

Fine, M. (Producer), Roberts, R. (Artistic Director), Torre, M.E., & Bloom, J. (2004). *Echoes of Brown: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education* [DVD and Accompanying Book]. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lalitha Vasudevan



Photos by Neil Selkirk

“I want to call all of you out who make call to actions and not make actions we can call on.”
- Yasmine Blanding, *Echoes of Brown*

The first time I viewed *Echoes of Brown*, I held my breath for the entire 54 minutes of talking, reflecting, and performing that moved across my computer screen. Seated in my office with no windows to inform me of day turning to night, I replayed several sections over and over again. How, I wondered, were the thirteen young people featured in this documentary making sense of the system of education that exists today as they considered the legacy of the legal battles fought and decided so many years ago? How did the arts – spoken word and dance, in particular – mediate this week-long critical reflection? What do these youth have to say about the education, equity, and schooling? And what are the ways in which their voices can be heard?

Like the tagline so often associated with the NCLB legislation, the young people in this documentary demand educational accountability. *Echoes of Brown* documents their participation in the week-long “social justice and the arts institute” in which they engaged with the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*, a legal decision that was, in part, a product of its time¹. During

¹ Gloria Ladson-Billings, in a recent article, notes that the Cold War context of 1954 was not insignificant in the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Citing Derrick Bell (1980) she writes that this “interest

this weeklong experience, the students were saturated in “the history of *Brown*, in law, in organizing, in politics and in the research that they and [Michelle Fine and her colleagues] had collected.” This diverse group of youth, comprised of high school students from the greater New York City area, is attending school in a time of media abundance and sound byte debates where naming can matter as much as the named itself. To this end, *Echoes of Brown* documents this institute as part of a broader investigation of the “opportunity gap”, an intentional modification of the “oft-used phrase ‘achievement gap’” which students felt placed the emphasis of inquiry more accurately on the schools than on individual students (*What Kids Can Do*, 2004).

Resonant throughout the documentary are the young people’s stories about their educational experiences, imbued with questions about (in)equity, categorization, race and racism, collective responsibility, and calls to action. The following excerpt is taken from a piece entitled “Classification”, by student-poet Amir Bilal Billups, who addresses the theme of categorization and low expectations:

It was 2000.
She said I was “eligible for special education.”
Possessing this label they gave me, I swallowed the stigma and felt the pain of being seen in a room with six people.
Yeah, it fell upon me and the pain was like stones raining down on me. From the day where school assemblies seemed segregated and I had to watch my girl Krystal from balconies...Away from the “normal” kids to the days where I found myself fulfilling self-fulfilled prophecies. See I received the label of “special education” and it sat on my back like a mountain being lifted by an ant—it just can’t happen.

Phrases such as “*Plessy v. Ferguson*” and “separate but equal” are grounded in the students’ explorations as well as in the memories shared by elders who lived through the *Brown* decision, including a civil rights lawyer, professors from local universities, the director of a local Head Start program, poets, and choreographers. Woven in-between are excerpts of student interviews; video footage of the young people writing, talking, and reading together; students participating in the dance and poetry workshops; and several of the youths’ spoken word performances.

Also to take into account:
White kids unfairly assessed in eighth grade
can never take AP Calculus, AP Bio, AP Chem,
NEED I GO ON?
Tracking isn’t bad for minorities.
Tracking is bad.
Tracking is bad.

In this excerpt, Elinor Marboe addresses the issue of tracking as institutionalized segregation that surfaced in conjunction with discussions of unchanging texts and profanity-carved desks. Additionally, the students reason with the history and echoes of *Brown* as they season their interpretations with reflections about their schooling observations – “the white kids sit with the white kids, and the black kids with the black” and “it’s like we have two cafeterias” and “two

convergence” was motivated by the desire of the United States Justice System to dispel internationally held assertions about U.S. hypocrisy toward racial equality.

buses because of the different neighborhoods.” In the following excerpt, Iralma Osorio Sorondo further implicates the role of geography in the plight of segregation:

**THE SUBWAY TOURIST MAP DOESN'T GO FURTHER THAN 125TH STREET =
I'M NOT HERE.**

Integration, however, is not understood by these young people and their elders as an unreachable goal. Rather, this text argues for daily, explicit, intentional articulation and implementation of integration in our daily lives: “for everyone to have an understanding of each other ... I think that’s when you get the true integration.” This text asks: how do we get to know each other? What does it really mean to be white or black (beyond skin color)? What came before us? What can we do? Who can I/we be? Who’s teaching in schools? Who’s learning?

Once the youth shared their writing with each other, they were guided by the resident poets and choreographers to add movement and inflection to their performances. Thus, not only do we learn about this particular experience of 13 youth reading, writing, and responding to *Brown*, we are given images of what it means to recognize young people as having valuable insights; what it means to draw on the arts as a means of inquiry and analysis; how young people learn with and from each other; and the true meaning of collective accountability. The text that accompanies the DVD includes interviews with the elders, written texts, still images of the youths’ spoken word performances, as well as results from a survey on the Opportunity Gap in which over nine thousand young people’s responses are reflected.

“I was thinking about how expensive it is for one group of people – White or Black, rich or poor – to hold another group of people back. Because you can’t dance if you got one foot on someone else’s neck. The only way you can dance is with both feet and ... I hope this society dances.”

– Bailey Jackson, retired optomechanical engineer who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope and one of the elders who was interviewed for *Echoes of Brown*

The image above is a montage of several of the spoken word performances in action, and is taken from the available press about *Echoes of Brown*. Embedded in this visual representation are layered meanings about desegregation, education, and hope that echo throughout the participants’ reflections. Ripe with action, this image extends the assertion found in the opening paragraph of the DVD: “*Echoes of Brown v. Board of Education* is relevant and provocative for anyone seeking racial justice in the public sphere – a dream not yet complete.” Through embodied calls for social/racial/educational justice and political action, the young people involved in this project call out from within the digital projection and dare the viewer to just sit back and watch. These youth, and this documentary, are “striking up the band.” It’s time to dance.

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