contemporary U.S. classroom milieu. With a focus on literature, I aimed to explore an engagement between literary studies and a critique of neoliberalism not only for my own benefit as an educator but also to encourage the participation of other educators in that project. To that end, I wrote two paper-experiments with fellow educators as my target audience. My aim in discussing neoliberalism within the context of a current example was to demonstrate how teachers could use contemporary happenings to draw students’ attention to the ways in which neoliberal ideology appears in their daily lives. Further, my goal was also to encourage students to think about whether they approve of the implications of neoliberal capitalism and to consider their own perspectives and experiences related to that seemingly ubiquitous rationality. Drawing on the work of scholars of various disciplines as well as of community organizers, in the introduction I asserted that neoliberalism alters not only the economic relations of classical liberalism but also the ways in which educational policy, curricula, and discourses are formulated. I employed that understanding of the processes of neoliberalism in the paper-experiments and discourse analyses of current events that I presented. Now, I turn to the research question I explored in the process of writing and researching this thesis.

5.1.1 How can an examination of literature enliven critical thinking and a transformation of personal politics pertaining to neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism is reconfiguring and has already restructured the way that students, parents, educators, and educational institutions think about education. Within neoliberal ideology, the primary goal of education is to make students marketable to employers, and that impacts every aspect of the educational environment. Thus, there is a disincentive for educational institutions to offer classes that are not seen as fulfilling that imperative, and even if such classes are offered, students are less likely to pursue electives that do not enhance their human capital positioning. It is conceivable that a student would not want to take a class entitled, for example, “A Critique of Neoliberal Capitalism” for fear that a potential employer would see this on their transcript and/or see a mention of it on their social media. That is the reality of today’s classrooms and educational settings. Teachers who stand in opposition to that situation are nonetheless working within it. Educators—perhaps particularly educators in fields now deemed un-marketable such as literature and the broader humanities—must respond to the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology in whatever contexts they can imagine. To that end, I chose to determine how I can bring a discussion of neoliberalism into the discipline in which I would like to teach—literary studies. I presented the preceding paper-experiments as an attempt to inform students about and to bring a critique of neoliberalism into the literature classroom. In both of the paper-experiments, I
took the approach of trying to relate themes from the novels to contemporary issues constructed by/within neoliberal ideology. At the outset, I did not know whether that approach would be successful, or even possible.

Initially, I had planned to follow the same framework for each of the semi-independent papers—namely, performing a literary analysis of each novel with an eye to themes that could be readily related to neoliberal ideology. However, as I engaged with *Jane Eyre* and existing literary critiques of that text, I concluded that my planned approach was inadequate since it neglected much of the work already done to illuminate themes from the actual novel. In my opinion, to discount the voluminous analyses of *Jane Eyre* in order to foreground neoliberalism would be to fail to provide students with a literary studies education. Therefore, I decided to implement a somewhat different modality. Rather than developing my own analysis based solely on topics that were most relatable to neoliberalism, I chose to focus on an analysis that foregrounded existing interpretations of the text, to proffer a teachable summary of those analyses that were both poignant and relevant to contemporary neoliberalism, and then to relate the themes identified in the summaries to neoliberal ideology, highlighting points of continuity as well as points of rupture. Again, I had planned to follow a similar framework when approaching *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but once again, I determined that I needed to turn to a different method.

When researching existing literary analyses of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I found a relative dearth of information compared to that found for *Jane Eyre*. Furthermore, whereas the literary interpretations of *Jane Eyre* offered clear philosophical and disciplinary frameworks (e.g., feminist, post-colonial, historical, traditional literary, etc.), most of the interpretations of *Wide Sargasso Sea* focused on a traditional literary narrative analysis of the text, with the notable exception of post-colonial critiques. Moreover, within the post-colonial critiques of the novel, the work tended to be far more theoretical and offered fewer commonalities that could be succinctly summarized. Therefore, I changed my approach once again when writing the second paper-experiment, deciding to focus more on practical points of relevance both to the text and to classroom discussions of neoliberalism instead of common extant themes.

When I began writing the paper-experiments, I had hoped that I would be able to present literature teachers with a framework that they might use to relate neoliberal capitalist ideology to texts. However, each of my paper-experiments required me to employ a different approach to the two novels. Thus, if such a framework exists, I did not discover it in my research. That being said, I was able to relate each of the novels to neoliberal ideology utilizing different modalities, and in that regard, the paper-experiments demonstrate the possibility of using literature to interject discussions about and critiques of neoliberal capitalism into existing literary studies curricula.

Taking two different approaches in each of the articles produced two different formats. First, in the *Jane Eyre* section, I explicate existing interpretations of the text, explain which subject-positions are congruent with those readings, draw out themes from those
interpretations, relate those themes to similar themes in neoliberal ideology, and finally compare the themes and subject-positions from the novel with those of neoliberal ideology. In my opinion, the aforementioned approach produced a thorough and clear analysis; however, it also produced a somewhat abstract analysis. As a tool of instruction, I think the classroom discussion of *Jane Eyre* and neoliberalism would greatly benefit from interaction with discourse analyses of current events such as those presented in section four. Second, in the *Wide Sargasso Sea* section, I did not have a broad range of literary interpretations at my disposal (as were proffered by *Jane Eyre*); that limitation led me to a format in which I selected and explicated topics that were themselves more grounded—namely, disability and resistance. Moreover, the topics I chose did not require analyses of the subject-positions proffered by the text or the existing literary interpretations and that occurrence facilitated the forging of a more direct connection between the topics from the novel and neoliberal ideology. In sum, engaging with *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* with the aim of bringing about critical engagement with neoliberalism resulted in variegated formats for each paper-experiment, with the formats being determined by several factors: (1) the quantity and quality of existing interpretations of the text, (2) the content and context of the text, and (3) the necessity of relating the discussion of each text to a critical discussion of neoliberal capitalism. Of the previous three factors, the first two are common to literary education, but the last point is crucial to the current research.

The paper-experiments demonstrate that it is indeed not only possible but also potentially fruitful and transformative to teach students to critically engage with neoliberalism through literature. Moreover, the paper-experiments also demonstrate that educators must keep the goal of critical engagement with neoliberalism at the fore, altering and adapting their approach in order to elucidate neoliberal ideology and to encourage their students to interrogate how it impacts their lived-realities. With some texts (e.g., *Wide Sargasso Sea*), the connection may be straightforward; with other texts (e.g., *Jane Eyre*), making the connection clear may require a more circuitous approach. However, the paper-experiments indicate the wide-range of possibilities that might exist for using an equally wide-range of texts to talk about neoliberalism in contemporary U.S. literature classrooms. Finally, the discourse analyses focused on relating the themes drawn from the texts to students’ lived-realities provide a compelling pedagogical tool: many of the themes might appear abstract, particularly when discussed in the context of less recent literature, and bringing the discussion to current events demonstrates the relevance of the course material to students’ lived-experiences. Since my goal is to enable students to understand the impact of neoliberalism on their day-to-day lives, I thought a grounded example would be necessary. Therefore, I include analyses of contemporary news items in order to cogently relay the impetus of neoliberal capitalist ideology to students.
5.2 Closing Remarks

One of the primary goals of critical educational praxis is to encourage students to interrogate the ideological underpinnings of their daily lives. The paper-experiments presented in my thesis have shown how using neoliberalism as a backcloth to the study of literature from multiple time periods can be a tool to enliven critical thinking and the transformation of personal politics. A pedagogical format that emphasizes a comprehension of the neoliberal capitalist system in which we live encourages students to develop a passion for knowledge, critical insights, and cultural understanding. Moreover, it proffers students knowledge that enables them to "thoughtfully" engage in the world around them and builds their confidence to think independently and creatively. Throughout the paper-experiments, I have utilized critical educational praxis as a dynamic tool of empowerment that should resonate with students throughout their lives. I have proffered examples of how to couple post-colonial literature (Wide Sargasso Sea) with the English literary canon (Jane Eyre) not only to facilitate cultural analysis but also to enable students to understand the legacy of colonialism and the lived-reality of neoliberalism. I have found the process of writing the paper-experiments to be incredibly fruitful, and I look forward to continuing to build on the techniques developed herein and to encouraging my fellow educators to undertake similar tasks to bring an understanding of neoliberal capitalist ideology to their classrooms and, thus, to their students.


