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Waiting for Superman: Neoliberal Educational Reform and the Craft of Filmic Direction

Jose Prado and Jeffrey Montez de Oca

The Waiting for Superman (WFS) cultural project and its push to transform the public school system has had great appeal among those sympathetic and unsympathetic to the victims of exclusionary and exploitative school agendas. This appeal is based on the double-tiered strategy of writer and director Davis Guggenheim, writer Billy Kimball, and producers Lesley Chilcott, Jeff Skol, and Diane Weyerman. First, they pursue the support of viewers who are sympathetic to the aspirations of discriminated students and their families. Second, they harness a vision of educational practice within contemporary economic parameters around economic efficiency and control. This is basic to the affinity they pursue between themselves and viewers that is grounded in perspectives and sentiments—however inauthentic they might be—with which viewers have often already constructed understandings about educational history. In this way, they signal ideas about educational inefficiency and resistance to racial oppression in education to build a bond with different groups of viewers. The specific ways that the directors engage in these practices of signification is one focus of our work. At one end this is the cultural and rhetorical strategy that the directors exercise in their bid to generate demand for educational reform. In even more subtle and strategic fashion, this “neoliberal affinity”—bridging the social and economic divide between distinct social groups via particular cultural and discursive strategies to advance corporate interests—would justify the leadership role taken by very wealthy white individuals in the move to corporatize public education.

The greater challenge for the directors of the WFS cultural project is to acquire the support of color-blind sectors of the public (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Where viewers from such sectors of the public are convinced that the issues of racial discrimination have been largely overcome the directors are tasked to frame their project within an objectivist narrative of market and institutional efficiency where an ascription to rules of the market—competition, individualism, resilience, etc.—and not any brand of racial reparations should dictate routine institutional policy and practice. The WFS directors would likely find great difficulty building
support on the basis of understandings around racial discrimination in education. Thus, the directors are meted with the task of simultaneously summoning ideas about pathologies in black communities, market efficiency, and national prestige—however questionable these might be—to garner the support of such viewers. In a very basic way, then, the capacity of the directors to join color-blind groups to their project rests on the absence of clear reference to educational racism as the source of the troubles that affect racial minority communities and the nation. This explains the fundamental reference in the WFS cultural project to institutional incompetence and bureaucratic authority that mark—or are said to mark—the experiences of racial minorities in schools. In this way, the directors seek the creation of a community of rationally minded viewers who possess appropriate and more contemporary understandings about educational policy and practice. The directors then take it upon themselves to assume leadership and identify corporate leaders—Bill Gates, Steve Barr, Geoffrey Canada, Michelle Rhee, and so on—who have the cultural vision and resources to more completely corporatize and reconfigure the nation’s educational system. Thus, theirs is the color-blind channel through which the schooling of racial minority youth is estranged from critical analyses of racial discrimination in education and found within the language of the contemporary capitalist market to more readily surrender public education to hedge fund investors (Giroux 2010b).

THEORETICAL FRAME

How does the framing of black communities in the WFS cultural project (as families, parents, grandparents, youth, men, women, and educational advocates) contribute to a corporate agenda to more completely appropriate the public educational system? An initial attempt to answer this question is made via key points throughout this article. Each pays particular attention to the construction of messages around race and education in the contemporary cultural and economic juncture. Consideration of these points allows us to arrive at basic conclusions about the current push to more completely corporatize public education. Thus, we examine the construction of a narrative agenda in the WFS cultural project that frames the contemporary crisis around the educational discrimination of black students as a consequence of government ineptitude and professional incompetence. We identify the polysemic strategies of the directors of the WFS cultural project and locate these strategies within the contemporary neoliberal cultural and economic period. Together they are meant to convince viewers that the contemporary capitalist market is the ultimate arbiter of institutional justice and that the character of individuals and not the color of their skin or their collective experience of historical discrimination must be the platform for social progress.

The politics of deregulation and decentralization that are central to the tensions of the neoliberal corporate agenda are situated on two planes (Apple 2001a; Harvey 2005; Saltman 2007). On the first plane these are situated at the governmental and electoral level where at mid-century newfound levels of governmental authority and electoral participation were captured by previously
excluded racial minority groups. Here such groups drew on the federal
government as a central governing body with far-reaching regulatory capacity
to push forth a range of encompassing legal policy in their bid to overturn
previously sanctioned systems of governmental and institutional racial apartheid
(Borstelmann 2001; Omi and Winant 1994). In the 1950s this included, for
example, the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision. And, in the
1960s this included a greater variety of federally mandated measures such as
the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act. Gains such
as these were partly rooted in concessions forced upon elite governmental and
corporate bodies that were pressured to uphold semblance of democracy and
inclusion at both national and international levels during the post-WW II period
and at the height of Cold War tensions. Thus, the pursuit of legal rights via the
centralized model of federal government authority and the more sweeping auth-
ority with which governmental institutions were thereby able to pursue racial
parity altered the social and cultural landscape the nation had known to that time.

Since the 1980s, and particularly in the presidential administration of Ronald
Reagan who set out to “end-government-as-we-know-it,” many of the social
and political in-roads acquired by the proponents of social inclusion and civil
rights in the 1950s and 1960s were lost (Stefancic and Delgado 1996). This took
place amid a social and economic climate where the perceived failures of the
nation—the military and political loss in Vietnam, the surrender of the Panama
Canal, the Cuban missile crisis, the toppling of US-backed Somoza regime in
Nicaragua, etc.—were attributed to a surrender to civil rights advocates in the
preceding thirty years. For opponents of civil rights era legislation it was not
difficult to believe the claim that racial minorities and the legal policy that
contested their discrimination were the source of the nation’s inferior standing
at the international level and many of the difficulties they experienced in the
labor and economic market. Thus, for the nation to reassert its international
standing and for whites to recuperate their losses the call was made to reverse
civil rights era legislation.

The civil rights movement, however, has complicated the promotion of unfil-
tered racist diatribe for the elevation of whites in United States society. Thus,
ostensibly color-blind language about individual rights, merit, and resilience
has surfaced with which otherwise well-intentioned individuals have led them-
selves and others to believe that they are rational and enlightened on matters of
race (Bonilla-Silva 2010). At one end, then, the call to reassert and reconstitute
exclusionary racial policy and practice have been developed within cultural
and legalistic paradigms that are antagonistic to governmental regulation and
centralization—organizational and institutional systems upon which civil rights
legislation rested. The allegation is made that centralized and regulated organiza-
tional systems and the race-based reparations programs linked to these systems
are inefficient, irrelevant, are racist against whites, and ultimately obstruct more
pressing national and international concerns. This language, which is basic to the
contemporary social and economic period, provides the legal and discursive
backdrop for a host of deregulatory and decentralization agendas upon which
elite corporate and governmental bodies have re-appropriated government
channels to displace fundamental civil rights era gains in education. These include,

Paradoxically, where there has been reversal of civil rights era legislation through decentralization and deregulation strategies there has been a corresponding centralization of corporate-based administrative practices that draw upon central governmental authority (Apple 2001b, 2008; Giroux 2007; Saltman 2007). Here then is the second plane upon which the tensions of the corporatist agenda and its attendant practices in contemporary educational reform rest. For the purposes of summary they are placed within three illustrative categories: (1) might, (2) order, and (3) profit. In the first case, the monopolization of government by corporate entities is facilitated through a series of attacks on those who provide and receive government institutional services. Thus, through the deliberate vilification of students and teachers, for example, and the corresponding sabotage of social and institutional safety nets upon which equitable provision of school resources and fair employment depend, corporate entities seek to weaken the prestige of students and teachers to justify their appropriation of school-based goods and services essential to each group. This is not entirely possible, however, without establishing a political and institutional order through which school-based goods and services can be marketed. Within contemporary educational reform this has meant the imposition of policy and practice around student and teacher accountability and the marketing of outcomes generated through such imposition. It is within this structural frame that standards-based curriculum, instruction, and evaluation would streamline students, teachers, and administrators away from any opportunity to interrogate and act upon their day-to-day existence. Instead, their task centers on public relations—the promotion of schools’ standing in various evaluation reports—students’ commitment to a pedagogy rooted in market-based interests, and teachers’ mediation of these objectives at the curricular and instructional level.

The contradictory reality of corporate-based educational reform—a regulation of public education that favors hedge fund financiers and corresponding deregulation of public education that increasingly undermines public oversight of public education—represents a victory on the part of corporate elite who have wrested governmental authority away from civil rights advocates to the extent that they had previously possessed it. Thus, they have effectively strengthened attempts to monopolize public schools and its resources. Their capacity to do so has depended in large part on cultural and rhetorical strategies that obscure the promotion of racial justice either as an irrelevant and bygone social agenda or one that threatens the very nature of the U.S. cultural and economic order. In this case, there exists a continuum between the narratives of the neoliberal capitalist market on the one side and the contemporary notions about race on the other (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Omi and Winant 1994; Omi and Winant 2012). In both instances any attempt to regulate social and institutional interaction is seen as anathema to U.S. principles of individualism and competition. In his analysis of race relations since the civil rights period, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) notes
the ways that contemporary social conditions depend upon ideas around the attainment of civil rights era objectives despite persistent and pervasive racial inequality. And at another end, Omi and Winant (1994) provide a pertinent point of reference to frame the strategic manipulation of race-based ideologies in the contemporary neoliberal social and economic period. Taken from Gramscian understandings of hegemony (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 1971), their work details the structural and ideological processes through which powerful social and economic interests normalize their cultural and economic objectives and thereby subvert subordinate social groups’ opposition to such objectives. In their analysis, sectors on the political right have today rearticulated language around racial justice that surfaced in the civil rights period. This is pursued to convince the general public that basic institutional objectives of the civil rights period depend on a rationalist corporate framework and, ironically, the leadership of wealthy white individuals. In short, “ghetto-related-behavior” (Moynihan 1965; Steinberg 1995, 1997; Steiner 1968; Wilson 1987) and an “inefficient” public education are framed as the source of the deplorable educational outcomes of black youth. Thus, it is color-blind ideology that provides the cultural and institutional logic to allay the concerns that the troubling contradictions of the contemporary neoliberal period can occasion—disproportionate incarceration rates for minorities, racial exclusion in the educational system and in housing, and so on. In so doing it justifies whites’ elevated position in U.S. society.

In the case of our analysis of the WFS cultural project civil rights era discourse is rearticulated within a corporate-based educational reform model where the pursuit of might, order, and profit dictates administrative, instructional, and curricular designs. As such, justice in education and the educational standing of the nation articulated in the WFS cultural project depend on racial minority students’ ability to meet educational standards and gain the skills for their subsequent incorporation into the labor market. This is the basis for their integration into the middle-class and the mainstream economic order in general that is lauded as a civil rights objective. According to the directors, a more complete corporatization of the public school system will facilitate this agenda.

The analysis of the discourse around racial justice introduced and developed in the WFS cultural project is framed in relation to Roland Barthes’s narrative analysis (1977). According to Barthes, the “distributional function” of language marks the relationship between and among linguistic events in society. Thus, iterations—utterances, script, signs, and so on—are tied to more general social narratives across both time and space that give them meaning. In this work it is identified as a “narrative continuum.” In the case of the WFS cultural project this narrative continuum summons incomplete or erroneous understandings around race that circulate in society to rationalize if not explain persistent forms of racial difference and discrimination in society. In the contemporary color-blind cultural climate where the parameters for any meaningful and critical discussion around racial discrimination are severely reduced on account of national policy of the last thirty five years—roll backs against affirmative action, attacks on multicultural education, reversal of anti-exclusionary school practice, etc.—and where racial discrimination is relegated to an almost irrelevant past these understandings often blame the victims of racial oppression for their condition.
Quintessential evidence used to substantiate belief about the existence of racial justice in the United States and that would undermine debate is of course the claim that Barack Obama’s presidency signals U.S. society’s ability to see individuals beyond race (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Omi and Winant 2012; Reed 2001; Wingfield and Feagin 2013). This color-blind understanding of race-relations is grounded on the belief that the dream of racial parity articulated by Martin Luther King in 1963 has not only been attained but any groups’ assertion to the contrary could only fracture the legacy of racial justice in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Dyson 2000). To contest claims to the contrary that are rooted in empirical evidence, proponents of color-blind understanding turn to normative ideologies and practices in the United States—meritocracy, skills training, individual resilience, and so on. From this vantage opponents of civil rights legislation explain the source of racial minorities’ persistent exclusion and propose subsequent channels through which that exclusion can be eliminated—faulty moral character and character enhancement agendas, for example. In the end, whites’ preferences and superior social standing are upheld all the while perpetuating racial discrimination and oppression historically landed on racial minorities in the United States. In the case of the WFS cultural project, then, these understandings are framed within rhetoric that is consistent with its political and economic pursuits (e.g., racial minorities lack the requisite social dispositions and behaviors, government regulation stifles their attainment of these dispositions and behaviors, the state and its institutions are inefficient, the market is a better arbiter of social justice).

The directors’ exercise of color-blind rhetoric in the movie is more than a simple case of cultural appropriation to push a corporate agenda in schools. In our analysis it represents a deliberate attempt to undermine the very politics of the civil rights period. Indeed, the neoliberal pursuit of educational reform depends on the displacement of race-based institutional and educational regulations that combat exclusion and that would otherwise complicate the greater corporate monopolization of schools. Thus, we draw from existing theoretical work to connect the relationship between the WFS trailer, the WFS movie, and a number of its undergirding cultural and discursive properties. We pay particular attention to the tropes around black communities’ “ghetto-related-behavior,” the crises around their education, and the corporate based solutions to these issues marketed by neoliberal educational reformers.

The more general claim to which our work is linked asserts that popular culture and society’s relationship to it provide the logic and emotion upon which hegemonic social and institutional policy and practice rest (Montez de Oca and Prado 2014). Scholars of education who use this argument document the ways that the logic of institutional efficiency—bureaucratic authority, the apparently impartial logic of the capitalist market, the utility of capitalist systems of institutional governance—shape the language, practice, and order of contemporary educational reform (Mathison 2004; Noguera 2004; Valenzuela 2005). Thus, standards-based educational reform, whose principles fit within the structures of increasingly privatized education, are basic to the understandings about the superiority of the market as the appropriate arbiter of educational policy and practice. Or, to put things in the terms of the directors of the WFS cultural project,
mobility and integration for working-class racial minority youth is possible to the extent that schooling is about social and economic mobility and to the extent that administrative, instructional, and curricular practice fits within a corporate agenda.

Yet even by the standards promoted by the directors of the WFS cultural project, the push toward charter schooling is lacking. In her critique of the documentary, Diane Ravitch (2012) notes the directors’ inattention to problematic and contradictory evidence about charter schooling. She draws from Margaret Raymond’s Stanford study of charter schooling, the CREDO study, and notes, for example, that thirty seven percent of charter schools were inferior to public schools on measures of students’ progress in math and that forty six percent of charter schools ‘had academic gains no different from those of similar public school[s]’ (23). That the vast majority of charter schools demonstrate such results is clearly no indication of a newfound educational panacea. Furthermore, and despite the claims to the contrary by the directors of the WFS cultural project, Linda Darling-Hammond and Ann Lieberman note that investment in public school education has had a positive impact in terms of racial parity in education (2012). Had rollbacks to civil rights legislation and equal school funding in education not been implemented in the 1980s, for example, the drastic decrease in black and white achievement gap experienced in the 1960s and 1970s—an astounding seventy five percent—would have been inevitably eliminated.

Incomplete assertions about the apparent deficiencies of the public education system that are articulated by the directors are substantive to the conclusions they make about an ill-prepared labor force, the inability of families to integrate the middle-class, and the inferior educational standing of the United States at the international level. Though Ravitch and Darling-Hammond and Lieberman provide valuable and important critique about the WFS cultural project, one very basic question demands attention: How is it that despite the misinformation and incomplete arguments about the public school system, which they identify, and the scathing analysis of the political and economic underpinnings of contemporary educational reform (Giroux 2010a; Noguera 2004; Saltman 2002, 2006, 2009), the United States continues to deliver its children to schools that are fundamentally linked to a corporate agenda? In keeping with their Gramscian perspective, Omi and Winant (1994) remind us that in the contemporary neoliberal and post-civil rights era it is ideologically rooted discursive persuasion, not empirically driven assertions and claims, that has greater political weight. This, then, accounts for the focus of our attention.

METHOD

To address the workings of hegemony in the WFS cultural project we examine three general scenes in the WFS trailer and link the ideologies that they summon to corresponding moments in the movie itself. The first is the interview of Anthony, a fifth grader from Washington, DC and lead subject in the documentary. The second is the general critique of U.S. schooling. And, the third is the introduction of the Seed Charter School (SCS). We unpack the language
and imagery around institutional justice in each of these scenes that center attention on U.S. students’ need for quality schools, black students’ low enrollment in higher education, and the push to unlock black youth from cycles of poverty. Though such demands were articulated during the civil rights period, they are reiterated by the directors of the WFS cultural project to frame the discriminatory politics they advance. These include, for example, the scrutiny of public school teachers, the critique and undermining teachers’ unions, standards-based curriculum and instruction, and deregulation of public schooling. These political and institutional objectives are basic to what is demonstrated around the strategic use of civil rights narratives in the WFS cultural project given the directors’ pursuit to facilitate the appropriation and monopolization of public schools by individuals such as Steve Barr, Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, Geoffrey Canada, and others.

Representations of blackness in the WFS trailer and movie provide more than a cultural platform to articulate what the directors claim to be a color-blind civil rights movement. They serve as a foundation for the development of related understandings around education that are cast in the WFS movie about students’ education and their family life in three corresponding scenes: (1) the interview of Anthony’s grandmother, (2) a second interview of Anthony, and (3) Anthony’s arrival at the SCS. Thus, once ideas about educational rights have been summoned alongside a critique of state sponsored education in the trailer and once viewers’ anticipated responses to each of these narratives are generated, the directors set the context for a persuasive proposal of their corporate version of educational reform. Given the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section and the attention to the identified scenes in the trailer and the movie, we identify a sequence of events that we propose would culminate in viewers’ investment in the directors’ version of educational reform. Although our proposal is only a theoretically based argument about the relationship between popular culture and political authority in the contemporary educational reform movement, it provides a framework to examine neoliberal educational reform in the work that grows from this preliminary study.

The WFS Trailer

Unfortunately, black families are often blamed for the educational crises that beset their children (Collins 2000; Moreno and Valencia 2002; Moynihan 1965; Murray 1994; Sewell and Hauser 1980; Weiner 2006; Wilson 1987). In fact, black children’s expulsion rates, suspension rates, grades, and their inferior educational track placement are often reduced to any combination of claims about fathers’ absence and unemployment, mothers’ welfare dependence, and parents’ low educational attainment. This is a trope that has a long record in the social sciences and education literature (Cherry 1995; Gonzalez 1990, 2001; Kelley 1997; Moynihan 1965; Myrdal 1944, 1962; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Steinberg 1981, 1997; Wilson 1987). The claims vary somewhat though they are generally rooted in the idea that there exists a mismatch between parents’ and caretakers’ norms and values on the one side and those of the school on the other. Robert Cherry (1995) writes, for instance, that as early as 1944 noted
sociologist Gunnar Myrdal had argued that through the diffusion of middle class norms “uneeducated and crude” Southern Blacks would “emerge out of the backwardness of slavery” (4).

This narrative continues to hold currency (Kelley 1997). If black students experience low educational outcomes, for instance, today the solution is still to alter black family life and schooling to integrate black students within the social and institutional mainstream. Policy recommendations about this are premised on the notion that what is missing in the lives of black youth and what accounts for their perceived pathologies—truancy, low achievement, dropping out, etc.—is black fathers’ absence. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) reminds us, however, that despite this implicit attack on black women’s parenting the greater challenge is not the absence of patriarchal relations. In fact, the problem is far more systemic and related to, for example, “inadequate child support, inferior housing, and street violence” (255). We are led to ask in light of Collins’s critique if the same narrative is really not more about justifying various kinds of abuse and oppression landed on black men in particular, men of color in general, and their families? So long as attention to pervasive forms of educational exploitation and exclusion experienced by black communities is surrendered to suspicion about black men, a more comprehensive and antiracist politics in the educational system is thwarted. In the end, the reductionist scholarship and policy that ignores larger and more oppressive structural conditions—undermined multicultural educational programs, defunded inner-city public schools, and underresourced social service agencies—that would otherwise impact the educational experiences of young black males like Anthony, are altogether ignored.

Indeed, assertions about the inferiority of racial minorities in general and black communities in particular reemerge in the WFS trailer. Attention and analysis of these assertions provide ground to evaluate language around governmental incompetence and the grandeur of the market introduced in the trailer and given greater attention in the documentary. Consider, then, the representation of Anthony in the film’s trailer, which readies viewers for a litany of critique and policy recommendations about black families, black parenting, and public education in the WFS documentary itself. In fact, the critique and recommendations are sourced from much of the same language about government ineptitude and black cultural deficiencies on the one side and market-based solutions on the other. The directors, however, appear to be well aware of the diversity of viewers to whom they must direct their message, as well as the historical moment that frames their project. As such, they are careful to compose visual and discursive narratives to ensure that distinct viewing groups—those who might be sympathetic to Anthony and those who might be unsympathetic to him—are incorporated in ways that fit their larger cultural and economic agenda.

“Make My Grandmother Proud”

Critics of “ghetto-related behavior” (Moynihan 1965; Wilson 1987) who link ideas about the social and economic challenges that black communities face to educational challenges see these problems as a consequence of cultural inferiority and absent fathers. This explanation provides a ready frame to contextualize
Anthony's experience and to signal larger conclusions about black communities. Thus, Anthony's situation is part of a larger pattern of social failure: blacks' licentiousness, matriarchal households, and a general unwillingness to conform to the cultural and linguistic mainstream. This narrative that is contained in the trailer and to which many viewers in a racist society already ascribe is extended in the movie. At the outset of the WFS trailer, for instance, Anthony states “I just has to do my best in school and make my grandmother proud.” As a visual and discursive representation the scene fits squarely within understandings about the suspicions generally directed against young black males. First, Anthony’s version of the English language—cast as tattered as the English language dictionary behind him—is ostensible evidence of his inferiority vis-à-vis the privileged position of Anglocentric diction in the United States (Fordham 1999; Kynard 2008; Perry 1998; Perry and Delpit 1998). Second, his desire to make his grandmother proud, as opposed to his parents, affirms ideas about fractured black families whose pathologies are gauged in relation to standard and seemingly neutral notions that privilege families' conformity to hegemonic cultural and economic standards (Coontz 2007). If it is his grandmother and not his parents whose praise he pursues then viewers' misgivings about Anthony’s family—if not all black families—are only confirmed when later they discover that he has been abandoned by his mother and essentially orphaned by his drug consuming father. The task, as it is presented to viewers, is to wrest Anthony from a similar destiny. This is landed on a revamped school system where Anthony and other students that stand in his place in viewers' imagination, are raised from the depths of cultural inferiority.

Public Schooling as Culprit of Educational Crisis

There is a second and equally pressing narrative that bears on the interpretations in question. It concerns viewers' mistrust and the directors' pursuit to corporatize public schools. In this case the directors of the WFS cultural project are tasked with the challenge of confirming viewers' misgivings about the public school system. To do so the directors call upon one set of viewers' anxieties about educational discrimination and another's anxieties about black students. In the first case, the directors claim that racial discrimination in the school system is a consequence of a disinterested and incompetent teaching force and is the wedge that divides racial minority students from educational and economic success. If, on the other hand, viewers are generally resistant to the call for civil rights-based racial justice that is signaled in the trailer, then the directors articulate the crisis as one that also rests on the incompetence of public school teachers. The greater danger for such viewers is not black youths' educational and economic segregation but the threat that their poor educational outcomes pose to U.S. international superiority.

Consider then the introduction of ideas about educators' incompetence and complacency in the face of young people's deviant proclivities. In one scene from the trailer a white female teacher stands at the head of the classroom and reads a textbook to students. Her immobile position in front of the classroom and her students' passivity illustrate boredom. All but one of the students' vision is
directed at their books. The one student who does not read is positioned at the front of the class and to the teacher’s right. He looks to her in a seeming sense of misunderstanding. The teacher doesn’t address him. She is, as it appears, more concerned to follow a scripted instructional and curricular agenda. The supposed danger that such educators represent is underscored by the summary of the accompanying statistical bar charts: “Among 30 developed countries we rank 25th in math and 21st in science. In almost every category we’ve fallen behind except one. Kids from the USA rank number one in confidence” (Guggenheim 2010). This statistic is made all the more problematic given the subsequent scene of young people’s (and even one middle-aged white man’s) celebration of one youth’s failed and disastrous attempt to fly onto the roof of an apartment complex with his bicycle. This same scene is accompanied by the slacker/corporate punk Green Day anthem, “American Idiot.” As depicted, the lethargy that incompetent teachers foster precedes youths’ ascription to baseless street culture and dangerous hedonism that is certain to lead future generations and the nation to peril.

This explains the presence of recycled narratives around black youths’ deviance in the WFS trailer, as well as in the movie, which we address later. Indeed, these narratives fit within the context of a corporate and disciplinarian-based educational reform movement that responds to cultural deviance and that is administered within the hegemonic political and economic order where racial minorities are to be schooled to conformity and success. This, according to the WFS cultural project, will not only facilitate racial minorities’ social integration but will restore the superior standing of the U.S. educational system at the international level. Black students’ educational success—scripted as cultural and economic conformity—facilitates shared belief among groups from disparate social sectors that the solution to marketed crises in the WFS cultural project is in the privatization of the public school system.

The task of cultivating and molding youth such as Anthony within the revamped and corporatized school system is landed on a professional black class under whose discipline black youth will be turned away from dysfunctional, pathological, and criminal behavior. Consider, for instance, Anthony in the last scene of the trailer. Here he is in the company of middle-school aged black youth with cornrow hairstyles and shaved heads. They stand at attention at the entry of a school and face a light-skinned black man in a tie who admonishes them that “someone has taken an interest in [them]. Someone loves [them] and they recognize the importance of education.” The moment is notable given its link to the tough-loving patriarchal authority that vilifies the kind of “ghetto-related behavior” (Wilson 1987) criticized in liberal black culture (Dyson 2005), on one side, and neoliberal and neoconservative mainstream U.S. culture on the other (Omi and Winant 1994; Stefancic and Delgado 1996). In fact, the young man is the director of the SCS where later we discover Anthony gains admission.

In our analysis, assimilationist and conformist narratives set the context and explain the filmic direction in the identified scene. Anthony and his peers’ attention to the SCS director are, after all, reminiscent of first encounters between young recruits and military superiors. The students, in this case, like the military recruits to whom they are imagined, are expected to shed an existing and inferior identity under the authority, instruction, and scrutiny of this educator. Now
introduced—and detailed for viewers later in the movie—is a plan to socialize and educate wayward black children such as Anthony and his peers to conformity within an economic plan that will provide the cultural and economic structure for them to enter the middle class.

From a less popular and more academic perspective, however, it is the “return” of middle-class Blacks to the lives of inner-city poor and working-class blacks (Kelley 1997; Wilson 1987)—and under the seeming auspices, tutelage and otherwise missionary zeal of ultra-wealthy whites—where the promise to transform “at-risk” youth into dapper and middle-class professionals exists. This narrative is in one instance consistent with larger anxieties around the increased racial diversification of the United States (Fishman 1992; Gallaher 2002; Omi and Winant 1994; Stefancic and Delgado 1996) and in a second instance converges with certain racial minorities’ own uneasiness with their presence in an Anglocentric U.S. social order (Chavez 1991; Rodriguez 1997; Steinberg 1995). This narrative facilitates a coupling of racial sectors who often possess disparate interests and perspectives on such hot-button issues as affirmative action and housing. Indeed, it signals a neoliberal affinity that rests on hegemonic color-blind logic. In the first instance, racist anxieties about racial diversification are closely tied to the realization that the intergenerational upward mobility that whites had generally experienced throughout the twentieth century is no longer certain. The consequent suspicion and anger that is targeted at those who are perceived to be the source of this phenomenon—racial minorities, immigrants—is spurred and fomented by racist radio commentators, union-busting politicians, conservative and racist foundations, and others whose attacks on anti-discriminatory civil rights era legislation is perceived as defense of “tradition” (Stefancic and Delgado 1996). As such, seemingly irrational and irrelevant multicultural institutional and educational agendas and the apparent threat of politically empowered racial minorities and immigrants undermine educational policy and practice upon which earlier generations in the United States had guaranteed whites’ social and economic mobility. The marketing of this threat obfuscates the rather tangled social and economic issues tied to current national and international shifts in and around education that include, for instance, the plunder of what had been the public school system in New Orleans and its surrender to the prison industrial complex as detailed in the work of Ellen Tuzzollo and Daman Hewit (2006), Henry Giroux (2010a, 2007), and Kenneth Saltman (2007). Each of these authors, for example, describes the political and economic machinations by which response to ecological catastrophe in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans was managed so as to deliver the city’s public school system to for-profit entities. In the end, the hatred and suspicion that was fostered in New Orleans about racial minority students and their public school teachers distracted attention from the corporate agenda in the New Orleans school system and the civil rights tradition that could have otherwise been harnessed to confront the challenges to its beleaguered schools. After all, it is institutional regulation basic to the civil rights tradition in education—racial and cultural parity in instruction, gender parity in schools’ sports programs, economic parity in schools’ funding, linguistic parity in the curriculum—that complicates the streamlining of an educational system whose
curriculum and whose instructional and administrative practice can be more easily scrutinized, manipulated, and standardized for profit in the current capitalist economy.

In the second instance, racial minority ascription to neoliberal color-blind educational politics is an almost logical response that misrecognizes the institutional and systematic nature of racism if it does not also safeguard social and cultural investments in the mainstream that they possess or pursue. Thus, the Anglocentric curricular and instructional design in the corporatist school reform movement—test-based instruction and curriculum—is not presented or even held by racial minorities in certain instances as racism or educational discrimination. Instead, it is framed as a rational—if not a “color-blind” and “post-racial” response (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Feagin 2013)—to a larger legacy of institutional/educational incompetence and neglect that some in racial minority communities identify as a source of their inability to reach social and economic parity with whites. Consequently, it is the reform movement’s “back-to-basics” educational agenda and its corresponding character enhancement framework that signals a link to the civil rights period that in their estimation would guarantee racial minority inclusion and success. These understandings that are reiterated in the WFS cultural project widen the discursive parameters and broaden the community of adherents to its agenda. Together they undergird the battery of educational policy and practice in and around the education of racial minority youth that has emerged in recent years (Duncan 2009; NewSchools Venture Fund 2004; Noguera 2004).

The irony here is that this discourse is coupled with the language of social justice in liberal and even radical strands of the civil rights movement (“content-of-their-character,” “smash-the-state,” etc.) with which various racial minority communities are familiar. Paradoxically, the language with which the neoliberal educational reform movement is buttressed represents the kind of rhetoric Omi and Winant (1994) identify as rearticulated discourse. To the extent, for example, that the “character education” of the charter school movement appropriates Martin Luther King’s “content-of-their-character-and-not-the-color-of-their-skin” speech it sets a discursive platform upon which regressive educational policies such as the dismantlement of state schools can more justifiably displace the kind of civil rights educational agenda and regulation that would otherwise hamper the corporatization of the public school system (Dyson 2000).6 Yet these appropriated narratives are also convergent with those contemporary political and economic currents bent on undermining centralized government regulatory systems and elevating the political and economic authority of elite capitalist groups. Here too, interestingly enough, the more radical cultural current of the civil rights period that was concerned to attack and transform the political order of the state appears to frame the WFS cultural project as a civil rights agenda.

The WFS Documentary

At this point we turn to an analysis of the relationship between the WFS trailer and the WFS movie, particularly as it concerns the following tropes: (1) the
so-called “ghetto related behavior”; (2) public school crises; and (3) the market as a solution to cultural and educational dilemmas. Here we broaden focus to situate these tropes within two arguments central to the film’s politics, which are introduced in the trailer and expanded in the movie.\(^7\) The first is directed at viewers who are sympathetic to the challenges of minority students in general and black students in particular. In this argument it is the combination of educational incompetence and black families’ articulated pathologies that foster “ghetto-related behavior” and black students’ poor educational outcomes, and not the exclusionary and exploitative racist tradition in the United States. The second argument is directed at viewers who would otherwise be opposed to the alluded race-based educational affirmative action programs of the WFS cultural project. In this instance, the danger is not Blacks’ own exclusion as much as it is the danger that this exclusion creates for society. In other words, to the extent that seemingly incompetent educators keep young black students from “proper” perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors, black students are inevitably destined to criminality and violence. As we have so far explained, each of these arguments is basic to the discussion around the scenes that follow and that would be summoned in viewers’ imaginations.

The implications about black families introduced in the WFS trailer and extended in the movie are multiple and center around the often reiterated critique of black motherhood and absent black fathers in ghetto neighborhoods (Kelley 1997; Moynihan 1965; Wilson 1997). As this critique goes, it is the sexual licentiousness, unemployment, and deviant proclivities in black communities that lead to the greater number of unwed mothers and unsupervised black children. According to a parallel critique, it is black mothers’ tyranny and their physical and emotional estrangement that emasculates black boys and sends them astray often to reproduce the pattern of hopelessness and fatherless families. These two understandings are basic to a tradition of sociology that evades any critical attention to the exploitative nature of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy (Collins 1998, 2000; Steinberg 1997). Thus, where the neofunctionalist tradition of sociology that is linked to the work of William Wilson has gained attention in government and social policy circles it is also critiqued by noted scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Stephen Steinberg for its failure to critically examine economic and gender-based practices in black communities. It is not, as Collins notes, that black women outperform black men in the labor market. Rather, it is that the labor power of black families in general is undermined in such a fashion that black women are tasked as they are. Or, as Steinberg attests based on the scholarship of Roger Waldinger (1996), blacks never had a significant presence in the now exported smokestack industries of the northeast despite Wilson’s lament for a return to such employment.

It is at the break between Steinberg and Collins, on the one side, who critique the neofunctionalist call for more capitalism and patriarchy as the solution to Blacks’ experiences, and the neofunctionalist tradition, on the other side, that shapes the policy promoted in the WFS cultural project where we land our critique. In our keeping with the critique of the neofunctionalist tradition we assert that the answer to the conditions of Anthony’s life and the lives of others with
whom he is associated is not an ascription to an economic perspective rooted in the contemporary capitalist economy. Neither is it found in their submission to a familial order where women’s authority is disproportionately absent. Indeed, each of these tropes is central to the visual and discursive narrative in the WFS cultural project and is one source of our trouble with the project.

Anthony’s Grandmother and Family

If viewers draw from the interpretations of black family life from the cited academics, liberal and even neoconservative politicians, and the directors of the WFS cultural project, and if such interpretations are coupled to claims about Anthony’s educators’ incompetence, then viewers might conclude that Anthony’s capacity to surmount the challenges of “life-in-the-ghetto” will be difficult at best. This perception is especially troubling given Anthony’s stand-in role for black students if not all racial minority students. Consider the interviews between Guggenheim and the black male probation officer and Guggenheim and Anthony’s grandmother. In his interview of the black male probation officer that takes place as they tour a prison in the officer’s vehicle, the officer informs Guggenheim that he was raised in a black community along with individuals who are today held in the same prison. In effect the officer alerts viewers—if he does not to remind them—about the incarceration that often contextualizes the lives of black men who did not possess appropriate guidance and support. These understandings gain greater validity still when seen in relation to the interview of Anthony’s grandmother. In this case, the domino effect of intergenerational abandonment that in the documentary characterizes Anthony’s grandmother’s life, her son’s life, and now her grandson’s life, and that is coupled to her fear and seeming incapacity to guide and educate her progeny, is consistent with pervasive representations of black women as unintelligent matriarchs promoted in policy circles. Indeed the directors would lead viewers to conclude that Anthony is destined to imprisonment given his grandmother’s incapacity to intervene on his behalf despite her role as his primary caretaker:

Grandmother: I’m just so afraid for him. I cries for him sometimes ‘cuz I’m just so afraid. I am. I pray about it all the time ‘cuz I know he easily be influenced to do things he shouldn’t do and it scares me. He’s never knew his mom. I think his mom has other kids but Anthony doesn’t know those kids. My mom left me when I was probably about eight. So, my grandparents raised me...

Davis Guggenheim: Was school important to you?

Grandmother: No...It wasn’t. It probably wasn’t because I never had nobody to probably push me. You know, to talk to me about stuff...

Davis Guggenheim: And your son?

Grandmother: Mm! He didn’t think school was important either. No, he didn’t. He did his thing I guess...

Later in the movie, following discussions of educational reform in Washington, DC and the SCS, Anthony’s grandmother is interviewed once more. This time the interview centers on her willingness to enroll her grandson in this boarding
school that by the directors’ implication is well-suited for children who are otherwise destined for prison.

Grandmother: In a way I want him to get in but another part of me really don’t want him to get in.
Davis Guggenheim: Why?
Grandmother: Because he’ll be gone all that time but I want him to go. A part of me wants him to go.
Davis Guggenheim: What are the odds of getting in?
Grandmother: I don’t know.

As they are cast, Anthony and his family are clearly on shaky ground. Evidence of this is Anthony’s grandmother’s own parental abandon, her low educational attainment, Anthony’s mother’s absence, his father’s drug-induced death, and even his own violent proclivities (suggested later in the documentary). Left to herself, then, Anthony’s grandmother is unable to push him out of a pattern of intergenerational crisis and on to the middle-class. The specific solution, as the directors would lead viewers to conclude, is the surrender of racial minority children such as Anthony to corporatized schools such as the SCS.

Indeed, this solution fits squarely within cultural assimilationist narratives that identify a character-building education as the solution to black youths’ criminality. Though such proposals are by no means the only ones that explain the reality of black males’ incarceration, they have become popular points of reference to gauge the value of black students’ schooling (Alexander 2012; Western and Wildeman 2009; Wilson 1987). These proposals lay out the contributing role that the crumbling educational infrastructure plays in fostering black males’ incarceration and the preventive role that a revamped education system can play to tackle this issue. This is the cultural narrative to which the directors of the WFS cultural project turn viewers’ attention to garner the political support of audiences who would oppose or favor their brand of educational reform and what appears to be an affirmative action for black students.

Anthony at SCS

The suspicion and hesitation in Anthony’s eyes while at a visit to the SCS is apparent evidence of his disregard for a school whose service is purported to compensate for his grandmother’s poor caretaking, his mother’s abandon, and his father’s death. Indeed, the WFS cultural project uses the vision Anthony shares with Davis Guggenheim of his life as a student at SCS as proof of his suspicious nature and to later underscore the value of corporatized schooling for young males like Anthony.

Anthony: If I’ma’ get in to Seeds I’ma’ have seven classes and wake up early. Usually . . . you gotta’ wear ties and stuff. No TV. No games. Nothing!
Davis Guggenheim: So are you hoping you get in or you hoping you don’t get in?
Anthony: It’s bittersweet to me if I get in. They give me a better chance at life but if I don’t I just—I just be with my friends.
Following Anthony’s lament about the possibility of life at SCS, the camera is turned immediately to evidence of his violent proclivities. Viewers witness Anthony absorbed in simulations of gang violence as he mutters words into the video game. Viewers would be led to question if what he means by being with his friends is time spent in virtual violence or real violence. Such questions are not altogether irrelevant given preceding reminders in the movie about criminality and desperation in ghetto neighborhoods. Recall, for instance, his grandmother’s fear about his and his friends’ deviance. Evidently, Anthony’s destiny and the destiny of all those with whom he would be associated in the viewers’ imagination is the rallying point with which very different social groups can unite to push for a corporate alternative to education.

If the solution to black males’ disproportionate incarceration, disproportionate unemployment, and disconnect with their families is found in a reformed public school system, and if the constitution and reproduction of traditional family relations are in fact what black communities lack and desire, then according to the directors it is in the interest of black community members to invest in the agenda of the WFS cultural project. Similarly, if black youth are a menace to (white) society, if black popular culture and political tradition are a source of the inferior standing of the U.S. educational system, and if society is generally concerned to address this inferiority, then again the directors of WFS cultural project assert that the answer is to place black students in corporatized schools. This is the neoliberal cultural slight of hand that collapses a tradition of civil rights agitation and political and institutional gains within a kind of political and economic system that in earlier historical periods was espoused by the proponents of “Nixon’s black capitalism” (Weems and Randolph 2001). As in the past, a right-wing economic agenda that is linked to the material aspirations of economically aspiring black communities and the capitalist establishment in the United States is what would thwart an antiracist institutional agenda set to contest a legacy of educational exploitation and exclusion.

The seeming incapacity of Anthony’s grandmother to stop his budding violence and deviance is compounded by what appears to be the absence of a man whose fortitude and disposition would otherwise straighten Anthony on his way to adulthood. Indeed, the only other male who is seen to engage Anthony in the movie is his math teacher. And yet his somewhat effeminate demeanor, the lisp in his voice, and the crumbling condition of the school where he works suggest that his teacher, like his grandmother, is unprepared to provide Anthony with a traditional masculine foundation. If this scene is any indication, Anthony will likely be unable to contest the imposing pressures of life in the ghetto addressed earlier and confirmed by Anthony’s own grandmother.

Interestingly, the directors take advantage of this scene to alert viewers who would identify with the sole white student of the danger that racially mixed schooling represents. In this case, racial mixing is precarious at best at one instance because white students become potential victims of violence and at a second instance because of the absence of hetero-normative role models. Thus, the one white student in the scene can effectively remind viewers that white students’ presence in racial minority communities is risky. Really, it is a subtle though pervasive call for those who are opposed to the civil rights pursuit of
equal education to abandon the company of racial minorities in general and black students in particular. Otherwise, they become potential victims of dangerous black youth and incompetent and questionable educators.

The interpretation proposed here illuminates the strategy and subtlety in the directors’ narratives: black people as threatening, white people as threatened. In both cases it is the state’s public school system that structures the destiny and danger of its students. Viewers are repeatedly reminded that the solution to this situation is a surrender of the public school system and black students to corporate-based institutional frameworks not unlike those where consumers and workers are subordinated to the administrative interests of those in power. This is the craft of filmic direction that markets itself as a social justice movement.

At this point we turn readers’ attention to narratives about the redemptive possibilities that capitalist institutions such as SCS represents to the nation and to black communities. Ultimately, the film articulates patriarchal and character building agendas that will make up for the shortcomings projected onto Anthony by the directors. This is signaled in the final scene of the movie when Anthony registers at the SCS. The frames within this scene that we analyze—(1) Anthony’s registration at SCS, (2) Anthony’s walk to his dorm, and (3) Anthony’s gaze at his father’s photo—are evidence of the way that narratives around black redemption are appropriated by the directors of the WFS cultural project and landed on young black males through Anthony’s educational biography.

Hope comes to Anthony and his grandmother via SCS, the nation’s first urban boarding charter school, where Anthony has gained admission despite his initial exclusion. The SCS is charged with the task of compensating for the crises that surround black children at home and in the schools of their ghetto neighborhoods. In the end, at least as portrayed by the directors in the select scenes, Anthony will be schooled by black men who, on account of their dress and demeanor, are more closely tied to notions of strength and authority than Anthony’s math teacher in the earlier scene. The advantage, particularly as it concerns the directors’ marketing of redemption and assimilation, is that Anthony and his peers will receive an education flavored with just enough culture and ample doses of patriarchal ambition to justify the hand-over of the public school system to proponents of corporatized educational reform. The expectation is that SCS will change Anthony’s destiny and commit him to the institutional design of the SCS that will lead him to the middle-class. For racial minority communities already committed to the idea that this is the function of education, this narrative provides great hope. For others who are concerned about what they perceive to be deviant and violent black youth, this too is a promising narrative.

Certainly the presence of Bill Gates as an advocate for school reform in the documentary provides a sense of security and promise to the narrative. Were it not for the concerns about black male character shared by those to whom the WFS documentary is marketed, the directors would likely have less compelling ways to convince viewers that they and not twentieth century leaders such as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter Woodson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Layle Love, and others who articulated a clearly Afrocentric response to the exploitation and exclusion of black youth in U.S. schools, are the principal arbiters of racial and educational justice for black students (DuBois 1932; Swartz 2007).
Consider the strategies of representation in the final segments of the movie where Anthony arrives at SCS: First, his registration at SCS indicates a structured integration that is administered by an authoritative masculine figure. Second, the directors’ strategically capture a Malcolm X poster to Anthony’s left on his way into his dormitory. This is a likely reminder that Anthony’s race will play some role in his education. What that role is exactly is left for viewers to interpret. In any case, the threat of racial empowerment and corresponding nationalist ideology that the Malcolm X poster might signal is assuaged in the very same frame. To Anthony’s right is a Temple University banner. In this way the SCS represents a pursuit of racial uplift that fits within academic parameters familiar to middle-class audiences.

Interestingly, it is two uniformed black men, one of whom is introduced as his “life skills counselor,” who receive Anthony at the threshold of his dormitory. They welcome him and reunite him with his father—however symbolic that reunion is. In the final frame of the movie, for instance, viewers witness Anthony in bed with his eyes glued to the photograph of himself in his father’s arms. This is the moment that the screen turns black. Anthony is reunited with his father and no longer in the care of a seemingly incompetent grandmother or wanting of his estranged mother’s presence and attention. The upbringing that awaits Anthony is set. He will be steered away from a destiny of violence, drug consumption, and criminality. It is to his father, though in the context of the SCS, that Anthony returns in the final moment of the movie. His mother’s absence, his grandmother’s exclusion, and the invisibility of any other woman in the final moments of the movie are each to be foundational in Anthony’s upbringing from that point forward. This is the world that will atone for the shortcomings in Anthony’s life. No attention is given to the antisegregationist educational agenda of black women and men and the larger legacy of the black civil rights struggle. This absence, which is as pronounced as the absence of women in the final moments of the movie, is especially problematic given the implicit understandings regarding racial justice in the movie.

SUMMATIVE ANALYSIS

The analysis of the WFS cultural project presented here centers on its polysemic properties and neoliberal affinities. Viewers who are critical of the civil rights legacy in education and the promotion of race-based reparation agendas more generally are rallied along with whose who are amenable to mainstream interpretations of that history to support what appears to be an educational reform movement that targets black students. The directors are challenged with discursive somersaulting. For one set of viewers they promise more black male educators, quality schools, educational success, and so on, and for another set of viewers they promise less public schools, less community authority over the education of black students, and so on. In each case the solution to the apparent inability of black communities to get along in public space because of their so-called “ghetto-related” behavior is less public education and consequently more corporate and charter educational models. This is consistent with contemporary neoliberal suspicion.
around race-based institutional reparation programs such as race-based school integration (Chávez 1998; Omi and Winant 1994, 2012; Robles 2006). U.S. society is called upon to abandon what appear to be integrated public schools, however minimal the integration in fact is.

The strategy with which the summons to extend the corporatization of U.S. schools is met is visible in the directors’ selection of images and scenes that hold the possibility of multiple and simultaneous meanings. The directors bet on the assumption, for instance, that in a single scene where viewers who are sympathetic to the rights of black students might see instances of institutional discrimination, those who are opposed to such rights will see a danger in their children’s presence in racially mixed schools. This polysemic filmic technique broadens the variety of viewers called upon to promote the directors’ school reform agenda and the diversity of viewers and sympathizers serves to circumvent accusations of racism and elitism.

Throughout our analysis we have drawn attention to the ways in which opposing social narratives simultaneously inhabit the two larger neoliberal objectives of the WFS cultural project: (1) governmental decentralization and deregulation—public school districts stifle the education of black students, threaten their safety and the safety of other children and public schools should be reformed within contemporary economic parameters, and (2) corporate centralization—the solution to the crises of public schooling is found in the charter schools that are linked to corporate conglomerates. Each of these overarching narratives provides ideological justification for the surrender of the public school system to corporate interests. The first narrative, which rests on assumptions of black cultural and institutional deficiencies, links the supposed crisis in public education to blacks’ presence in the public school system and the institutional challenges they face to their ignorance and cultural deviance. The second narrative asserts that the solution to the crises in both the public school system and black communities is the public school’s surrender to the market and corporatization.

The WFS cultural project is predicated on an agenda very much in line with parallel cultural and economic agendas in other institutional spheres where state employees are the focus of scrutiny and attack (Harvey 2006; Weiner 2007). In keeping with the general discursive practice of the neoliberal post-civil rights era, the WFS cultural project draws on the language of the civil rights period to occlude its more cynical and racist nature. The strategies of representation that the directors of the WFS cultural project use to push corporate school reform are one side of the cultural and political equation. A more complete examination necessitates a study of viewer reception vis-à-vis the particular interpretations pursued by the directors identified here. In this study it would be useful to focus on various contexts of viewers’ lives that bear on their concerns around their children’s education. These include, for example, immigration, race, class mobility, and labor relations. How, for instance, do different racial minority groups and whites process the messages about black criminality and deviance in the WFS cultural project to make meaning of their children’s schooling? The more general parameters of subsequent study locate the value of the directors’ visual strategies within existing political and economic realities and the corresponding
social and cultural transformations that they pursue. Thus, we might ask, what are the practices of racialization modeled in popular culture and to what extent do these parallel and/or converge with larger political and economic projects in the educational system?

NOTES

1. From this point forward they are referred to as the directors of the Waiting for Superman cultural project.
2. Greater analytic attention is given to the concept of colorblind race relations below.
3. See also discussion of “reiterations” in Winant (2000).
4. There are multiple examples in the trailer and in the documentary itself. These will receive attention in subsequent work.
5. Black families are not the only subjects of the WFS cultural project. This article provides an analytical slice of the treatment black students and their families receive. Subsequent work will expand upon this analysis and link it to the attention and treatment of other racial communities in the WFS cultural project.
6. Dyson’s critique is not specific to the educational system. Its pertinence here rests in its capacity to illuminate the particular ways that racist and exploitative institutional policy advocates appropriate the legacy and memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. See, for instance, the promise of “additional funds . . . for character education grants” in No Child Left Behind legislation.
7. Though many other arguments can be made about the WFS cultural project, we attend to the two identified here: (1) corporate control of public education is facilitated through the appropriation of civil rights era narratives around racial justice and integration, and (2) corporate control of public education is facilitated through the demonization of black youth.

REFERENCES


