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As its title suggests, *Our Schools Suck: Students Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Urban Education* tackles the issue of urban education in the context of racial and economic segregation in the early 21st century. The extensive introductory and concluding chapters lay out the two major purposes of the book. First, the book aims to refute popular depictions of a “culture of failure” in inner cities and to reframe urban youth as complex persons who deserve an excellent and challenging education (p. 6). Second, the book aims to complicate notions of “cool pose” values among urban youth by arguing that their presumably negative feelings and behaviors largely have been born out of the conditions in which they live and the limited kinds of educational

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experiences made available to them (p. 6). With this dual purpose, the authors hope to refocus public discussion on failed education as a cause, rather than a result, of the state of urban youth today.

The authors situate *Our Schools Suck* in the aftermath of the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the largely reactionary responses of public figures, such as comedian Bill Cosby, NPR/Fox journalist Juan Williams, and Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, who argued that many minorities were not “holding up their end of the bargain” regarding the *Brown* decision. In reality, the authors argue, the failures of *Brown* can be linked directly to hyper-segregation and unequal conditions in urban school systems around the country—not a “culture of poverty” or “cool pose” among some Black and Latino youth in America’s urban centers. In addition, the authors note being “alarmed by the absence of youth voices in the public discourse and the skewed nature of the public conversation around urban education” (p. 6); thus, as the book’s sub-title suggests, the authors have attempted to highlight the voices of urban high school students that have been conspicuously absent in the mainstream media, as well as many academic studies of urban education.

The authors go to great lengths to frame these arguments with an extensive introduction by Celina Su and Gaston Alonso’s Chapter 1—*Culture Trap: Talking about Young People of Color and Their Education*, which reiterates and extends much of Su’s introduction. Both the introduction and first chapter trace the ways in which scholarly representations of young people of color often influence more popular discussions regarding the education of minority youth, particularly around the “racial achievement gap” and the “culture of failure” narrative often blamed for this gap. According to Alonso, these discussions have tended to focus on the cultural values and norms of minority youth, thereby drawing attention away from the “decrepit conditions under which they continue to be made to learn” (p. 36). Here, Alonso critiques three influential schools of thought related to the failures of urban education: (1) notions of the “cool pose” used by

African American young men as a coping strategy to counteract the negative forces in their lives; (2) John Ogbu's cultural-ecological theory of academic achievement; and (3) notions of "oppositional identities" that are allegedly taken up by the children of immigrants. Alonso finds fault with these frames of thought in that they direct our attention toward the "'moral life of the inner city' and the 'oppositional outlooks' of its young residents and away from ... educational inequalities" (p. 53). Unfortunately, Alonso argues, much of this scholarship, though lacking in evidence, has found its way into public discourses on schooling and urban youth.

The middle half of the book is composed of qualitative studies of urban youth in three different contexts: the case of four US history classes in a segregated high school in south central Los Angeles (Chapter 2); the case of four talented Black and Latino young men in New York City (Chapter 3); and a case study of a youth organizing group—the Sistas and Brothas United (SBU)—that works to improve conditions in schools in the Bronx (Chapter 4). These three chapters attempt to reveal some of the complexity of these students' lives in and out of school in order to complicate or critique dominant portrayals of urban youth.

In Chapter 2, Jeanne Theoharis presents the findings of her ethnographic study of Fremont High School, a segregated high school in Los Angeles. Theoharis analyzed the journal writings of Latino and African American high school students to examine how these students viewed education and counter the "incessant lamentations that these students are unreachable and unteachable by demonstrating their hunger for substantive learning" (p. 71). Contrary to the narrative tropes about minority youth described in the first chapter, the students' journals demonstrated youths' recognition of the importance of hard work, goal-setting, motivation, and a positive attitude, as well as a desire to succeed, including academically. The students also wrote of their appreciation for those teachers who challenged and supported them, and reacted vociferously against the standardized testing to

which they were continuously subjected. At the same time, many of these students had internalized popular discourses about minority youth, and in turn, located much of the blame and responsibility for failures or shortcomings within themselves. This chapter challenges the portrayal of urban youth described in Chapter 1, which casts students as the source of the problem of urban education, and attempts to allow them to demonstrate their humanity for themselves.

In Chapter 3, following a brief discussion on the poor conditions and high attrition rates in urban schools as well as the dire youth job market in New York City, Noel S. Anderson documents the attempts of four young Latino and African American men to navigate these school and work worlds. Across four narratives derived from the author's field notes and students' own words, readers gain a sense of how these young men strove to do well in under-resourced schools, yet faced discrimination in the job market. Ultimately, the myth of the American dream—that all is possible with hard work and dedication—seemed to elude them; despite their motivation and desire to set goals and succeed, the chances of these goals being realized were complicated by factors outside of their control. As a consequence of these narratives, Anderson concludes the chapter by calling for increased concern for equity in institutional practices and public policy regarding urban education.

In Chapter 4, Celina Su depicts an eighteen-month ethnographic study of four youth involved in a school reform campaign in the South Bronx—Sistas and Brothas United (SBU). Su follows the trajectory of four focal participants who became active in the SBU to see how they navigated Bronx schools and worked for social change. Su highlights two SBU campaigns regarding teacher quality and public safety and argues that the SBU “provided these students with the means to express frustrations with their schooling that they could not convey before,” (p. 160) frustrations which were presented to policy makers. Though these students were working with limited resources, their engagement with and passion

toward making a positive change within their schools and communities countervails popular tropes of urban minority youth as apathetic and disengaged. Su argues that all students, not only those participating in such organizations, are worthy of great teachers and a quality education.

In the concluding chapter, Theoharis points to two predominant themes from the three studies highlighted within the book: the bodily experience of students in under-resourced schools and the authoritarian governance and anti-intellectualism of the schools. Theoharis suggests that “much of what currently passes for school reform is misguided and insulting, ... provid[ing] little accountability to students and ... not actually address[ing] the concerns young people have with their schools” (p. 180). In light of this statement, Theoharis concludes with recommendations for a reformulation of No Child Left Behind—one that holds the country more accountable to its students and that provides for the kind of high-quality education promised by the *Brown* decision.

In our reading, *Our Schools Suck* offers salient critiques of the representations of urban youth that dominate the main media and, to be honest, many urban schools and teacher education programs. The authors make an admirable effort to present the counter-narratives of urban youths in a way that avoids being patronizing, condescending, or romanticizing—no easy task. In doing so, the book denaturalizes dominant tropes of urban education and captures some of the complexity of youths’ lives that gets lost in dominant representations of urban education, race, and under-achievement. The book also illustrates how apartheid schooling remains alive and well in the US, at least in major urban centers like Los Angeles and New York City. In this sense, *Our Schools Suck* seems to follow in the tradition of Jonathon Kozol’s (1991) *Savage Inequalities* and offers a rallying cry for the kind of urban education reform outlined in texts like Jean Anyon’s (2005) *Radical Possibilities*.

More than fifty years after *Brown*, the book's sustained focus on the effects of segregation and economic inequities remains all too relevant, especially when the public conversation about urban education tends to emphasize the values and norms of the poor, and not the political economy or social structures that influence their lives. However, this is a somewhat different scholarly contribution than we anticipated given the book's provocative title and subtitle. We anticipated that this book would clearly emphasize the voices and perspectives of urban youth—if not position urban adolescents themselves as authors or co-authors of particular chapters. However, in our reading, the dominant voices of the text were not urban youth, but the researchers themselves. We were 70 pages into the book, for example, before we encountered the first case study of urban youth; in addition, the book's extensive framing chapters—the introduction, chapter one, and conclusion—comprised half of the book's 214 pages. Thus, while the middle chapters of the book provided some platform for youth to “talk back” to popular discourses which cast them as apathetic failures, their “voices” did not figure more prominently in this book than they do in most qualitative studies. Thus, in our view, the voices of urban youth did not so much frame the book as they fit neatly into a tightly framed argument that the failure of urban education is not primarily caused by a “culture of poverty” or the deficient values, motivation, or “cool pose” of Black and Latino urban youth—but separate and unequal conditions that continue to plague urban education more than fifty years after *Brown*.

In conclusion, *Our Schools Suck* offers a critical view of urban education that challenges the popular argument that cultural values, norms, and personal choices explain the academic and economic success or failure of African American, Latino, and immigrant youth in America's urban centers. The voices of urban youth may not figure as prominently in this book as its provocative text suggests. That being said, the book successfully debunks many of the limiting narrative tropes of urban education in the mainstream media, attends to some of the complexity of

the lives of urban youth, and draws attention to the persistence of “savage inequalities” and “opportunity gaps” in low-income communities. Thus, we would not hesitate to recommend *Our Schools Suck* to teacher educators or teachers looking for a more critical perspective on urban education that acknowledges how societal factors, separate and unequal conditions in American schools, and the largely punitive, anti-intellectual governance of urban education work to constrain the academic and economic success of many urban youth.

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