

## CHOICES WE CAN BELIEVE IN: CITY PARENTS AND SCHOOL CHOICE

David E. Kirkland  
*New York University*

*“Choices We Can Believe In” explores (parental) “school choice” as postcolonial phenomenon. Based on ethnographic interviews Kirkland finds that, for four inner city parents, available school choices are in essence forced choices: the choice to remain in one’s community but endure poor schools, or the choice to abandon one’s community for better schools but endure nascent and sometimes blatant discrimination and other associated hardships. Each of these choices comes with ulterior consequences that eliminate them from being rational or free. As such, neither of these options is adequate for citizens of an evolved democracy. In this way, Kirkland argues that the “free choice” movement is very much a mirage that obscures historical integration efforts, leaving today’s schools to bathe in the failed backdrop of a pre-Brown educational politic that sanctions schooling as a way to reproduce social inequities. Without a true treatise toward making all school integrateable, Kirkland suggests that any effort at providing broad school choices will disintegrate into what amounts to neo-segregation or educational colonialism. To resolve this dilemma, Kirkland calls for comprehensive school reform that has at its end “integrateable schools” as opposed to integration itself. For Kirkland, integrateable schools can move us closer to integration by offering parents real school choice based on an available pool of schools that are safe, non-discriminatory and have as their design a holistic model that values and mixes the common and complex cultures of all Americans.*

At the time that I interviewed the parents of the subaltern<sup>i</sup>, the hidden costs of school choice were, indeed, grave. Yet these costs, which can be traced to the era of segregation, lay hidden in the presumption that schools and communities are not created equally. While there may, in fact, be some truth to this claim (Barret, 2006; De Vos & Suárez-Orozco, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Sleeter & Grant, 1987), its proclamation suggests an overly essentialized view of American schools, where parents seem to submit to the way things are, insisting upon a dull conclusion that does not consider, allow for, or demand change.

For Kara, Gwen, Rachel, and Manuela, school choice had been shaped in the presumption that some things—schools and communities—were essentially better than others. According to Rachel, “That’s just the way it is.” This presumption alone, I argue, challenges any notion of free choice because who would choose the “inferior” option?<sup>2</sup> In making the pivotal choice over what schools to send their children, suburban parents have rarely been

required to cross geographic borders (Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003). By contrast, city parents—such as Kara, Gwen, Rachel, and Manuela—are frequently compelled to cross borders, both geographic and cultural (Noguera, 2003a). Usually their crossings mean leaving behind a physical and ideational space and conducting a literal and figurative march of treason, where the children of the subaltern are expected to abandon communities and friends, languages and lifestyles (Ogbu, 2003; Smitherman, 2006).

For much of the twentieth century, this march was seen as an upward climb away from the segregated schools that lay nested in the permanent borders of the United States. The goal of this movement, which gained legal backing with *Brown*, was to provide parents, who are usually poorer and minority, with greater access to the choices needed to ensure their children the best education possible. However, it is not clear whether or not *Brown* accomplished this goal. To what degree can these parents make free choices? Such an aporia wraps itself around a larger question—a question that guides this work: Can the parents featured in this study freely choose their child(ren)’s school?

To address this question, I critically analyze the discourses<sup>ii</sup> of school choice persistent in my conversations with Kara, Gwen, Rachel, and Manuela. The purpose of my analysis, here, is to reveal the “taken-for-grantedness” of the ideological messages that characterize these parents’ choices over where to send their children to school. In doing so, I treat the parents’ choices as a type of social practice representative of discursive and ideological systems, and ask: In what ways might the parents have reinforced the ideologies of segregation in their school choices instead of disrupting them? That is, in choosing to leave and sometimes in having to stay in city schools, the parents of the subaltern may have been speaking for another group whose interests they had interpellated for their own. In this process of being passively and unconsciously drawn into dominant assumptions, or dominant discourses (e.g. City schools are bad and suburban schools are good.), the parents of the subaltern may have thought—as the dominant discourses of school choice certainly encourage them to do—that they had a genuine choice and that somehow this choice expressed their individuality. In propping up dominant discourses, such choices, if analyzed critically, may reveal the relative small degree of power these parents actually exercised.

## From Segregation to Resegregation

Before analyzing the parents' school choices, it is helpful to review the historical legacy in which these parents' school choices are embedded. This history reveals sets of movements that at certain points—perhaps long ago—turned on themselves. The national journey away from school segregation, by 1954, seemed to happen “with all deliberate speed” (Siddle Walker, 2001). *Brown*, the engine for this movement, represented a leap in civil, racial, and human jurisprudence and the power of a nation to take bold and principled steps toward promoting justice even in the face of chronic injustice, social derision, and cultural intimidation (Thomas, Chinn, Perkins, & Carter, 1994). As the country marched past segregation, social mobility was supposed to spread across the country (Labaree, 1997).

However, as U.S. schools moved farther away from *Brown*, they have arguably moved further away from its promises. Segregation continues to have a powerful sway in U.S. schooling, denoting a painful legacy of legal and illegal separation of peoples by race and increasingly by class (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Orfield & Yun, 1999; Prendergast, 2002). This practice of forced separation has centralized the values of the social and cultural elite, projecting elite privilege onto mechanisms of social organization and apparatuses of social capital (Coleman, et al., 1966; Noguera, 2003a; Wells & Serna, 1996)—chiefly schools. In turn, schools have displaced non-elite groups, resigning them to marginal postures that limit their social mobility (Fruchter, 2007; Noguera, 2003a; Wells & Serna, 1996). In this way, the non-elite have been compartmentalized to specific sectors of society—reservations and ghettos, poor ethnic districts, and rural communities (Borjas, 1999; Thorne, 1997; Willis, 2002; Wong, 1988).

This division of people into spatial camps can sometimes fog differences experienced by groups. For example, individuals living in cities experienced the consequences of segregation differently than individuals living in other regions of the US. According to Fruchter (2007):

[In many Northern, Midwestern, and Western cities] The threat of integrated schooling, combined with the process of industrial dispersion, suburban housing development, and highway construction influenced millions of white middle- and working-class families to leave central cities for the neighboring suburbs. Low-cost mortgages, subsidized by the federal government but made available almost entirely to white families only, helped spark this movement. In many cities, blockbusting by the same consortia of realtors that had maintained white-only neighborhoods also helped to swell the exodus and turn the core neighborhoods of central cities into all-black districts (p. 13).

Noguera (2003a) suggests, “Changes in nomenclature [a naming system peculiar to a social group] reflect more than just ideological and political trends” (p. 23). For Noguera:

The association between the term *urban* and people and places that are poor and non-White is tied to the demographic and economic transformations that occurred in cities throughout the United States during the past 50 years....In the 1950s, federal policies hastened the decline of cities as new highways were constructed, making it easier for the middle class to move out of cities to obtain a piece of the American dream: a single-family home located in the suburbs (pp. 23-24).

As many cities grew darker following precipitous White Flight, White city school enrollments drastically declined. In cities such as Detroit, this decline has been as much as 90 percent post-*Brown* (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007). With jobs and housing moving to suburban regions, many people began to view cities such as Detroit through a deficit lens. By the early 1970s, cities like Detroit were no longer seen as housing the best institutions—schools, jobs, families, etc. Instead, they became associated with crime and violence (Anyon, 1995; Fine & Weis, 1998; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Wilson, 1987) and “disproportionately comprised of residents who were poor and non-White” (Noguera, 2003a, p. 25).

This deficit view of the city and its poor, non-White residents questioned not only its economy, but also its morality. In this light, cities as vast as New York and as luminous as Las Vegas were better known for drugs, gangs, and sex than for any other alluring qualities they might possess. Further, with the rise of drugs, gangs, and a culture of burlesque, the 1980s would see another dip in the public’s perception of U.S. cities (Wilson, 1987). The resulting image produced a spectacular range of things, chiefly a deteriorating city positioned against an imagined suburb. By many accounts (cf. Baker, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Orfield & Yun, 1999), this image has given way to discourses of resegregation, which have served to extend

segregation's legacy not simply into separate and unequal classes, but also into a better and worse America.

There is evidence that segregation has not only continued today but has, in fact, increased (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007; Orfield & Yun, 1999). The modern presence of segregation—what Orfield has termed “resegregation” and what I call *neosegregation*<sup>iii</sup>—updates the ravages of segregation. For Orfield and his colleagues, desegregation efforts have not fully worked as they are merely positing an idea of change under the illusion of “choice.” Schools, they believe, reproduce many of the abuses of segregation, including high concentrations of capital and resources to a few privileged hands. New trends of segregation are particularly disturbing as student populations become more diverse. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), “The percentage of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the nation’s public schools increased from 22 percent in 1972 to 31 percent in 1986 to 43 percent in 2006” (p. iv). The most dramatic growth is seen among Latino students, who “represented 20 percent of public school enrollment, up from 6 percent in 1972 and 11 percent in 1986” (p. iv.).

In spite of growing trends in diversity, Latino students, the fastest growing demographic enrolling in American schools, are also the most segregated minority group, with steadily rising segregation since federal data were first collected a third of a century ago (Gándara, 2000; Moll & Ruiz, 2002; Orfield, 1995; M. M. Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2002). According to Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield (2003), “Latinos are segregated both by race and poverty, and a pattern of linguistic segregation is also developing” (p. 4). For some scholars, such trends are especially damning because it gives U.S. society one more way to exclude its minority populations (M. M. Suárez-Orozco & Pérez, 2002; Suro, 1998).

Neosegregation has affected other American racial groups as well. For example, a growing proportion of Black students, as much as one-in-four in the Northeast and Midwest, attend what Frankenberg *et al.* calls “apartheid schools,” schools with overwhelming minority populations (99-100%) where “enormous poverty, limited resources, and social and health problems of many types are concentrated” (p. 5). In addition, White students are perhaps the most segregated racial group attending American public schools. According to Frankenberg *et al.*, “they attend schools, on average, where eighty percent of the student body is white” (p. 4). These educational trends demonstrate, that while America is an excitingly diverse place made

richer by its diversity, it is also a divided nation, troubled by its deep divisions, where trends of poverty and miseducation correlate too well with racial segregation.

While the *Brown* ruling set forth the course of legal reforms needed to challenge these divisions, it also seemed to strengthen the dominant discourses that, in effect, have reproduced segregation—that White is right, that elite values are most desirable, that cities are slums when compared to suburbs, etc. In effect, *Brown*, while promoting school desegregation, never set forth a real plan to stimulate school integration (Noguera, 2003a). Such a plan would imply not only the allowance of cultural hybridity where groups take on many of each other’s ways of living and thinking, but also the allowance of free choice where groups are given a liberal set of options that come with few consequences.

*Brown’s* biggest and perhaps only success has been to promote massive school desegregation particularly through busing programs that forced choices<sup>iv</sup> onto people who did not necessarily want them. In this way, the *Brown* solution came in the form of massive appeals garnered by coercion, which brought communities and cultures together in unholy unions, wedding two under-committed partners for better or worse. Indeed, it has been for worse that the discourses of choice that have been internalized and (I argue) have helped to transmit urban educational inferiority. This explains in part why even non-racist White parents (the vast majority of White parents) resist sending their children to most public schools in culturally diverse cities. While it can be argued that such resistance to integration only undermines desegregation, we must also keep in mind that White parents are not the only ones running away from such city schools. As perceptions of schools in U.S. cities grow worse, non-White parents too have increasingly sought educational alternatives for their children within and outside the city limits (Fruchter, 2007; Noguera, 2001, 2003a; Oakes & Lipton, 2002; Willis, 2003).

While parents throughout American cities and suburbs desire the best possible education for their children, questions remain about the role of segregation in American education. Do we remain a set of divided school systems? Do we continue to push for integrated schools? While these questions require much thought and complex solutions, what seems clear is that, as it becomes more diverse, America needs stronger schools capable of unifying its students in order to meet the challenges and capitalize on the promises of its unique blend of people. These schools must be designed to bridge cultural and linguistic differences

and educate all youth regardless of ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic background. As the nation tiptoes farther into the new millennium, a deeper question shall become more pressing: how do we move the nation beyond the petty divisions that have long fractured it into separate and unequal parts?

### **Postcolonial Stirrings in the Shadow of *Brown*: Theoretical Considerations**

Using postcolonial theories, I view the discourses framing school choice as constructing sets of distinctions, where a hegemony of western cultural norms prevail. Such distinctions have also gained critique in Whiteness studies, which have examined the ways in which dominant social and cultural discourses prop up White privilege (Marx, 2004; Richardson & Villenas, 2000). It is thus through a postcolonial lens that the hegemony of western culture and the privilege of Whites become visible. Once revealed, such visibilities can never again be hidden in objective light. As Fanon (1961) puts it: for non-Whites, “objectivity is always directed against him” (p. 77).

On the other hand, unexamined acts, such as school choice are revealed to be particularly political ones, which intermingle with the cultural vibrations of history, the polity of social space, the articulations of identity, etc. Parents might not recognize all that is going on when choosing “the best school” for their child(ren). Thus, the question—can the parents of the subaltern choose—raises the scepter of how choices can be rendered and received. That is, the choices that one makes can be seen as constructions based on positions of privilege and power, neglect and marginality that—like a colonizing relation—trade on false notions of individuality to sustain prevailing interests that sanction and serve western cultural hegemony and White privilege. Situating school choice in this context challenges our understanding of how choices exist. It changes choice from something individual to something historical that is buried in a sea of elite discourses.

## **Methods**

### **Contexts**

This study is set in the metro Detroit area, a region that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the “ground zero” of education. The metro Detroit area is also important for

this study because of its history of segregation. According to Frankenberg and Orfield, Detroit is “emblematic of the racial divide that cleaves unto the US” (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007, p. 4). Other scholars view Detroit as the most interesting example of a postindustrial city, battered by joblessness, social exodus, residential gentrification, racism, and a collapsed urban infrastructure (Farley, Danziger, & Holzer, 2002).

The evidence of Detroit’s decline is highlighted in its shrinking population. In 1950, the city’s population totaled approximately 1,850,000 residents. By the 2000 Census, the population had plunged in half to 951,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The population has continued to plummet since the last census. In 2006, the Census Bureau estimated the city’s population at approximately 834,000. The most recent figures suggest that the city is still hemorrhaging people at the rate of as many as 20,000 people *a year* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004), and the number of abandoned housing units in the city has more than doubled from 38,668 to 85,951 in six years (2000-2006). Much of Detroit’s population decline has been due to the mass exodus of its White and middle class Black populations. For example, in the 6-year period between 2000 and 2006, the Census estimated that Detroit’s White population declined from 99,921 to 68,883, an estimated 8.3% of Detroit’s entire population. By comparison, Blacks made up 83% of the city’s population in 2006.

The Detroit area is perhaps the most segregated geographic region in the U.S (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2007). For example, Southeast Michigan’s greater Grosse Pointe area—a suburban region just east of Detroit—is 95.6% White according to 2000 Census data. Only 1% of the households in Grosse Pointe, according to the 2000 Census, were Black. Patterns of racial segregation are nothing new to the industrial Midwest. Such patterns are continuations of a resegregating nation. Segregation is equally entrenched in Midwestern cities from Chicago to Milwaukee (Frankenberg, et al., 2003). However, the degree to which Detroit is segregated represents a seismic event in American geographical history not seen since the Black Northern migration that began in the 1920s (Farley, et al., 2002). Therefore, Detroit is the perfect context for examining the discourses of school choice and the politics of segregation.



### The Parents of the Subaltern (Detroit)

The parents participating in this study are all from Detroit. They represent the racial and socioeconomic make up of the City. Kara is a 47-year old African American divorced single mom, who sends her son, Chris, to a predominantly White private school “inconveniently” (for her) located in one of the City’s northwest suburbs. Her son Chris, who commutes beyond city borders each morning, is the youngest of two older siblings, who attended and graduated from Detroit Public Schools (DPS). Gwen is a 33-year old mother of five. Her oldest daughter attends a neighborhood high school on Detroit’s Eastside. Rachel is a 35-year old single White mother with one daughter, Grace. Grace attends high school in Detroit. Finally, Manuela is a 42-year old Latina Mom of Mexican decent, who lives on Detroit’s southwest side. She sends her children to the neighborhood schools. These four mothers are among the many parents of the subaltern who grapple with the choice of where to send their children to school daily.

Table 1

*Parents of the Subaltern*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Section of City</b>	<b>School Choice</b>
Kara	47	Black	Northwest	Suburban
Gwen	33	Black	Northeast	City-Magnet
Rachel	35	White	Southeast	City-Neighborhood
Manuela	42	Latina	Southwest	City-Neighborhood

### Data Collection

I collected data for this study by interviewing the four mothers during the 2004-2005 school year as part of a larger study commissioned by the African American Language and Literacy Program at Michigan State University. Using an ethnographic interviewing approach to collect data (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Miller & Crabtree, 2004; Spradley, 1979), I asked parents the following questions: What factors did they consider in choosing schools for their child(ren)? What role did their perceptions of city schools and suburban schools play in their choices? What other factors (beyond geography) may have influenced their choices? What

did they believe were the consequences of their choices? How did they feel about those consequences?

In terms of scope, I interviewed parents individually, usually at their homes or at their children's schools. I interviewed each parent at least twice: initial interviews that took place in early September 2004, and exit interviews occurred in June 2005. I also conducted less formal interviews with parents between October 2004 and May 2005. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded following Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse approach.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the testimonial data (i.e. interview transcripts) of the four parents. The goal of my analysis was to uncover the hidden discourses behind their school choices as they appeared in their testimonies. CDA is an appropriate method for this line of inquiry, as it explores "taken-for-granted" concepts that carry assumptions housed in discourse, speech, or confession (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2004; Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005; Smitherman & van Dijk, 1988; Wodak, 2008). My primary purpose for using CDA, then, is to closely analyze such language events in order to expose the hidden ideologies or discourses that governed the four mothers' school choices.

Discourses can be analyzed in different ways at many distinct levels: linguistic, social/historical, political and a combination of the three (Rogers, et al., 2005; Wodak, 2008). For this article, I examined the parents' speech through their testimonies to uncover the social and political discourses that help shape their school choices. I am using the term "discourse" similar to Foucault (1969, 1970, 1972, 1995), who viewed the term as a practice that produces what it purports to describe. As it relates to choice, discourse in this article can be seen as a common pattern of culturally internalized expectations rather than the supposedly pure or essential decision that is traditionally implied by the term choice. When Foucault used the term, he was not always referring to "language" or any other system of representations. He was referring to something close to the Marxist term ideology, a mystification of language and systems of representation that serves specific socio-political purposes.

Following Foucault's definition of discourse, I do not offer a linguistic analysis of confessional data in this article. Rather, I aim for a much larger social analysis of language,

exploring how the parents' testimonies, working as texts, reveal hidden ideologies about their school choices. As already mentioned, I am using a postcolonial lens to uncover such ideologies and will, therefore, employ postcolonial terminology to discuss my findings. Because western White (and I would argue middle-class) culture privileges certain values, ideas, and practices over others, those associated with these things get normalized. The speech, behaviors, and institutions of the elite appear as natural, the inevitable order of things (Foucault, 1970). Hence, I hypothesize that the way the four parents interpreted and used language (defined broadly) promulgated specific views of schools and schooling, which influenced why they choose to send their children to specific schools as opposed to others.

In terms of procedure, my coding process was iterative, informed and guided by my research questions (Erickson, 1986). I developed an initial coding schema based on a random sample of interview data and coded interview data using this schema. This schema was based on my own postcolonial readings of transcripts. It is entirely possible that someone reading the interview transcripts with a different lens would arrive at different conclusions. However, to quiet my influence over the data, I have sought diligently to: (1) ground all my interpretations in the text and (2) examine my claims and interpretations within and across the contexts of the texts (Gee, 2004; Lewis & Ketter, 2004; Rogers, et al., 2005; Wodak, 2008) and in relation to theory.

### **“I ain’t got nowhere else to go”:**

#### **Revealing the Hidden Costs of School Choice in the Subaltern**

Parents who do choose to send their children to what they believe are “inferior” schools seem forced to do so because of a perceived lack of options (Diamond, Wang, & Gomez, 2004; Lareau, 1987). According to Gwen and Manuela, “We have to send our kids to the neighborhood schools [schools in the City] because we can’t afford to send them anywhere else.” Perhaps a bit more optimistic than Manuela, Gwen admitted, “At least I can send my daughter to [a magnet] school, but even [the magnet school] ain’t good as the one out there [in the suburbs].”

Conversely, parents who choose to send their children to what they feel are “superior” schools do so because they feel it is the best option they have. According to Kara:

I don't mind getting up taking Chris across town to school. I mean it's a lot of work sometimes, and he sometimes don't like going to school way out there [in the suburbs]. But he getting a good education, and at the end of the day, I know my son is safe. I don't have to worry about people hurting him or whether he gon be prepared for college or not. So it don't make no difference to me if he not here around his friends and stuff. He where he needs to be, and I'm ok with that.

Each of the parents' sentiments suggests that school choice is complicated, especially for parents living in a city like Detroit. Yet, each parent has made conscious and unconscious decisions that appear to blot out some of the very real consequences of their choices.

Their dichotomous views of schools set in place what I see as a forced choice, a choice that one makes given limited or insufficient options such as voting in a two-party political system when your politics disagree with both parties. Of course you can choose not to participate in the electoral process at all. But even this choice does not absolve you from the consequences of the election, it may in fact shape the consequences of the election less in your favor. Given this, forced choice reifies the dominant discourses of the ruling order—in this case segregation. In education, forced choices have ensured that schools remain separate and unequal.

What gets constructed through such choices is a new form of segregation that is more pernicious than its predecessor. This new form of segregation, neosegregation, is legitimated (Bowels & Gintis, 1976) through dominant discourse of segregation. It too is capable of quieting the unspoken consequences of the forced choice itself—chiefly the consequence of a system of chattel schooling that reproduces the abuses of segregation (the gross concentration of wealth and capital, undemocratic schools, ethnic and racial demagoguery, White privilege, the exploitation of poor and working communities, the displacement of local populations, and restrictions on speech and civil liberties). Drowning in a sea of consequences, neosegregation transforms into a form of modern day colonialism, where the ravages of the past become the conditions of the present. It is through examining such conditions that the hidden discourses of school choice—*internalized inferiority*, *otherness*, and *false agency*—are revealed.

### **Internalized Inferiority**

Perhaps the greatest consequence post-*Brown* has been in the way it has constructed individuals' perceptions of schools and communities. As mentioned earlier, such perceptions

usually get couched in dichotomous language: superior/inferior, good/bad, black/white (Darder, 1991). In fact, one of the major arguments given to desegregate schools is not simply because there is something essentially wrong with the system of segregation, but because some schools are viewed as essentially superior to others. Following this logic, a range of scholars have argued, in order to challenge educational inequity, children of inferior schools should be given access to superior ones, even if that means movement away from one's community, one's friends, one's knowledge, etc. (Chapa, 2002; Gilmore, 1991; Lee, 2002; Ogbu, 1990; Walqui, 2000; Willis, 2003). This argument has promoted a discourse on schools that has shaped a lingering set of beliefs, which project perhaps the most vicious stereotypes on the subaltern and its residents.

This discourse of inferiority was, indeed, internalized by the parents of the subaltern. Hence, I use, here, the concept of *internalized inferiority* to speak to the way in which the parents saw themselves and their communities as fundamentally lacking, especially in comparison to some other group or community (cf. Collins, 1986; Tatum, 1992; West, 1993). In this way, the parents of the subaltern did not see their communities or the schools in their communities in very positive light. For example, Kara believed that the schools in Detroit were "beneath" her son. According to her:

I want the best education for Chris and the schools in the City are a mess. It is a little inconvenient for us [to send Chris to school in a suburb of Detroit], but my family chips in. I don't trust Detroit Public Schools to educate my child and that's a shame. I know kids around the block who attend the neighborhood schools. It feels like they are getting the worst education possible. And the kids around here are bad. That makes schools around here dangerous, and I fear for my son's life if I send him to one of these [neighborhood] schools. A boy up the street just got shot the other day coming from school. All Chris's cousins, they go to the school just around they block. They get picked on, beat up. They beatin people up. There just aren't any good schools around here, that's it. So I send Chris to school where I know he will get a good education.

Gwen had a similar view of the City schools:

I guess I'm satisfied [with the magnet schools she sends her daughter too]. But I know that these [schools in Detroit] ain't the best schools. . . I don't know if there are benefits [to sending your children to City schools]. I mean, we all know that White folks got better schools, but I'm glad that Tiffani is where she is at. If we move to [a northeast suburb], I do feel she will get a better education though. But she might not be able to keep up with the kids out there, so I am glad where she's at.

Rachel's view of City schools even appeared bleaker than the other two parents:

I send [Grace to school in the City] because I ain't got nowhere else to send her. I'm very dissatisfied with her school. It wouldn't be my first choice. It wouldn't even be my second choice if I had one. It is hard on Grace going out there. Grace is smart. She makes friends at school, but with her being White, most of her friends don't go to school around her. . . She does fine at school, but I don't think that they are preparing her well to succeed in life.

Manuela's view of the City schools was perhaps the most nuanced. At the time of this study, she had two sons, José and Antonio, who attended high school on Detroit's Southwest side. Manuela's first language is Spanish, so she saw the school as a place where her children could gain access to mainstream English and American values:

I send him and his brother to that school for a good education. I can't help them that much. I want them to learn English because language is a barrier for us. I think we hurt them at home by speaking Spanish, sometimes. I don't let them speak Spanish that much. . . I want them to speak Spanish, but it is like a choice you have to make. . . I know that there are better schools out there. But we can't get to them, and I think the issues might be worse there because those schools [are] harder even though I think they are better.

What is interesting about the parents' discussion of the City's schools is the overwhelming belief they shared that the schools were "bad." Perhaps one of the most extreme interpretations of this sense of "badness" was expressed by Kara, who also believed that City children were equally bad. From their conversations, we can infer how the parents felt about suburban (White) schools. I think Manuela summed up the group's sentiment when she said: "I think they are better." Hence, the parents shared an overall feeling that the City was bad and the suburbs were good, that schools in the City offered diminished possibilities, while schools in the suburbs offered "a good education." Moreover, when they "had" to send their kids to City schools, parents like Rachel did so under tremendous duress. Perhaps ironically, Gwen and Manuela felt, too, that their children would be best served in the "inferior" schools of Detroit because, as Manuela put it, suburban schools are "harder."

#### Discussion of Internalized Inferiority

Operating within the historical backdrop of segregation, it becomes clear that the parents of the subaltern viewed their neighborhood schools as inferior to the schools outside their local contexts, which they imagined as superior. The idea of inferior urban schools and communities is often reinforced through the news and popular media, which depict city schools in the worst light as chaotic, barbaric, and bellicose (Fine & Weis, 1998; Noguera, 2003a). The parents, as well as popular media, imagined schools outside city limits as

inherently better. By all accounts “better” never meant anything declarative. The notion of “better” that drives the image of suburban schools, for example, promotes a kind of grand illusion that romanticizes suburban schools and vilifies city ones.

This illusion is not necessarily based on what goes on in suburban schools, however. It is fundamentally constructed on how we perceive the city and use this perception to inform our desire for a better place. That is, since city schools are seen as demonstrably inferior, suburban schools, then, must house better teachers, better facilities, better resources, and better students. This grand illusion is ever-present in the parent interviews, particularly in Kara’s discussion of fleeing the city so that her son could get a “better education.”

While the parents held concrete assumptions about schools in general, it was never entirely clear to me what they based their assumptions of neighborhood schools on. A kind of myth world surfaced in these parents’ words, where everything about their communities was negative and everything outside of it, positive—particularly the schools. Perhaps their perceptions of what was “bad” about their communities were overstated: “Kids getting killed everyday at these schools”; “These teachers around here don’t know a thing”; “All of the schools around here are falling apart. The schools out there are brand new.” Such comments were made even as forceful and effective policies against school violence had decreased violence in Detroit schools; as more skilled teachers were being recruited into the districts and effective ones were being rewarded by the district; and as facilities were undergoing some major renovations.

Even while “positive” projects were sweeping through Detroit schools, I cannot and do not discount the parents’ sentiments. Indeed, their apathy suggests the degree to which as a nation we need an even educational playing field that covers all communities. These parent testimonies offer clear evidence of the fixed mythologies at play when it comes to their symbolic and imagined readings of the world. According to Fanon (1952), such mythologies carry interesting and disturbing sociological and psychological consequences. For example, they could reinforce stereotypes that have been used to justify social discrimination and isolationism. Or they can provoke a “pride” counterreaction, especially as segregation had gone so far to strip marginalized populations of their sense of self-respect and proud history. Either way, segregation is reinforced in the discourses that make such myths available.

Clearly this reinforced form of segregation—neosegregation—looks differently than segregation of old. However, the system of forced separation remains the same. For example, to extend choices and unabashedly voice cultural pride, “national identity” schools<sup>v</sup> have been cited as a remedy to the failure of *Brown*. These schools are supposed to provide the children of the subaltern a “good” education based on a decentering and disruption of the colonial discourses that maintain bad schools. Such forms of schooling deliberately slip back to *Plessey*, however, as certain groups established national identity schools in response to their exclusion from mainstream education. Such schools have called for pride in one’s heritage, blurring diasporic borders around a “collective personality” that differs radically from the established norm. However, while these efforts call for cultural reversal in schooling itself, by insisting upon an alternative discourse of cultural dominance, they further stroke the sensation to segregate.

Even as efforts persist to extend better (not freer) choices to parents of the subaltern, national identity schools should be criticized for what can be seen as a defensiveness in their assertion of a false sense of pride. According to Nigerian playwright and Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka, “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces.” In a similar way, Fanon (1952) believes that in the guise of rejecting internalized inferiority, false pride reinvigorates the same stereotypes in which the elite group believed and perpetuated.

Other scholars have argued that the competing discourse of internalized inferiority and “tragic nationalism” have both worked to sustain the exploitation of oppressed people—their histories and identities—through a self-colonizing and self-segregating neo-segregationist movement (Levitt, 1997; Waylen, 1996; West, 1993). The movement has happened in two directions: away from oneself and away from others. Moreover, analysis of the parents’ testimonies reveals the distortions in such inferiority and romanticizing discourses that marginal groups possess about schools. What we miss is that schools—like all structures—change continuously.

### **The Double-Conscious Other**

Another dominant discourse of school choice that helps extend school segregation is the concept of *the double-conscious Other*. In the postcolonial sense of the term, the “Other” expresses a degree of marginality, a distance from the center that gazes in from the periphery. It



is the position or positioning of the outsider or marginalized in relation to the position of the insider or the elite. DuBois (1903/2003) describes the double-conscious Other when he writes about the social position of Black Americans at the turn of the Twentieth Century:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (pp. 16-17).

Du Bois's description of the double-conscious Other bears similarities to how the parents of the subaltern saw themselves, their communities, and the schools within their communities. According to Kara:

We see what's going on outside of the City. Those [suburban] parents out there enjoy so much more, and they see us as good-for-nothings. [Chris] complains a lot about not going to school out there, not being with his friends. He also says that it's harder and that his teachers are prejudiced. They don't like him because he's Black. I tell him that he doesn't go to school for friends. I send him there for an education. He has to see the world differently, like they see it because that's what's going to get him out of [the City]. . . . I always tell him that he has to do what it takes to fit in. He can't worry about his teachers. He just has to worry about making good grades so that he can go to a good college.

Rachel, too, viewed herself, her daughter, and community with suspicion. By this, she believed that her daughter, Grace, was “marked” by her city education. For Rachel, “Grace can't go nowhere without people knowing that she went to school in the City. This make people feel, including people in my family, that Grace is behind.” What's revealing about Rachel's feelings of Otherness is how she interpreted for herself the feelings of others. This interpretation maps well onto her belief

that ain't a school in the City worth a damn. The people who run the schools—take money. They ain't got no control of the bad students. I'm in the mind that most of the kids are good. But they just let the few wreak havoc. That means that there is something about us in the City that's set apart from people in other places.

Both Gwen and Manuela expressed similar views concerning who they were and how they viewed their city. According to Gwen, “We are the outcast. That's why they give us the crumbs. They don't have to give us anything else. And when I look out into these streets and see all that is going on, I see what they see: that we do not have our stuff together.” Manuela

expressed her views using a less forceful tone; nonetheless, it carried a similar sentiment: “The people in this city are not seen in very good light. It is hard for me to talk about anybody in this city using positive terms.”

As a matter of perception, the double-conscious discourse of the parents constructed the City, its residents, and its schools as the Other to the suburban Self. This Self was, for the parents, the desired image. For them, it was also the location from which to view themselves, others around them, and the schools in their communities. That is, their construction of the Other was based on a self-viewing that did not emanate from the parents’ individual circumstances at all, but from the system of differences that encouraged their circumstances. In this process of viewing the City, the parents had been compelled into unconsciously accepting the assumptions underneath the actual conditions of the City (Althusser, 1969).

These assumptions both constructed them as Others and allowed them to distance themselves from Others. Hence, the idea of the Other takes on a nuanced meaning, as one aspect of “they” described the City residents, and quite another aspect of “They” described individuals living outside the City. In this way, these parents thought hard about suburban school interiority (see example above), inviting myths that helped them to understand it. However, I would bet that suburban parents rarely speculate about the interiority of education in the city. Indeed, because they were subject to a special gaze, these parents—the parents of the subaltern—had little choice but to see themselves from a perspective outside the subaltern. They could not afford the denial of the suburban image that the parents outside the city luxuriate in and depend on to uphold and rationalize their privilege.

### **Discussion of the Double-Conscious Other.**

I would like to connect the notion of double-conscious Otherness to our larger discussion about *Brown*. That is, it can be argued that the dominant discourse of segregation that *Brown* failed to disrupt reinforces constructions of the Other as sensual, lazy, exotic, irrational, incapable individuals and communities, ruled by their deficiencies. The actions of such individuals and communities are, therefore, seen as determined by national, racial, and geographic categories. In constructing the Other, then, the dominant discourse of segregation has also constructed the desired Self—a romanticized place of rational, hard working, kind,

democratic, moral, modern, progressive, technological, individualist—as the center of the world, the norm against which everything else, including the City, is a deviation.

Following this logic, the parents’ testimonies can be read as propping up segregation, as their views about neighborhood schools and neighborhood people as Others seamlessly follow the cadences of the dominant discourses of school choice. These discourses can best be explained using the language of postcolonial theories. It is within this literature that Said (1993) has suggested that colonial (but in this case segregationist) discourses continue to shape economic, political, and social relations between the social center and its margins. The ruling assumption is that since the center had means of projecting itself on the rest of the world, the schools that occupy the center (e.g. suburban schools) are normal and the ones that occupy the margins (e.g. city schools) are aberrations. As such, these parents treated suburban schools as if they were universal and simply natural rather than culturally specific and constructed. By contrast, they viewed city schools through an exotic lens as cultural accidents flung along the margins of Otherness.

### **False Agency**

In spite of the discourses of inferiority and otherness that influenced their school choices, the parents of the subaltern felt they had a degree of autonomy in choosing the schools their children attended. Hence, it was not unreasonable when I learned that Kara, Gwen, Rachel, and Manuela sided in favor of policies like vouchers to “extend” their school choice. These parents perceived a freedom in such policies. Moreover, their perception of these—vouchers and the freedoms they would bring—fed the impression that parents could have some control over their children’s education. For example, Kara explains, “School choice gives parents more power over where their children will go to schools.”

The power Kara is alluding to also suggests that parents felt they had some stake in their children’s destinies. Kara continues, “It is up to us to do what’s best for our kids. If we don’t, we are responsible for what happens to them.” Kara’s sentiments summed up the overall feelings of the group. These parents took their choices seriously, weighing competing concerns. Each of them felt that it was their “responsibility to make sure [their child(ren)] got a good education.”

Even while some parents felt that school choices were available, each however also felt the tensions associated with the existing choices available to them. For Kara:

It's expensive sending him there, I won't lie. I don't know how we are going to keep it up, but I'm going to do what I have to keep him in there because it's a good school. Right now, I'm doing hair on the side [in addition to her other job]. We living check to check, but we're living. You know. I'm trying to do everything I can so Chris doesn't have to live like this.

Gwen suggested that sending her daughter to a suburban school would be difficult because “those schools do not always teach the kinds of things [urban Black] children need to learn about, like their history.” Given this, Gwen concludes, “I'm making the best choice for [my daughter] because I ain't got nowhere else to send her. All my kids went to [the magnet school].”

Rachel “would have loved more choices” in terms of schools for her daughter; however, as she sees it:

It's hard to get Grace out there [to the suburbs] everyday. She will be old enough to drive in about two years. I could send her then, but by then she will have made a lot friends, got involved in all those activities—you know—and started doing whatever high school students do. I wouldn't want to take her out of school then. That just doesn't seem right to me. We just have to make the schools we have work. We've been able to do it all these years. I think we can last for four more.

Manuela's options seemed to be the fewest:

There are no choices for Spanish and English speaking schools, see. I would love for my sons to have both because they have to live in both. If I sent them to a school outside the City, I am sure that they will not have teachers who are Hispanic like we are. In this area, this is pretty much where the Spanish speaking people live. . . . I want my boys to feel like they are part of something, and I also want them to learn. Out here, we have tough choices.

Based on their testimonies, what seemed like “free choices” were not so free at all. The options that each parent perceived revealed what I call “figments of choice”—a series of forced options that express an ability to choose but not a desired choice. These figments of choice were usually costly in some way. For example, in choosing to send a child to a school outside the community, parents would also be choosing to endure the hardship of a daily commute, the consequences of racism and economic oppression, and the tragedy of loss that accompanies assimilation.

The greatest costs would, perhaps, be to the child. For example, Kara's son who travelled miles away from the city and his neighborhood to attend school in the suburbs may experience a good deal of grief from the lack of association with neighborhood friends, confusion due to the imposition of "foreign" knowledge, isolation due to feelings of internalized inferiority and otherness, and fatigue due to many other socio-psychological and physical factors associated with commuting a long distance to school (cf. Mabokela & Madsen, 2003; Nasir, 2004; Ogbu, 2003; C. Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). By choosing to keep their children in city schools, Rachel and Manuela faced what they perceived to be high costs too. Their perceptions fall in line with current scholarship which suggests that children attending city schools will experience poor instruction, declining facilities, the threat of violence, low parental involvement, etc. (Fine, 1993; Fruchter, 2007; Kearney, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2002; McLaughlin, et al., 1994; Noguera, 2003b). These costs multiply in industrial cities like Detroit due to higher concentration of segregation, stark divisions of wealth and poverty, and the overall erosion of the educational infrastructure.

While they may feel that they have options—or at less the illusion of options—the parents of the subaltern still made difficult school choices that they did not entirely believe in—send your child away from home and endure social and cultural threats; leave your child in city schools and endure physical threats. So while they felt a sense of relative autonomy, they actually possessed less autonomy in choosing a school for their children than what they hoped or believed. This idea seems to be what Kara was getting at when she admitted: "There are pros and cons for every choice you make." It is also captured in Manuela's sentiment that "no [school] choice is going to give you everything you want. You have to choose when you choose—what you can live with and what you can live without."

### **Discussion of False Agency.**

The parents' discourse on school choice suggests that their choices were never free ones. What they experienced as agency (the ability to make things happen) was in fact *false agency*. False agency is the condition of powerlessness that operates ideologically under the guise of true choice. For example, when Kara believed that she could make something happen by sending her son Chris to a suburban school, she was playing into a discourse of inferiority that suburban (White) schools are essentially better than urban (Black) schools. For a parent

with means, the choice between better and worst is oxymoronic. It isn't really a choice. That is, the discourse of inferiority essentially leads to one choice, a false choice, which reveals another discourse of exclusion that further props up segregation or promotes a racist reality that victimizes city students of color who commute to White suburban schools. Hence, Kara's false choice illustrates false agency.

The testimonies of the parents of the subaltern also reveal a key but hidden issue in the school choice discourse: the lie that we can extend liberties by promoting a system of nomadic practices that we pass off as educational reforms. Regardless of where you stand in the school choice debate, the choices that such "reforms" permit come with enormous consequences—suburban communities do not want poor city kids of color attending them and urban communities are made more tragic when their children are made to abandon their schools. Given these consequences, what feels like agency and free choice in one sense is in another, stagnation and a vote for the status quo.

Still, Kara, Gwen, Rachel, and Manuela were not fixed or locked into static positions. Indeed, they felt that they could move and send their children to schools beyond the split corridors of the margins, away from the broken promises and buried dreams that rested in their neighborhoods. They felt they could migrate across political and cultural borders. Hence, rather than seeing borders as dividing lines, these parents saw them as porous transit points that sifted and sorted people as much as they separated them (Bhabha, 2004).

However, somewhere in the travel and the exchange of human bodies, each of the parents—in their own way—ended up "mimicking" the imagined elite, desiring with very few questions to adopt the elite language, the elite knowledge, and so on. They intently believed that the schools on the other side of the tracks were better. They did not seem to care as much that accommodating for these schools would come at a price. Hence, the promising passage into a place that could finally yield their dreams turned on them. Whatever school choice they made for their children in one way or another came to alienate them and their children from the confidence in their own identities, truths, knowledges, and often their languages. The hidden discourses behind their school choices, hence, destabilized the choice itself.

## Conclusion

While there are many lessons about school choice and social relations yet to learn from *Brown*, perhaps the most meaningful lesson has been in revealing the hidden discourses of school choice that influence the continuation of segregation in American education. Questions, now, exist not only as to how to finally disrupt these discourses, but also how to promote a new discourse on choice in its place that truly brings people together. We cannot, however, achieve this goal—the goal of true integration—by simply desegregating schools. Desegregation policies have long proven flawed, as they leave in place the dominant discourses of inferiority, otherness, and false agency that limit choices.

In order to bring people together, parents and students need true choices. They require a pool of schools that are integrateable,<sup>vi</sup> or capable of occupation without consequences to self and community. Integrateable schools are schools where parents, regardless of race or class, would desire to send their children. These schools would be cosmopolitan spaces (Appiah, 2006), addressing the concerns of city parents—safety, quality, effectiveness, etc.—without injuring students, as Chris’s suburban school seemed to have injured him. That is, if we are to achieve in practice the theory that integration implies, then these schools must reframe how we approach integration.

In this light, integrateable schools are not simply intergrated or desegregated schools, they are schools that represent the rich and transitory cultures, knowledges, and perspectives of all Americans, made available to all students who wish to attend them. They are safe destinations, not reached by giant social, cultural, and geographical leaps. They do not serve the interests of the few, but of the many, and are accessible to all. In this way, we can’t integrate schools by forcing diverse populations together. We’ve tried this, and it failed. Further, we can’t meet our students’ needs in a tiered educational system that works for some but not all, that embraces the cultures, knowledges, and languages of some and yet ignores that of others. We don’t have integrated schools simply because people refuse to come together; we don’t have integrated schools because most of our schools are not yet integrateable.

Creating integrateable schools are all the more urgent, particularly as the political and cultural borders between cities and suburbs have emerged as figures of the irrepressible yet contested migration of peoples. For her part, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/1999) has insisted on a

similar sort of mixing of national, racial, sexual, and gendered cultures and identities. Her notion of *mestiza* (racially “mixed”) can be extended to my vision of integrateable schools, which can (and should) structure a setting and a system of education based on mixings of ideas, languages, and knowledges representative of all “American cultures.” This calls for a reinvention of American education across multiple borders. In reinventing schools, we must seek to represent multiple identities and languages, multiple thoughts and social philosophies instead of supposing that our differences can continue along separate paths.

Many might find my call for integrateable schools to be overly idealistic. However, I take license from Glissant (1989), who has described an existing model of many cultures, languages, and peoples mixing together. He sees, for example, the Caribbean as an “integrateable” society, where there is a compatible mixture of African, French, English, Spanish, indigenous, and South Asian origins. This mixture of many selves has in Glissant’s words produced a *métissage*—or mixing—that never settles into the stable and stale sameness of conventional social structures that characterize many traditional schools. As they privilege mixing over segregating, integrateable schools become an important model for rethinking schools. Such a rethinking is needed because throughout the U.S. in cities like New York and Los Angeles, city schools are becoming more and more worlded by diverse cultural and linguistic groups from across the globe whose mere presence challenges borders and begs for a new set of choices.

In Detroit, this call for a new, integrateable school model couldn’t be more urgent. Recently the city announced the closing of 45 of its public schools (with 13 more public schools to close a year later). Detroit’s students are scattering in droves, retreating to suburban schools that do not want them, charter schools that are on a mission to “save” them, and failed city schools that simply still exist. New charter schools are poised to open; accepting suburban schools are revising their missionary statements (hopefully into true mission statements) to meet the needs of Detroit’s refugee student population. My hope is that when the dust settles, out of the ashes will arise a set of schools that are integrateable, a set of schools that can give parents like Kara, Gwen, Rachel, and Manuela choices they can believe in.



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Notes

<sup>i</sup> The term *subaltern*, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985), refers to people with less power, for example South Asian Indian women. I have adapted the term here to refer not only to the children of the city but also to the ideological and physical place of disempowerment in which city parents with less power and fewer choices than their suburban counterparts reside. In this sense, I use the term to denote a tension in their choices, where decisions submit to questions that are open, continuous, and unanswerable.

<sup>ii</sup> By discourse, I mean the entity of signs, symbols, and statements that represent larger relations (or associations) to objects, subjects and other enouncements. A discourse, in this way, constitutes the substance and content of such relations and associations both in linguistic and extralinguistic forms (Foucault, 1969, 1970, 1972).

<sup>iii</sup> I use the term neosegregation as opposed to Orfield's (1999) term resegregation to signal the differences between segregation in the past as compared to the present. That is, segregation today is similar but not the same as the segregation of yesterday. Today's segregation is far more class-based and has different consequences due to differences in the modern postindustrial economy and culture.

<sup>iv</sup> By this I mean the choice to leave ones community or the choice to adopt unwanted guests.

<sup>v</sup> National identity schools are usually developed by centering a particular race or religion.

<sup>vi</sup> To reframe my approach to integration, I channel William Julius Wilson's (1997) concept of marriageable men. In reference to the marriage gap between White and Black families, Wilson (among others) explains the gap by suggesting that Black women seeking a mate of comparable character have the limited choices in available—or as he puts it—marriageable Black men. Extending his idea to school contexts, I contend that parents seeking a school of comparable character have limited choices in what I call “integrateable,” schools. For the parents of the subaltern, neighborhood schools were questionable because of issues of quality and safety; however, out-of-neighborhood schools were also questionable because they did not always reflect them, their children, or their interests.