THE LANGUAGE WE CRY IN: BLACK LANGUAGE PRACTICE AT A POST-DESEGREGATED URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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Introduction

As the United States approaches the 50th anniversary of *Brown* v. *Board of Education* we must celebrate the unprecedented improvements the ruling has brought about in the education of black students. At the same time, we must also acknowledge the fact that *Brown* did not and could not completely resolve the struggle that has shaped questions of race and education in the U.S. for nearly 400 years. For instance, in upholding the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment the Warren Court largely affirmed civil and political rights, or First Generation Rights, in its rendering of *Brown*. Unlike the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U.S. Constitution gives only scant attention to Second Generation Rights, or cultural, social, and economic rights (Wronka, 1994). In failing to fully account for these latter rights, *Brown* neither challenged white supremacy in society nor called for an examination of how it shaped and continues to shape our notions of race and education in America.

In this paper, we argue that the intransigence of white supremacy in U.S. public education informs the contradictory role that school desegregation policy has played in the education of black students the past 50 years. Specifically, we examine the textured legacy of *Brown* in the context of an ethnographic analysis of the academic and social lives of black male students at City High School (CHS), a magnet academy located in the Midwest United States. The conversion of the urban-based City High into a magnet academy occurred as part of a court-monitored voluntary desegregation settlement agreement between Monticello School District (MSD) and surrounding area suburban school districts. As it stands now, CHS represents a paradox of sorts: Although the state has recently designated MSD as an at-risk system, it consistently ranks the academy as its top public high school. In many ways, CHS exemplifies all that school desegregation policy promises: a first-rate, harmonious, racially integrated educational institution; in short, an exemplar of what other schools in the area and the nation can be. Anyone who visits CHS will readily sense its friendly culture and the high value that students, parents, teachers, and administrators place on education. Yet, despite the presence of a student-centered curriculum and in the absence of overt racial hostility, CHS's success at educating black male students mirrors that of other beleaguered urban schools in the area and across the nation. We argue in this paper that the intransigent nature of white supremacy in post-Civil Rights era public schools and the way it shapes how educators, researchers, and policy-makers view, educate, and evaluate black students in general accounts for color-coded inequalities that are observable in public schools such as CHS.

Toward a Post-Critical Approach to Researching the Schooled Lives of Adolescent Black Males

The title of this article comes from a similarly titled documentary that charts the path-breaking work of the linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner. In the 1930s Turner demonstrated that certain features of the Gullah culture of the South Carolina Sea Islands that differed from white American culture could be directly traced to West Africa, specifically to the Mende of Sierra Leone (Turner, 1948). His work is foundational to the long line of scholarship that affirms the African cultural and linguistic heritage of Africans in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., Alleyne, 1971, 1980; Gundaker, 1998; Herskovits, 1958; Holloway, 1991; Holloway & Vass, 1993; Matthews, 1998; Morgan, 1993; Mufwene, 1993; Turner, 1948; Vass, 1979). Although we concur with the general thesis of the West and Central African origins of black language in the U.S. inspired by Turner and his intellectual legacy and although it was our initial observation of the way that the young men in our study seamlessly integrated various phonological and morphosyntactic features of the language when recounting their school experiences, this is not the primary analysis presented in this paper.

Instead, we take a "post-critical" approach to educational problems to examine them in terms of their moral and political dimensions. A post-critical approach draws on and moves beyond critical theories of schooling inequality and has theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological implications for research. Major critical theories, for instance, posit that class mainly shapes social relations of inequality in capitalist societies and that other salient formations, such as race, are its derivatives. However, a post-critical approach to social inequality recasts race as an autonomous social value as opposed to a

derivative of class (Bell, 1987, 1992, 1998; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gwaltney, 1993; Ladner, 1998; Matsuda, 1996). Such an approach takes into account the way that race is implicated in the contradiction between democracy and capitalism in the U.S. This contradiction has its origin in the very framing of the U.S. Constitution and creates a tension in U.S. society between *property* rights and *human* rights (Bell, 1987; Duncan, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Wronka, 1994). At the outset, this tension was greatly exacerbated by the presence of enslaved Africans in the country, where black people were viewed to be commodities to be consumed rather than persons with constitutional rights (Chin, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The preservation of material property rights as well as the extension of the notion of property to include skin color has always played out in this country in ways that maintain an unequal distribution of economic, social, and political resources that privileges white people over people of color in the United States.

Following this, we posit that the plight of the students in the ethnography reported in this article is neither an aberration nor simply the idiosyncratic practice of individuals or schools. Rather, issues of color-coded forms of oppression and inequality are symptomatic of the racial injustice that finds its roots in the founding of the United States (Bell, 1992, 1998; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995). We argue that because white supremacy is such an ingrained feature of society, it is embedded in educational practices and values that are shorn of the more explicit and formal expressions of power that we typically associate with racial oppression (Crenshaw et al., 1995). As we've already suggested, the racial oppression of the sort that we're describing is linked to the intransigence of white supremacy, where white cultural norms are arrogated to the exclusion and, in some instances, the derogation of all other cultural norms. Therefore, although the standard education story explains the plight of black students in urban and suburban schools as a persistent and troublesome, but random, outcome of a reasonably fair, aracial system, we hold that their situation is actually a manifestation of the racial politics that are intrinsic, even vital, to the day-to-day functions of U.S. society and social institutions such as schools.

Methodologically, in a post-critical approach, ethical considerations inform the nature of our research categories (Darder, 2002; Du Bois, 1935; Laible, 2000). First and foremost, it means that we privilege the voices of those who bear the brunt of inequalities in schools and grant them the opportunity to inform the analytic and conceptual categories we bring to bear on our research. This commitment is consistent with a tradition of ethnographic research that is exemplified by the work of the post-colonial anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney (1993). Gwaltney posits, for instance, that the words of ordinary black folk are more than "crude data" to be analyzed by university-trained experts. On the contrary, the values, systems of logic and worldview that the words of black folk evince "are rooted in a lengthy peasant tradition and clandestine theology" (Gwaltney, 1993, pp. xxvi, xxix); we explore what this means theoretically and analytically in greater depth later in the article. For now, suffice it to say that such a methodology means that we move from explicating different "realities" to identifying the various and intricate sociolinguistic processes that bring received social categories into existence. Invariably, such a move entails an examination of the presupposed ontological categories embedded in communicative structures that inhere in how human beings evaluate truth claims. Along these lines, we draw on the critical ethnographic literature (e.g., Carspecken, 1996; Fabian, 2002) to examine these structures in terms of the interplay among the following categories: *subjective ontological categories* that refer to existing states of mind and feelings to which only one actor has access; *objective ontological categories* that refer to existing objects, conditions, and events to which all people have access; and *normative-evaluative ontological categories* that refer to existing agreements on the rightness, goodness, and appropriateness of certain activities (states of mind and objects) (Carspecken, 1996).

Critical and post-critical explanations of schooling and inequality, however, differ on the question of epistemology. For example, for certain critical theoretical perspectives, consensus plays a huge role in assessing evidence, making truth claims, and determining the validity of such claims (Carspecken, 1996). A post-critical approach, however, generally holds that unequal power relationships among social groups make true consensus virtually unachievable (Bell, 1995; Delgado, 1995, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Duncan, 2000, 2002a). Along these lines, we posit that researchers and educators typically marginalize or render mute the voices of black students and create the condition for a *différend* when it comes to explaining their school performance. A *différend* is a conflict between two or more parties that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of terms to which all parties can agree, causing in such case members of the subjugated group to continue to suffer (Delgado, 1996; Lyotard, 1988). We take up the question of epistemology later in the article in a discussion of the implications of our work for educational reform.

Finally, a "post"-critical approach also acknowledges a *spiritual* ontological category (Clark, 1996; Freire, 1995, 1996, 2002; Palmer, 1993) in addition to the subjective, objective, and normative-evaluative ontological categories outlined previously. A spiritual ontology is characterized by such concepts as "belief," "hope," and "faith" and defies easy placement into purely subjective or objective categories. The source of these concepts is neither our intellectual tradition nor our material reality but, rather, our spiritual heritage (Palmer, 1993). Cornel West captures this idea when he notes that those of us who are serious about

struggle often find ourselves "stepping out on nothing, hoping to land on something" (hooks & West, 1991, pp. 8-9). In short, we are speaking of a collection of conceptual devices that fall into what Paulo Freire calls the category of the untested feasibility, or a belief in the possible dream (1995, 1996; see also, Freire, 2002). We discuss this category at length elsewhere (Duncan, 2003; Duncan & Jackson, 2003). Briefly, however, as it concerns the present study, a spiritual ontology informs our belief that black language is not only a reflection and a constituent of reality but also is a cultural rope that connects oppressed people across generations and even continents. It is the source and the substance of the enduring hope that is implicit in the struggles of a people who strive to "make a way out of no way."

Understanding the language practices of the youth in our study in terms of their post-critical dimensions allows us to view the experiences they inform as essentially moral and, moreover, as resonating with the voices of not only their family members and peers, but with others who participate in the cultures of the broader African Diaspora. Along these lines, the data presented in this article provide insights into ways that young men make sense of and negotiate an educational institution where they are literally "always outnumbered and always outgunned" (Mosley, 1998) - and how, in the process, they maintain their dignity and live to tell about it. From an epistemological standpoint, the data boldly render the limit situations that prevent us from realizing the untested feasibilities of school reform some fifty years after the landmark decision rendered by the Supreme Court. Paulo Freire (1996) describes limit situations as the psychological, material, political, or social conditions that hinder societal transformation. By explicating these conditions, we can rethink our research or pedagogy in accordance with the new knowledge that inhere in them and act upon it to promote social change.

Along these lines, the stories of the students in our study depict unjust schooling conditions, or limit situations, that angered and saddened us; they also reveal responses to these conditions that sometimes amazed us and often made us laugh. We have shared the stories of these young men with black colleagues, friends and family members who, in turn, generally affirmed them by relating similar experiences about their own schooling; we should also add that some of the stories shared in the larger study prompted within us, the authors, moments of déjà vu. The point here is that the young men in our study mediate aspects of their schooling experiences in a "language we cry in": It is a language that is conveyed through moral narratives that evinces a strong emotional content; it also attends to the here and now and, at the same time, embodies within it historically constituted linguistic elements of generations past. In other words, following the lead of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), we posit that black language has both a *synchronic dimension* that attends to the conditions that the youth in this study encounter in their everyday lives and a *diachronic dimension* that links them across time and space to other Africans in Diaspora who have similarly struggled against various forms of oppression.

In short, our post-critical approach is one that embraces and goes beyond traditional critical analyses (hence, the "post") and that privileges the subjective ontological categories that inhere in the language of the students in the present study. In turn, these categories inform our research, especially in terms of how we make sense of objective ontological categories. We hope that such an analysis alters existing normative-evaluative categories that typically bear on how we understand the post-Civil Rights schooling experiences and outcomes of black students. In our view, the racially particular, or culturo-centric (Young, 1990) and standpoint (Collins, 1990), knowledge that the youth in this study evince in their language brings into relief the assumptions, values, categories, and concepts that inform what James Scheurich and Michelle Young (1997) call racist epistemologies. Racist epistemologies are deeply embedded in the meaning-making structures that inform the naturalization of oppression and the normalization of racial inequality in public schools.

Following Paulo Freire (1994), we believe that "changing language is part of the process of changing the world" (pp. 67-68) in which black youth live, learn, and work. We further believe that these youth are best situated to take the lead in the transformation. Against the backdrop of the post-critical considerations overviewed in this section, we now turn to a brief discussion of the contested issue of black language and education before examining how it informs the schooled lives of adolescent black males at the school in this study.

Scholars in Dispute: An Overview of the Research on Black Language

Different conceptualizations of black language inform different ways that researchers assess its role in schools. Researchers who conceptualize black language as a non-standard form of English often see it as either adversative or obstructive to school success (Baugh, 2000; Fordham, 1999; Lanehart, 2002; Ogbu, 1999; Seymour et al., 1999). For example, Fordham (1999) views black language use by the black students in her study as evidence of a form of guerilla warfare that contributes to the "successful" academic failure of youth who opt not to "lease" the ideally standard English discursive practices during the school day to avoid "acting white." Similarly, Ogbu (1999) argues that the black community in his study is caught in a dilemma

characterized by the belief in not only the necessity of mastering ideally standard English for education and job success but also by the belief that "mastering proper English threatens their slang English identity, their bona fide membership in their community and racial solidarity" (p. 168). To be certain, studies in this vein also implicitly or explicitly affirm the non-standard language as a legitimate mode of communication (Baugh, 2000; Foster & Peele, 1999; Seymour et al., 1999). When this occurs, researchers generally emphasize acceptance and accommodation of the speech patterns in the classroom and focus on the development of teaching and diagnostic strategies to foster academic achievement (Baugh, 2000; Foster and Peele, 1999; Seymour et al., 1999).

In contrast, scholars and researchers who view black language as deriving from a Niger-Congo or Bantu linguistic heritage often treat it as an unremarkable dimension of the classroom environment (Delpit, 2002; Hilliard, 2002; Perry, 1998; 2003; Miner, 1998). These scholars and researchers view black language as a natural and welcome feature of classrooms with students of African descent. Delpit (1998) perhaps captures this sentiment best in her response to the question, "What do you think about Ebonics? Are you for it or against it?" "My answer must be neither," she writes, "I can be neither for Ebonics or against Ebonics any more than I can be for or against the air" (Delpit, 1998, p. 17). Along these lines, these researchers are explicit in their advocacy of classrooms that affirm the importance of fluency in black language and ideally Standard English. Such a view of language in the classroom realizes "that fluency in the standard code can never be the singular goal if, and this is a big if, our schools are to participate in the creation of the next generation of African American scholars, preachers, dramatists, writers, blues men and women - African American leaders" (Perry, 1998, p. 15). These researchers do not necessarily conceive of English and black language as discrete sets of linguistic and discursive practices that are in conflict with each other, as is generally the case among those who conceptualize the latter as a non-standard expression of the former. Rather, those who view black language as natural and unremarkable maintain that black people have access to (or should have access to) a linguistic repertoire that is comprised of it and the privileged code, along with additional languages. Further, black student underperformance in public schools within this conceptualization of black language has less to do with linguistic barriers or pupil attitudes toward education than it does with the social identities of black children and youth and how they are treated by those charged with educating them (Baldwin, 1979; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Hopson, 2003; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Smith, 1998, Smith & Crozier, 1998).

A review of the research literature indicates that post-1996 studies that treat black language as a nonstandard form of English dominate the empirical literature. Here, researchers largely view black language, at best, as a cultural resource or asset to facilitate academic achievement (Foster and Peele, 1999) or, more generally, as an impediment to school success (Fordham, 1999; Lanehart, 2002; Ogbu, 1999). Despite the disparate views of black language within this body of research, contemporary studies in this vein share conceptual and theoretical orientations that reinforce racist imagery that has historically plagued social scientific representations of black language. For instance, empirical educational studies of black language conducted since the widely publicized 1996 Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) resolution that affirmed the worth of the primary language of black students are typically replete with references to "dropped," "reduced," and "deleted" post-vocalic consonant configurations and to "zero" and "absent" copulas, to name some of the more obvious terms. As Smitherman (2000) observes, "a deficit is a deficit by any other name" (p. 78). It is in this way that contemporary empirical studies on black language inadvertently reinforce racist assumptions in the constructs that researchers bring to bear on framing, analyzing, and representing its role in schools.

In contrast, the scholarship on black language and education that asserts an African linguistic and cultural continuity of black language in the U.S. is largely conceptual and theoretical. For instance, it typically relies on autobiographical, anecdotal, and/or dated empirical evidence for support. The reasons for this may be two-fold. On the one hand, scholars who produce literature in this vein view the humanity of black children and youth as self-evident and believe that no proof is necessary to assert the legitimacy of their language. Moreover, it follows that to single out language as a predictor of the school success or failure of black students is little more than a decoy issue that takes attention away from more pressing issues of racism and oppression that inform the public education of these children and youth (Baldwin, 1979; Hilliard, 2003; Hopson, 2003). On the other hand, contemporary researchers whose work is sympathetic to a view that affirms the African linguistic heritage of black language encounter numerous obstacles in securing support for and disseminating their research. For example, in response to the OUSD resolution, in 1997 then U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley made a preemptory rejection of any petition by school districts to access Title VII funds on behalf of black students and, in a related vein, politicians across the country rushed to draft legislation to prevent federal support for programs and research based on the premise that black language is a legitimate linguistic activity. Such measures have had a chilling effect on contemporary language research based on the premise of the African origins of black culture in the U.S. In addition, researchers in this vein have had to contend with gatekeepers and protectors of the status quo when submitting their work for publication. Consequently, as was the case in the mid-1970s, researchers who today challenge popular conventions on black language and education encounter resistance at every level of the research enterprise not faced by their peers who uphold the status quo.

The work reviewed in this section indicates that contemporary research on black language and education *in toto* is generally ambivalent regarding the importance of black language in promoting achievement among black students. To be clear, empirical studies typically conceptualize black language as a non-standard variety of English that students should at least bracket and use in non-academic situations in class, if not altogether eliminate in the developmental process of mastering ideally Standard English. In many ways, the situation described here is indicative of one of the predicaments that characterize the post-Civil Rights education of black children and youth in the U.S. Specifically, 50 years after *Brown* the current research climate favors research on black language that tends to affirm studies that reinforce the normalcy of a white linguistic standard and that tends to marginalize scholarship that asserts the normalcy of black culture.

However, there is reason for optimism. The bold stance taken by the members of the OUSD board of education in 1996 as well as a small but significant number of scholars over the years have created the opportunity for researchers to re-examine relationships between culture and power and to embark upon new programs of research to further unravel the complexities of black language and its role in public schools. We regard the present study to be one such effort. Along these lines, we focus mainly on one activity that affirms the African heritage of black language practices in the United States, namely indirection. In what follows, we look at how the black language practice of indirection plays out in the lives of adolescent black males at a post-desegregated high school and explicate both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. However, before doing so, we discuss pertinent issues related to data collection and analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

As indicated previously, our interpretive framework is informed by a post-critical approach to schooling and inequality that includes critical ethnographic and discourse analyses (e.g., Carspecken, 1996; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) to examine the layers of meanings and multiple viewpoints that are brought to bear on the academic and social experiences of black male students in the study. The larger, ongoing project began in the spring of 1999. Data for the study discussed in this paper were obtained from black male students using loosely structured conversations, semi-structured, open-ended question and answer sequences, and stimulated recall interviews; both individual and focus group sessions were conducted. Both authors collected the bulk of the interview data reported in this paper. Additional data were obtained from interviews with other students and faculty and staff members. Data related to the culture of the school were collected through systematic participant observations of classrooms and corridors and during assembly sessions and other school-related activities and meetings. Data were recorded in field notes and on digital videotape and audiotape. Data related to demography, standardized testing, attendance, and graduation rates, and documents related to the historical, ideological, and programmatic features of the school augmented the interview and participant observation data in the larger study. Finally, we collected both participant observation and textual (e.g., written assignments) data from an ethics course the first author taught at the school during the 2000-2001 academic year.

The Schooled Lives of Black Male Students at City High School

Established in 1972 in a mid-sized metropolitan setting in the mid-west U.S., City High School (CHS) has a national reputation as a racially integrated public school that emphasizes a rigorous curriculum and that produces first-rate students. In addition to its curriculum, CHS is also known for its "caring" ethic, which was established by the school's founding principal and is codified in the school's mission statement. Anyone who visits CHS will conclude that its reputation for being a caring, high-achieving school is indeed merited. However, not unlike other fragmented communities that at first glance appear to be internally coherent (Fine & Weis, 1998; West, 1992), CHS has demographic fractures that marble a school that, observed from a distance, appears to be a paragon of academic excellence and educational equity. Black male students, for instance, have not fared as well as their peers at City High. For example, although the school is racially balanced, females outnumber males by a ratio of 2 to 1 as a direct result of the dearth of black male students. The absence of these students was realized most poignantly in 1998, a term that the school ranked first in the state on various measures of academic accomplishments. The school year concluded with only one black male student, from an initial cohort of fifteen, to walk with his graduating class at commencement time.

Our initial interviews and observations suggested that well-intentioned responses to the absence of black males at City High are out of sync with how the young men, themselves, frame and would address the conditions at the school. For example, after one of the initial visits by the first author to the school in the spring of 1999 to talk with members of the mentoring program that the school's administration created for black male students, one of the younger adult mentors, a 25-year-old black male, shared the following observations:

> Some of the more recent speakers have come speaking to our students as if they have the solutions to ALL of their

> problems (including [a prominent black educator that had recently conducted an inservice at City High]), and after the presentation, their problems would be solved…. These younger brothers don't need a speech or series of speeches, they need positive and conscious Black men like ourselves to be honest with them, guide them, and truly listen to them. (04/29/99)

The views of this mentor are not unlike those of Nel Noddings' (1999) who observed that claims "to care must not be based on a one-time, virtuous decision but rather on continuing evidence that caring relations are maintained" (p. 14). It follows that, to effectively address the concerns of the students in this study, "they need the continuing attention of adults who will listen, invite, guide, and support them" (Noddings, 1999, p. 13).

As indicated in the following account, black male students at CHS could indeed use support, but perhaps not of the kind envisioned by those charged to educate them. Aaron, a 17-year-old senior, whom the first author interviewed, relates an experience at CHS that was echoed time and again by his peers:

Garrett	Do you feel that you're treated fairly at City - do you feel that you're treated the way everyone else is treated?
Aaron	Uh, nah.
Garrett	Oh, really? Why would you say that?
Aaron	That's my opinion. It's not, I don't know if it's factual. But I have personal evidence to back that up, when I say that. It's because, I remember one time in my sophomore year. I was taking a test in English and, this is kind of wrong, I know it is. I just needed to know. I took the exact same report that a white male wrote - the e-xact same, the same words and everything, and put my name on it. And, in fact it wasn't exactly stealing, because he knew about it, because the person I got it from, he knew about it, he gave me permission. The guy had a perfect score on it. But when I turned it in, I only got a B on it. I wanted to know what was so wrong about mine, what was wrong about my paper. And, it was the exact same as the other, the white male's paper. So, as far as the teachers go, I don't feel like I'm treated fairly, as far as the teachers go.

Aaron's account about this particular experience contains contradictions and even self-incrimination. In this instance, he cheated on a classroom assignment to determine whether his teacher assessed his work in the same ways that he did that of his peers. In sharing the above account, Aaron also aired a widespread practice among his peers. Data collected in connection to the larger study suggest that cheating is an accepted, albeit problematic, feature of life among students at CHS. Students largely attribute the "need" to cheat to the competitive and to what some of them decry as the cutthroat culture of the school. For example, in an interview, a 16-year-old white female student concedes the following: "I even find myself rooting for people to screw up. It is so sad, I want somebody to get a B in that one class, just slip a little, so I can move up. I am not going to force people to slip or make them but I am not going to be sorry when they do. I feel like I am being desensitized. It is just one big contest." In another example, it was rumored that a black female student stole the school seal used to authenticate grades and submitted fraudulent transcripts with her application to a prestigious private east coast college, to which she eventually gained admission. When asked about the rumor, the principal verified that the counselor in charge of the seal had reported it "missing for a few days" but that she, the principal, was uncertain about what had happened to it. To be clear, students openly criticized cheating, both when they were culpable and when their peers were in violation of the tacit assumption of truthfulness that purportedly governs the cultures of schools (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). In addition, some of the students denounced cheating on normative grounds, as indicated during a discussion in an ethics class that the first author taught in the fall of 2001. In this instance, the class rejected an argument promoted by Glaucon and Adeimantus in Plato's *The Republic* that suggested that vice would get one ahead further in life than would virtue.

Drawing on their words and insights, we've characterized the practice of cheating at CHS in terms of an ethical dilemma posed in the following question: Do I do right and suffer or do I do wrong and get ahead?[1] However characterized, the culture of cheating at CHS should not allow us to lose site of the discrepancy in the treatment of Aaron and his classmate by his English teacher. On the one hand, the teacher's actions may reflect a more general perception of the competence of black males at the school. On the other hand, the teacher's action may reflect how he and his colleagues view Aaron. With respect to the latter point, late in his senior year, his advisor, a white female teacher in her late 30s, reported to his parents that he had earned a B in his ethics class for the quarter, despite the fact that she had never received a grade report from his ethics teacher, the first author, and that Aaron actually had earned an A for the quarter.

There is still another disturbing possibility that may account for the English teacher's action: he may have never read Aaron's or his peers' papers and simply assigned grades according to how he perceived each of them. This is a distinct possibility for, as described elsewhere, students at City High constantly complain that teachers treat white males differently, often demanding from them less effort, giving them high grades for incorrect and incomplete work, and allowing them greater autonomy and flexibility in class (Duncan, 2002a). Whatever the case, the significance of this violation is not lost upon Aaron:

Garrett	Now, did you ever confront the teacher? (chuckles) I understand why you wouldn't confront the teacher. So the teacher never said anything to the effect -do you suspect that the teacher may have felt, they knew where the work came from and they would rather give you a B and not …
Aaron	Okay, well, I felt like… my opinion is, if you know I cheated or whatever, you could have just, you know, you could have just told me to do it over instead of give me a lower grade when I did the exact same thing that someone else has done, word for word, it's the exact same thing. I feel like it was totally unfair. I knew that it was ethically wrong. I knew that the fact is, I'm not wrong - I'm not the only person wrong. I realize that I'm wrong but that teacher will not realize that he's wrong. He will not realize at all.
Garrett	Did the same teacher grade the same paper or did different teachers grade the paper?
Aaron	Same teacher, same paper.
Garrett	Okay, so he's giving different grades to different people for the same work? Or, if he did know where it came from, he really had no business giving you a B, he should have jammed you up about that and should have confronted you and said, "hey, what's going on?" What do you think - do you think he just wasn't aware, and gave you a lower grade, or he was aware and just didn't want to confront you?
Aaron	I think he just didn't want to confront me. If you know I did something wrong, just tell me, don't just mark my paper down. You could even give me an F. It's the fact that, giving me the F is actually the right thing to do, or making me write it over, is the right thing to do. But marking me down, when it's the exact same paper that somebody else turned in: that's wrong. And, I went to him, he had nothing to say.

Data from this study indicate that black students engage in various linguistic practices to negotiate a school climate that, for them, is characterized by indifference and unfairness, as illustrated in the preceding dialogue. These activities include remaining silent, using indirect language, and subverting "the master's tools." For example, on an occasion during the spring of 2000, Jack, the first author, conducted a group interview at CHS with new members of the mentoring group. However, older adult mentors who were present constantly interjected themselves into the conversation. On the one hand, they counseled and encouraged the young men yet, on the other hand, they peppered their advice with comments that apologized for uncaring teachers and that blamed the young men for their conditions at City High. A detailed analysis of this session is presented elsewhere (Duncan & Jackson, 2003).

Our initial review of the videotape of the mentoring session focused mainly on what was said during the meeting. When we redirected our focus to the students, we first thought that they were extremely patient, especially considering that the mentors consistently disregarded or ignored them and apologized for the problematic conduct of their teachers. However, after reviewing the tape several times, we picked up on a pattern of activity that seemed to indicate that the young men did not necessarily buy into what their mentors were saying. The footage captured cues from the young men that suggested that their silence notwithstanding they were not merely passive agents during the session.

For example, the video recorded the young men strategically rolling and closing their eyes as well as glancing at the clock on the wall. We use the term "strategically" because these actions were often embedded in others, such as reaching for a buffalo wing, sipping soda from a cup, stretching, and shifting one's weight in the chair. The mentors, who regularly chastised the students for what they deemed to be disrespectful or inappropriate behavior, never remarked upon and appeared to not notice what the young men were doing, further supporting our view that the young men were engaged in clandestine activities. The boys also appeared to be communicating with one another, not only through eye contact but also through auditory cues, such as synchronized coughs and throat-clearings. These communicative cues indicated that we needed to investigate what the boys were thinking during and what they thought about the mentoring session.

We subsequently organized a session to conduct stimulated recall interviews with some of the mentees who were present at the mentoring session. This interview session was conducted at the university where we work and involved Jack and two mentees,

Aquil and Roger, reviewing the videotape of the mentoring session; the recall session also was video and audio taped. The change in the setting made a difference in the quantity and the quality of the students' comments about their experiences at CHS. For instance, when Jack finished setting up the VCR and monitor and started preparing the camcorder and audio tape machine to record the recall session, Roger stated, "ah, he's got the audio-video going on … we've got to watch it?… You're going to tape us watching it? Cool!" In addition, as the tape of the session began to play, Aquil and Roger begin to signify on the mentors, making references to one's body and to the way that the other sits in his chair: "Larry be killing me the way he be sitting - he be sitting like he on a toilet!" Although many of the adults at CHS, including the principal, allow students to call them by their first names, referring to Larry by his first name was a departure from the usual practice of the young men who usually referred to him as Mr. Henderson.

During the session, in addition to the students confirming their general boredom during the mentoring session in question, Aquil repeats concerns that his peers raised in the earlier session, namely that adults at the school treat black males unfairly. Specifically, he complains that teachers and other adults at CHS who have marked him as having an "attitude problem" constantly picked on him. Aquil, however, recasts "attitude" as an adult problem, as opposed to a black male problem. "Definitely," he contends, "they have an attitude toward us. People like … people like have an attitude problem toward us." Aquil also sets the record straight about what teachers perceive to be his attitude problem: "She would say, 'that boy has a … Aquil has a smart mouth,' I don't got a smart mouth, I just 'respond' - I respond to questions! She asked me a question and I was like, 'huh? What happened? Like, you going to sue me? I ain't got no money…."

Mark Tappan and Lyn Mikel Brown (1991) suggest that the key to understanding the complexity of moral situations is found not only in the relationship between the cognitive and affective dimension, but also in the conative dimension of how individuals construct their experiences. The conative dimension focuses on what people do and, along these lines, of particular relevance to this paper, are aspects of the stories that Roger and Aquil told during the recall interview that provide insight into strategies they employ when they feel authority figures are disrespecting them and when it appears that they have no way out of the situation - where they are outnumbered and outgunned. In the following story told during the recall session Aquil describes how he got out of a situation at CHS when he felt that he was being unfairly targeted for reprimand by the school's security guard. In doing so, he illustrates how the use of indirection, a strategy similar to those that he and his peers also appeared to have employed during the previous mentoring session, helped him to survive a testy situation. Aquil recounts the story as follows:

> Well, wait a minute, I was running through the hallway, right? He was chasing me, yeah, he was chasing me because I said something to him. I think I told him that his pants were too [incomprehensible] or something. And I ran past this, what was that, uh Mephistopheles, right? [group laughter] straight up, right? And I run past her, right? She looks and I'm like, "whatever." Then I kept on running and then I came back, she said, "Come here. Now, if you would have ran into me, I would have Sued you for assaulT." And I was like, "huh?" She said, "yeah, I could have just Sued you for assault." "Aw, sue me what?" "You were running in the hallway. If you had bumped into me, I would have Sued you." I was like, "whatever, can I go? …." She was like, "No I want to talk to you." "No," I was like, "I got to go to class…" She was like, "I want to talk to you right now…" "No, I'm going to be tardy bye." That was all I did. I haven't said nothing to her since. I ain't said nothing else to her at all since then. I would have took her on Judge Judy and sued for some pennies, now. Straight up. But Judge Judy would do that type of stuff, too.

Aquil retells this episode in response to Jack's follow-up inquiry exploring students' complaints about double standards at the school. It is obvious to Aquil that the security guard was subjecting him to a double standard; however, as indicated elsewhere, he was also aware at the time that she perceived him as having an "attitude" problem - recall that "Aquil has a smart mouth." But passive acquiescence is not an option for this young man, as suggested in his words above. At the same time, though, Aquil could not directly call the security guard on her unfair treatment of him for, having been in this situation a number of times, Aquil knew that the airing of his legitimate concern would only get him into more trouble. Hence, he is confronted with a racial and gendered inflection of the dilemma that characterizes the culture of cheating described previously: "Do I do right and suffer or do I do wrong and get ahead?"

In his version of events, Aquil reconstructs his story with a variety of indirect languages. Marcyliena Morgan (1993) argues that the use of indirection, as demonstrated by Aquil, "has to do with the development of a speech economy in which 'ways of speaking' inherited directly from Africa have been reshaped by the historical experience of Afro-Americans in America" (p. 423). According to Morgan, the counterlanguage of the sort that Aquil employs is an expansion of indirect speech in the U.S. Diaspora that signals "both the social reality of antisociety as well as solidarity among African descendants" (p. 427). The initial use of this counterlanguage is evident in Aquil's reference to the security officer: "And I ran past this, what was that, uh Mephistopheles,

right? [group laughter] straight up, right?" The laughter of the group may be interpreted any number of ways. On the one hand, just the use of the term Mephistopheles in the context of this conversation is cause for laughter. However, the laughter in the room, especially as it comes from Roger, is more of the sort that says, "I cannot believe that you just went there!," to which Aquil replies, "straight up," or "I sure did!" His use of Mephistopheles illustrates one way that Aquil appropriates a tool borrowed from school for his own end and is also consistent with Bakhtin's (1986) view of language. For Bakhtin:

> Any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an other's word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and, finally, as my word, for since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression….
> These words of other's carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (pp. 88, 89)

Clearly, Aquil assimilates, re-works, and re-accentuates a word that carries with it its own expression and evaluative tone. Mephistopheles, for instance, represents the personification of evil forces, or the devil in Goethe's *Faust*, a book that is required reading for sophomores at CHS. The video footage and transcript suggest that Aquil, cognizant of the fact that his voice and image were being recorded, was rather purposeful in selecting a specific term that conveyed his sentiments in a way that expressed his candid assessment of the security guard, that elicited laughter, and that also lent itself to deniability. Clearly the reaction of Roger and Jack indicated that they heard Aquil call the white security guard a *devil*. We are inclined to agree with Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) who would likely argue that the main purpose of Aquil's choice of words was to get a laugh from his peers; this interpretation of Aquil's language activity emphasizes its synchronic dimension. We may also interpret his account in terms of its diachronic and polyphonic qualities that links it across time and space with others throughout the African Diaspora in North America. His use of counterlanguage in this regard employs the style of Martin Luther King, Jr. who used snake metaphors to convey essentially the same sentiments as Aquil. This specific use of counterlanguage is in contrast to its uptake by, say, Malcolm X or Frederick Douglass who explicitly referred to white people as devils in their public speeches and writings.

In addition to Mephistopheles, Aquil also appropriates another official tool of the school. However, this particular use has its conative significance within the context of his interaction with the security guard, in contrast to his retelling of the interaction. We can interpret his actions diachronically, in terms of a tradition, exemplified by Nat Turner, in which black people use the tools of the dominant society against itself. In this instance, and from a synchronic perspective, Aquil appropriates for his own ends a tool that school personnel often used against him. Specifically, he uses the school's tardy policy to flip the script, so to speak, on the security guard to get out of a difficult situation. Although the tardy policy is rarely enforced on this open campus where students come and go as they please and enter and leave class without permission, authority figures selectively enforce it against black males in the same way that the rule against running in the hallway was selectively enforced in this case. Moreover, Aquil places the security officer in an awkward position by suggesting that she, whose main job it is to enforce school rules, is contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and a black male at that!

Black male students at CHS readily employ the indirect language strategies such as those used by Aquil. That this is so is brought into bold relief in the parting shot of Aaron when the first author asked him to respond to those who would doubt that black male students could so clearly and eloquently describe their circumstances at CHS. Here, the usefulness of indirection as a mediating device is captured with particular clarity - and hilarity, we might add:

Aaron	When I look back on it, I wasn't prepared at all. But, I got here. I'm still here. And, I made it through. So, for people to say, you know, that black males can't make it? Aaah, … no (chuckles). Ah, ah - you know what I'm trying to say, but I'm not going to say it (smiles) -
Garrett	Ah, you can say it (laughing) -
Aaron	because it's kind of derogatory, but, uh, you know. Forget them. (pauses and smiles). Forget them.
Garrett	(laughing)
Aaron	FOR-get them.
Garrett	(laughing) Right, I heard you. (laughing). I heard you. I heard you.

Discussion and Conclusion

> I consider the fundamental theme of our epoch to be that of domination - which implies its opposite, the theme of liberation, as the objective to be achieved.
>
> Paulo Freire (1996, p. 84)

To reiterate, we suggest that the significance of the language practices of the black male students in this study is largely moral and political in nature. Data discussed in this paper provide insights into ways that young black males make sense of and negotiate academic and social settings in a school where they appear to be always outnumbered and always outgunned. Overall, the stories of the young men in the broader project depict unjust conditions at school; they also illustrate the strategies these students employ to negotiate their academic and social lives within these institutions. To what extent may their experiences inform educational practice and policy? The data tell us something about the nature of schooling in post-Civil Rights America and even about ourselves as teachers and researchers that runs counter to conventional wisdom about public education fifty years after *Brown*. For instance, the analysis in this study may offer alternatives to the pervasive notion that the post-Civil Rights era plight of black males in integrated public schools is simply an expression of their purported anti-intellectualism or oppositional identities (McWhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 2003). Indeed, our analysis may also point to more endemic problems related to oppression and domination in schools that place all students at risk and may provide insights on how to reform schools in more fundamental ways.

For instance, fundamental to the present discussion is the way in which second generation issues come into play in the marginalization and exclusion of black students in desegregated schools. For example, as indicated elsewhere in this article, *Brown* never challenged the assumption of white supremacy in society and this omission has had contradictory consequences for black students in public schools. On the one hand, black students who exceed the expectations of their white teachers are often regarded as "unusual" and as exceptions to the racial academic norms (Morris & Morris, 2002). Autobiographical and ethnographic accounts of race and education indicate that the preferential treatment accorded to "successful" black students by their teachers often cause them to be either estranged from or ostracized by their peers. Other studies document the dilemmas of "acting white" and the oppositional attitudes and academic disengagement that constitute part of this aspect of the legacy of race and education in post-Civil Rights America (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2003). On the other hand, from the outset of school integration, black students in the main encountered second-generation discrimination, or their resegregation within schools once they were desegregated. Integrated schools typically sort students into homogeneous subsets by ability groupings which typically results in the concentration of white students in honors and gifted classes and of students of color in lower tracks, remedial courses, and special education programs (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989).

At CHS, the denial of second-generation rights and the marginalization of black students around the issue of language, for example, is indicated in the following account. During the period in which this study was undertaken, CHS was preparing to become an International Baccalaureate (IB) campus, a move that would give it even greater prestige. Against this backdrop, in the 2000 fall semester, prior to a faculty meeting, an administrator asked teachers to submit entries for a "Top Ten List" of "Signs that City High teachers are exhibiting stress early in the school year." Items on the list, distributed at the meeting, included humorously clichéd to suggestive responses to the request by the administrator. The top item on the list, however, was "Thinking IB is bad grammar for 'I am.'"

Given the social and academic climate at CHS that allows for the public denigration of black culture, we contend that black males students suffer a *différend* when it comes to explanations for their exclusion and marginalization at the school. As used by the postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1988), a *différend* refers to "a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (p. xi). Lyotard argues that when a conflict arises between dominant and subjugated group members the stories of members of the latter group are not taken into full account in decision-making processes, causing them to continue suffering wrongs at the hands of those who oppress them. Similarly, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2001) note that the *différend* "occurs when a concept such as justice acquires conflicting meanings for two groups" (p. 44). In most cases, the dominant system of justice deprives subjugated persons of the chance to express their grievances in terms the system will understand. In such cases, the language that subjugated persons use to express how they have been injured or wronged does not resonate with those who are in authority and, consequently, their versions of truth are not accorded full respect when justice is meted out.

The *différend* aptly captures the conflicting accounts that students, teachers, and administrators provide for the marginalization and exclusion of black male students at CHS. On the one hand, with the exception of black male students and a few peer and adult allies, students, teachers, and administrators generally frame the plight of black male students in *technical* terms (e.g., "they simply do not perform well in such environments"). Black male students at CHS, on the other hand, frame their experiences in *moral* terms (e.g., "people really don't care too much about brothers here" or "I think they set up some of us to get us in trouble").

Generally speaking, moral discourses are generally absent from the language of school reform (Bartolomé, 1994; Noblit & Dempsey, 1996), except in those cases where the vocabulary is incorporated into technical frameworks, such as "character education" curriculum. Moreover, given both their domination and oppression (Young, 1990) and the intensified post-9-11 technical discourses that reduce important educational issues to high-stakes tests, the "achievement gap," and school violence, black male students are even more prone to suffer a *différend* when they employ moral discourses to describe their academic and social experiences in school.

Critics of Lyotard find his idea of incommensurability troubling and point out that such a take on language disputes is epistemologically suspect and leaves no hope for a resolution of the *différend* (e.g., Burbules, 2000). Departing from Lyotard in the latter respect, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) frame the *différend* as a dialectic and believe that narrative intervention, that is, allowing those who suffer to tell their stories on their own terms, creates the conditions for a resolution that involves both the oppressed and the oppressor. Also, critical ethnographers (e.g., Carspecken, 1996) who argue that consensus is a crucial element in establishing truth claims may also take issue with the notion of incommensurability that is at the heart of the concept of the *différend*. We argue, however, that the oppression that characterizes the experiences of black male students renders it virtually impossible to reach a consensus about the nature of their plight in a way that is equitable and that remedies their situation.

We further argue that the domination and oppression that render the voices of black male students unintelligible are organizational features of education in general in post-Civil Rights America where the denial of cultural and social rights of black students in particular are the rule. Along these lines, research indicates that when black educators have greater decision-making roles in the education of black students, problems attendant to the denial of second-generation rights in schools dramatically decrease (Henig et al., 1999). Such findings suggest that second generation issues are primarily about human relationships and, thus, are moral in nature. As such problems they are not easily eradicated by judicial decrees, such as those rendered in *Brown* and the subsequent court rulings that followed its lead. Moreover, if domination and oppression most accurately characterize the conditions that contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of black students, and we believe they do, liberation should be the primary term for conceptualizing remedies to address them. A notion of liberation in this sense fosters cultural democracy (Darder, 1991; Ramírez & Castañeda, 1974), or the nurturing of group differences. As Iris Marion Young (1992) suggests, group differentiation, or what we commonly call diversity "is both an inevitable and desirable aspect of modern social processes. This alternative view of social justice, then, requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression" (p. 180).

Along these lines, the stories of black males in this study offer helpful insights for how researchers, educators, and policymakers might go about working for meaningful change in urban schools. The young men assert the value and specificity of their cultures and attributes and, in doing so, render the dominant culture as relative, as one culture among other cultures (Young 1990). It bears to reason, then, that a consideration of their words may provide a frame of reference to articulate a new racial literacy and, perhaps, to imagine the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of a what Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002) conceptualize as a political race project in post-Civil Rights era public schools. A political race project mobilizes public consciousness around a common cause of social justice, based on critiques proffered by oppressed group members. It builds around the premise that not only do the experiences of oppressed groups signal endemic social and economic problems in the U.S., they also support a particular way of looking at society and its deficiencies. Racialized perspectives also offer a more basic critique of U.S. culture and life than do other points of view that are typically taken up in public debates and, in turn, can lead to social action at more fundamental levels. Such action improves not only the lives of members of racially oppressed groups but those of the wider society as well.

Optimistically, we found that a significant minority of students and adults at CHS forged relationships that support the academic success of students without respect to race, ethnicity, gender, or class. Our on-going research suggests that teachers and administrators that support black male students at the school share in common affiliations with social movements or commitments to egalitarian ideologies. Further, some of the students at the school also demonstrated their willingness to mobilize around the concerns of black male students to promote change at CHS (Duncan, 2002b). These findings suggest to us that political race projects are indeed possible strategies for bringing about the conditions of social justice promised by *Brown* - those that are grounded in the affirmation of and respect for group differences. We believe that such conditions will not only foster the academic achievement of black male students but that of their peers as well. Moreover, these possibilities are the stuff of the untested feasibility that frames our post-critical approach to this study and that inspires our continued belief in the promise of *Brown*, despite its troubled fifty-year legacy.

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Endnotes

1- Walter Mosley (1998, 2000) powerfully renders this dilemma in his short stories featuring Socrates Fortlow and in a collection of essays that critiques white supremacy in U.S. society. back

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