

# The Literacy Narrative of Chadwick's *The First Grader*

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While examination of narratives written by and about older adults is, by now, recognized as crucial to the critical work of age studies, the overlapping projects of age studies and studies of literate activity (including writing) have not yet been sufficiently integrated. Through analysis of *The First Grader*, a film dramatizing the true story of an eighty-four-year-old Kenyan man who attends primary school in order to learn how to read and write, this essay illustrates the value in establishing deliberate cross-talk between age studies and writing studies through joint examination of literacy narratives: stories that capture both master and “little” narratives about literacy and learning. As a cinematic literacy narrative featuring an elder protagonist, *The First Grader* demonstrates how age meanings and age identities impact and challenge culturally endorsed perceptions of literacy and learning by uncritically representing prefigured ideas about literacy and old age, while also suggesting some critical alternatives. At the same time, the film acknowledges how literacy and learning contribute to, and are implicated by, the creation and circulation of the meanings of old age.

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In an overcrowded primary school classroom, small children in blue gingham squeeze together on benches and on the packed earth floor. From among the tangle of youth protrudes an anachronistic body. Shoulders hunched over a child-sized desk in the front row, his walking staff leaning nearby, an eighty-four-year-old man strains to hear instructions on writing a lowercase letter a. Holding a pencil awkwardly, he struggles. The teacher pauses to adjust his grip. Slowly and almost tenderly, he forms his first letter.

Justin Chadwick's *The First Grader* dramatizes the true story of Kimani Ng'ang'a Maruge, an octogenarian and former Mau Mau freedom fighter who, in 2003, took seriously the Republic of Kenya's offer of free primary education and fought to enroll in a local primary school.<sup>1</sup> Despite the school's over-enrollment and dire lack of resources, teacher Jane (played by

Naomie Harris) eventually allows Maruge (Oliver Litondo) to join her class. The absurdity of Maruge's schoolboy knee-highs is only slightly diminished by the earnestness of his desire to learn how to read, write, and do simple math. Although the real Maruge's story circulated in international media, *The First Grader* represents the most significant treatment of his story thus far.

Although set and shot in Kenya with many Kenyan cast and crew members, *The First Grader* was devised and distributed primarily within Western contexts: independently inspired by a 2005 article about Maruge reported in the *Los Angeles Times* (Dixon), Sixth Sense Productions and screenwriter Ann Peacock teamed up to turn Maruge's story into a film. Unable to secure sufficient financial backing in the United States, they eventually partnered with the United Kingdom's BBC Films and Origin Pictures, with the further support of the UK Film Council and Videovision Entertainment of South Africa (Goldcrest Films). Following showings at film festivals in North America, Western Europe, and Western Asia in 2010, the film was distributed in American theaters by National Geographic Entertainment in 2011. With this largely western-based production and distribution history, it is reasonable to approach the film as one catering primarily to Western audiences. An interest in appealing to American viewers is further suggested by the film's contrived references to the political climate of the United States.<sup>2</sup> The film is (among other things) an ode to education, to persistence, and to the power of the written word—a celebratory theme common in Western cultures in which both compulsory, state-funded education and intergenerational culture clashes have relatively long histories. Despite the story's origins in Kenyan contexts, audiences cannot approach *The First Grader* as a legitimate representation of literacy and aging in Eastern African contexts so much as a reflection of Western attitudes toward literacy and aging. Although a film partly about healing from the traumas of British imperialism, *The First Grader* captures (and in some ways challenges) the popular desire to erase tribal history in favor of British-style systems of education and government.

The film is, indeed, flawed; however, this essay is not a critique of the film's historic or artistic merit. Through analysis of *The First Grader*, this

essay illuminates the significance of the relationship between the purposes and meanings of old age and literacy, and argues that literacy and literate culture participate in defining meanings of aging by displacing elders from social participation, even as they provide potential means of integrating with social worlds and reconfiguring age identities. What follows is an examination of the film as a particular narrative genre—commonly called the *literacy narrative* by rhetoric and composition scholars—that can reveal literacy’s influence as a form of cultural capital. Bearing both culturally typified and emergent attitudes about language and learning, literacy narratives are a means of understanding the cultural values and practices that construct barriers to creative and intellectual activity in later life. As part of a literacy narrative, two of *The First Grader’s* significant narrative threads serve as meditations on the uncertain role of elder adults in modern society, and the belief in the power of literacy and education. These intertwining themes render evident the crosscurrents of prominent concerns in age studies and literacy studies—two humanistic projects that, despite their transdisciplinary configurations, have not informed each other deliberately or consistently.

In the humanities, the question of older adults’ cultural purpose and place is framed as a question of meaning: “What does it mean to grow old?” has been identified as a centralizing point of inquiry for humanistic studies of aging (Cole, Ray, and Kastenbaum). Extending from these interdisciplinary explorations of the cultural significations of aging are the consequences of those portrayals, including how age meanings shape societal and individual expectations of old age. What do these meanings suggest, for instance, about the social role of the modern elder? Is one’s purpose in later life to impart wisdom from past experience in order to benefit future generations? Is one to serve as a warning or inspiration to the young? Or is one simply counted upon to be ill enough to support a developed economy by generating revenue from medical care (Cruikshank 39–42), or else to simply step aside (or die) rather than tapping resources that should benefit younger people (Brooks; Longman)? Chadwick’s dramatization of an elder’s claim on his right to a

government-sponsored education captures the instability of the meanings and purposes of elders in modernity, and in doing so, points to the overlap between critical examinations of age and literacy.

One notable scholar who alludes to such an overlap is Ruth E. Ray, whose study of elder writers in *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing* merges critical gerontology with a study of literate activity, which she identifies as crucial to understanding age identity and the meanings of old age and aging. By examining the written and spoken discourses of participants in a life story group at a senior center, Ray demonstrates how paying attention to the literate activity of ordinary elder writers captures rich variations among individual experiences of aging (variations that had gone unacknowledged in traditional gerontological research), as well as the impact of social scripts for age, gender, race, and class, which inevitably shape the life stories individuals tell. As Ray shows, the process of writing life stories in peer groups helps writers to explore the meanings of their lives, and offers researchers a way to capture the emergence of those meanings. While literate activity provides access to the heterogeneous experiences of older adults as they “articulate what life ‘means’” (Ray 7), this analysis of *The First Grader* captures the meaning of old age as it is developed through a narrative specifically about an older adult’s literacy and learning. By turning to analysis of a narrative that consciously dramatizes a specific aspect of one elder’s life (that is, Maruge’s literacy), this essay refocuses the narrative study of elders: rather than asking how an elder’s writing captures meanings of aging, I ask, in part, how cultural meanings of aging impact how elders learn (or are perceived to learn) how to write at all. Moreover, by examining a literacy narrative that has been highly fictionalized, this analysis can identify what Beth Daniells (drawing from Lyotard) calls “grand narratives of literacy”—that is, the stories about literacy that reflect as well as shape common perceptions of what literacy is and what it can do.

In tandem with questions about the meanings of old age and aging, *The First Grader* invokes questions about the meanings of learning. In rhetoric and composition, the belief in the power of literacy is an important but

volatile subject. Hope of improving one's position in social strata is often tethered to literacy and education; the struggle to learn and the struggle to teach, especially within narrowly constrained circumstances, is buoyed by the promise of what rewards literacy might offer, whether they be upward social mobility, democracy and civic participation, social respectability, or countless other individual, social, and political incentives. And yet, literacy researchers and teachers must also remain cognizant of literacy's limits and, indeed, its dangers. Despite our greatest hopes, literacy cannot uphold all promises to all people, and it is leveraged as often for social ill as it is for social good. Rhetoric and composition scholars commonly examine beliefs in the power of literacy within the context of the literacy narrative (Eldred and Mortensen), a genre that has become routinized in writing classrooms, in qualitative research methods, and in fictional representations of learning. As Maruge, his teachers, his classmates, his neighbors, and his government all wrestle with various beliefs in the purposes and values of literacy, they represent competing narratives of literacy that reverberate in non-fictional classrooms, workplaces, political arenas, and other domains of everyday life.

*The First Grader* does not ultimately provide stable or singular meanings of either literacy or old age, but the film's juxtaposition of literacy and aging as central themes illustrates a deep and real correlation between the two. Literacy learning, though usually viewed as a childhood pursuit, can have equally great exigency for elder populations. Literary criticism in age studies (or, literary gerontology) already examines late-life intellectual activity by including the "missing category" of old age in literary theory and by taking a qualitative, lifelong approach to understanding the work of literary figures (e.g., Kastenbaum; Woodward). For instance, Anne Wyatt-Brown's "Resilience and Creativity in Aging," anthologized in the 2010 *Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging*, reviews aging's positive influences on literary work, such as the unique flavors of authors' late style, or enriched perspectives on themes of resilience, disability, death, and mourning. Such literary analysis helps undermine the belief that older adults are somehow incapable of creative and intellectual achievement, or

that they have nothing more to contribute to the intellectual world at large.

Analysis of texts by (and about) older adults is by now recognized as crucial to the critical project of age studies. But it is important here to note, too, that these methods align with critical work occurring within literacy and writing studies, which also has a history of analyzing texts and their contexts to capture the relationships among literate activity, ideology, and identity. Both fields share an interest in recovering the previously ignored work of marginalized social groups in order to make sense of the rhetorical worlds in which they write or otherwise make meaning; both turn a critical eye on the ideologies that create and sustain systems of oppression through discourse; and both identify opportunities for the resistance to, appropriation of, or confirmation of dominant ideologies through literate acts. To my mind, then, a partnership between age studies and writing studies seems only sensible.

In expanding, from a literacy studies standpoint, the analysis of cultural representations of aging writers, I attend to the stories and experiences of elders who are not recognized as authors, nor even, in many cases, as literate. As with other marginalized identity groups, including African-Americans, women, people with disabilities, and members of the working class, elder adults are a social group marked by assumed illiteracy. While Maruge is deemed illiterate because he cannot read or write at all, even adults who have rich experiences with literacy, and who have excelled in literate environments, find themselves labeled as less-than-literate in their later years. Familiar with outmoded, devalued ways of knowing, being, and communicating, elders are seen as outsiders in new literate environments because their literacies are no longer understood as the *right* literacies. As a result, familiarity with literacy practices that have lost value is sometimes (mis)taken as an incapacity for new literacy development (Bowen). Literacy and aging together become a crucial point of mutual reinforcement, whereby literacy is perceived as being wasted on the oldest members of a population.

### LESSONS FROM LITERACY NARRATIVES

Janet Eldred and Peter Mortensen identify literacy narratives as stories “that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy” (345). Literacy narratives “include texts that both challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy,” built on tropes and cultural scripts about literacy that reflect and shape cultural values. (Thus, American figures like Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln become icons of literacy because they link literacy with American virtues, such as freedom and the self-made man.)

As a genre, literacy narratives have gained traction in popular cinema. Films like *Dead Poets Society*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Finding Forrester*, *Freedom Writers*, and *Precious (Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire)* can be classified as cinematic literacy narratives: stories of heroic teachers and inspired students struggling to overcome racism, sexism, poverty, violence, trauma, and even illness through the power of education. These literacy narratives draw easy criticism as well as easy crowds. For one thing, such films present stories of social change and upward mobility within carefully preserved power structures; with rare exceptions, teachers represent dominant identity groups, often as the white (usually female) educator and her troubled “urban” students of color, who must learn to assimilate into the mainstream of white, middle-class, literate culture before they can better themselves, their families, and their communities.

Further, such narratives can be easily condemned for their eagerness to erase or ignore the material realities that literacy simply cannot fix. In an analysis of the critical reception of *Precious*, Patrick Berry cites Ishmael Reed, who notes the incongruity of the literacy-as-uplift theme in light of the film’s dismal end, in which the main character is “jobless, saddled with two children, one of whom has Down syndrome, and she’s learned that she has AIDS” (17). In the film, *Precious*’s teacher (who is, like *Precious*, African-American) responds to her student’s grief over her HIV-positive status by thrusting a journal into *Precious*’s hands and commanding her to write. *Precious* is expected, literally, to write off her troubles; however, as Berry aptly states, “Literacy can only do so much” (17).

What makes these filmic literacy narratives so deeply problematic is that they are among many “cultural endorsements” of what literacy historiographer Harvey Graff has named the *literacy myth*. Through census data from 19th-century Canada, Graff (*Literacy Myth*) argues that literacy has been ill-defined and overly imbued with social and moral values that have been upheld for centuries. Among those assumed values, the belief that literacy is—in and of itself—a remedy to major social ills remains especially powerful. As Graff shows, however, an education does not guarantee individuals a better paycheck, or a better life. While literacy is often an effective means of socializing a population, its promises to provide individual social advancements are largely unmet. While there may, indeed, have been a time and place when a primary education paid off for individual workers, education programs cannot guarantee national development.<sup>3</sup>

But even when storytellers romanticize literacy, analysis of these narratives reminds us that literacy is always bound up in questions of culture, oppression, identity, and materiality—questions that complicate our beliefs in the inherent virtues of literacy development. In her own analysis of a fictional literacy narrative, Donna Strickland reads Dorothy West’s “The Typewriter” as a story about the “uneven consequences” of literacy. When a young African-American woman needs to practice taking dictation, she enlists the help of her father, an office custodian. At first reluctant, the father eventually performs hegemonic discourses with zeal, even improving his performance by consulting a dictionary. Thus, as Strickland writes, “It can’t be his literate abilities or his ambition that has caused him to clean offices rather than preside over them” (53). Once the daughter lands a job, the fantasy splinters. For the father, who is emotionally invested in the literacy myth, the devastation of literacy is its culturally endorsed, but ultimately unfulfilled, promises. In West’s literacy narrative (and in others—see, for instance, Eldred and Mortensen on Shaw’s *Pygmalion*), acquisition of literacy and language presents a paradox: people invest in literacy in the hope of achieving social uplift, but the pursuit and even acquisition of literacy throw inequities more sharply into relief.

In the remainder of this essay, I turn to the literacy narrative told by

*The First Grader*, wherein we again encounter the paradox of literacy. In a story that seems determined to speak to the fundamental value of literacy as a source of personal enrichment and as a mobilizer of positive social change—as something sought both for its own sake and for the sake of a better world—we are yet reminded of literacy’s dark side. In this literacy narrative, cultural values of education become enmeshed in cultural attitudes toward elders and aging. Already positioned as “Other” by his age as much as by his violent past, Maruge and his late-life education encapsulate prefigured ideas of aging alongside grand narratives of literacy.

#### **MOTIVATION FOR LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN LATER LIFE**

Telling a literacy narrative about an elder learner demands, it seems, answers to questions that are rarely posed in stories about younger learners. No one asks why a post-millennial five-year-old should learn to read; an eighty-four-year-old student, however, might be regarded with amusement, skepticism, or even malevolent suspicion. When word spreads that Maruge goes to school, news reporters flock to ask: “What is the motivation now?” *The First Grader* illustrates cultural doubt in literacy’s value for elders—a doubt that, in part, has inspired decades of research on motivations for late-life learning, of which the most useful findings indicate that elders typically have many reasons for learning (Kim and Merriam).

Likewise, the film evades straightforward claims about the value of later-life education; Maruge’s motivations for learning shift over the course of the film, reminding us that literate activity, as with any activity, is always multimotivational (Prior and Shipka 2006). However, the film’s depiction of those motives are, nonetheless, structured by “literacy tropes” (Brodkey, qtd. in Eldred and Mortensen 345). Specifically, the central motivations for learning reflect Maruge’s shifting investments in the three metaphors of literacy outlined in a now-classic essay by Sylvia Scribner: literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as a state of grace. Scribner identifies the limits of such metaphors for achieving a universal definition of literacy (a definition that, as many literacy scholars have since agreed, is quite impossible). Regardless of their limits, these metaphors are nonetheless powerful in supplying individual and

collective incentives for pursuing literacy—even at great cost. Taking shape within a larger literacy narrative of *The First Grader*, these metaphors speak to the powerful “push” and “pull” of literacy (Brandt 27) at individual and societal levels. In what follows, I use Scribner’s three metaphors to illustrate how the film’s structure of a literacy narrative (and the cultural values and beliefs endorsed by that typified narrative form) throw into sharp relief the insecure position of elders in modern literate societies.

### LITERACY AS ADAPTATION

The first of Scribner’s metaphors of literacy, *literacy as adaptation*, is based on a belief in literacy’s pragmatic value; the concept of functional literacy within this metaphor is defined as “the level of proficiency necessary for effective performance in a range of settings and customary activities” (9). In knowledge economies where literacy has become a central means of communication and exchange, the pragmatic value of literacy rapidly increases. Although functional literacy is sought and obtained by individuals, the value in functional literacy is strongly maintained at the societal level. Across a variety of national contexts, the “commonsense appeal” of the literacy-as-adaptation metaphor helps to frame literacy as a means of generating human capital to support national economies, as investment in the education of individual citizens is understood as investment in the development of the nation (Scribner 9).

Chadwick’s rendering of Maruge’s story demonstrates the strength of the literacy-as-adaptation metaphor, as both a national and individual motive for learning. Within its first few minutes, the film portrays the tectonic shifts that give literacy pragmatic value in Maruge’s life. The audience first encounters Maruge at work in a small, dry garden, as he stoops to drop seeds into freshly turned grooves in the earth. A shot of his wrist shows a metal bracelet, imprinted with a series of small characters. Spliced with flashbacks of his deceased wife and children standing in lush, greener fields, Maruge completes his dusty work and washes up inside his home, in almost total darkness. Clean and dressed, he opens a briefcase and removes a letter-size envelope, its printed lettering illegible. Here, Maruge’s illiteracy resides in a dark and solitary space, which

contrasts sharply to the juxtaposed scene, in which laughing children in bright clothing run toward a school, while a group of men talk animatedly over a newspaper. Literacy, by contrast, is a lively community event.

The children flock to the fenced-in schoolyard, joining parents who crowd against long tables where teachers sit holding ballpoint pens. An aerial shot captures the surge of a tightly packed crowd waiting to move through the gate; parents wave white and yellow sheets of paper, calling for recognition from school officials. The shoving and shouting becomes increasingly forceful, a threat of violence simmering beneath the agitated tremor of crumpled documents. As one teacher rises from the table, she subdues a vociferous mother, pointing out her paper is not, in fact, a birth certificate. The teacher, Jane, is called away to speak with Maruge, who now stands apart from the fray, just outside the schoolyard gate. From inside his cloak, Maruge produces a folded newspaper that reads, “New government follows through on education promise. Free elementary school education for all.” Jane explains that this promise was meant only for children. Maruge shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I heard on the radio with my own ears. They said ‘everybody.’”

In these first few minutes of the film, the metaphor of literacy as adaptation is firmly established as an early motive for Maruge’s struggle. In a classic essay that describes his own experience of the rise of literacy in Nigeria during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, F. Niyi Akinnaso notes that encounters with literacy change the way people—even nonliterate people—see and talk about the world (154). From these opening scenes, it is clear that “documentary reality” (Smith) has nearly permeated Maruge’s community, creating a documentary society (Brandt; Vieira) in which citizenship and civic participation are conditioned by official papers, regardless of one’s ability to read them. In effect, it is not essential that Maruge know how to read—he has the radio and literate community members to tell him what the newspaper headlines say. However, as Maruge knows, the expansion of bureaucracy makes the written word the only means by which Maruge can recognize and be recognized by the new government. Thus, in lieu of a birth certificate, Maruge brings the newspaper.

The motif of documentation—the bureaucratic process of abstracting people into textual and symbolic artifacts—provides exigency for the literacy narrative Chadwick’s film ultimately tells. In addition to parents wielding paper in the schoolyard, this motif appears in the form of Maruge’s identification bracelet from his days as a prisoner in the detention camps, when he was known as “Prisoner 4339”—an identifier that later reappears in the mysterious letter Maruge keeps in his briefcase. Literacy has become, quite literally, a gatekeeping mechanism for the new government. But bureaucracy is not always affiliated with rejection or denial: the moment when Maruge is at last entered into the education system is a moment of triumph. He is no longer Prisoner 4339, but Student 207. He willingly assumes a documentary label in the hope of adapting to a documentary society.

Although *The First Grader* tells the story of only one elder’s experience, Maruge’s predicament is representative of common histories of rapid social, political, and technological change. When the terms and means of communication are suddenly redefined, either by force or by a confluence of circumstances, elder adults are very often excluded from social and civic participation. Rather than reaching a pinnacle of expertise and wisdom, elders may find the ground has shifted beneath their feet. When global literacy researchers can claim that, within certain social contexts, “to be computer illiterate these days equals being illiterate *tout court*” (Blommaert 5), it is clear that the rapid proliferation of digital media technologies, shifts in labor markets, and international conflicts and alliances can (and do) fundamentally change communication and literacy practices, which can disproportionately hinder elders. Thus, from the perspective of elder advocacy, there is a real sense of urgency that fuels metaphors of literacy as a means of adaptation. If one of the goals of age activists is to promote independence and dignity in later life, and to support elders’ abilities to sustain activities critical to their wellbeing, then literacy development programs may be a necessary (though perhaps overlooked) step.

In using the literacy-as-adaptation metaphor to establish the film’s initial conflict, *The First Grader* pinpoints a seemingly innocuous, but

nonetheless effective, method of social exclusion for elders. While age studies scholarship already recognizes many cultural mechanisms by which elders are rendered invisible, the treatment of late-life education as frivolous creates as many problems for elders as does the tendency to push older adults into retirement and into retirement communities. Literacy is not a key that, once possessed, is capable of opening all the right doors. Rather, as Deborah Brandt notes in her pivotal study of literacy in America, it is a form of currency exchanged between sponsors and recipients. As such, literacy's value does not remain stable over time: as economies shift and sponsors of literacy emerge, develop, and fade, the literacies of those sponsored will see the worth of their literacies rise and fall accordingly. Although "literacy as adaptation" and "functional literacy" must be defined in individual terms (i.e., literacies required to function in one person's life may not be necessary to the functions of all others), literacy's fluctuating worth leaves elders vulnerable when they are excluded from centers of literacy development.

#### **LITERACY AS POWER**

As audiences learn more about his history as a revolutionary and as a political prisoner, Maruge's desire for literacy appears more ideological than practical. Literacy carries the promise of long-awaited retribution. *Literacy as power*, according to Scribner, marks a belief that literacy uplifts the oppressed. Activists and advocates of critical pedagogy invest in literacy as a vehicle for social change. The treatment of literacy as a source of empowerment is most famously championed by Paulo Freire, who argues that literacy lessons rooted within the "word worlds" of learners can "enable the people to reflect on their former interpretation of the world before going on to read the word"—literacy development can be a means for learners to recognize and resist conditions of injustice (36). As Scribner characterizes this metaphor, education is, in essence, an opportunity for the disempowered to "claim their place in the world" (12).

Scribner's spatializing of literacy as an act of "claiming a place" is illustrated quite literally in *The First Grader*. As described earlier, Maruge's first onscreen actions are to turn soil and plant seeds, and his happier

flashbacks are set against the idyllic backdrop of vibrantly green fields. But owning and working the land, we are led to understand, are activities of an older economy. Today, as Maruge explains to curious news reporters, “The power is in the pen.” The documentary reality of the Republic of Kenya means a shift in the sources of power; thus, not only does Maruge feel compelled to adapt to new forms of civic participation, but he must also use literacy to signal a shift in identification, from tribe to nation. He explains to teacher Jane that he had originally joined the Mau Mau Uprising to reclaim land from British colonizers. “What is Kikuyu without land?” he asks, reflecting on the close ties between land and tribal identity. In the wake of Kenyan independence and documentary reality, however, Maruge’s affiliations have changed. In the present, he says, “we are nothing if we cannot read. We are useless.” In a literate society, social and cultural capital shift from the farmer’s land to the bureaucrat’s pen. Thus, when Maruge ultimately learns (from the contents of his mysterious letter) that he is eligible for financial compensation for his imprisonment and torture, he nonetheless resolves to continue his mission for justice through public education. As reward for the loss of his tribal soil, he vows to “learn until I have soil in my ears.”<sup>4</sup>

But while the literacy narrative of *The First Grader* constructs its learner-as-hero story—a figure common to literacy narratives (Alexander; Williams)—the narrative also captures what Elspeth Stuckey terms the “violence of literacy.” While literacy learning is often considered either a benign childhood practice or the path to empowerment and social justice, literacy just as often carries dire consequences. From efforts to withhold literacy in order to keep hierarchies in place (Graff, *Legacies* 362), to the production of the material goods of literacy that create toxic living environments (Mortensen), to the oppressive ideologies borne by literacy programs (Stuckey), literacy might sometimes empower, but not without casualties.

The violence of literacy is depicted in the film in the most literal of ways. Asked to sharpen his pencil during class, Maruge flashes back to memories of white British guards rupturing his eardrums with the wickedly

sharpened end of a common yellow pencil. This trauma casts shadows on the seemingly harmless setting of the schoolroom, in which Maruge's young classmates raise their sharpened yellow pencils aloft, responding to a call-and-answer mantra that reminds them to guard their pencils like the precious resources that they are:

Teacher: "Pencils nice and sharp?"

Children: "Nice and sharp!"

Teacher: "My pencil is my friend. I keep him to the end."

Children: "My pencil is my friend. I keep him to the end."

In a scene already rendered chilling by its association with Maruge's trauma, the pencil chant does more than introduce the village's anxieties about wasting scarce resources for literacy and learning. American audiences may further recognize that the chant resonates with the U.S. Marine Corps Creed, also known as the Rifleman's Creed, which has been popularized by war films such as *Full Metal Jacket* and *Jarhead*: "This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My rifle is my best friend. ...My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless" (Rupertus, qtd. in Wildsmith 136). Although Maruge does not participate in the pencil chant, his choice of words later in the film also echoes the Rifleman's Creed: "We are nothing if we cannot read. We are useless." Such reverberations of military indoctrination and the association between pencils and violence recast Maruge's desire for the power of the pen as a kind of crusade: a quest motivated by faith in literacy's value that also involves acts of violence.

Maruge's effort to obtain literacy runs parallel to flashbacks of his effort to steal weapons for the rebellion. A belief in literacy as a human right collides with the belief that literacy is a powerful and precious resource that must not fall into the wrong hands. As a former freedom fighter, Maruge must be denied access to intellectual weapons, and as an octogenarian, he must not be allowed to "waste" literacy resources better distributed among the young. The violent response to Maruge's learning, though significantly less brutal than the violence he experienced during

the Mau Mau Uprising, is nonetheless telling of the significant overlap between attitudes toward literacy and attitudes toward aging—and the battles brewing within that overlap.

As a literacy narrative, *The First Grader* tells the story of an inter-generational turf war, in which the welfare of younger generations is pitted in a zero-sum game against older generations. Perceived as a finite resource with direct links to power and social mobility, literacy causes an age war. In some ways, education is a finite resource: as teacher Alfred points out, “We have 200 [young] students and only 50 desks.... We can’t waste them on an old man with one foot in the grave.” Parents blame Maruge for siphoning precious resources away from their children, and as one newscaster reports, they “are outraged that such a valuable place is wasted on such an old man.” Indignation seeds terrorism, as a militia of hooded men throw rocks at the schoolhouse; teacher Jane and her husband receive threatening phone calls; and Maruge is menaced by a gang of younger, more able-bodied men who think he has become wealthy from media attention.

However (melo)dramatic its portrayal in the film, this intergenerational combat is hardly limited to the realm of fiction. The film sets the schoolyard as the battleground, but the fight over whether to expend state resources on elders is familiar to Western audiences. In the U.S., for example, Margaret Gullette has identified an “age war” that had reached a crescendo in the 1990s (but is still ongoing) that blamed the Baby Boomer generation for a host of social and economic problems (*Aged* 53). As the Boomer population ages, resentment toward longevity continues to build; as Gullette notes in her most recent book, “One vile interpretation of longevity (that more people living longer produces intolerable medical expense) makes the long-lived a national threat” (*Agenise* 49). Maruge’s fight for education parallels the “Greedy Geezer” rhetorics that perennially circulate in the U.S. political arena and support imagined struggles over education, social security, healthcare, jobs, or other resources.

Although literacy is configured as a source of power, it is not merely his sense of justice that motivates Maruge’s claim on education. To deny

Maruge education is to deny him the chance to become intellectually honorable. In the third and final metaphor of literacy, we find a motive for learning that embraces the intellectual virtues of particular cultural contexts—at the expense of others.

#### LITERACY AS A STATE OF GRACE

Scribner's third and final metaphor of literacy, *literacy as a state of grace*, can be recognized in the founding principles of liberal education, in which learning outcomes are largely about shaping the individual thinker, rather than providing specific credentials or skill sets directly applicable to a vocational path. The cultivation of habits of mind (or "intellectual virtues," in Aristotelian terms) connotes ethical and cultural orientations toward literacy, as well as a belief in the essential value of literacy for personal development above and beyond the practical or political functions literacy might also serve. Literacy as a state of grace names the belief in literacy as a sacred point of access to intellectual, creative, and/or spiritual life (Scribner 14).

*The First Grader* implies that literacy will make Maruge "better," not only by helping him to become an active, critical participant in a modern literate society, but also by becoming the kind of modern man who embraces a life of the mind over the cruder practices of physical labor. Maruge becomes a pious exemplar of aging manhood (notably, no older women are depicted in the film), in contrast to the film's other elder characters. All homogeneously named "Old Codger" in the film's official credits, the four other elders spend their days slouched on the dirt porch of a squat, windowless building. After his initial rejection from school, Maruge walks by the Old Codgers, who call out to him: "Come join us. Life is short and the beer is good." When Maruge ignores them, they scoff: "Maruge thinks he's too good to have a drink with us." While perhaps not contributing much to the community or to their own health, the Codgers perform a culturally accepted model of elderhood, familiar to Western contexts: stay among your age group, stay chemically comfortable, and stay out of the way. Maruge, however, chooses to walk in the street and mix it up in a schoolyard filled

with children. His pursuit of intellectual virtue makes him inherently more respectable as a modern protagonist. He appears to exemplify the “successful aging” model promoted by Rowe and Kahn—and also much criticized (e.g., Cruikshank 2)—that emphasizes high cognitive and physical function and active engagement in daily life through social relationships and meaningful activities.

While Maruge’s literate state of grace makes him more intellectually pious than his peers, his advanced age forces a departure from the usual configuration of the state of grace metaphor. Described in Scribner’s terms as having “self-enhancing aspects,” the state of grace metaphor in Maruge’s literacy narrative does not track Maruge’s growth and development. Indeed, Maruge’s attitudes and behaviors change very little over the course of the film: he remains, throughout the onscreen action, an embittered, temperamental, and (at best) semi-literate character who consistently demonstrates fatherly (even grandfatherly) affection for teacher Jane and the school children. Nor is Maruge’s intellectual piety valued as inspiration for other elders to change their ways. Whether Maruge truly achieves a higher state of intellectual being is rendered virtually irrelevant, so long as his life and struggle can inspire learning and literacy among members of younger generations.

Developing literacy, however, means more than mastering the skills of inscribing Greek-based letter systems or decoding words on a page. In this literacy narrative, learning also means becoming enlightened to the primitiveness of older ways of being and knowing. For Maruge, literacy alone separates man from beast. He tells fellow students that “a goat cannot read. A goat cannot write his name,” and that unless they study hard, they will wind up like him, “an old man no better than a goat.” Teacher Jane further buttresses students’ hope for ascension to a higher state through literacy, by acknowledging that the torch of literacy has been passed from generation to generation: “You know, my mother never went to school. But she said to me, ‘Jane, you must love education because I want you to be better than me.’ Now I am your mother. And I’m telling you all, you must love education so that you can be better than me and all of us teachers

here.” Maruge’s state of grace is not achieved in elevating himself above the level of livestock, but in setting the bar higher for future generations.

That Maruge’s education is for the betterment of his country’s future rests on a deep and enduring belief in the developed world that literacy is inherently a marker of an advanced culture. The drive to become a bookish society reiterates a long-held belief in what literacy scholarship now refers to as “great divide” theories that make hierarchical distinctions between literate and oral (or “preliterate”) cultures. Represented most notably by the work of Jack Goody and Ian Watt, Eric Havelock, and Walter Ong, great divide or “great leap” theories that separate literacy and orality contend that reading and writing alter individual minds as well as collective cultures. Summarized by David Barton, great divide theories claim that “modern literate societies are fundamentally different in many aspects of social organization from earlier simpler societies and that these differences are ultimately attributable to literacy” (119).

The great divide theory of literacy has since been roundly challenged by ethnographic studies of literacy (see, for example, Heath; Scribner and Cole; Street). Yet, the false separation between orality and literacy, and its subsequent privileging of literacy as a sign of forward progress, endures in public discourses and implicit cultural values. Indeed, the distinction extends to a cultural mandate: in order for a society or an individual to become fully civilized in the modern sense, they must do more than embrace the written word; they must also abandon oral traditions. We see this belief in literacy as the key to cultural progress play out in *The First Grader* primarily through tropes of modernity and movement from the rural third-world to the metropolitan developed world. Maruge’s educational experiences are marked—quite literally—by a journey from illiterate darkness into increasingly literate light, from rural periphery to metropolitan center. By the time the film concludes, Maruge has journeyed from the shadowy interior of his pastoral home, to the raw sunshine of the village schoolyard, to the polished, manufactured surfaces of Nairobi, and finally (offscreen) on his first airplane trip to speak at a United Nations meeting in New York City. Throughout his journey, however, we are reminded

that a man of Maruge's age is out of sync with modernity. He is betrayed as a primitive outsider when he violates decorum and doles out corporal punishment with the walking staff that has marked him as decidedly "other" in the schoolyard. Audiences are again reminded of the impossibility that Maruge's body will ever weave seamlessly into the fabric of the new age when Maruge goes to Nairobi to attend the Adult Learning Centre, which school officials have deemed more appropriate for him. With no money to take the bus that zooms past him, Maruge limps with his walking stick over what must be a considerable distance from his village to the urban learning center. Once he has arrived at the center, his stooped, cloaked body stands out in sharp contrast to the visual rhetoric he finds within the center. It's a scene American audiences might recognize from *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, displaying marginal young lives spent milling about in educational institutions: loud hip-hop music echoes down darkened hallways, occupied by (apparently) idle young adults wearing emblems of American hip-hop culture—oversized earrings, reversed baseball caps, knit winter hats, brightly dyed hair. Whatever the problems with the literacy center itself, it is clear that Maruge's body does not fit in. Even should he learn to read and write, his assimilation into a modern state of grace will remain incomplete—and happily so.

Audiences are reminded that Maruge, marked as a living anachronism, will never really achieve the state of grace to which his young classmates might strive, as the new standard of grace is marked in large part by assimilation into Western cultural forms. Within such forms, literacy can too easily be singularized, adopting the autonomous view of literacy described by Brian Street, in which literacy is understood as a decontextualized set of specific skills, rather than ideological practices that are both contextual and political. Such an autonomous view is clearly the basis of the village school superintendent's strict control over teaching practices—a strictness that works in favor of only the most narrow, formulaic forms of teaching (such as teacher Alfred's unbending insistence that literacy means sharp pencils and straight lines). From an autonomous view of literacy, the fact that

Maruge stands out as having a body (in that it is marked as the primitive Other) only furthers his distinction as illiterate. Like the goat to which Maruge compared himself, Maruge's illiterate body is marked by a closeness to labor, to the earth, and to orality. But if Maruge is a representative of the world that his country is so eager to leave behind, how can he hope to serve as a model to the students?

Neither a credentialed teacher nor an unmolded student, Maruge seems permanently caught between the worlds of the literate elite and the preliterate proletariat. Yet Maruge does manage to locate a kind of third space in his aging body. In age studies, the aging body is a lightning rod of cultural meaning. As Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick remind us in their introduction to *Images of Aging*, "the aging body is never just a body subjected to the imperatives of cellular and organic decline..." (2–3). On the one hand, Maruge's body seems to be a "mask of ageing" (Featherstone and Hepworth) that imprisons his youthful potential within a wrinkled, gray-haired, hobbling form that prevents his full acceptance into a civilized, literate state. On the other hand, Maruge's body provides a transitional point that does not force him to reject his past in order to embrace the future.

The third-space potential of Maruge's body emerges most dramatically in a climactic scene following teacher Jane's removal from the school, when he returns to Nairobi, this time wearing a blazer and using the modern convenience of a bus service—though he also brings a goat on a leash, reminding us that he remains tethered to agrarian, preliterate culture.<sup>5</sup> Arriving (sans goat) at the sleek offices of the Ministry of Education, Maruge again breaks modern decorum and interrupts a meeting of high-ranking bureaucrats, despite the protests of a frantic receptionist. A disembodied male voice—the chairman's—offers Maruge permission to speak; unlike Maruge's, the chairman's body remains out of focus for the majority of the scene, as only as a vague shape seated at the center of a U-shaped boardroom table. Fully in focus and in close-up, Maruge reminds his captive audience that he, like the nation's founding fathers, served in detention camps under British rule. Lifting his outstretched arm

toward a line of perhaps ten neatly framed black-and-white photographs, he reminds the board of the sacrifices of those founding fathers, whose faces (he also points out) now occupy a visual space once occupied by a single portrait: “Before, it was only the queen’s face there.”

Then, Maruge assures that his audience sees what they, as members of a younger generation and leaders of the new age, might never have seen with their own eyes. Turning his back, Maruge sets his staff on the conference table and steps unassisted to the center of the room to remove his blazer and shirt. Naked to the waist, he raises his arms to shoulder height, displaying his posterior as the camera slowly closes in on the center of his back: a canvas marked crosswise by laceration scars. “The British did this to me,” he explains. “They cracked my skull. They chopped off my toes.” As an uncomfortable board member protests, Maruge stops describing his bodily damage and instead adopts the language of literacy as a state of grace. In a tight shot of his face and bare shoulders, he says, “We have to learn from our past. We must not forget. But we must be better. We need good teachers. We reap what we sow with our children. Bring her back.” Without a further word from his audience, Maruge collects his shirt, coat, and cane, and leaves.

In this moment of bodily rhetoric—which is ultimately successful in its purpose—Maruge’s nonliteracy does not preclude his communicative competence in other forms, nor does his otherwise out-of-place body undermine his ability to contribute to national progress. Maruge reminds the board members that there are, in fact, important communicative practices that predate the mass literacy program, including physical signs that must be read alongside alphabetic texts. Maruge’s body-as-text reminds those who “read” it of the sacrifices made in the name of progress: his use of a cane and his deafness can no longer be read simply as signs of old age and weakness, but as reminders of the political violence that severed his toes and pierced his eardrums—signs of a past that would be dangerous to forget in the shine of the documentary future. This is not the first time that Maruge’s body has been used as an object or sign; minutes earlier in the film, we see Maruge’s smiling face on government-produced billboards

and signs bearing the slogans, “The power is in the pen” and “It’s never too late to learn”—words Maruge still couldn’t read. Rather than using his appearance as an abstract icon of literacy’s value, however, Maruge recasts his body as a sign of physical collateral damage and as a caution to “read the world” alongside the word.

Maruge’s subversive character operates within a film that was explicitly designed to retell the master narrative of literacy’s inherent value for achieving a national state of grace. Bracketing his subversive visual display, Maruge begins and ends with a singular, simple purpose: “I’m here for a teacher.” In other words, while Maruge is a stark, visual reminder of the violence carried by British oppressors, he is unwilling to question the value of the educational system and values being appropriated from that same oppressive force. Indeed, according to production notes, director Justin Chadwick was “keen to stress” that his film is, ultimately, about “the importance of education in people’s lives” (qtd. in Goldcrest Films 16). Despite “squirreling in hard-hitting issues” (which, I can only surmise, include colonial oppression, violent uprising, torture, ageism, and the like) Chadwick aimed, in his own words, for “essentially an uplifting story about the power of education” (qtd. in Goldcrest Films 8). Like *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers* that came before it, Chadwick’s vision of the film seems to address only the uplifting possibilities of literacy and learning.

However, despite this vision, Maruge’s filmic body offers—even if unintentionally, and if only for a moment—a counterclaim to the Ministry’s (and the filmmakers’) blind faith in the written word, which abstracts and obscures the embodied experiences and sacrifices of those who have not been well served by a documentary society. In such moments, we might glimpse alternative possibilities for literacy and for elders. Even if authorized master narratives of literacy and aging fail to do so, the joint analysis of age studies and literacy studies might recognize the important contributions and challenges studies of elders make to perceptions of literacy and learning, and vice versa.

## CONCLUSION

As a fictionalized literacy narrative featuring an elder protagonist, *The First Grader* invites cooperative inquiry between age studies and literacy studies, each of which has a vested interest in examining (and critiquing) prevailing ideas about their respective subjects. In other words, Maruge's cinematic story is "a model against which we can read others" (Eldred and Mortensen 513). As Maruge's character functions as a disruptive presence throughout the film, he might also present a model for disrupting popular and scholarly perceptions of literacy and aging. In the film, literacy and aging work in tandem as means of Maruge's social and political exclusion. When we include the category of aging, rhetoric and composition can be more fully aware of the diverse meanings of literacy over time and over a lifespan, and the mechanisms by which literacy is used to reinforce existing hierarchies. Likewise, as demonstrated by the work of scholars like Ruth E. Ray or W. Ross Winterowd, when scholars examine literate activity as a mechanism by which age is given meaning, they more ably identify the individual and social dimensions of the aging experience.

The film reveals how age complicates literacy by suggesting that elder members of a culture might present alternative or even resistant meanings of literacy, as well as alternative pathways to literacy learning. In particular, Maruge's elder body raises challenges to the autonomous model of literacy and to the literacy myth that, in part, sponsored Kenya's push toward mass literacy. When Maruge's scars, deafness, and walking staff are understood as signs of history rather than other-ness or uselessness, he can teach students, teachers, villagers, and bureaucrats that mass literacy is not, in itself, progress. In fact, mass literacy—when implemented with narrow definitions of what counts as literacy, and who counts as literate—is foremost an act of forgetting. Maruge's aged body might be a kind of required reading for those developing literacy in the years following colonial oppression.

To begin with, Maruge's body marks the inseparability of literacy and orality, and the insufficiencies of the alphabetic literacies taught in the Western-style schoolroom. Rather than the autonomous model of literacy that teacher Jane's supervisors try to impose on the school,

Maruge is a relentless reminder that any literacy is always ideological, and always co-existing alongside other literacies and communicative practices—including Maruge’s highly developed aural/oral communication. Indeed, within the overcrowded classroom at Maruge’s school are students with a range of literacies, abilities, and intellectual interests. In such a diverse setting, the elder Maruge becomes an asset, as he is able to assist in the education of students whose ways of learning do not align with the uniform, standardized practices of the class, including Kamau, a student who exhibits signs of dysgraphia and who benefits from Maruge’s rhyming mnemonics.

More important than using his aurality as ancillary to mass literacy development, Maruge’s presence in the classroom is also a reminder that the literacies privileged there are the literacies of the oppressor. By bringing his own oral histories to the modern classroom, Maruge can ensure that the violence of literacy will not go unexamined. We see potential for this as Maruge holds an impromptu lesson on political history and language when a student asks about his prisoner ID bracelet. “The British stole our land,” he explains, “So we said they must give it back. They told us to be quiet. So we spoke very loud.” When a student asks if they gave the land back, Maruge explains that some did, and “that was *uburu*,” introducing the Swahili word. Looking around the English-speaking students’ uncomprehending faces, he asks, in teacherly form, “What does *uburu* mean?” Hearing no answer, Maruge begins to chant in English, shaking a clenched fist for emphasis: “*Freedom!*” The students respond in kind, and they begin a multilingual chant: “*Uburu! Freedom!*” As an elder with expertise in older ways of knowing and being, Maruge calls attention to the fact that literacy and aurality are perhaps best used jointly, rather than separately and hierarchically, as Western systems of education often do (Selfe). In short, Maruge advocates for pedagogical recognition that multiple ways of communicating and knowing the world exist and hold value.

Through his acts of disruption in the classroom and in the boardroom (and perhaps even at the UN), Maruge defies the literacy myth that has begun to emerge in his village. His very body delineates the limits of

literacy, and reminds his audience that literacy itself does not guarantee social uplift. Without a critical understanding of literacy situated in its historical context, literacy is simply violence and colonialism in a new form. By implying the need for multiliteracies, both to support individual learning and to maintain a critical watch over the push to develop the national economy through educational programs, Maruge insists that literacy learning for everybody means literacy richly and critically defined.

Although largely fictional, Maruge's cinematic literacy narrative suggests points of juncture for further cross-disciplinary work between age studies and literacy studies that would have much to say about the non-fictional intersections of aging and literacy. Such questions include: In what ways are literacy and education being treated as a figurative bone in a culturally constructed dogfight between the old and the young? How might literacy (and illiteracy) serve as gatekeeping mechanisms for elders? How is the expertise of practitioners, such as writers and educators, brought into question in later life? How are cultural attitudes toward old age and aging transferred through the transcultural global flows of literacies and literate technologies? How do other social identity categories, such as gender, place further pressures on the literacy development of elders?

However important it is that age studies and literacy studies continue to attend to the cultural depictions of literacy and aging in popular discourses that might inspire cross-disciplinary points of inquiry, it is important, too, that they also continue to attend to literacy and aging as lived experiences. As a film serving a particular narrative arc and not a full biography, *The First Grader* does not (could not) depict the extent to which Maruge actually learns to read and write, or what, actually, becomes of him and his people. The real Maruge, it turns out, died of stomach cancer at age eighty-nine as an internally displaced person, or IDP, having lost his property during a period of political upheaval in 2007 (Anyangu, n.p.). While news stories about his life almost universally emphasize themes of success and inspiration, the reports of his IDP status and cancer diagnosis suggest a far more complicated life, in which literacy could only do so much. In order to note such tensions between

the literacy myths we want to read and watch, and the realities of literate lives that are often difficult to bear, it is important that age studies and literacy studies scholars collect and examine literacy narratives from elders who find themselves navigating a cultural shift in which particular forms of literacy function as obstacles and as opportunities for social adaptation, empowerment, and cultural enrichment.

If nothing else, then, *The First Grader* should spur more scholars in age studies and in rhetoric and composition to examine—perhaps even collaboratively—the intersections of their fields through literacy narratives, as told by elders. Just as elders’ life stories have expanded and enriched our perspectives on the aging experience, examinations of literacy narratives (which we might understand as a specific genre of life story) told from the lived experience of elders can also uncover counternarratives to the popular and pervasive “grand narratives” of literacy (Daniell) in regard to aging. In rhetoric and composition, non-fiction literacy narratives are already recognized as valuable caches of information about emergent values, beliefs, and identities that are otherwise obscured by such grand-scale “prefigured ideas” of literacy that we might expect to find in fiction and popular discourse.<sup>6</sup> By observing how narratives of literacy such as those represented in *The First Grader* are internalized and/or resisted in the literate lives of elders, we can, like Maruge, create a productive disciplinary disruption. A deliberate, shared analysis of the literacy narratives of elders would better capture the mutual constitution of old age and literacy, and thus, perhaps, further complicate disciplinary definitions of both.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The launching of Kenya’s Universal Primary Education (UPE) program in January 2003 coincided with the beginning of the United Nations Literacy Decade, a resolution by the UN to foster literacy development through the Education for All program (the program’s slogan, “Literacy as Freedom,” is implied as a recurring theme in *The First Grader*) (United Nations Grand Assembly). However, the push toward universal primary education in Kenya had been decades in the making. Two years prior to Kenya’s independence from British rule in 1963, the Conference of the African States on the Development of Education in Africa set goals and developed plans toward universal primary education in Africa (UN Commission for Africa and UNESCO, cited in Sifuna 691). Then, in 1973, a presidential decree promised free primary education for

all Kenyan children up to the fourth year of schooling, while more advanced levels required payment of tuition. By the end of the next decade, however, high demand and strained resources (facilities, materials, teaching personnel, etc.) made it necessary for the Kenyan government to introduce a cost sharing policy, according to which students' parents and their communities were partly responsible for sponsoring all primary education, which reduced education quality and caused a decline in enrollment rates (Sifuna 693). Although Kenya's celebrated 2003 UPE program aimed to counteract these negative effects and fulfill a decades-long goal, the program was initiated without sufficient resources in place (Sifuna 695)—a massive challenge to local school communities, which is dramatized by early scenes of *The First Grader*.

<sup>2</sup> Winking at the conspiracy theory that questioned President Barack Obama's American citizenship and Kenyan heritage, villagers in one scene discuss whether Michelle Obama is South African or Kenyan. As it is doubtful that Michelle Obama would be the subject of gossip in a small Kenyan village in 2003, I take this as a sign that the film aims at American audiences.

<sup>3</sup> In their excellent study of compulsory schooling in the United States, Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz point out that, at least during a critical moment in the nineteenth century, primary education could pay off for the individual worker. Today, however, the stakes are much higher for education programs worldwide: "An educated citizenry does not guarantee rapid growth and inclusion in the 'convergence club' of nations, but the inverse of that statement is generally true" (13).

<sup>4</sup> Several Mau Mau elders sued the British Government for damages in 2005. It wasn't until 2013, however, that a large settlement between the British Government and the Mau Mau was made, far too late for Maruge to have actually benefitted (Press Association).

<sup>5</sup> Jane had been relocated to another school three hundred miles away following her decision to privately tutor Maruge after he had been removed from the school by the superintendent.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, narratives provide rich evidence of literacy's knotted connections to questions of social class (Brodkey; Rose); race and ethnicity (M. Young; V. A. Young); and transnational flows of people, ideas, and goods (Berry, Hawisher, and Selfe).

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