

1 / Introduction

In 1984, the Texas Legislature began constructing an educational system that would place higher and higher stakes on students' performance on standardized tests. More than twenty years later, students must pass state-mandated tests not only to graduate from high school, but also to move on to the fourth, sixth, and ninth grades. Ironically, the constant public surveillance, the constant dissemination of statistics, and the "continual alteration" and "doublethink," characteristics of the world imagined by George Orwell in 1984, are all aspects of the system of high-stakes testing in Texas. Students are constantly being tested, not only by the state, but also by individual districts preparing students for the state exam. Test results for schools and districts are highly publicized in the media, painted across headlines in nearly every major Texas newspaper. Between 1984 and 2004, Texas had phased in three different assessment exams, and each new exam had increased in difficulty. In 2004, the score considered passing for the exams was higher than that of the previous year. This system of testing, which has been named "accountability," leaves students to bear the largest burden. High-stakes testing systems are only fueled by educational heroic myths such as the idealization of Joe Clark in *Lean on Me*, for which the real measure of pedagogical success is the unveiling of the envelope with the standardized test results.

Behind the statistics and the educational heroic myths are students like Jessica,¹ a bright young Latina high school student I tutored at a local Austin Public Library branch, whose mother drove across town in

the dizzying maze of city traffic to bring her daughter to after-school tutoring in math. I could tell that Jessica was not receiving the kind of personal attention she needed in school, and I suspected that the school may have even mistaken the difficulty she had storing information in her long-term memory for a lack of motivation. I learned from the tutoring coordinator at the library that Jessica had failed her Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test twice, and the coordinator asked me to continue to tutor her over the summer. She was already a junior and needed to pass the test soon in order to graduate with her peers. When the summer came, the coordinator told me that Jessica was not coming, that she had already begun calling herself a failure and was ready to give up. I never saw or heard from Jessica again. The hope in her eyes that appeared whenever she solved a difficult problem and the self-recognition in her voice that appeared when she found that she *did* understand algebra were dashed by a data-processing corporation far removed from her reality, by a test that could not truly represent her achievement, by a system that imposed on her a label of “failure,” by a single statistic empowered to function as a gatekeeper between graduates and dropouts. Indeed, one could even describe her as “becoming a statistic,” a symbol of an impending invisibility that would ultimately be attributed to her own individual deficiency. This book is for students like Jessica, who become objectified and silenced by the measures of high-stakes testing regimes.

This ethnographic study interrogates the connections between the political struggles in Texas that both produce and resist high-stakes testing and forms of truth produced about students through high-stakes testing, particularly statistics. Several questions form the basis of my study: What are the historical and political contexts and social implications of reducing students, like Jessica, to their test scores, particularly in a state such as Texas, with its racialized histories of colonization, slavery, Jim Crow and de facto segregation, gender conservatism, and regional and local economic disparities? What forms of objectification, knowledge production, and silences work not just to reinforce such a system of testing, but also to provide openings for challenging the system?

The impetus for this study and for a growing body of literature on high-stakes testing is both the passage of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act, requiring states to increase the amount of testing, and several legal challenges to state testing systems in Texas, New York, Minnesota, Louisiana, California, and Massachusetts. As

national and state legislators addressed No Child Left Behind, students, parents, and organizations across the country began protesting against high-stakes testing. In Massachusetts, nearly three hundred students boycotted their state-mandated test and organized an “anti-MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] movement called the Student Coalition for Alternative to MCAS, SCAM.” One sophomore who joined SCAM objected to the fact that “education is starting to be reduced to ‘what we can put on the test,’” and another student held a sign at a rally that read, “Don’t confine our minds to bubbles. Stop the MCAS” (Shaw 2000: 42).

In September 2002, twelve English and social studies teachers from Curie Metropolitan High School in Chicago composed a letter “intending to refuse to administer the controversial CASE (Chicago Academic Standards Examinations)” (Schmidt 2002). Two years earlier in Illinois, about two hundred students purposely filled in wrong answers in protest against a new state exit exam (Shaw 2000). The inequalities of standardized testing led seniors in Los Angeles to boycott the Stanford Achievement Test—Ninth Edition (SAT-9), and subsequently sparked a movement by the Coalition for Educational Justice to lobby for parental notification of their right to waive testing for their children (Wat 2003). Both the Los Angeles and San Francisco school boards voted to study and develop alternative assessments to the state-mandated tests, promoted by then governor Gray Davis. In Wisconsin, parents and educators fought against the imposition of high school exit exams and promotion exams (Shaw 2000). In Louisiana, Virginia, and Texas, tests were challenged in the courts on the basis that they were racially discriminatory. In 2002, NCS Pearson, with whom Texas contracts for administering and scoring its mandated tests, agreed to a \$7 million settlement after it incorrectly reported that eight thousand students in Minnesota had failed their exams (Pugmire 2002).

In Texas, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) challenged the state testing system, then the TAAS, in the courts on the basis that the testing system disproportionately denied Black and Latino students their high school diplomas. The federal court ruled in 1999 that despite the statistical proof of the disparate impact of the tests, the testing system, implemented with no (proven) intention to discriminate on the basis of race, was justifiable on the grounds that it was educationally necessary and objective. Further, the trend of decreasing gaps between Whites and students of color indicated to the court that the testing system, instead of creating discrimination, exposed

inequalities and was then a tool for alleviating inequalities—ultimately caused by individual factors, such as socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and student motivation (*GI Forum et al. v. Texas Education Agency et al.*, 87 F. Supp. 2d 667 [2000]; Saucedo 2000). During the case, the Texas Legislature, under the guidance of then governor George W. Bush, passed bills requiring third-, fifth-, and eighth-grade students to pass a state-mandated exam in order to be promoted to the next grade; expanding the testing subjects required for high school graduation; and replacing the TAAS with a more difficult assessment called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

Urged on by MALDEF, Texas state representative Dora Olivo led an effort to pass bills that would decrease the stakes of testing, expanding the decisions to promote students beyond testing, which had essentially become the single criterion for passing (Valenzuela 2002). The alternative Representative Olivo promoted was “multiple criteria,” in which portfolios, grades, and teacher evaluations could be weighed against failure on state assessments, and which gave parents more input into the decision to pass or retain their children in a particular grade. In 2001, in the 77th Texas legislative session, Representative Olivo authored two multiple-criteria bills concerning graduation and the promotion of third, fifth, and eighth graders to the next grade. Though the bills passed through the House Public Education Committee and the full House, they were held (and effectively killed) in a Senate committee. At the national level, Senator Paul Wellstone² in 2001 proposed a similar multiple-criteria bill (S 460) to coincide with No Child Left Behind. Citing the report by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, commissioned by Congress in 1997, the bill (S 460, § 1(a)(5)(C)) stated the following: “High stakes decisions such as tracking, promotion, and graduation, should not automatically be made on the basis of a single test score but should be buttressed by other relevant information about the student’s knowledge and skill, such as grades, teacher recommendations, and extenuating circumstances” (S 460, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (March 6, 2001)).³ Though it garnered support from teacher organizations such as the National Education Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Wellstone’s bill also suffered defeat.

Despite these defeats, in the 2003, 78th legislative session, the Texas representative attempted to pass the multiple-criteria bills again, with the stakes raised higher, since in 2003, for the first time in Texas, third graders would be required to pass state assessments in reading (TAKS)

in order to go on to the fourth grade. It is this movement behind the effort to pass these multiple-criteria bills in Texas that forms the heart of my study.

In Texas, in the face of the court rulings and new legislation, a body of literature critiquing high-stakes testing emerged from the experts testifying in that case on the side of MALDEF, particularly Linda McNeil, Angela Valenzuela, Richard Valencia, and Walt Haney. McNeil (2000a) presented the historical and political-economic context in which testing in Texas was implemented, linking it to a broader project of educational reform led by Ross Perot in 1984. Advocates of testing in Texas, Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2000) argued that the system raises student and school accountability (and achievement) through public access to disaggregated testing data⁴ and a shift from an “input-driven” to “results-driven” accountability model; thus, the system effectively closes the educational gap between Whites and minorities. However, critics of testing argue that the mandate to raise scores at any cost creates new inequities since, increasingly, Texas schools practice the following: (1) teaching to the test, (2) retaining at-risk students in non-testing grades, (3) tracking students of color and economically disadvantaged students in special education courses to prevent their scores from affecting accountability ratings, and (4) encouraging dropping out (Haney 2000; McNeil 2000a, 2000b; Valencia et al. 2001). In *Raising Standards or Raising Barriers?* (2001) edited by Orfield and Kornhaber, Valenzuela and McNeil contributed to essays that explored the impact on students of color of testing, particularly minimum-competency tests and other state-mandated exams required for high school graduation (and recently for grade promotion). In the volume, authors linked present testing regimes to historical uses of testing, addressing and questioning the hypothesis that high-stakes exams increase educational quality and student motivation for learning, the likelihood of college attendance and completion, and, ultimately, postsecondary work productivity. While some of the authors confirmed such a hypothesis, others, including Valenzuela and McNeil, argued that high-stakes testing adversely affects teaching and learning for students of color, particularly students with limited English proficiency; that such testing tends to result in increased dropout rates for students of color; and that it exacerbates inequalities by draining funding from state and federal public education budgets. Valenzuela (2002) argued that these adverse effects stem from placing so many stakes for students, teachers, and school administrators solely on standardized tests (or test results) and that

“multiple compensatory criteria in assessment” would both provide a more “reliable and valid measure” of student achievement levels and relieve students, teachers, and families of the pressure associated with test anxiety (106–108).

While this body of literature critiques the educational merits of testing, my study takes an anthropological view of the culture of measurement that places such emphasis on test results, specifically on the production of testing statistics.⁵ Many scholars have contextualized the intensification of testing in Texas and across the country within broader neoliberal movements for privatization of public education through intimate corporate involvement, such as occurs with the testing industry, in the public schools (Saltman 2000; Sacks 1999; Apple 2001; Bartlett et al. 2002; Collins 2001). In her ethnography of the Chicago public schools, Lipman (2004) contextualized the high-stakes environment imposed on schools within the intersection of the city’s racial and political history and the transformation of the city into a global economic center. For Bartlett et al. (2002), this movement not only transforms the structure of schools to reflect the structure of the free market and industry—through standardized testing, charter schools, vouchers, and other forms of corporate partnership—but also affects local policy through the deployment of “the ‘school in the service of the economy.’” These structural and discursive transformations constitute the “marketization of education” (6, 7). McNeil (2000a) conceptualized the discourse of what Bartlett et al. called the “marketization of education” as the articulation of educational goals in the “language of cost accounting” (264). Drawing from the work of Gould (1996) in *Mismeasure of Man*, Sacks (1999) attributed the exponential growth of the testing industry to “the near magical power that quantification, standardization, and the measuring of minds continues to have over Americans” (7). Critics of the accountability system, in Kentucky, for example (Whitford and Jones 2000), have argued that education is being reduced to the measurable, yet, as Sacks commented, standardized testing represents “no more than a statistical sampling of specific skills that are supposedly covered in the curriculum” (1999, 114). Saltman (2000) also asserted that testing allows for the “affirm[ing of] disadvantage as a statistical variable,” and “factor[ing] out those disadvantages suffered by poor and nonwhite students” (25). For elementary school teacher Selma Wasserman (2001), the obsession with standards, testing, and quantification stems from the “presumed certainty of numbers” and numbers’ “sense of security,” given that “with the use of statistics and probability, we measure things

that we cannot even see" (30). The political landscape of testing debates tends to be a veritable statistical battleground, in which opposing sides seize statistical methods of proving or disproving either the effectiveness or adverse effects of testing, of which the *GI Forum* case and the bell curve debates (Fraser 1994) are prime examples. I argue that what allows the technique of mass standardized testing and its use as a mode of controlling student populations; the articulation of school purposes through the language of accounting; and the hegemonic certainty of testing systems' production of truth, but also the terrain for the struggle over that production of truth, is *statistics*. Furthermore, the hegemony of testing as part of the marketization of education is maintained through statistical discourse.

I am interested in connecting studies of statistics to education, particularly because educational theory views schools as contradictory sites of both social reproduction, or socialization, and struggles for (and resistance against) cultural hegemony (Althusser 1971; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Morrow and Torres 1995; Freire 1970; Aronowitz and Giroux 1991; Apple and Weis 1983; Willis 1981; Spindler 1997). Standardized testing has an intimate connection to statistics given that educational psychology, via psychologist Charles Spearman, was born out of the Galtonian school of statistics (Desrosières 1998: 139, 145), and the school's statistical innovations (for instance, the bell curve and quartiles) then made possible mass educational testing by state governments and the military (Lemann 1999). Examining testing and the marketization of education through the hegemony of statistical discourse, I follow Kamin (1974), Rose and Rose (1976), Gould (1996), and Valencia (1997) in viewing testing and its racial politics in terms of a cultural critique or study of science. Cultural studies of science (Rouse 1992; Traweek 1993) question the production of facts and the construction of objectivity by scientific networks (Latour 1987) in ways that reinforce capitalism (Rose and Rose 1976), racialization (Baker 1998; Du Bow 1995; Gould 1996; Harding 1993; Menchaca 1997; Stocking 1993; Tapper 1999; Vaughan 1991), constructions of gender and sexism (Haraway 1988; Harding 1991; Hubbard 1990; Keller 1992; Stepan and Gilman 1993; Easlea 1990; Russett 1989), and cultural views of subjectivity, particularly in light of weapons industries (Gusterson 1996), computer technology (Helmreich 1998), and reproductive technologies (Davis-Floyd and Dumit 1998). In terms of statistics, scholars have studied the development of probability calculus from the seventeenth-century on (Stigler 1986; Feinberg 1992; Daston 1988; Hacking 1991;

Porter 1986; Desrosières 1998),⁶ but also the development of administrative statistics or “science of the state” (Foucault 1991; Woolf 1989; Hacking 1991; Desrosières 1998), in terms of colonization (Appadurai 1993; Asad 1994), the history of the United States (Cohen 1982; Alonso and Starr 1987), the politics of eugenics in Britain (MacKenzie 1981), racialization and resistance (Nobles 2000), as well as the crafting of nationalistic subjectivities (Urla 1993). While many of these studies tend to focus on modern conceptions of statistics, Woodward’s study (1999) discusses statistics, subjectivity, and the formation of “structures of feeling” in the global capitalist postmodern era.

I conceptualize statistics in the Foucauldian sense not only as a discourse that, as a discourse of truth, possesses its own political economy, but also as a technique of governmentality embedded in processes of racialization, commodification, truth production, and subjectivity formation. For Foucault, discourse is the nexus of power and knowledge, whose transmission of power and silences provides the conditions for the reinforcement of power, yet also the conditions for resistance against that reinforcement (1978: 100). What counts as truth is not simply arbitrary, but is formed within a particular political economy, based on the preeminent role of scientific discourse, its production by dominant political and economic institutions (such as the university, military, and media), as well as its “immense diffusion and consumption” through educational and informational systems that in turn make it an “issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation” (Foucault 1984a: 73). These methodological challenges to a singular notion of knowledge and truth have inspired many studies of statistics, along with his writings on the connections between statistics and government, or what he terms *governmentality*. Foucault (1988c, 1991) argued that statistics, as a “*savoir* of the state,” not only was “indispensable for correct government” (1988c: 77), but also tied “problems specific to the population” to economy, providing the conditions for the emergence of “political economy” (1991: 99, 100). Given that statistics also formed a “moral science” (Hacking 1991), the science of government merged political economy and the “art of self-government.”⁷ McNay (1992) argued that Foucault conceived of self-government as both “self-policing” and a mode of resisting the “government of individualization” (68). In her critique of Foucault, Spivak (1988) noted the significance of Foucault’s insights for analyzing power within the contexts impacted by colonialism, imperialism, and globalization: “Sometimes it seems as if the very brilliance of Foucault’s analysis of the centuries of European imperial-

ism produces a miniature version of that heterogeneous phenomenon: management of space—but by doctors; development of administrations—but in asylums; considerations of the periphery—but in terms of the insane, prisoners, and children. The clinic, the asylum, the prison, the university—all seem to be screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism” (291).

To understand the ways in which the formation of statistical discourses functions through (and alongside) government and self-government to produce and reproduce particular relations of power, particularly gendered, racial, and class oppression, I connect Foucault’s conception of statistics to theories of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci. Like Foucault, Gramsci is concerned with “formations,” struggles, contradictions, education, and self-government. Gramsci’s status as a political prisoner provided him deep insight into relations of power, leading him to conceptualize hegemony as a form of dominance that operates through an ideological struggle to gain consent or consensus, or the constant articulation of goals of disparate social groups in order to attain self-identification (of those different groups) with a particular collective, “national-popular,” or universal will or worldview, that in fact maintains the dominance of a particular class or historic bloc (Simon 1991 [1982]; Mouffe 1979). Like Foucault’s political economy of truth, the formation of what is considered truth, or common sense, depends on a type of silence as the “uncritical and largely unconscious way in which a person perceives the world” (Simon 1991 [1982]: 64), and also occurs in the context of struggle and through the educating of consent by the “interventionist state”: “The state is both political society and civil society, in other words, hegemony protected by the armour of coercion” (Gramsci 1971: 263). The notion of hegemony allows us to consider the ways in which statistical discourses become common sense through struggle, negotiation, and articulation, as well as provides insight into the ways that particular groups form a historic bloc and function through the state in projecting their worldview and in structuring their dominance.⁸ According to Gramsci while hegemony is “ethico-political, it must also be economic” (quoted in Mouffe 1979: 183), and this allows for a Marxist interpretation of the commodification (commodity fetishism) of statistical discourses and an understanding of how the formation of the common sense of testing intersects with economic interests. Thus, while Sacks and Wasserman explained the intensification of testing as a product of an obsession with quantification, I explain it as a product of both the processes by which statistical discourse becomes the commonsensical

way of both representing educational achievement and governing educational systems and the individuals and populations within them; and also the political economy of that statistical truth whereby a particular coalition educates this common sense via state interventions and economic consumption.

For Desrosières (1998), the importance of statistics as a technique “for inventing, constructing, and proving scientific facts, both in the natural and social sciences” (3), derives from the process of statistical objectification, or “making *things that hold*, either because they are predictable or because, if unpredictable, their unpredictability can be mastered to some extent, thanks to the calculation of probability” (9; italics in original). Statistical objectification forms “solid things on which the managing of the social world is based” by uniting the “mastering of uncertainty” and the “creation of administrative and political spaces of equivalence” (10). In other words, the materialization of social facts through statistical discourse makes possible the scientific management, engineering, or governance of individuals and populations (see Seltzer and Anderson 2001; Miller and O’Leary 1987; Porter 1995).⁹ In this sense, statistics form a “discourse network,” described by Tapper (1999) as the assemblage of devices that “articulate certain phenomena [and individuals/populations] as natural or unproblematic targets or instruments of specific practices” (6). My objective is to question how statistical materialization becomes common sense or truth while masking the relations of power that both objectify and commodify or exploit people and knowledge. To me, this project is key in understanding McNeil’s (2000a) observation about the process of standardization involved in high-stakes testing, in that “standardization widens educational inequalities and masks historical and persistent inequities” (230).

Methodology

My study addresses the need indicated by reflections on educational ethnographies for conducting ethnographies outside the classroom. In a genealogy of social theory approaches to education,¹⁰ Morrow and Torres (1995) suggested that what tends to be missing from educational social theory is a theory of public policy formation as a mediation of “societal processes” and the “microanalysis of conflicts within educational systems” (343). In his seminal school ethnography, Willis (1981) suggested a need for studies that shift the gaze toward educational institutions, in order to demystify structure and cultural processes. Similarly,

Devine (1996) pointed to a tendency of school ethnographers to neither go beyond the classroom nor examine broader issues of power—which for him starts even in the school hallways. In a reflection on his own ethnographies of Black students, McDermott (1997) wrote that his focus on Black students for answers to their failure wound up individualizing what is a cultural and social production of failure. These calls for a shift in the anthropological gaze from the student, which can be individualizing (see also MacLeod 1995), to institutions mirror the call for shifting the anthropological gaze from groups of people inscribed by processes of colonization and imperialism as “premodern” and “primitive” to the sociocultural processes central to modernity, a call that produced the anthropology of science (Fischer 1991: 530). This shift in the anthropological gaze emerged from critiques in the post–World War II era of the role of science, particularly with the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (Rose and Rose 1976), and anthropology in colonialism and U.S. imperialism (Balandier 1966 [1951]; Gough 1968; Lewis 1973; Asad 1973; Willis 1969; Fabian 1983). According to Gusterson (1996), the anthropology of science is part of a “third wave” of anthropology whose subject is “the functioning of power and flux of identities within an integrated global system” (x). Framed as “studying up” (Nader 1972; Helmreich 1998), ethnographies of science “deconstruct . . . [media and scientific] discourses precisely by drawing attention to their presumptions, their particular groundings, or the social contexts from which they are staged” (Fischer 1991: 529).

Like Bartlett et al. (2002), who suggested that the “ethnographic study of policy formation” should take into account the historical context, political economy, and social struggle (or micropolitics) inherent in discourse production and public debates, my study examines the importance of scientific discourses in forging, maintaining, and struggling against the hegemony of certain educational policies. Bartlett et al. (2002) employed an ethnographic method they called “critical-discourse analysis,”¹¹ which involves conducting “public anthropology,” which “engages in and informs public debates around issues of economic and political participation and exclusion” (8). Their ethnographic methods of textual analysis, participant observation, and interviews form the basis for “ethnographic studies of policy formation,” an approach that, first, “historically contextualizes contemporary debates, tracking the emergence of (now orthodox) discourses, revealing the political and economic changes that made such discourses possible (and for some, desirable), and implicitly comparing the current moment to a time when

people imagined other purposes for education” and, second, “situates the actors who take up discourses, examining the micropolitics of actors’ identities and actions” (24). I interpret the method adopted by Bartlett et al. as combining Foucauldian archaeology¹² and genealogy¹³ with Gramscian studies of resistance.

My interest in using the anthropology of science as a “cultural critique” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) of testing stems from a broader history of vindicationist literature by scholars writing against racism (Drake 1980, see also Stepan and Gilman 1993).¹⁴ One of the major projects of African American vindicationist literature from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century was the formation of a “‘race uplift’ historiographic tradition”—with authors such as William J. Williams, Alexander Crummell, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, and Carter G. Woodson—in order to counter the conception that the “Negro . . . is without history” (Robinson (2000 [1983]: 187–192). With scholars such as DuBois, C.L.R. James, and Richard Wright, Black historiography became radicalized, largely through the appropriation and challenge of Marxist historical materialism (Robinson 2000: 207–208, 287–288). These scholars recognized—as Stoler (1995) distinguished as one of Foucault’s insights in his writings on race—that historiography is “a political force” (62), as it was DuBois who said, in *Black Reconstruction* (1962 [1935]), that “history is ‘lies agreed upon’” and that the “real frontal attack on Reconstruction . . . came from the universities, especially Columbia and Johns Hopkins” (714, 718). In fact, part of the appeal of Foucault is due to my intellectual genealogy, as a Black female scholar, being informed by the “Black radical tradition” (Robinson 2000) and its project of opposing racism through radical historiography, a tradition that has informed and been informed by activism. As Ella Baker argued:

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term *radical* in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising a means to change that system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is, in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come

from and where we are going. . . . I am saying as you must say, too, that in order to see where we are going we not only must *remember* where we have been, but we must *understand* where we have been. (Quoted in Moses and Cobb 2001: 3)

Thus, part of my project, in conjunction with the “public anthropology” method of Bartlett et al., is reexamining, or in Baker’s terms “remembering,” the history of statistics in relation to racism and the “development of . . . racial capitalism”¹⁵ in order to understand the power relations embedded in statistical discourses today. In his historical examination of the role of anthropology in shaping racial discourse and policy in the United States, Lee Baker (1998) argued that “during . . . racial realignment in the U.S., particular approaches for understanding race come to the fore and shape public opinion, policy, and laws” justifying that realignment (218). For Baker, this history not only contextualizes the racial realignment of the 1980s, but also serves as a tool for opposing the neoliberal politics of colorblindness that simply silences the experiences and the persistence of racism. Despite the politics of colorblindness, discourses of race are everywhere,¹⁶ especially as statistical discourse. The statistical essentialization of race is one of the areas that scholars opposing race essentialisms, such as Miles (1993) and Gilroy (2000), have not addressed. For me, studying statistical discourses in terms of their history, objectification, and politics helps to shed light on the contradictions of race essentialism, that is, not just the limitations of appealing to racial statistics due to their subjectivizing and objectifying force, but also the necessity of using statistics in the politics of negotiation due to the centrality of statistics to modern and postmodern hegemony.

Often studies of discourse are critiqued by feminists in particular both for leaving out questions of subjectivity and specific experiences (Deveaux 1994) and for reinforcing the study of “great White men” that further silences the experiences of marginalization. For Scheper-Hughes (1995), “If anthropologists deny themselves the power (because it implies a privileged position) to identify an ill or a wrong . . . they collaborate with the relations of power and silence that allow the destruction to continue” (419). However, not everyone views anthropology as emancipatory (see also Visweswaran 1994: 9), and in fact, it has long been regarded by Black scholars as one of the prime forces of racialization. In his article “Skeletons in the Anthropological Closet,” Willis (1969) cited DuBois as having “described the black man as the ‘football

of anthropology'” (126). Gwaltney (1980) introduced his monumental ethnography *Drylongso* with a quote from Othman Sullivan: “I think this anthropology is another way to call me nigger” (xix). Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) argued that “ghetto ethnography” has been a major force in constructing the concept of the “ghetto underclass,” as it not only reifies Black culture as a set of behaviors, reducing it to a “set of coping mechanisms,” but also erases Black women (19) (at the same time that it pathologizes Black culture because of its “matriarchy” [see Moynihan 1965]). While many scholars of color have responded by conducting “insider anthropology” (Lewis 1973), insider status does not always guarantee an escape from the pathologization of Black culture. For Scheper-Hughes (1995), “The answer to the critique of anthropology is not a retreat from ethnography but rather an ethnography that is personally engaged and politically committed” (419). However, ethnography is inherently problematic, due to the power differentials between the observed and the writer-ethnographer, as well as to the awkward position enabling the ethnographer to obtain status and financial gains through observing the pain and struggle of others (Behar 1993; Enslin 1994; and Gordon 1993).¹⁷ The question Foucault (1994 [1973]: 84) asked of the clinic surfaces for me as a question we should pose of ethnography:

But to look in order to know, to show in order to teach, is not this a tacit form of violence, all the more abusive for its silence, upon a sick body that demands to be comforted, not displayed? Can pain be a spectacle? Not only can it be, but it must be, by virtue of a subtle right that resides in the fact that no one is alone, the poor man less so than others, since he can only obtain assistance through the mediation of the rich . . . what is benevolence towards the poor is transformed into knowledge that is applicable to the rich.¹⁸

“Giving voice,” from any standpoint and even under the guise of political commitment, often hides intellectuals’ complicity in reproducing the international capitalist system and the construction and assimilation of subaltern women as other (Spivak 1988). For Spivak, stories of experience must be counterbalanced by studies of “ideological formation” and “measuring silences” (296). Thus, one way of resolving some of the problems of ethnography is to follow Freire (1993 [1970]), who argued that the research process should parallel dialogue, with the sub-

ject of study being ideological formations and the themes of domination and liberation. Furthermore, as Freire attested, the “danger lies in the risk of shifting the focus of the investigation from the meaningful themes, to the people themselves, thereby treating the people as objects of the investigation” (1993 [1970]: 99). It is Freire’s model that has informed the development of “activist anthropology,” whose basic methodological steps consist of choosing research questions, collecting data, interpreting results, disseminating results, and validating results through collective effort with a certain (activist) group of people (Hale 2001: 14). The goal of this project was to become politically involved, conducting as close to what would count as activist anthropology as I could, with my anthropological gaze on the processes or strategies and forms of resistance against statistical objectification, without losing sight of the politics of experience.¹⁹ The public anthropology approach by Bartlett et al. (2002) provided a basis for me to study discourses and movements, while staying politically engaged. The basis of my fieldwork began with my secondary research on the *GI Forum* case and with my decision to tutor math at a predominantly minority Austin high school (for the spring semesters of 1999 and 2000) and at a local branch of the Austin Public Library (from the summer of 1999 to the fall of 2001). These experiences provided me with a historical and social context with which to begin an ethnography on statistical objectification processes related to the Texas accountability system. Over the course of the study, I conducted mostly informal and nontaped interviews with Austin teachers and school staff, members of civil rights organizations, and employees of the Texas Education Agency. My true participant observation began when I attended a rally held by Texans for Quality Assessment in January of 2003, in support of creating multiple criteria for students in Texas, particularly third graders, who for the first time would be required to pass the new, more difficult state assessment in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. At the rally, I met an aide for Representative Dora Olivo sponsoring bills that would institute multiple criteria for both grade promotion and high school graduation. She was one of the few Black people attending the rally, and I asked her why she thought there were so few Black people there. My question piqued her interest, and at that time she introduced me to Representative Olivo, who then invited my husband and me to her office. There, the Representative invited me to volunteer for the office since, as a graduate student, I would be able to help with research needed to gain support for the bills; thus began my study. I drove to Representative Olivo’s Austin office from San Antonio

two to three times a week over the duration of the regular 78th legislative session, usually working there from five to ten hours per day, particularly toward the latter portion of the session, when the office became short in staff and when the other volunteer interns from the University of Texas had final exams. I was limited to some extent by driving from San Antonio, since severe weather on some occasions forced me to stay in San Antonio and because I limited the amount of time I spent in Austin so I would not have to drive home by myself too late at night. Representative Olivo was gracious enough to pay for my gas and give me a pass for free parking near the Capitol. I soon discovered that legislative work proceeded far beyond regular working hours, and I left many a night wishing that the others could go home at the same time I did. Most of the work I did in the office consisted of attending and taking notes regarding House Public Education Committee meetings, usually scheduled every Tuesday at 2 P.M., as well as researching for talking points that would aid in gaining support for the bills. I was even recruited by the Representative to help write a speech on multiple criteria for a press conference. However, as the session progressed, the office became short staffed, and I was needed for answering phones, filing bills, making copies, and running documents for the Representative to the House floor. At times, the Representative needed to recruit her friends to volunteer for the administrative assistant work. Working in the Capitol took a physical and emotional toll on me, and at times, it became so stressful that I experienced chest pains. As I spent less time on ethnography and more on filing bills, I worried that my position was better suited for a study of employment or the workplace than for one of educational politics.²⁰ While working as an intern, I was given access to meetings, luncheons, and dinners held exclusively for legislators, and I was able to speak with and listen to many different groups of people, from civil rights organizations (League of United Latino American Citizens [LULAC], MALDEF, NAACP, National Council of La Raza, and Intercultural Development Research Association [IDRA]) to groups lobbying for teachers, midwives, interior decorators, and people with disabilities. I also participated in a lobby day for Representative Olivo's multiple-criteria bills in which we, representatives from groups supporting the bills, visited the offices of House representatives in order to speak in support of the bills. Working in legislative offices also provided me access to news updates and search databases not available to the public. In observing the House Public Education Committee meetings, I was able to take notes as would a fly-on-the-wall anthropologist, but in

other situations, I largely took notes after holding conversations or even after I drove home to San Antonio. Technology, particularly RealPlayer, made it possible to view committee meetings and floor proceedings in real time and taped over the Internet, both while I was in the office and when I was at home. RealPlayer, however, was no substitute for being physically present in meetings, given not only the wider range of vision, but also an embodied ability to sense the emotions concerning particular bill debates.

In addition to interviewing and participant observation, I also conducted a media review, being fortunate enough to be on mailing lists concerning educational news, and having access, as a University of Texas graduate student and a legislative intern, to electronic newspaper databases. I conducted most of the historical research in this book, particularly the history of statistics, through secondary sources. I did analyze primary statistical texts released by the Texas Education Agency on its Web site, as well as “nonsecure” (paper) documents given to me by a TEA employee, particularly the Technical Digest of 1999–2000, which summarizes the manner in which tests are designed, scored, and reported. I visited Internet Web sites dedicated to testing issues, particularly that of Texans for Quality Assessment and its links. Also, I watched television broadcasts of educational issues, primarily news, newsmagazines, and congressional proceedings, official speeches, and conference proceedings on C-SPAN.

Writing

As I employed a public anthropology approach as a way of conducting activist research, the methodology of writing I have chosen for this project is also embedded in the politics of using anthropology as cultural critique. While Denzin (1997) located the movement of ethnographic writing as a form of cultural critique as a moment in (and reflecting) the postmodern, “multinational . . . to transgressive” phase of capitalism, I tend to draw on Lewis (1973) and Willis (1969), locating this moment in the crisis in anthropology that developed out of broader anticolonial struggles in which the role and truth of anthropology were challenged by the objectified subjects of anthropology.²¹ For Marcus (1998 [1994]), postmodernist questionings of “conventional forms” have produced experimental, reflexive ethnographic writing that he calls “messy texts.” According to Marcus, “These authors [of messy texts] refuse to assimilate too easily or by foreclosure the object of study, thus resisting the kind of

academic colonialism whereby the deep assumption permeating the work is that the interests of the ethnographer and those of her subjects are somehow aligned" (1998 [1994]: 188).

Messy texts are "*symptoms* of a struggle" to challenge commonsense perceptions of the world and anthropology, to "critically displace sets of representations that no longer seem to account for the worlds we thought we knew, or at least could name" (Marcus 1998 [1994]: 189). While my method of writing in this ethnography may be considered a "messy text," I prefer Visweswaran's (1994) conception of ethnography as an "interrogative text" that "emphasizes the subject split into both subject and object, as continually in the process of construction: a 'subject in process,'" and that rests and risks its authority on constantly posing questions (62). In this sense, my text as interrogative is born not purely out of a postmodern concern for challenging convention, but out of my lived struggle against racism; against a form of "academic colonialism" that does not simply impose its interests on those it is studying, but has aided in the colonization and imperialist assimilation of people of color, of whom I am a part; and against a form of "disciplinary colonialism" that silences the interventions and scholarship of us "natives" (McClaurin 2001: 59). Thus, in the tradition of Black feminist anthropologists, inspired by DuBois, Fanon, and U.S. Third World feminists, my reflexive, interrogative text practices autoethnography that not only questions the division of the observer/observed (Denzin 1997: 225) and subject/object (Visweswaran 1994: 62), but also critiques the elitist and imperial temporal and spatial distancing of the anthropologist from the object-as-subject (Fabian 1983; Peters 1997) through an "amalgamation of self and community" or self and society (McClaurin 2001: 67). Thus, my autoethnography emerges exactly from the "interest of . . . her subjects," exactly from the politics of the "community" ²² of which I am a part. It does require the messiness of acknowledging academic colonialism, against which Marcus cautions, and I question whether we can really decolonize anthropology. It also requires me to interrogate the ways in which I am a producer of and produced by the very processes of statistical objectification and subjectification about which I am theorizing and writing. Through autoethnography, I acknowledge my double consciousness, as a product of the university and discipline of anthropology, but also as a Black woman with a critical and experientially grounded perspective or "embodied theoretical standpoint" (McClaurin 2001: 56–63, 65); as a theorist employing the language, theories, and methods of hegemonic and exclusionary canons; yet as a theorist capable of what

Sandoval (2000) called “differential movement,” or exercising the “middle voice,”

wherein the activist attempts to exercise power upon *what* is conceived as an object (as in the active verb form), and unlike positions of social subordination such as those of “pet,” “game,” or “wild,” positions permitted the oppressed in which exterior powers exercise domination on the citizen-subject, who can only act in response (as in the passive verb form), . . . the middle voice represents the consciousness required to transform any of the previous modes of resistance out of their active-or-passive incarnations into what White calls a “reflexive,” or differential form. That reflexive mode of consciousness self-consciously deploys subjectivity and calls up a *new* morality of form that intervenes in social reality through deploying an action that recreates the agent even as the agent is creating the action—in an ongoing, chiasmic loop of transformation. The differential activist is thus made by the ideological intervention that she is making: the only predictable final outcome is transformation itself. (156–157)

My text escapes (or goes beyond) neither the “empirical omniscience” (Denzin 1997: 210) nor the claims of rigor and validity characteristic of modernist (yearnings for) scientific anthropology. My uses of narrative, self-reflectivity, and experiential standpoint are attempts at blurring the lines between fact and fiction (see Denzin 1997: 126–162), but in the sense that they attempt to politicize the production of truth while maintaining authority (Clifford 1988)—not only to chart the racial and gendered political economy of truth, in other words, to problematize the ways in which the production of facts objectify and commodify and exploit people and their knowledge (through statistics), but also to argue that the lived experiences of objectification are facts,²³ or truths that need to be taken into account in order to oppose the marketization of education, which ultimately is the “de-democratization” of education (McNeil 2000a), or the retrenchment of the welfare state’s policies of redressing inequities, implemented as a result of historic struggles for civil and human rights.

In this project, I interrogate statistics as a hegemonic discourse network, whose genealogy as a science of the state and as a probability calculus (or mathematical science) allows it to be a technique not only

of objectifying subjects through governmentality and exploitation, but also of producing truth, materializing social facts, and providing measures of certainty, representativeness, and significance. I argue that the hegemony of the high-stakes regime as an element of the marketization of education is maintained through the operation of statistics as a discourse network, allowing the coalition of the Right to do the following: (1) conduct the conduct of students, teachers, administrators, and the public—despite the appearance of freedom; (2) commodify knowledge and exploit public education through a system of competition; and (3) produce the truth of testing through notions of progress, representativeness, standards, and validity. I also examine questions of subjectivity in both the production of and resistance against statistical discourse. On the one hand, self-identification with statistics and becoming a producer of statistics—that is, “statistical subjectivity” (Urla 1993)—reinforced statistical discourse and the regime of high-stakes testing, yet, on the other hand, formed the basis for constructing a statistical counterdiscourse that challenged high-stakes testing. However, it was exactly the politicization of experiential narrative as a *contre-histoire* to statistical discourse that became both central to the resistance against high-stakes testing and also diagnostic of the forms of power (objectification) through which high-stakes testing operated. Thus, I viewed this form of resistance as constituting what Foucault (1983) called the “struggle against the submission of subjectivity” (213). While this resistance did not articulate race or anti-racism as its *raison d’être*, it not only emerged from the opposition to the impact of high-stakes testing on students of color (led by MALDEF), but was also racialized in terms of its being led by a Latina Democratic representative. Given both the articulation of race through statistical discourse and the use of testing as a technique of segregation, I also examine the ways in which the statistical discourse of high-stakes testing racialized U.S. Mexican and Black students as embodiments of risk and as the markers of failure and inefficiency. I consider the ways in which the dual strategies of statistical counterdiscourse and experiential narrative as *contre-histoire* signify what Sandoval (2000) called “differential movement,” part of the “methodology of the oppressed.” Further, this differential movement is present within and echoes my combining of the anthropology of science and autoethnographic activist anthropology, what may be called “studying up” with a view “from below.”²⁴

In the following chapters, I contextualize the Texas testing system historically and examine three forms of statistical objectification (governmentality, commodification, and statistical truth production) that I

contend maintain the hegemony of the testing system. Chapter 2 provides a historical context for my involvement in the movement to pass multiple-criteria bills in the wake of the *GI Forum* decision that denied that the Texas testing system was racially discriminatory and of the passing of the “no social promotion” bills. I examine the emergence of testing in Texas in the context of desegregation, as well as the racial realignment of the Republican Party in Texas. In Chapter 3, I describe the ways in which students, teachers, and the public become manipulated or governed through statistics. Resistance against standardized testing, particularly by students, revealed the way in which the discourse network of standardized testing statistics objectifies students. I also explore the ways in which statistics impose a structure of feeling, particularly what Woodward (1999) called “statistical panic.” Third, I view the ways in which statistical production supports practices of making students of color invisible statistically, objectifying marginalization and invisibility. In Chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which statistics allow for the commodification of students and their knowledge via the informational economy. Second, I argue that the assimilation of students, teachers, school administrators, and the public into a system of competition works to maintain the hegemony of the testing system. Third, I argue that in the neoliberal imperative to combine profitability with governmentality, conservatives are deploying statistical discourses in order to attack the democratization of the public school, in their general attack on the welfare state. Examining Desrosières’s concept of statistical objectification in terms of stabilizing objects and “taming” uncertainty (Hacking 1991), Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which statistical fact production operates to make certain truths hegemonic. First, I call into question the ways that the statistical objectification of minority failure has underscored the hegemony of the testing system. Second, I view the ways in which polls on testing serve as tools for educating consent by statistically constructing a collective will. Third, I examine the way in which the statistical constructs of *standard error of measurement* and *correlation* also operate to stabilize objects and serve as a form of ideological glue between different objects. Fourth, I examine statistical subjectivity, including in my own practice, as a way of understanding the ways in which statistical discourses become a terrain for negotiating politics as well as common sense. In Chapter 6, I elucidate the ways in which narratives of children’s experiences with testing served as the major political tool in gaining support for the multiple-criteria bills, which I describe as opposing statistical objectification. In this chapter, I

reflect on my own “romanticization of resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990) and interrogate the ways in which the “subaltern cannot speak” (Spivak 1988). In the concluding chapter, I summarize the various modes of objectification occurring under high-stakes testing in Texas, as well as address the problematic of “studying up,” public anthropology, activist anthropology, and autoethnography. I also interrogate the politics of my arguments and whether or not my product will be useful to activists, exploring the concept of providing or prescribing solutions. In order to consider solutions, that is, the future, we need to first examine the historical context and political economy of testing in Texas.