“A raw, emotional thing”
School choice, commodification and the racialised branding of Afrocentricity in Toronto, Canada

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Abstract
In this paper we contend neo-liberal education policy which supports the creation of schooling choices in public education systems is reshaping, conflating and branding ethnicity. We make these points in reference to school choice in Toronto, Canada, and the establishment of an Africentric ethno-centric school. We argue that one of the registers within which education and ethnicity in Toronto operates relates to the conflation of commodification, ethnicity and geography, and that this conflation indicates one of the limits of school choice as a possible way to redress Black student disadvantage. We suggest education policy, which enables the establishment of ethno-centric schools, enters the realm of other debates about race, equity and difference that include the practices of marketing and branding.

Keywords: education policy, ethnicity, markets, Canada

Demands for change are often framed in the language of school choice and markets, but they can also be seen as a demand for recognition in a plural democracy and a critique of the cultural assumptions that underpin current versions of the common school... (Gaskell, 2001: 32)

Mark this term: empowerment. In the post-colony it connotes privileged access to markets, money, and material enrichment. In the case of ethnic groups, it is frankly associated with finding something essentially their own and theirs alone, something of their essence, to sell. In other words, a brand. (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009: 15, original emphasis)

In September 2009, just over 100 students entered the classrooms of the Africentric Alternative School (AAS) for the first time. The AAS opened as an elementary school within the existing Sheppard Public School in Brookwell Park in the north-west of Toronto, Canada. This school was one of four elementary schools that opened in September 2009 as part of a Toronto school choice policy framework – the ‘alternative
schools’ programme – that allows for the establishment of new schools by parents and other interested parties.

School choice in Canada is the remit of the provinces, and then reconfigured and enacted at school board level (Davies, 2004). Toronto, like many other cities, has a local education quasi-market, with a combination of state control and market mechanisms (Taylor, 2009). Quasi-markets engender a focus on the role of the individual as a responsible consumer, and the processes and outcomes of choice (Olssen et al., 2004). While a quasi-market valorises the ‘consumer-parent’, there is less emphasis on the idea of the ‘producer-parent’ who can play a role in establishing schools. This is a particular formation of choice policy that permits the creation of separate, publicly funded educational spaces (Wells, Lopez, Scott & Holme, 1999). In the case of Toronto, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) supports the development of alternative schools, which not only presumes parents can choose to send their children to existing schools, but provides the capacity to establish schools. There are now more than 40 elementary and secondary alternative schools in Toronto (Toronto District School Board, 2012).

And yet, in the case of the latest alternative schools established in 2009, only the AAS – a small school in a city-wide Toronto District School Board system with 600 schools and close to 300,000 students – near the intersection of Keele Street and Sheppard Avenue West, an intersection in an area of the city not often included in any tourist guides for Toronto, isolated by the surrounding gargantuan urban freeways and adjacent to the mid-town airport, only this small school managed to evoke equal parts support and outrage when it was proposed. The other three ‘alternative’ schools were proposed and approved with nary a whimper of controversy.

In this paper, we use the example of the differential treatment of the AAS to contend that neo-liberal education policies which supports choice, like the alternative school programme, are reshaping, conflating and branding ethnicity in racialised quasi-school markets. In so doing, school choice policies provide new conditions for, and have reshaped the possibilities of, equity. We suggest this is similar to Fraser’s (2009) proposition that forms of politics such as second-wave feminism are far more complicated, and possibly contradictory, under neo-liberal conditions; that is “[a]spirations that had a clear emancipatory thrust in the context of state-organised capitalism assumed a far more ambiguous meaning in the neo-liberal era” (Fraser, 2009: 108). While we might quibble over whether state-organised capitalism is an equally apt description of neo-liberal reforms, the notion of ambiguous meaning, and what Fraser calls “dangerous liaisons” with neo-liberalism, are salient ideas in relation to school choice.

White, middle-class parents and students are often identified as the main beneficiaries and strategic users of school choice policies (Ball, 2003). However, the possibility of parent and community driven establishment of schools is shifting the parameters of opportunity, access and equity; they “help redefine educational opportunities as
the creation of separate spaces” (Wells, Lopez, Scott & Holme, 1999: 175). Education policy supporting school choice of existing schools now permits parents and other stakeholders to establish new public schools. Rather than merely advocating choice as the opportunity to attend different types of schools, policy conflates both the provision and choosing of education. What is being enabled, therefore, are new forms of what might be termed government-funded “ethno-centric” (Wells et al., 1999) schools that are developing in the Asia-Pacific, North America and Europe through a variety of different school choice mechanisms. These schools – charter schools in the United States, publicly funded ‘private’ schools in Australia, ‘free schools’ in the United Kingdom, for example – are often affiliated with ethnic or cultural groups. This includes religious denominations that are ‘minority’ and/or racialised populations in nation-states, such as Afro-Caribbean in Canada, Muslim in Australia, and Latino/a in the United States. We use the example of the AAS as one such type of school, the first established in Toronto since the 1980s, to look at the links between ethnicity, race and education policy. We locate this problem within an understanding of ethnicity taken as both “increasingly the stuff of existential passion, of the self-conscious fashioning of meaningful, morally anchored selfhood” and as “also becoming more corporate, more commodified, more implicated than ever before in the economics of everyday life” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009: 1, original emphasis).

In this paper we first provide our theoretical and methodological premises relating to critical policy studies, including detail about the broader project from which this paper is drawn. Second, we outline the policy environment pertaining to school choice in Toronto and the establishment of alternative schools. This includes discussing broader shifts towards ethno-centric schools, and how school choice provides a form of self-fashioning and empowerment for different groups. We then link ideas of empowerment with notions of racialised commodification and ethnicity in Toronto. In this section, we argue that one of the registers within which education and ethnicity in Toronto operates relates to the conflation of racialised commodification and geography, and that this conflation indicates one of the limits of school choice as an equity project.

We conclude by suggesting school choice policy operates on the premise that the provision of schooling choices is a neutral market. Thus, a ‘neutral market’ effectively depoliticises education through the commodification of ethnic identities while providing the opportunity for the creation of separate ethno-centric schools. While choice opens up agency as an option in social justice projects, it also complicates other forms of collective action as part of anti-racist projects. Further to these claims, we illustrate that any differentiation in quasi-school markets occurs in the practices of choice undertaken by students and parents. We aim to show that, counter to the notion of neutral markets, education policy that enables the establishment of ethno-centric schools such as the AAS enters into, and constitutes, the realm of other debates about equity, race and difference, including the practices of marketing and branding.
Methodology

This paper is drawn from a three-year (2010–2013) qualitative project on education policy, curriculum, identity and globalisation in relation to the establishment of the Africentric Alternative School in Toronto, Canada.¹

In this paper, we take an approach located in critical policy studies, which is attendant to how issues of power affect the production and subsequent enunciations of different discourses (e.g., equality, recognition, identity, commodification) (Simons, Olssen & Peters, 2009). Our understanding is that while policy is often idealised and crude (Ball, 1994), the policy process and policy itself is messy, inchoate and unpredictable. That is policy “is designed to steer understanding and action without ever being sure of the practices it might produce” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010: 5). The outcomes are contingent on prevailing historical and geographical factors that shape and are shaped by different actors and different truths about what is significant in any particular policy issue (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1994).

Our analysis in this paper “not only recognizes the historical formation of policy but also its constitution as discourse” (Olszen, Codd & O’Neill, 2004: 58). We draw on notions of governmentality and its links to policy “to analyse the governing regime and the conditions of possibility for policy texts, policy problems and solutions, and actors and their self-understanding to emerge” (Simons et al., 2009: 67). In this, we attempt to look at the conditions of possibility for equity, provided in and through education policy enabling and supporting markets and choice.

We are concerned with both the histories and geographies of policy problems. As such, we are attendant to the geographical aspects of policy – that markets play out in spatial ways, and that policy is a form of spatial ordering (see Gulson, 2005; 2007; 2011). We want to identify the difference geography makes in constituting power relations, including those of race and ethnicity (Allen, 2003, 2004; Delaney, 2002). Our goal in this paper is to use the example of the AAS in Toronto to illustrate the ways that education policy frames the discourses of recognition and equality are tangled with discourses of ethnic commodification and neo-liberal policies of school choice.

Data generation

The data were generated from over 1000 school, district, and community documents (e.g., Provincial and school board policy texts, meeting minutes, newspaper editorials) and other media (such as video footage from school board meetings, documentary films) from the 1992–2012 period, and we explored how these texts signified and conceptualised the links between policy and identity. In 2012, we supplemented this archival work with eight semi-structured interviews with stakeholders including community representatives and School Board Trustees. The latter are elected officials of the school board with a mix of those who voted for and against the school proposal. For reasons of anonymity, in this paper we do not indicate how trustees voted and we name all as ‘trustees,’ even if they are ex-members. If participants identified with a
particular ethnicity, racialised position or culture we have noted this in the excerpts (e.g. Black Canadian, Jewish). We undertook semi-structured interviews that attempted and at times succeeded in developing rich and challenging conversations about the development of the ASS. As part of this, we were reflexive about our racialised positioning in this project as white, middle-class, male researchers.

Eight interviews were conducted with current and past TDSB Trustees. Formal interviews averaged 1.5 hours, with some lasting 2 plus hours and one that lasted 12 minutes. All the interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Data were organised by themes that served as analytic constructs among many examples of participants’ actions (Flyvberg, 2006). In addition, member checks were conducted with key participants, asking if the data were accurate and interpretations plausible. Interestingly, participants developed an enthusiasm during the interviews when we involved them in analysing, not merely reporting, events and issues surrounding the establishment of AAS. We note that the participants discussed these issues to help themselves understand policy and power issues in their work. In fact, several participants responded at some point during the interview that the discussion had been cathartic, needed and important.

**Education policy, school choice and ‘Alternative schools’ in Toronto**

[The school] was a raw emotional thing. There was…a hurly burly man, we were all in there punching and kicking and fighting and yelling, there was no structure, no process, no framework, no nothing.

(Black Canadian, Trustee A, TDSB)

The provision of ‘alternative’ schools in Toronto emerged as part of a broader movement in the 1960s and 1970s around ‘free schools’, co-operative parent teacher elementary schools, and community, conservative elementary schools (M. Levin, 1979). In the 1980s and 1990s, alternative schools – many of which had culture or language bases and were underpinned by different groups’ desires to have control over, and make more culturally relevant, their children’s schooling – were part of contests about schooling in Ontario, and challenges to “an Anglocentric, Protestant and bourgeois regime” (Dehli, 1996b: 78). As one TDSB trustee notes:

[T]he old Toronto board, established what it called alternative schools which essentially were sort of grassroots, a bunch of parents want a school of a certain kind of methodology or a focus and …[the board would] say ‘OK’ and then they would turn their neighbourhood school into that, that was the basis for a lot of the so-called alternative schools

(Trustee B, TDSB).

A parallel to this counter-political form of alternative schools were those established by white, middle-class parents who were intervening in school debates and articulating
participation as consumers: “These are the groups who have adopted a cultural script of consumer democracy in education” (Dehli, 1996b: 83).

The alternative school programme continued through an amalgamation of the Toronto school board. In 1998, as part of the Harris Conservative provincial government’s (1995–2003) push to reduce the number of municipal organisations, the current Toronto District School Board was created by combining the old central Toronto Public Board of Education, and the school boards of the surrounding cities, York, East York, North York, Scarborough and Etobicoke. At amalgamation the TDSB became a 600-school and 280,000-student board, the largest in Canada and one of the largest in North America (B. Levin, Gaskell & Pollock, 2007). The old Toronto Board of Education was notable and distinct from the other boards in the broader Toronto city and Ontario for its attempts to address issues of equality and equity, including anti-racism, alongside a focus on parental involvement in education and schooling (McGaskell, 2005). With amalgamation, like other boards in Ontario, many of these programmes disappeared or were moved from the purview of the board to the remit of parents or the ‘community’ (Dehli, 1996a). All of the previous boards had some form of school choice that remained in the new amalgamated board. The alternative schools programme was one that was retained, albeit with a hiatus until a flurry of activity in 2007 when new proposals were put forward.

In 2007, the TDSB attempted to formalise its definition of an ‘alternative school’ as:

Sites that are unique in pedagogy, forms of governance and staff involvement, and have strong parental and/or student involvement; environments vary and provide an educational experience suited to individual learning styles/preferences and/or needs (Quan, 2007: Appendix A-1).

The new iteration of ‘alternative schools’ reinforces school choice as both parents choosing to send their children to existing schools, and actually establishing a school. Individuals or groups are able to propose a school and, if they meet the requirement of the board, the trustees vote on the proposal. Schools that were created by parents or other educational stakeholders, post-2007, and have been listed on the TDSB website as alternative schools, included the AAS and the following: the Da Vinci Alternative School, a school based on Waldorf and Steiner education; The Grove Community School, with a social justice and environmental focus; and the Equinox Alternative School that has a holistic learning and teaching approach (Toronto District School Board, 2012). All of these new schools are located within the bounds of the old Toronto board, with the AAS being the only alternative school located outside of the boundaries of the old board.

While the latter three schools were not challenged publicly², or at the very least there was little reported contestation, the AAS was created through numerous public meetings, and entered the maelstrom of the complicated politics of race and equity in the Toronto school district (McGaskell, 2005). Two Black Canadian female ‘commu-
nity activists’, Donna Harrow and Angela Wilson, for example, drove the AAS. These two activists were variously lauded or vilified throughout the process of establishing the school (Weiss, 2010). In an interview for a documentary on the AAS called “Our School” (Weiss, 2010), Donna Harrow noted:

And yeah, there are other alternative schools but those same people who were against all of this [the AAS] had no idea how many alternative schools, what kind of alternative schools, but because this one came up, and there was the big hullabuloo about the Black focused school, of course, ‘they’re going to say, well no I don’t agree with this’ (Weiss, 2010: Film time 14.03-14.36).

This recounting of uninformed, yet vehement opposition to the idea of a Black-focused school indicates how choice policy and its ostensive neutrality enters the realm of differentiation and racialisation of provision; that some forms of choice are seen as discomforting, unsettling and dangerous and others as normal or natural (Gulson & Webb, 2012). In Toronto, this differentiation depends on how the AAS is positioned in relation to the historical disadvantage of Black students. In the Toronto school district in 2006, 12% or 31,800 students identified as Black (Yau, O’Reilly, Rosolen & Archer, 2011). Over 40% of Black students are underachieving in relation to the district standards (Toronto District School Board, 2009). In the 1990s, the extent of Black student disadvantage and racism in Toronto was well known, with the 1992 “Royal Commission on Learning” making extensive recommendations about Black-focused education (Ontario Government/African Canadian Community Working Group, 1992). Between 1992 and 2007 there were myriad moves to include a Black-focused curriculum in Toronto schooling, as well as proposals to develop separate Afrocentric schools. These schools were posited as counters to a Eurocentric focus in the curriculum, sites for Black role models, and as ways of engaging Black students who were not completing school (Dei, 1995, 1996). Despite this extensive focus on Black education, progress on systemic equity initiatives was complicated by the amalgamation of the school boards (McCaskell, 2005).

The AAS as a ‘choice’ initiative therefore took place against this backdrop of 20–30 years of attempts to rectify Black student disadvantage, and repudiations of those attempts. In June 2007 a feasibility report was prepared for an Africentric Alternative School, after being requested by Black Canadian community members. In November and December 2007 community meetings were held under the aegis of the TDSB, about the school in conjunction with meetings on the education of Black students more generally in Toronto. The trustees approved the school, 11 votes to 9, in a fiery and controversial school board meeting in 2008, televised live. As one trustee noted:

This was one of the biggest debates in TDSB history, perhaps of ... school history in the country (Trustee E, TDSB).
Representing different parts of the city, the trustees were celebrated or pilloried for voting for or opposing the school\(^3\). Some trustees were physically assaulted and received death threats in response to how they voted (both ‘for’ and ‘against’). For, within a normalised policy environment that has long supported the establishment of parent- and stakeholder-led schooling initiatives under the alternative school programme, the AAS, as distinct from the environment school, or the holistic learning school, became the touchstone for all sorts of debates about the future of Toronto – Black student achievement, the management of diversity in Toronto, equity and equality. Therefore, even before it was established the AAS stalked the landscape of Torontonian education like a policy apparition (Webb & Gulson, 2012); even the threat of its existence evoked uncertainty, doubt and fear as part of the policy process. The primary opposition, for example, to the establishment of the AAS was framed in the media as a particular form of re-segregation within the TDSB public school system. The spectre of segregation was raised repeatedly in local media regarding the general ideas of Black-focused schools in Ontario (James, 2011), and specifically in relation to the AAS. For some opponents, the spectre of segregation that was to be manifest in the AAS was both an historical and a-historical reference; historical when the opposition made links to segregated schooling in North America, a-historical when the opposition ignored low student achievement and historical exclusion within public schooling – that is racism within public schools (James, 2011). The school was caught in a maelstrom of concern over race, ethnicity and equity not only in Toronto, but Canada more broadly. As a Black Canadian trustee noted:

...there were weeks and weeks of public consultations and people coming into the boardroom. And you know, those kinds of public consultations really attract the lunatic fringe, right? Like people who couldn’t string a coherent sentence together, but were having this deeply emotional response because again they couldn’t come to grips with whatever it is they were feeling, you know, and get up and kind of rant and rave, and sometimes not even talk about issues related to Black focus school. It really because a locus for people’s discomfort. You name it, public education, the Black community, with poverty, with geography, with the city, like it became this thing (Black Canadian, Trustee A, TDSB, our emphasis).

In the rest of the paper we discuss this differentiated treatment within the realm of choice policy, in two ways. The first emphasise the empowerment in the market – closely related to new forms of recognition and agency, the capacity and permission to act, and self-fashioning around ethnicity in education afforded by ethno-cultural schools like the AAS. The second looks at how the school is, we contend, enmeshed with and constitutive of the racialised cultural politics of the city. This latter section is intended to complicate the notion of empowerment in relation to ethnicity and commodification.
Afrocentricity Inc.? : Ethnicity, choice and empowerment

Education policy is, of course somewhat axiomatically, about change: “it offers an imagined future state of affairs, but in articulating desired change always offers an account somewhat more simplified than the actual realities of practice” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010: 5). School choice policy in the form of alternative schools offered the possibility for parents to take control of parts of Black education in Toronto. This is related to a politics of recognition that has, for the past 20 years or so, been played out through and enabled by marketised educational policy in various iterations in different countries and cities – such as open enrolment, changing school establishment regulations, vouchers and charters (Wells et al., 1999). That is, the individualised form of neo-liberal participation as based on parental freedom to choose has also been part of “a demand for recognition in a plural democracy and a critique of the cultural assumptions that underpin current versions of the common school” (Gaskell, 2001: 32-33).

School choice policies can enable the development and establishment of ethno-centric schools and curricula based on ideas of identity and recognition (Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). This includes opportunities to develop ethnic-specific curricula for Native Hawaiians (Buchanan & Fox, 2004), Native Americans (Belgarde, 2004), African Americans (Shujaa, 1988, 1992; Yancey, 2004), Black Canadians (Dei, 2005), and Aboriginal Canadians (Archibald, Rayner, & Big Head, 2011). Afrocentric schools in particular have a lineage tracing back to community-based or ‘free school movements’, and the notion of ‘independent Black institutions’ in the United States (Shujaa, 1992), with contemporary iterations continuing across many states of the United States including Ohio, Missouri, Washington and California, and Afrocentric curricula initiatives in Nova Scotia, Canada (Dei, 1995; Ginwright, 2000). In the case of the Canadian AAS, the school website states: “A unique feature of the AAS will be the integration of the diverse perspectives, experiences and histories of people of African descent into the provincial mandated curriculum” (Africentric Alternative School, 2011).

School choice policies and the emergence of ethno-centric schools within this policy frame can thus enunciate ideas of choice, freedom and equality. The politics surrounding this, however, are complex and at times contradictory. We might see the opportunities afforded by the establishment of ethno-centric schools as part of providing members of an enterprising cultural group with opportunities to speak for themselves and to take responsibility for themselves against persistent and historical educational inequalities. And we might read the AAS as enmeshed in a similar kind of politics – that is in the absence over 20 years of any substantive addressing of Black disadvantage at a systemic level, and with the reduction of equity focus in the new school board, the market becomes the modality for equality. As Donna Harrow identified, a school like the AAS can be borne out of endemic procrastination and obfuscation, of systemic rejection or belittling of the issue of Black student disadvantage, except during moments of crisis. In talking about why the AAS took so long to be established,
remembering that Black-focused schools had been recommended as legitimate and important initiatives in Toronto since the 1990s, Donna Harrow suggests:

I think it took long because we’re all very comfortable, and we’ve become very complacent in how we treat students in our schools, and more specifically, how we treat students of colour within our schools. It has been suggested time and time and time again, and we will have a shooting in a school, we will have a death in a school, and somebody else will recommend … [a Black focused school], and everybody says, ‘yeeah, great idea! We really should deal with this because students, Black students self esteem is down a hole and we need to do something about it’. And we talk and we nod and we smile, and then we forget about it (Weiss, 2010: Film time 11.00-11.56).

We might see, furthermore, that the market requires certain types of compromises. Lipman (2011) posits the idea of TINA – *There Is No Alternative* – to discuss how Black and Latina/o parents and community members in the United States have become involved in the setting up of charter schools, including highly corporatised models. If we apply this more broadly to choice options like alternative schools in Toronto, what is enabled by neo-liberal education policy is complex for “people are recruited into neo-liberal forms of governmentality, even if they also, simultaneously, seek to resist some of its effects” (Bondi, 2005: 499). In a sociological sense, TINA may be a politics of belonging, a kind of politics that seeks practices of inclusion and empowerment. However, because TINA is marketised and racialised it is a politics that certainly produces a “politics of self-separation” (Dei, 2005) that pivots on determining who has the authority to place themselves and their children within particular schools to practice discrete forms of care, and how ethno-centric schools are constituted in an education market (Gulson & Webb, 2012). This has led some scholars to argue that education and economic policies that promote the choice and creation of schools with an ethno-centric identity are a new force in educational politics that is simultaneously “progressive” and “conservative” (Pedroni, 2007). This complicated nature is represented by accusations that ethno-centric schools are merely tokenistic. As one TDSB trustee argues:

I also think one of the things that can be problematic about some of these [ethnic and cultural focused] schools is you say ‘well we’ll set up a school for …[these groups]’ and that might be beneficial for couple hundred kids, but that doesn’t mean that anybody else in the system is getting an opportunity to have that kind of programming…. But what about the 249,905 [other students in the TDSB], I mean those kids are still, if we’re not making an effort to teach them that knowledge as well then I don’t think we’re doing the right thing (Trustee B, TDSB).

In this sense, the trustee makes a claim that indicates how school choice policies – and alternative schools that educate small numbers of students – are poor mechanisms to address historic inequalities. This presumes, as we noted above, that there has not been advocacy for collective change in Black student educational provision in Toronto over the past 30 years. The AAS will not, obviously, address the educational needs
of all Black students in Toronto; nonetheless, what this school does achieve, within a choice framework, is an intervention into the discourses of educational inequality. As we have noted previously: “In the end, school choice policy is also a politics of no longer waiting” (Webb, Gulson & Pitton, 2012). Spider Jones, a Black Canadian radio host, suggests a similar thing when he proposes that opposition to the AAS tended to be skewed.

First of all you get a perspective from basically, with all due respect white guys, that have never grown up in the projects or understand the problems. I think many of them mean well, but there’s a difference between meaning well and understanding that we live in desperate times. And in desperate times, you take desperate measures, nothing else is working (Weiss, 2010: Film time 16.16-16.44).

And as a Black Canadian trustee suggested:

It was all about how do you meet the needs of the students and their families? And it wasn’t that an Africentric school was the answer. It was that there wasn’t one answer (Black Canadian, Trustee A, TDSB).

The AAS transmutes across and through different discourses of difference, pain, poverty and privilege; discourses that delineate the possibilities of culture, identity and recognition in arguments for equity. For instance, Ginwright (2000) wonders, in relation to the possibilities of social justice through Afrocentric schooling, “what are the limits and possibilities for using racial and cultural identity as a solution to reforming urban schools?” (p. 88). For our purposes, we also wonder what limits and possibilities are afforded by racial and cultural identities in urban school reform initiatives within quasi-school markets. Ethnicity, racialisation and culture do not stand apart from the market, but form and are produced as integral features of urban school reform predicated on neo-liberal choice factors. As a Black Canadian TDSB trustee contends:

I think there’s no doubt that because we live in a society that’s geared toward individualism this is where choice becomes kind of a double-edged sword, right, because on the one hand choice is about empowerment and being able to make decisions for your family, for yourself, and for whatever, your children, and on the other hand it becomes about entitlement. ... I think as a culture [in Toronto], we’re not set up to have these conversations about how systemic oppression or barriers work, your fallback is to frame it on that individual level which is about choice (Black Canadian, Trustee A, TDSB).

School choice policy is both the opportunity and responsibility to be entrepreneurial – as care of the self in neo-liberal policy frames (Brown, 2003; Dean, 1999; Foucault, 2005). We might also see this within what Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) identify as “empowerment”.
Mark this term: *empowerment*. In the post-colony it connotes privileged access to markets, money, and material enrichment. In the case of ethnic groups, it is frankly associated with finding something essentially their own and theirs alone, something of their essence, to sell. In other words, a brand (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009: 15).

To be clear, we are not suggesting that having something to sell — that is a Black-focused school — is the impetus for the Black activists and supporters who established the school, nor what underpinned trustee support at the board level. Nonetheless, it is a precondition for a new TDSB alternative school to differentiate itself from other schools — and these schools are seen as part of claiming a ‘market share’ of students. We are, therefore, interested in how a black-focussed school becomes both subject to, and can take advantage of, the education market. An ethno-centric school is therefore dangerous in Foucault’s sense: “My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do” (Foucault, 1983: 231-232). Cultural and ethnic identity – strategically and opportunistically essentialised – is mobilised and enabled within neo-liberal education policy regimes that are racialised (Gulson, 2011; Goldberg, 2009). Nevertheless, as we discuss and conceptualise in the next section, empowerment is a fraught and fragile concept for policy and the unintended consequences of policy are played out in multicultural cities like Toronto.

**Recognition in the city: Racialised geographies of ethnicity, identity and education**

We posit there are at least two ways to understand the relationships between the discourses of recognition and identity and the discourse of school choice. First, Toronto’s geography and its history provide registers that recognise and identify different racial and ethnic identities. Second, school choice policy mechanisms that emphasise empowerment and neo-liberal ideas of equality provide different registers that enunciate ethnic recognition and identity. We discuss these ideas next.

The ASS raises a series of key questions concerning identity and ethno-centric schools or, in this particular case, what is ‘Black’ in Black-focused education, and does it differ from Afrocentricity? In other words, what are the aims of ethno-centric schools in relation to particular forms of identity, curriculum and pedagogy (Dumas, 2009)? Further, how does defining Afrocentricity points to its possible role as a powerful assertion in marketised forms? These issues had relevance in the framing of the ASS — that is, what it would mean to have a Black-focused or Afrocentric school in Toronto? The trustees were not shy about addressing this question, nor its contested and complex nature (see Figure 1).
But again, another philosophical debate about who counts and who doesn’t and one of the real, the really legitimate arguments about what is involved in a Black focus school, right,...[it’s about] who gets to define Blackness.

- Black Canadian, TDSB Trustee A

When we used the word ‘Africentric’ we have to be very careful with myself being an African-Canadian. I think we need to look at those words very carefully and sort of decide how we’re gonna use it and where we’re going to go ... we had a lot of discussions around the word, the term, what it really meant and were we alienating other groups from coming into the school simply because of that.

- Black Canadian, TDSB Trustee D

I mean with the Africentric curriculum for those couple of hundred kids that are there, they are learning lots about African cultures because I would emphasise that there is more than one culture in Africa, and two, not to think so is to essentialise the African experience you would be amazed how many people say things like ‘oh go learn African culture’.

- Trustee B, TDSB

**Figure 1:** Problems of recognition – Trustee views on Afrocentricity
The constituting of Afrocentricity is, of course, not only the purview of those who proposed the AAS – it also enters the market of schooling where potential clients and opponents are given opportunities to provide input into its existence and development. It similarly allows the TDSB to demonstrate it is doing ‘something’ about Black schooling:

I think it’s probably more true now because now [the AAS is] a selling point and ... how diverse their Toronto school board is and you could send your child here and here and here and ... (Black Canadian, Trustee A, TDSB).

For our purposes, the problems of recognition pivot on the extent to which recognition and the concomitant ideas of ethnic identity are used in developing choice schools. That is, as Fraser notes, we are concerned with how markets tame politics (Fraser, 2009). Likewise, Shujaa (1992), in study of parental choice of independent Afrocentric schools, pointedly states:

...I am concerned about the uses to which Afrocentricity has been put. Too often is has come to be regarded as a quantity rather than a quality, and, in some instances, even as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Shujaa, 1992: 158).

We want to take this point and look at how this idea of commodity and ethnicity has some salience to understanding how the AAS was posited differentially from other alternative schools in Toronto. Cities and education systems, through policy, have long constituted and classified what is possible and prevented; especially governing the ways that difference is produced and reconfigured through and due to race (Gulson, 2011; also see Lipman, 2011). Cities have also been sites in which ethnicity has operated as different forms of capital. We suggest that one way to understand how ethnicity functions as capital in Toronto is to understand that, prior to World War II, Toronto was primarily a WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) city. After the war, the city’s migrant make-up changed, to the point that it is now the most ethnically and culturally diverse city in Canada (Buzzelli, 2001), as noted by some trustees.

...for all intents and purposes Toronto’s a black city (Black Canadian, Trustee A, TDSB).

...we live in a more identity conscious city than anyone else... (Jewish Canadian, Trustee D, TDSB).

The spatial politics of the AAS were rooted within this geographical history in which the resistance to the school is constituted and constitutive of race and ethnic relations established within the city of Toronto. For instance, Trustee F noted how resistance to the AAS was also rooted in concessions about the school’s location in the city.
Local councillors basically pushed back, I was surrounded by councillors that voted against it and if you’re gonna vote against it the political will on the ground is not gonna see it happen. So they want it up in the northwest corner of the city where we have the highest concentrations of communities of African extraction. They wanted it up there (Trustee F, TDSB).

When asked to explain how the city of Toronto was racially stratified, the trustee noted that:

ethnic communities tend to congregate [in Toronto] around religious institutions, churches, mosques, synagogues, community centres, shops so you do have people of national extractions living in a community (Trustee F, TDSB).

The spatial politics of Toronto were not created by the AAS; rather, the AAS was located on a highly contentious grid of racialisations already mapped onto the city in particular ways. For instance, the politics of segregation regarding the AAS were intertwined with the spatial politics of the city. Trustee F noted that his support of the AAS was partially due to calling out the inherent racialised segregation of Toronto already. He stated that in a meeting he said to other trustees:

“If you wanna talk about segregation you go look at your Claude Watson [TDSB school, primarily black population] over there, your North Toronto Secondary [TDSB school, primarily black population].” It was like whoa, so they backed off of [their critique of the AAS] (Trustee F, TDSB).

The establishment of the AAS was in part due to how it fitted on Toronto’s grid of race, ethnicity and class. More importantly, for our purposes, the racialised commodification of ethnicity occurred – in part – through the movements through the city. In other words, alternative choice schools in TDSB are ‘open boundaries’ that destabilise the historical practices of catchment and provide consumers of race-based education with a market in which to participate. Through these movements, a market for choice schools was developed and the commodification of race followed through the selection and consumption of the AAS. Trustee F noted:

I also messaged on school boundaries and the reality was ... if you wanna talk about so-called segregation you go look at these school boundaries, don’t lecture my Afrocentric parents, let’s start removing these school boundaries and make sure there’s more integration (Trustee F, TDSB).

Here, the term “integration” is used in relation to a city already marketised in relation to difference. Toronto is a city that has identified its neighbourhoods through explicit conflation of place with the ethnicity of the ‘original’ migrants: Little Italy, Greektown, Koreatown and India Bazaar. As multiple generations of migrants have left these parts of the city, like other multicultural cities around the world such as
Sydney and London, these names have remained as part of emerging ‘cultural to quarters’ that are connected both to an historical remnant of migrant collectivism and to commodification (Keith, 2005; Pugliese, 2007).

Ethnicity and identity in contemporary Toronto therefore operates within an already presumed sense of collective commercialisation. It is in the gentrified inner areas of the city, and now the most affluent part of the city (Hulchanski, 2010) and the site of the old Toronto board, and where most alternative schools are located that ethnicity and commodification are most clearly in tandem. Hackworth and Rekers (2005) suggest that as inner city areas like Little Italy or India Bazaar have changed demographically their function as commodity has intensified – in combinations of “commodified culture and traditional landscapes” (p. 216) – as part of the consumptive practices of the new (white) middle classes of inner-city gentrification. Different neighbourhoods are identified as business improvement areas, and then reference ethnicity in the title such as Greektown; local ethnic identity is ‘managed’ by these improvement associations to varying degrees. Difference becomes tied to a commodity – e.g., restaurants – that communicate these differences in essentialised forms to the ‘outside’ world. In this way, the governance of the city is tied not just to incorporating the multiculture, but to the creation of racialisations and ethnicity. As Osborne and Rose (1999) suggest, from the 19th century onwards, “the government of the city becomes inseparable from the continuous activity of generating truths about the city” (p. 739, original emphasis).

In Toronto, the policy frames that link business improvement with ethnicity also provide an indication as to the possibilities and limits of empowerment in relation to cultural identity. Some forms of ethnic difference are more palatable when constituted as an area that is to be consumed. When consumption is tied to education – such as the AAS in an education market – notions such as Black and Africentric move onto more fraught terrain than a neighbourhood with ‘authentic’ cuisine or ‘A Thousand Villages’ ethnic free-trade wares. The AAS was a form of ethnicity that was intelligible in the racialised geography of the city – the school invoked the threat of race, rather than benign difference and diversity (see Gulson, 2011; Goldberg, 2009). If a city like Toronto has one set of discourses that considers ethnicity as a marketable and essentialised form, then this reduces the nuances and complexities of how other discourses of ethnicity in the education market may be mobilised by Black Canadian parents and students towards equitable purposes. As such, the AAS, while able to be established through policy, is cast loose by the ostensive neutrality of choice policy and enters the registers of commodification and ethnicity that are racialised and (re) articulated in Toronto.
Conclusion

I was really driven to say there is a hierarchy of racism in our city and Black people are at the bottom of it and First Nations people are at the bottom of it. But they’re just less obvious, you know. And again those were the race conversations that nobody wants to have (Black Canadian female, Trustee A, TDSB).

As Rizvi and Lingard (2011) note, “a commitment to market values in education does not entirely involve a rejection of a concern for social equity, but it does suggest that the meaning of equity is re-articulated” (p. 9). This is choice as part of neo-liberal governmentality and new forms of affinity and community within marketised forms (Miller & Rose, 2008), which reshapes policy “not by entirely eliminating equity concerns but rather by embedding them within choice and accountability frameworks” (Forsey, Davies, & Walford, 2008: 15). Education policy seems to now demand the entrepreneurial self and the self as, paradoxically, the collective production of educational equity. As we have noted: “In a re-articulation of equality, education policy now develops markets of care for entrepreneurial, innovative, and particular selves” (Webb, Gulson & Pitton, 2012, p.6).

Neo-liberal policy also depends on the racialised and marketised reconfiguring of space – about which parts of the city are deemed acceptable for the consumption of ethnicity. For the creation of separate spaces such as the AAS is, of course, not uncoupled from the histories and geographies of schooling systems and cities. When an Africentric school is proposed in Toronto, it is enabled within a choice framework but enters the domain not just of education but of how ideas of ethnicity may be constituted and marketed/branded within the city. That is, the AAS is not treated in the same way as other proposed alternative schools – rather there is extensive racialised contestation over who has the right to define the parameters of the market, that is, which alternative schools are acceptable – and also a debate over who controls culture. This is both an opportunity and problem, for the commodification of culture then runs the risk of being reduced to property (Gilroy, 2006).

The cultural politics of policy are thus incredibly complex in relation to ethno-centric schools like the AAS, for these politics repudiate the notion, endemic in school choice research, that agency in education markets is the purview of the white, middle class and a concomitant lack of agency for people of colour (for critiques, see Lipman, 2011; Pedroni, 2007). What we are seeing in a policy sense is that policy normalisation of the creation of separate spaces of educational opportunity, in which school choice policies in the form of establishing separate spaces, is now the complicated and contradictory new forms of cultural recognition, survival and agency (Webb, Gulson & Pitton, 2012; Lipman, 2011). And we might ask whether, simultaneously, neo-liberal education policy is limiting our capacity to imagine new forms of cultural transformation in schools and the city.
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Notes

1. This research was supported by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
2. The Grove School has been the subject of tabloid journalism (see http://www.torontosun.com/2012/05/07/what-are-they-teaching-our-kids).
3. The spatial politics of the TDSB, and the identification of place with trustees, is noteworthy yet beyond the remit of this paper.

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